

[COMPLETE STORY.]

THE PASSING OF GON OUT

By THEODORE WATERS

IF you go out by the Sound Steamer you the "Chinaman's Seat," which those who know will point out to route past Blackwell's Island is a small rock situated half-way up the Manhattanward shore. Every evening at dusk a Chinaman used to come down from the prisoners' cook-house and sit blinking at the brilliance of the big boats with such strange persistence that in time he came to be pointed out as a curiosity, and stories were told about him on the smoke deck.

The Chinaman was known as Gon Out, an island rendering which was sufficiently suggestive and which did him very well for a nickname. But he was more of a curiosity than the people on the boats guessed. He was a study, an object of pathological interest. His memory went back but a few years—not more than six, the doctors decided. Of his life previous to that they could learn nothing. He told them of crossing a big water, of wandering over a big land, of sufferings by the way, of his admission to the island as a vagrant. It was an unvarnished tale, and its vagueness would have been laid to the door of his Orientalism but for two things—one, that he was a Chinaman without religion, even without language, unless you reckon with his pidgin English, and as such had been cast forth from the ranks of his countrymen, who could not too fully despise the man who knew naught of and cared less for the honors of his ancestors; the other, that Watson, the house physician, who was a Mason, discovered one day that Gon had an inkling of the ritual.

Watson told the other doctors about it and worked with Gon a long time in the hope that this might prove the connecting link with his past. But it was only an inkling, after all, and the curtain remained down. Although his efforts failed, Watson was willing to wager that Gon "was no Canton coolie before he stepped out of the ranks." When it was seen that he had no desire to run away, Gon was made a "trustee" and given a job in the cook-house, which allowed him a certain amount of freedom.

One evening when he had been on the island for five years Gon sat in his rock seat gazing with half-closed eyes at the reflections which wriggled over the water from the last and biggest of the boats. There was that in the reflections which reminded him of something he had seen in the past. He could not tell what the something was, and his face wore a puzzled expression as he tried to remember. Again and again he made the effort, but the more he thought the more confused he became, and finally, when the steamer had passed on and the reflections had thinned out and disappeared, he fell to watching the swells chasing one another along shore.

In the narrow channel the swells break heavily against the shore wall and the spray falls like a curtain on the rocks. While looking through this Gon saw a black rowboat bobbing uneasily on the crest of a roller about a furlong from shore. There was no moon, but he could see that no one sat in the boat. The tide was running out, the waves were going up obliquely and the opposing effects drove the boat steadily shoreward. Gon rose and followed it slowly along, watching it curiously. A big wave hurled it at last against the abutment at the Chinaman's feet. He reached down and grabbed the gunwale to prevent the following swells from smashing it against the wall. There was nothing in the boat, and the painter dragged loosely over the bow. Probably it had broken away from some vessel bound out through the Gate. Gon hauled in the rope and when the last swell went by he tied the line to a bush on shore and went back to his rock seat to think about it. He sat there until his usual time to turn in, and then with a new light on his face stole off to his bunk in the shed by the cook-house.

Kerry Flanagan, the cook-house watchman, saw him go in and bade him good night patronisingly, and

Gon responded without more than his usual unctious, a fact which afterward preyed upon Mr Flanagan's mind and caused him to raise his voice next day in the presence of his superintendent.

"To think," said Kerry, "to think he could be that unconcerned like, and then go steal the bed slats from under him and run off unbeknownst to me. It wasn't like him, so it wasn't."

But Mr Flanagan's imagination was limited, after all, by the appearance of things. Gon, after closing the door of his room on Mr Flanagan, had quietly slipped two slats from his bed, climbed out of the window and made his way stealthily down to the shore; but plunder was far from his mind. He had merely become possessed of a desire to leave the island and had taken advantage of the situation in a manner least calculated to arouse suspicion. Casting off the painter, he got into the boat and, placing the slats in the oar-clears, pulled out into the stream.

Gon had no idea where he was going. Indeed, he gave the matter not a thought. But this was characteristic. Five years' residence in a city institution and a natural Oriental capacity for irresponsibility are not likely to beget forebodings concerning the future. As might a child whose memory dated back but six years he had connected the boat with the idea of going somewhere, and having started on the journey he was content to float with the tide. Presently he found that his bed-slat oars were of greater use in guiding than in propelling the boat, for, in spite of all he could do, they would turn sidewise to the ebb. But the current runs strong between Blackwell's Island and Manhattan, and in a very little while it had carried him abreast of the long point of rocks which forms the southern end of the island. He swung out into the centre of the river, where the water runs less swiftly than in the western passage, and here in the tide streak he drew in his oars and became part of the general drift.

The miracle of his safe passage through the maze of the river's activity was not more remarkable than his wonder at the panorama which sped before his eyes. What he saw was like a picture without perspective, for the sense of comparison was beyond his grasp. He saw things which, like the Sound steamers, almost opened the doors of his memory, but admittance was always denied to him. The strain made his head ache and he ended by taking refuge in that fatalism which is as the breath of the Asiatic, and all things became as one to him. The light, the dark, the pleasure, the pain, the heat, the cold, the distance, the direction—it mattered not. He moved with the tide streak and had he returned with the changing tide it would still have mattered not. But that was not part of the general scheme of things, for at last, without the raising of an oar, his boat went shoreward to the wharves which abut on Fulton Market. It missed the piling neatly and went into the dark beneath a pier without an effort on his part to stop it. Presently it grated against the inner platform.

Now this wharf was the retreat of that informal organization known locally as the Fish Market Gang, of which one, "Bute," surnamed the Grumbler, was the distinguished head. And when Gon went in "Bute" and three brother wharf rats were even then sitting around a packing-box on the platform and having a little game of "draw" by the light of the candle. A fifth member had gone for a can of beer, and the noise of Gon's boat was mistaken by the card players for the signal of his arrival. The Grumbler had just filed a straight and the others had prospects, so no one looked up at the moment. One of them growled out:

"Get a gait on, Denny. What was ye doin'—makin' it?"

As no answer came from the belated Denny, Bute turned with a curse. Seeing Gon rising from the boat in the usual

darkness the Grumbler jumped to his feet with a yell of "Cops!" He overturned the box, and, followed by his companions, sped away into the darkness far up under the pier.

Gon got out of his boat and picked up the candle which lay spluttering on its side. Instantly there was a report and a bullet singed his head, and buried itself in the piling beyond. The Chinaman yelped like a struck spaniel and dropped the candle. The light went out. Then, with the instinct of self-preservation, he fled into his boat and pulled from under the pier. Another bullet followed him out, but he got safely into the open. Scuttling into the berth beside the wharf, he clambered up over the strongpiece into South street.

Passengers leaving a Fulton ferryboat concealed his landing from the watchman at the head of the pier, and he followed the crowd westward. Gradually the crowd thinned out and he stopped, wondering what to do next. Then the roar of an elevated train attracted him and he followed it up Pearl street. The wound on his head troubled him a little. He bound it up in a large bandanna handkerchief and trudged on. The bandanna absorbed without revealing to the casual passer-by the blood that pumped out of his wound every time he strained his neck to view the wonder of the "L" road overhead.

Once, as he looked up, a strange word babbled to his lips—a word he could not understand. It was such a curious word and it reminded him so forcibly of something or other he had heard and forgotten that he repeated it over and over again. This word was "Fan Kwei," which, translated literally from the Chinese, means foreign devil. Later on, after he had strained his neck again, another strange word came out. He stopped and repeated it—"Hsiu tsai, Hsiu tsai," again and again. "Hsiu tsai" means first literary degree. Again, when a drunkard jostled him, he said quite fiercely, "Samsu," and passed on without knowing what it meant or why he had said it. He did not notice that this increasing vocabulary was making his bandanna wetter and wetter or that the number of the words was growing with the passage of the trains. And, as there are naturally many trains passing on that road, Gon had said many strange things by the time he was ready to step out into the lawdry brilliance of Chatham Square. Standing near the old Jewish burying-ground he could see directly across the square and into the vista of Mott street, with its lanterns shaking on the balconies, its clattering throngs and its overpowering odours. There was something intensely delightful about these things, and they drew him to them as iron is drawn to a magnet.

Chinatown is the Mecca for all the Chinese of Greater New York and the smaller cities nearby, and even among his countrymen Gon might not have attracted undue attention. But it so happened that his path crossed that of little Joe Enright, the lobbyist. The stray gamine who get their living mostly by running errands for the white women of the quarter are known as lobbyist girls. From the eyes of the lobbyist little is hidden, and the condition has its sinister aspects. Little Joe was deserving of neither more pity nor less censure than the rest of his class, although he might have been

surprised to find that he deserved either. Just then he was in sore trouble. For a week he had pyramided in the New Year's gig in that quarter lottery, the Bah-ka-pu, so dear to the Celestial heart and pocketbook, and all had gone his way until this day when, with unaccountable inconsistency, his number had failed to come out. He had wandered down to the junction of Mott and Worth streets where, in the glare of the arc light, he stood looking cynically at the characters on the yellow paper ticket with the green border which proclaimed the reassuring legend that "the world is vast." Joe, whose philosophy was simple, uttered a profane truth concerning the Chinese and their ways and cast the ticket bit by bit into the gutter. Just then Gon Out stepped past in the full glare of the light.

"What a bird-lookin' Chink!" muttered the boy as, with the natural instinct of the grafter, he proceeded to dog the Chinaman's footsteps.

Gon wandered slowly along, looking with perplexity into the windows piled high with red and yellow gew-gaws of the Orient, carved teak cabinets and ornaments of jade; into the cellars hung with dried nests and cuttle-bone; at the balconies filled with sallow-faced Mongols, hurling jibes at one another in a strange tongue and breathing down the scent of rice liquor and rose wine. These indeed affected him strangely, but above all there was the powerful, all-pervading odour of the "dope," which was like a breath from the past and which filled him with vague desire.

In front of the Lee Hop Hong, which is a restaurant on the second floor of a tenement, stood a closed carriage with white horses, and on the sidewalk an expectant group of quarter riffraff. Evidently they waited for somebody to come out of the doorway.

Gon stopped and waited with the rest. Presently he felt his sleeves tugged, and turned to find a small boy who asked him in broken Cantonese if he would like to see where the lady lived, accompanying his question with a nod of his head towards the carriage. It was Joe Enright, who had marked him for a stranger and who scented possible perquisites for conducting him about; not from Gon, but from other individuals, his friends of the lottery, for instance, who might be much interested in any yellow stranger in Chinatown. Gon shook his head with his old air of perplexity, for even in the boy's jargon he felt the vibration of the lost chord. Joe judged him by other lights, and repeated his insinuations in another dialect. Gon replied in the English he had picked up on the island:

"No sabs you talk; talk all same me." Its effect upon the lobbyist was tremendous.

"Hully gee!" he gasped. "He don't understand his own language."

It came into the boy's mind that perhaps Gon was a disguised emissary of the police. But he put the thought from him after another scrutiny of that placid countenance.

"Where'd you come from?" he asked. "Islan" Ribbah. Big boat go by all time."

"Is that so?" Joe looked upon this as whole cloth, woven for the purpose of misleading him. Generally speaking, he knew the Mongolian habit of mind. He met it, therefore, with a truth which he supposed would be accepted as a lie. "Well, I come from the islan' meself, onct Orphan. See?"

"You come along wid me and I'll show you," he continued, leading Gon away from the crowd. "Dose people are waitin'

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