

Yellow Men Sleep

By JEREMY LANE

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CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

—17—

Later March said, out of his somber thinking: "I cannot believe that my Elthna is gone."

Levington could make no reply. It seemed that March remembered his bride as she was eighteen years ago. Time had not, until now, touched that sacred portion of his life.

"And they have taken my little child, touched her eyes with the drug, until she is no longer mine but theirs. She refuses to go to America, my own daughter. She has been made to forget her mother."

Con was overwhelmed. He stretched out his hand and found March's arm. It was trembling.

"We're not done for," said Levington.

March seemed not to hear. "Helen does not love me, scarcely cares to make my acquaintance, never wished to see me. Perhaps that is my punishment for thinking of her always as an infant, with a glorious mother. And Elthna has been dead for years."

Levington was alarmed concerning his friend, who was slipping deeper into despondency. He forgot his work for the United States government, his long labors in the name of humanity, and all his thought centered upon his personal disaster. He was close to a tragic unbalance. Levington said quickly:

"But Helen says her mother is not really dead. You have yourself told me that this life is but the camp of one night in a long journey, that the better air of the hills is just beyond."

Slowly March smiled, and sadly. "The camp of one night. Yes, a long, dark night."

"We have work to do, now," urged the younger man. "Work that may bring our dawn."

It was useless to try to cheer the benumbed man, who merely replied: "They are causing little Helen to forget all her mother gave to her; they are giving her to that yellow man doll."

"No!" cried Levington. "Not yet."

Andrew March laughed at him bitterly.

In some subtle, potent manner, the Gobi was too much for white men. They could not remain the same.

March was slipping down hill. Levington was not his former self, easy-going and slow to kindle, a dreamer. He had grown tense of nerve, keyed up strangely high, with a whole new set of passions in his breast. He was expanded, set free, despite the pitchy caverns.

He arose now and moved away from his comrade, elbowed through the shifting crowds, a Goliath by contrast. They made way for him. The

city, its palace like something built in a mighty yesterday by giants, and left behind for men—dark now, but plainly outlined. From the crest Levington viewed the shadowy secrets of the Sha Mo, and presently his eyes stopped on a point in the road, at the head of the ravine. He stared through the twilight, and saw a motionless horseman there.

He must know. Taking his former path, down the further side of the ridge and around to the cut, he hastened in the loneliness of that gray dawn. Creeping near he could not mistake the large, limp hat, the distinctive fling of the cloak, the pony. He stood up and ran toward Helen.

"What is it?" he asked.

"They are coming for you at sunrise," she said. "They will kill you."

"We are ready to receive them," he said. "The miners are not at work, and are not sleeping. They are waiting, armed. The plan is to fall upon the soldiers if they come into the mines."

"You have caused this?"

"Yes," he answered.

"For what reason?"

"Freedom, for your father and myself; for the four workers who were taken yesterday; for the whole underground city of miners; and for you."

"For me? I do not ask it."

"You want to be queen?"

"Yes." And she implied that nothing could be so natural. She was surprised at the question.

"You can be a queen in America," he said, with his soul limping. "And who will remain here for your rule, when we have done with your army?"

She did not know whether to smile, or be terribly displeased. He dared not be serious, lest his heart break. In the gray of the morning she was as lovely as a great moth in an enchanted garden.

"You would not be interested in ruling here," said her lover, "if you really belonged here. It is your white blood that gives you this strength. All Asia is only a stage-setting for you. Let me fight today for you, let me lead in your name. Is it so much to be queen of a solitary city where strangers never come?"

"Never?" she repeated.

After a pause, he asked: "What brought you out so early this morning?"

"Yesterday you were displeased because I rode in the full sunlight," she parried him.

He saw at once that he could not expect to be given any true reason for her presence here now, unless—

"I am thankful I did not miss you," he said.

"The dawn colors are full of wonder," she replied, evading again.

"That is true."

"Are you afraid to die?" she asked point-blank.

"Yes, I'm not going to. I want to live. Yesterday I told you why, but you were asleep."

"I could not respond," said the princess, glancing away at the dark horizon, "but I heard distinctly—your words."

Levington's cheeks burned suddenly at the revelation. She continued to look away from him.

"I meant my words, all of them," he said steadily.

Still she did not turn back to him, and he asked, "Why do you allow them to give you the drug?"

"I am not so lonely when I dream." "It places you more securely in the hands of Chee Ming, and he is no man's friend."

"He has been my father, always," he said.

"This sleep of yellow men is not life—not rulership—for you."

"Would you give me unhappiness again?"

Again he felt the tremendous doubt, that she might be laughing at him from behind her earnest, lovely eyes. She looked full in his face for her answer.

"I will not go away without you" said Levington.

"You may not go at all," said Helen. "That is why I came here. It was troublesome to arrange. But I wanted to tell you."

"What?"

"If my soldiers kill you, it is—not because I hate you."

"Thanks," murmured Levington. "I could have died for less."

"Come with my father, the way you came yesterday, and I will do what I can."

"You humble me with so much honor," said the one who stood below her, "but I expect to be very busy with the miners."

The copper light touched her face. The pony blinks at the east, and far away Con saw the purple mantle slip from the city, a line of faint gold upon the loftiest tiles of the palace.

Sweetly across the empty world came the voice of the hour-gong from the city. The last stars were melting into a pallid sky that was shot across with crimson, violet, and russet gold. Levington's heart was full, but all he longed to say he had told her yesterday. That intimacy was renewed by the thought that she had heard and remembered everything he had said.

"They Are Coming for You at Sunrise," She Said. "They Will Kill You."

Arab called something he did not catch. He had a desire for a breath of upper air, and was going toward the base of the shaft.

It was dark at the top, still night, the blot of a sentinel there. Con went up by the aid of the long vine, which had been worn smooth by the pulling of many hands, day after day. The hunched one who watched at the top made way for him, but did not offer a hand. The stars were fading by the nearness of new day. Leaving behind him all the smoldering life below—the warped, sapped, wasted human—Levington left the mouth of the shaft and strode up the rise. He drank the cool air of the open.

To the east a low band of dusty yellow, above and around the pale smooth smoke of waning night. Only the larger stars remained aloft, white and friendly points, familiar, seeming

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closer than America. Westward the city, its palace like something built in a mighty yesterday by giants, and left behind for men—dark now, but plainly outlined. From the crest Levington viewed the shadowy secrets of the Sha Mo, and presently his eyes stopped on a point in the road, at the head of the ravine. He stared through the twilight, and saw a motionless horseman there.

He blushed. Something came to him of her struggle—a fantastic kingdom almost within her grasp, a throne from which every whim was law, a city of weird power and much gold, her own for the taking; and only one young white man, almost a stranger, to draw her away from it all. She had been born to love, yet all her training was toward power and queen-craft. And there was Koresh.

"Helen!" he said softly.

"Speak."

He could not. The wave on which he had ridden had passed. The old silence was upon him, the wordless intensity in the presence of beauty, timidity before the woman who could set him free if she would.

A quick sparkle crossed the dead wilderness to the east. Twilight fled away, and the world whitened. Still the princess did not move. She too was silent. Then from the distant gate a horseman stood forth. Levington waited.

"Go," she said.

"There is only one coming."

"It is the prince, Yekutol."

"Will he lead your soldiers?"

"He will never lead anything." Helen's voice had become suddenly filled with weariness. Levington roused again to the joy of making her unhappy. "I shall ride away," she threatened.

"Please wait. Let him come."

"For what reason?"

"I won't hurt him," said Con.

"You have no weapon," said the princess.

"He may have enough for both of us."

"I see no others upon the road. They are very sure. They do not haste. It is early."

Yekutol came on, doubtless having learned of the absence from the city of his bride-elect. Levington waited beside the large stone, hidden from the prince. A world of meaning came to him from the fact that Helen remained. She was not unwilling to decoy his prince. Levington himself was acting more upon intuition than by any reason or plan.

"What would you?" she inquired.

"I won't hurt him," he repeated. "I don't know."

In her calm way, she was looking straight at Levington, and he had regained enough of yesterday to return her gaze. His eyes were robbers, now boldly taking the slender curves that lay beneath the gray cloak. Another wave was coming, that would carry him—

The prince, as he rode along to the head of the ravine, was a mere pale shoot of royalty with the sun dazzling his eyes. He was long-boned, languid, his slanty eyes peering from beneath a white satin turban, ringed with pearls. The pennon hung limp from his lance. He was brave with knives. His loose-sleeved arms were lax, evidently weary with holding out the lance. He made no bow of greeting to his intended lady, giving her but a word of Oriental speech. Helen scarcely noticed him, but continued to study the sunrise. Levington arose from concealment and took the jeweled bride.

The fright of Prince Yekutol was painful. He poured a rapid series of syllables upon the white man, who grinded at him and took down the lance. Then the waxy face, shining in the new sun, was obscured by a pair of upraised hands. Yekutol dared not face what had befallen him. He forgot the princess. Soft moans came from behind the flowered sleeve. Levington lifted him down from the saddle, a relaxed form. The prince had fainted.

Con led the diadem mount down the ravine to the valley floor beyond and started the animal away to the south. He shouted and hurled a stone. In a panic, Yekutol's horse ran, with one sparkling bit of color in one stirrup, dangling. Still Helen had not changed her position. The prince lay upon the sand, a relaxed form. The prince had fainted.

The sailor comprehended and rather brightened at the plan. It was better than falling upon the soldiers in the dark of the morn. He called to his men. The swinging palanquin was taken in for March. In that final minute in the caverns, Con had a word with him.

"It's all right," said the younger man.

March's eyelids remained calmly closed, but his voice came in a dry rustle.

"Some men grow brave in their sorrow, but I was not one of them. I waited so long—you understand, boy. If you get away, make the report. Show them how to find Tan Khan, to scotch this curse of the world, if possible."

Levington gave assurance, then ran after the Arabian, who had taken a position near the base of the shaft. Here Yekutol still lay upon his back, although no bond held him. No one dared go near him. The twisted men retained their superstitions concerning royalty. Now in great numbers they hopped about, gesticulating, lifting odd weapons, like a nestful of matine spiders.

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