

“ The only thing I remember of any historical interest about your house was that during the war, bad time that, some Japanese requisitioned it, Kempeitai actually, the worst of a bad lot. Some appalling atrocities, I understand. Not first-hand of course, having been thrown into a flea pit of a camp myself, but I was told. Probably better off not knowing, wouldn't you say? Tenants at the time were said to have shipped off to an internment camp in the New Territories somewhere. Wife and child got very sick, I heard. No one ever said what happened to them. Nothing would have surprised us. Nasty business. “

Fanny knew that she had learned what she wanted to know and now she'd heard it, she couldn't ever have imagined not knowing it. The ghosts must have been there for over twenty five years. Kempeitai, the brutal and merciless Japanese military police. That would be the cause of it all.

She watched the children. They had taken Caroline's lead and were spinning around and around, their arms above them, showing off for the stranger. She called out to them, “Stop it

immediately. You'll get dizzy and be sick. Lets go look at the water and see if we can find some birds to feed our crusts to."

She gathered up the papers and cups. "Anytime you'd like to stop over, John, you'd be more than welcome. I'm quite generous with gin myself."

John Carr forced himself up. "Might just take you up on that. Would be good to see the house again. I'd like to meet your husband. Heard a bit about him, actually. Interesting young man, I hear. Going places. Well goodbye, and thanks for the sandwich. Hit the spot."

Fanny watched him walk towards his car. Then she took Drew and Caroline by the hand and walked them to the water, William following.

That night after dinner, after the children were in bed and the dishes were done, she and Peter sat out with a couple of brandies. She shared what she'd learned from John Carr. Peter nodded, "I'm not surprised. Such is the stuff of legends. That explains why they gave us the house. You know, I'm relatively junior to have received such palatial lodgings. I'd assumed it was a sign of good favor, but obviously it was backstabbing trickery. Good work, Fanny, cheers." He lifted his glass and she bounced hers against it. He continued, "Actually, I've been making some inquiries myself. I've decided to get rid of them."

"Get rid of what?"

"Whatever it is that's making people so jumpy. I've arranged for the British government to pay for a Buddhist exorcism right here. With any luck, and enough cumshaw we ought to be able to get it arranged in a week or two. Then we can get the damn servants back."

The exorcism became Peter's obsession. He thought he'd hit on the only thing that might work and he was determined to have it done properly. As far as Peter and Fanny knew, Buddhist exorcisms weren't often done in European buildings. There were

a few, very well publicized exorcisms a few years back, one at the Jockey Club and the other at a government building in Central. The only problem being, that although Peter wanted the servant network and the local Chinese to know about the ridding of the ghosts, his superior, David Mulgrave, agreed to foot the bill on one condition. "For heaven's sake, Ardel-Rhys, keep it out of the English speaking papers. God knows what sort of stampede of superstitious nonsense we will unleash, not to mention ridicule, unless we keep it muzzled. I'm not only thinking about the department, but you and your family. Fame of this kind is a two edged sword. These things can get quite out of hand, take it from me. Get it done properly, with the minimum of fuss. I don't want to hear another word about it."

This prohibition put Peter under a great deal of stress. First of all, arranging such an event was a time-consuming, difficult matter and cut into his normal duties. Secondly, the whole purpose of the show, in his opinion, was to get the word out and have people believe that *Water Music* was cleansed of its ghosts. The idea wasn't to rid the place of ghosts, because he didn't believe in them.

How to keep it all within the confines of the Chinese community? Such a thing was impossible. Servants would tell their masters and word would get out and one way or another he would be in trouble. Because he was Peter and intent on furthering himself, he had made contacts among the press. Some had even visited *Water Music* for dinner parties. He doubted that they were friends enough to let a good story go once they heard of it. In fact it would anger them that Peter hadn't tipped them off and favors in the future would be sacrificed and all his hard work cultivating them would be in vain. He had to be very careful.

The first thing that Peter did was enlist Ah Fong, his driver, who he knew would let it be known among the servants when

the threat in the house had diminished. At Ah Fong's recommendation, he hired a spirit-medium from Ting Kau, the closest fishing village. This sing-gung arrived on foot with an entourage of interested old men and women. After messing about for a while, he went into a trance. He confirmed with dramatic gestures and energetic twists and turns of his body the presence of unhappy spirits in the house.

Then Peter arranged the exorcism with the abbot of a small, relatively impoverished, monastery outside Yuen Long. Once he had set things in motion, it was impossible to stop them. There was only a small chance it wouldn't become a colony-wide sensation. It was in his favor that *Water Music* was isolated from the main pulse of Hong Kong in a place more rural than bustling.

The abbot saw this as a way to aggrandize his monastery, being asked to do an exorcism was an honor and should be publicized to the fullest. He wanted to wait several months, he said, for an auspicious date. However it became clear that he wanted to wait in order to give himself enough time to organize a really impressive spectacle. Peter began to understand why Mulgrave had insisted on a low-key operation when he discovered that the abbot was in the process of recruiting thirty monks from one of the big important monasteries on Lantau to help. Although he put a stop to it in time, it worried him.

He told Fanny, "That was a close shave. I'd envisioned a couple of bony fellows lighting a pot of incense, walking around a bit, saying a few prayers, passing the word and that be that. I had no idea it would create such a palavah."

The abbot asked for transportation and Peter arranged for the monks, and their assistants to travel, in the back of several vegetable lorries along Castle Peak Road. Peter and the abbot were to ride in Peter's car driven by Ah Fong up front. The abbot negotiated hard with Peter. He insisted on all sorts of provi-

sions being laid on and stopping at villages along the way. Peter didn't want them drawing attention to themselves in this way, but gave in when Fanny convinced him that Europeans noticing the cavalcade would think it was for a farming or fishing festival that they traveled. Peter's only requirement was that in return for the payment of a hefty sum of money and the providing of food, firecrackers and other essentials, servants would be willing to work in the house again. The abbot assured him that this would be so.

Fanny hadn't told Peter that she didn't believe that the exorcism would work. She felt that whatever it was that the ghosts were doing in the house, they would continue to do until they felt like stopping and no amount of firecrackers and pleading would stop them. On top of it all she wondered if the ghosts were Buddhist, Confucian, ancestor worshipers, or Taoist. If they were Japanese they might be Shinto, whatever difference that made. She wondered whether Roman Catholic ghosts would leave a house exorcized by Buddhists and decided not. It was more complicated than that. That particular worry need not have concerned her, for as Peter told her later, the Buddhists were not the only ones there. The Taoists didn't want to miss the fun, Peter counted five Taoist monks among the Buddhists and "who knows what else."

In the end nineteen monks showed up, with as many novices and assistants and a small crowd of onlookers, mostly drawn from the villages along the way. But there were a few smartly dressed Chinese among them who didn't look like farmers or fishers and were clearly educated and highly interested. Peter was terrified that one of them would whip out a camera and a notebook, but couldn't send them away.

Their friends, Alan and Jean Meade, insisted that Fanny and the children stay with them for the duration of the exorcism which they'd been told would last three days and two nights.

The night before the lorries of monks were due to arrive, Fanny packed suitcases. Peter stood by with a drink in his hand watching. "But Peter, this is the most interesting thing that's happened in years. I don't want to be shunted off to the side. I know these spirits better than anyone. I want to see them leave. Say goodbye or something."

Peter, although anxious that the next day would be a success, was in an unusually good mood. He answered dramatically. "Say goodbye tonight, my friend." When Fanny didn't respond he modulated his voice, "You're right. This isn't a joking matter. There will be gongs and firecrackers. A lot of them. Loud enough to scare off the living and the dead. I'll tell you all about it. You know you've got to take care of the children. I imagine the whole thing will be pretty terrifying actually." He took a swig of his drink. "The children don't appear to be nearly as unhinged as their parents by all this."

Fanny cursed the gods one more time for giving her three children instead of the two she'd bargained for. There was always someone willing to take care of two children for you, but three seemed just over the limit of what you could ask of people, no matter how well behaved the children were. More than anything she wanted to be able to watch the excitement.

As though he could read her mind, Peter said, "You know, you could give the children to my mother for a few days."

"Never," said Fanny. "It's not a good idea." They hadn't told Penelope about the exorcism for fear that she'd let the cat out of the bag at one of her parties and the whole English speaking world be rapidly informed.

Peter drove Fanny and the children over to the Meades early the next morning. He kissed them goodbye and promised to join them that evening and tell them all about it. So as not to frighten the children, they hadn't explained anything to Caroline except that they were all going to stay with Auntie Jean and

Uncle Alan for a few days.

Fanny and Jean and the children walked down to the road from the Meade's driveway when they expected the lorries to be driving by. They only waited about ten minutes before Peter's car and then the lorries appeared. Fanny desperately wanted to go watch. As the lorries rumbled by, she got a glimpse of saffron-robed Buddhist monks with amber necklaces, red robed Taoist monks and several white-robed grey bearded characters. Although Jean and Fanny didn't see much else, they heard it. From the verandah of Jean and Alan's house about two miles towards Castle Peak from *Water Music*, Fanny and Jean could hear the firecrackers all through the afternoon and night. Alan and Peter described later what they didn't hear and see. The candles and incense, the red streamers and gold calligraphy, the gongs beating and the droning chants. He and Alan left the house in the possession of the monks when they returned to the Meades, exhausted at 3am. Apparently the monks worked in shifts around the clock.

Fanny was right. After three days and two nights of rigorous work on the part of the monks and their followers, after a sizeable amount of money had exchanged hands, after a layer of thick grey ash was deposited all over the house, the spirits hadn't budged. Fanny knew it at once and knew the sing-gung spirit-medium knew it too. He wasn't telling and neither was she. He avoided her stare. He knew she knew. He was, however, in the pay of the abbot and knew which side of his bread was buttered. He pronounced *Water Music* free of spirits and disappeared quickly, to the annoyance of the abbot, who wished to exhibit him to the curious. Fanny was surprised that the abbot seemed oblivious to the ghosts, but then she knew he was the business manager of the monastery, not the one closest to the spiritual side of things.

She left the children playing outside with Jean while she

wandered through the house in a daze. It was filthy. There were food offerings everywhere, ash, shreds of red paper and candle wax. She was glad they'd rolled up the good carpets and locked up their more valuable possessions. The house smelt of incense, dried fish and smoke. It permeated the curtains in the bedrooms, it wafted from the pillows in the study. Little piles of hardboiled eggs, dried flowers and cakes had been left in corners. She knew it had been hopeless. If the servants hadn't wanted to work there before, they certainly wouldn't now that even the experts had been unable to do the trick.

She decided on a preemptive strike.

She ran outside onto the grass in front of the house where the abbot and Peter were making their goodbyes, hands clasped together, heads bowed and she interrupted. "Peter, just a minute, don't let him go. We need people to clean the house. We need them now."

He threw her an angry look. "For God's sake Fanny, not now. We will see to that later."

She didn't back off. "No Peter, get him to designate someone now. It's important."

Peter turned to look at her. "No. Absolutely not. It's not his job."

She blinked back her tears hating that she cried at the drop of a hat. "Then, my dear, you are going to have to clean the house yourself, because if he can't make them, we certainly can't. This was your idea and hasn't helped a bit."

Jean walked over from where she was standing under the trees and took Fanny by the arm. "I'll ask Ah Soh to get all the amahs to help. She'll have an army here cleaning in no time flat."

Fanny said to Jean, "You don't understand. They won't stay. The place is still as haunted as ever."

Jean said, "You don't know that. You're upset, dear. I know,

who wouldn't be. I'm ready for a good strong drink and so are you. These are the experts, dear, it must have worked. Come along, children" She gestured to Caroline, Will and Drew who were playing by the goldfish pond.

Jean's amah, Ah Soh and a number of other curious amahs came that afternoon to tidy up. It took them until six to put the house to rights, and, except for the smell, which Fanny didn't think would ever disappear, they did a commendable job. They waxed the parquet floors, they mopped, polished and shined and then they went home.

Sitting in the study that evening, Peter described it to Fanny. He was pleased with himself. He hadn't spotted anyone from the newspapers, the police or local government. It seemed to have gone off without a hitch. It had been fascinating. A good story to tell his mates some day when they drank together. He rewarded himself with expensive old brandy that he saved for special occasions.

Fanny sat quietly, listening to his self-congratulation. She thought the ghosts were listening too. She wondered if they understood English.