

THE  
TIME DRUNKARD

(BY ARTHUR SPERRY.)

ILLUSTRATED BY HAL HURST.

**D**EAR MISS HOULTON,—I scarcely know how to begin writing to you. I feel so sure that I shall be unable to prevent your misunderstanding me, and also that perhaps I deserve to be misunderstood by you, that only the false pluck that comes from desperation enables me to begin. And now that I have begun I am at a loss how to go on. When I asked you to marry me, and you told me not to speak of the matter again for a month, I could not help thinking that it was very strange, because you are usually such a straightforward, outspoken girl. I was much hurt, too, by your refusing to even tell me why you said "No" to my proposal. Then, when I called, you refused to see me, and, on top of it all, three days ago, when I got to the club, Irvine drewled out to me. "I say, old boy, you know Miss Houlton?"

"I looked at him, wondering what was coming."  
"Well," he said, "the paper here announces her engagement to old Colonel Haynes."  
"Rubbish!" I said. But, when I looked at the paper, I felt as though I were growing twenty years older when I read the paragraph. Irvine saw that something was the matter with me, and as I put the paper down he drawled—

"I say, old boy, you are not interested in that quarter, are you?"

"I could have killed him for the way he said it. I had but one thought—to get away, away from London, where everyone I saw would remind me of you, and of the change that had come over me. It was early, and there was time to catch the mail for Queenstown and the New York boat. You know how alone in the world I am, and how little any living person cares what I do or where I go. I put a few things in a bag, and caught the boat at Queenstown the next morning."

"Two hours after we left Queenstown I saw Colonel Haynes on the promenade deck. His appearance is as striking as mine is commonplace, and it is no wonder that, though we had only met once, I should know him very well, while he entirely failed to remember me. Naturally, I did not care to make myself known to him, but his going away from you at such a time puzzled me. I thought there must be some mistake in what the paper said. Yet it is hardly possible. I don't know what to do. I feel that I shall go mad if I do not write this letter to you. Several times I have been on the point of making myself known to the Colonel and congratulating him on his engagement, but I feel that I should not be able to keep from making a fool of myself while I talked to him. At first I thought I would cable to you from New York as soon as I landed, and ask you to wire me at once whether the report in the paper was correct. But perhaps you would be offended. One cannot say everything in a cablegram. So I have decided to be as patient as I can, and wait for you to answer this by cable. If the report was wrong, and you will let me come back to London and try to tell you how I love you, the one word 'Yes' will mean more to me than all the literature in the world. But please wire me either 'Yes' or 'No' at once. The uncertainty is what I cannot bear. I do not know what I shall do with myself till I have your answer."

"Cable to 'Spencer, F Avenue, New York,' and your message will reach me at the hotel where I shall stop. We will get to New York Friday night or Saturday morning, and this letter will go by the same day's boat, so that you will have it a week later, and I shall expect your answer the same day."

"Be kind to me, Ethel, and end this agony of suspense. Even if you cannot say 'Yes,' wire something, so that I can know my fate. I shall not try now to tell you how much I love you, Ethel. I have tried before, and failed.—Ever yours fondly,

'GERALD SPENCER.'

Painful as Spencer had found the uncertainty on ship-board, it was trifling to the suspense that followed his landing in New York. Before he posted the letter—and he did this at once—he had it to think about, to alter and extend or shorten. But, after it was sent, there was only the dreary wait of a week. He could not interest himself in anything. He walked and drove, but saw nothing of what was about him. He rode from end to end of New York on the overhead railways over and over again. The impatience that surged about him in the trains suited his mood, and he was more nearly at his ease there than anywhere else.

Spencer passed five days of the week in this feverish way, eating little and sleeping only when he dosed himself with bromide. On Friday morning, when he went to ask at the hotel office if any letters for him had come, he stopped to chat with the pleasant-mannered young fellow in the office.

"You don't seem to be enjoying your visit overmuch," the hotel clerk said.

"I am not enjoying it at all," Spencer answered. "I am merely waiting for a very important cablegram, and I cannot get my mind from it long enough to enjoy anything."

"You should go about a little. Have you been down to Coney Island?"

Spencer said that he had no wish to go anywhere. The hotel clerk mentioned some of the points of interest in and about New York, but Spencer shook his head wearily.

"Go down and make a tour of Chinatown—the Chinese quarter, you know," the clerk said. "That will surely interest you. I can get you a young Americanised

Chinaman who will act as guide, and you will be sure to enjoy an afternoon in Chinatown with him."

At first Spencer demurred, but changed his mind, and said he would go. He felt that some diversion was absolutely necessary. After luncheon the hotel clerk introduced to him an intelligent-looking, bright-eyed, yellow-skinned young man, well-dressed and gentlemanly, whose slanting eyes alone bespoke the celestial.

With his guide, Spencer went across town and took an overhead train for Chatham Square, where they got out. A few steps through Pell-street took them into the midst of Chinatown—the weirdest of weird dwelling-places, where the quaintness of the old Chinese civilisation is engrained on to the modern, ever-changing ways of New York.

Spencer went through it all like a man in a stupor. The tiny dens of the opium 'joint' keepers, like toll-houses in their smallness and pretiness; the gambling-rooms, where strange games, older than even the languages of the West, were proceeding—some of them in the midst of ceaseless chatter, others in silence; the grocery shops, where birds' nests and sharks' fins were the least strange of the wares displayed for sale; the Chinese printer's establishment, where books and papers were being printed by exactly the same methods the proprietor's ancestors used on the other side of the world before any European nation had even a name—none of the strange things of Chinatown aroused even passing interest in Spencer's troubled mind.

At the Joss House, where an occasional worshipper was burning Joss-paper before the great, grotesque, painted Joss, Spencer was sufficiently interested to ask his guide what it all meant—this solemn worship of a painted thing by grown men.

The guide rapidly outlined some of the oddities of Chinese religion.

"These men you see burning Joss-sticks before the image," he said, "are not seekers of salvation or repentant sinners, as one would expect them to be if they were worshipping in a Christian church. They are simply asking Joss to give them luck in some particular undertaking—gambling, probably."

"And do you believe in that sort of thing?" Spencer asked, as the guide bought a little bundle of Joss-sticks at the counter beside the door from the ante-room through which they had entered.

"I am sure," said the guide, with a smile, "you do not care to have me discuss my religious views with you. It

thought. But," he went on seriously, after a moment's thought, "I have heard that old Hop Wah, the philosopher, can teach anyone how to kill time—how to annihilate it. He is a strange man, Hop Wah. He will interest you, perhaps, even if he does not teach you how to kill time. Shall we go and see him?"

With the thought that to do so might pass an hour of the time that separated him from the morrow, Spencer assented, and in a few minutes they were in the little waiting room of the Chinese philosopher's residence. The guide explained in Chinese to the servant who stood by the door to the inner room, that Spencer wished to consult Hop Wah. In a moment the servant returned and motioned that Spencer was to enter the inner room.

"You must go alone," the guide said. "It is a secret. I understand, this time-killing trick. Hop Wah knows English, so you will get on all right. I will wait for you here."

The large, square inner room was brightly lit by large windows. The floor was covered with skins of all sorts and sizes. There were no chairs, but around the walls there were great wide divans, as large as beds, and between them stood strange-looking cabinets of lacquer. One of the walls was occupied by a cabinet divided into scores of narrow square holes, in each of which was a rolled Chinese rice-paper book.

Hop Wah stood in the centre of the room—a little wiry old Chinaman, whose queue was so long that its end rested on the ground at his heels. His black satin tunic was lavishly ornamented with strange gold and silver embroideries, the richly-worked sleeves falling over his hands and hiding them.

"And what may I have the pleasure of doing for you?" Hop Wah asked, in a pleasant vigorous voice that came strangely from so old a man.

The philosopher wore a pair of large, round, tortoise-shell rimmed spectacles, and through their lenses looked the calmest, most searching pair of eyes Spencer had ever gazed into. Any idea that he was going to enjoy a lark, or be amused, that the Englishman may have had before he looked into those eyes, vanished at once. His mind became serious under their silent mastery.

"I am tortured by uncertainty regarding a matter that is of the greatest possible importance to me," he said. "I expect a message to-morrow or Sunday that will end the uncertainty, but meanwhile the time drags so slowly that I feel as if it were endless. I have been told that



'IT IS THERE, YOU CAN JUST SEE IT!'

is expected that people who come here will invest something in Joss sticks."

For a moment the troubled look had gone from Spencer's face, but it returned again as the guide talked. The young Chinaman noticed it, and seemed disappointed.

"I am afraid you do not find Chinatown interesting," he said. "I am sorry, for I had hoped you would be amused."

"You are no more sorry than I am for my indifference," Spencer returned. "At any other time I am sure I should have enjoyed the day very much. But, to tell you the truth, I am not able to interest myself in anything to-day. I am expecting a cablegram that will mean everything to me. It cannot reach me till to-morrow; but, meanwhile, I am almost insane with anxiety. If your Joss, now,"—Spencer looked at his guide with a weak smile—"if your Joss could make it to-morrow."

"Ah!" said the guide lightly, "you are not a China-

you were able to teach people how to make time pass quickly."

"It must be that you are in love," said Hop Wah, with a smile. "Will you sit down?"

"Yes," Spencer answered, simply.

"All I can do," said the philosopher, "is to teach you to deceive yourself. Hypnotism, you call it in English. We Chinese think that what you call a hypnotist does not hypnotise his subject, but merely tells the subject how to hypnotise himself. We will try it if you like. But I must warn you not to do this sort of thing again after to-day. You must not get into the habit of killing time in this way. I should like you to promise this before we go on."

Spencer had become deeply interested. The old man's eyes, with their calm expression of limitless power, fascinated him. If the Chinese philosopher could but hurry the time when a message would come from the woman he loved, he would promise anything.

"Yes, I promise," he said, quickly.

"Thank you," said the philosopher. "Listen to me