

The Company House

by

David T. K. Wong

“So this is the mysterious East,” John Cranshaw said to Robert Ferguson as they gazed upon the lush greens from the balcony of the Selangor Club. “It doesn’t really look very mysterious, you know.”

Cranshaw had an impressive public school voice which matched his athletic build and his patrician manner. His voice had served him well over the years. Its warm, reassuring tones had taken him to heights not altogether warranted by his commercial abilities. But in the final analysis it still proved insufficient to secure for him that seat on the main board that his wife coveted.

Cranshaw himself had not been particularly anxious, regarding it only as a pleasant way of rounding off his career. He knew it was sometimes held against him that he was too much of a gentleman in dealings with both staff and customers, which was just another way of saying he was not aggressive enough. But he was unwilling to develop a hard edge or to suppress the natural inclinations of his character for the sake of a directorship.

By the time a vacancy on the main board occurred, he had already entered middle age. When the post went to someone junior to him, he accepted the decision without fuss, though his wife was much distressed. Later, when he was offered the consolation prize of replacing old Ferguson as head of the Stapleton subsidiary in the Far East, his wife had insisted upon his accepting. So he headed for Kuala Lumpur, filled with ambivalence about having to find his feet in a foreign place so late in life.

Ferguson took a swallow of pink gin. The toll of the tropics marked his features. His brow was seamed and his skin leathery. What remained of his hair had turned grey and the bags under his eyes hung like tired remnants from a happier past. “You haven’t been out this way before, have you?” he asked.

“No. Never further than Athens till now.”

“It’s not a bad life. Company house and car, chauffeur and servants, club memberships and an expense account. It’s quite a pampered exile, actually. It’s a bit hard on the women, though. They feel cut off and are left without enough to do. When is your wife coming?”

“Not till later in the year, I’m afraid. She’s getting our youngest daughter into boarding school.” Cranshaw’s open, guileless face, with its soft grey

eyes, straight nose and strong chin, registered a fleeting look of sadness as he spoke. He missed his wife and children, for he was very much a family man.

Ferguson ordered another round of drinks, reflected for a moment on his retirement, and said: "I had best begin briefing you. We are market leaders in Malaysia, in everything from incandescent and dichroic display lamps to gas-discharge lamps. We are also strong in insulated cables and glands. Sales are healthy for accessories as well. We are holding our own in Singapore but the competition is tough in Hong Kong. Thailand looks like the next place with potential. You might spend some time to develop it. As for the rest of your bailiwick, you will simply have to mark time till their economies take off or their governments relax controls. We can go into all the projections in the office tomorrow. There are also one or two personnel problems but we can leave them till tomorrow.

"As to your personal arrangements, I have already put you up for membership in a couple of clubs. I assume you play golf? As I said, a car and a chauffeur go with the job. There is also a company house on the outskirts of town but I wouldn't live there if I were you."

"Is it horrid?"

Ferguson took another gulp of pink gin. "Yes and no. It's quite a handsome colonial building, with wide balconies on three sides and surrounded by extensive grounds. It also has separate quarters for servants.

But it is supposed to have bad joss."

"Bad joss?"

"Yes, it's unlucky, inauspicious. I think what people mean is that it's haunted."

Cranshaw chuckled, revealing a fine set of teeth. "It is amazing, you know, how stories about haunted houses do the rounds. Someone once observed there is no chamber more haunted than the human mind."

"You may well laugh, but don't you remember what happened to Morrison, Courtney and Blain?"

A puzzled look came into Cranshaw's eyes. Something stirred in his memory. He delved into those mental pigeon-holes where he kept odd bits of Stapleton history but all he could retrieve were some vague notions of illnesses and of Blain being prematurely retired because of ill health.

"I remember Blain," he said. "He had to leave on health grounds. His wife was sick too, I think. I have an impression Morrison and Courtney also suffered some misfortune."

"Misfortune! They both died. Morrison was quite a splendid chap in his way. He had tremendous energy and foresight. When everybody was concentrating on Singapore, he saw the potential of Malaysia. So he directed his efforts here. When he had established a customer base he persuaded London to move the Far

Eastern headquarters here. He argued that the move would provide expanded showroom space and cut overheads to boot.

“After he got here, he took a fancy to an old house which was on the market. The asking price was ridiculously low. He thought he was on to a bargain. So he snapped it up as a company house. Within six months of moving in he died of a heart attack. He was only forty-six.

“Then Courtney came. He moved into the house and before a year was out he too was dead. Cirrhosis of the liver. Blain followed. A year later both he and his wife were diagnosed as tubercular. Can you imagine well-to-do English folk suffering from tuberculosis in this day and age?”

“That’s really rotten luck,” Cranshaw said. He remembered suddenly the bad jokes at the time about providence creating more room at the top and felt a twinge of guilt over benefiting indirectly from those misfortunes.

“I was working in the Middle East at the time,” Ferguson continued. “They transferred me here to replace Blain. The poor chap warned me immediately about the house. He told me never to live in it because there was something queer going on. I must say that while helping the Blains to pack I felt quite ill at ease. I couldn’t put my finger on it but I felt as if formless things were lurking around everywhere. There was no point taking risks, so I rented a flat and told London that the house was too damp for my wife’s rheumatism. More than ten years have passed. I doubt if I would have lasted so long if I had lived there.”

A latent Anglo-Saxon scepticism stirred in Cranshaw but he resisted the temptation to pour ridicule on his host. Instead, he asked: “So who’s living there now?”

“Nobody. I use it to put up visiting firemen or customers from out of town. It stands empty most of the time, looked after by a housekeeper named Sim. She is someone you’ll have to see to believe. I cannot even begin to describe her. She looks as if she belongs to a Hammer horror film. Incidentally, she is one of the personnel problems I’m leaving you with.”

“What’s the matter with her? Dishonest? Difficult to control?”

“Neither, really. Sim keeps the place in very good nick. It is just that she gives some of our guests the willies. She’s probably also long past retirement. Nobody seems to know exactly how old she is, and she herself does not remember. She has been on the company payroll since Morrison bought the place. I did ask the personnel manager to see about pensioning her off, but he’s afraid she might cast a spell on him. He says she’s a bomor.”

“What’s that?”

“That’s a Malay word for witch or shaman.”

“Come on now, Ferguson! First there’s a haunted house. Now there’s a witch. Are you pulling my leg? We are electrical engineers, for

heaven's sake. We are men of science. How can we subscribe to such poppycock?"

"You haven't been in the East as long as I have. Strange things do happen here. There are gods and demons we have never even heard of. Strange customs and black magic rule people's lives. After all, the scientific attitude is one of systematic doubt. Our ignorance of certain things does not mean they do not exist."

In the conversation that followed, Cranshaw learnt that Ferguson had denied Sim salary adjustments for the previous two years in the hope of provoking her to leave. But she made no fuss. She simply carried on. Such an underhanded approach grated against Cranshaw's sense of fair play and he resolved that once Ferguson was out of the way he would make amends. His sceptical turn of mind also tempted him to try out the house.

So, a week after Ferguson's departure, Cranshaw made his way there. As he entered the long driveway he noted that the building, though lacking in a distinctive national identity, represented a not unhappy blend of Western architectural concepts with indigenous designs. Its wide balconies and tall French windows suggested an interior well insulated from the scorching heat outside.

As he approached the car porch, he saw a waiting figure clad in black and wearing a strange, dark headgear. He immediately sensed something unusual about the person. It was only after he had got out of the car that he realized what an unforgettable sight Sim presented.

Despite Ferguson's warning, he was taken aback by Sim's appearance. There was a seared black pit where her right eye ought to have been and vitiligo, that disfiguring skin disease, seemed to have bisected her face into two startling colours. The upper part was in a dusky, tropical shade, the lower a bleached, blotchy white. Those two features made her appear like some macabre creature from the nether regions.

"Hallo. My name is Cranshaw. I'm Mr. Ferguson's successor," Cranshaw said, with the practised nonchalance instilled by good breeding. At the same time he extended his right hand in greeting.

Sim looked at him warily with her single eye before taking the hand. "You are welcome, Master," she said, in a voice that was low and surprisingly gentle.

"Do you mind showing me the house?"

"As you wish, Master."

As Cranshaw followed Sim through the house, he noticed she moved with an incredible lightness, as if she were a mere shadow floating over the polished timber floors. The ground floor was clean and spacious and exuded an aroma of incense. The potted plants, the rattan furniture and the wooden-bladed ceiling fans all confirmed those images of tropical houses conjured up by the stories of Conrad and Maugham. The shuttered bedrooms upstairs were exceptionally cool, but somehow the coolness seemed to convey the unsettling quality of catacombs.

By the end of the tour Cranshaw had concluded the place was quite habitable. Sim seemed an efficient housekeeper, in spite of her appearance. She knew every little defect in the house and demonstrated that she was right on top of her job. So, being satisfied with what he had seen, Cranshaw said: "By the way, Sim, I think there has been some mix-up about your salary the last couple of years. I have asked the personnel manager to make adjustments. I hope that is satisfactory."

"Thank you, Master," Sim said. Something responsive and long dormant flickered momentarily into life in her remaining eye.

"I'm getting rather tired of living in a hotel. I might move here for a while. At least until my wife arrives. Will that be a great bother for you?"

"This is an old house, Master. No one has lived here for a long time. The plumbing needs repairs. The linen, the crockery and some other items need replacing. It will not be as comfortable as a hotel."

In detecting the hesitancy in Sim's voice, Cranshaw said: "I'm not very demanding. Let me know your requirements and I'll have someone attend to them."

Several days later Cranshaw moved into the house. He settled in comfortably enough and Sim looked after him well. She prepared excellent native dishes and he became impressed by her cleanliness and industry.

But one day he caught sight of her with her headgear off. She was absorbed in burning incense and he was shocked to see that her appearance was even worse than he had allowed for. Her head was covered by tufts of grey hair and there appeared to be scars on her scalp from which no hair grew. As she crouched in her devotions, with the smoke of incense swirling around her, she looked like a demented scarecrow engaged in some bizarre rite. Although he had long dismissed talk about her being connected with the black arts, he nevertheless suddenly realized that his wife would be quite upset having someone like Sim around the house.

In the days that followed, Cranshaw wrestled with that dilemma. He was dead set against getting rid of Sim simply because of her looks. Such disfigurement had to be tragedy enough for any woman without his adding unjustly to her woes. On the other hand, he did not want his wife's first taste of life in the East to be any more unsettling than necessary. The only solution that occurred to him was to follow Ferguson's lead in living elsewhere when his wife arrived. But that would represent a surrender of his principles and an evasion of the issue.

As he exercised his mind over the problem, he began to experience a creeping sense of discomfort and unease. Perhaps he had taken the whole thing too seriously or perhaps he was being irritated by an inability to devise a fair solution. In any case, he became less tolerant of the perpetual smell of incense around the house and his sleep became more fitful.

He would on occasion wake up in the middle of the night to strange sounds, like the sougning of wind, even though not a breath of air would be stirring outside. He also began having distressing dreams and nightmares, filled with the terrified screams of women and the cries of shadowy figures engaged in desperate combat. Sim's two-toned face would frequently intrude into those dreams but, most surprising of all, she would invariably appear with both her eyes intact.

The inability to find rational explanation for his nightmares bothered him. He could not understand why Sim should creep so persistently into his subconscious. He became increasingly convinced, however, that if there were really dark secrets about the house, then Sim would know about them. He thought of asking her but feared appearing ridiculous. In the end he decided to get on more familiar terms with her first.

So one evening, after Sim had served him an excellent curry, Cranshaw remarked: "This is very good, Sim. Thank you. Your English is good too. Are you Chinese?"

Sim gave a soft laugh. "I suppose I'm a bit of everything, Master," she said. "My father was Chinese, though he was suppose to have some Thai blood. My mother told me she was half Sakai and half Portuguese. But in this part of the world people like us can never be sure. I started working for British people when I was very young. So I had to learn your language."

"I must say you have learnt it very well. Did you work in this house before Mr. Morrison came?"

"Yes, Master. I have worked here for close on fifty years."

"Good heavens! That is a very long time! You must have gone through some distressing experiences. Mr. Morrison dying. Then Mr. Countney."

"Yes."

"Have you ever thought of retiring?"

"I have no family. I have nowhere to go. Is Master asking me to leave?"

"No, no, Sim. You can stay as long as you like. You look after me very well. But at your age, I thought the work might be too much for you."

"Master is very kind. I can manage."

"Did you have an accident? Your eye, I mean."

"Yes, Master. An accident. It happened a long time ago." A faraway look came into Sim's single eye, as if she were reliving some ancient horror. Her silence thereafter suggested she did not care to dwell on the matter. So the conversation lapsed.

A few evenings later, while Sim was serving dinner, the sudden cry of an owl so startled her that she dropped her serving spoon. A look of fear overtook her.

“Don’t be alarmed,” Cranshaw said. “It may sound repulsive but I think it’s only an owl.”

“I am sorry, Master,” Sim said, as she retrieved the spoon. “It is a fish-owl. The Malays call it the ghost bird. Its cry is a warning of calamity.”

“That must be just superstition. There are lots of owls around. If a calamity occurred each time they cried, the world would be in a terrible state indeed.”

The very next day, Cranshaw noticed that an ugly plant, with some multicoloured threads tied around its pot, had been placed in his bedroom. The plant consisted of a number of stalks with small, spiky leaves. He could not identify the plant, nor did he take to it.

When he questioned Sim about it, she replied: “I put it there for you, Master. It will keep away evil.”

Cranshaw recalled British superstitions about mistletoe and wood betony offering protection against the malice of demons. Obviously Sim must feel that he was in need of protection. That worried him, but he did not pursue the matter because he did not want to appear given to such superstitions. Nonetheless, he began wondering if Sim’s strange initiative might be connected in some way with his disturbed sleep and his unusual dreams.

About ten days later, Cranshaw was suddenly seized by violent chest pains following a luncheon. Since he had never experienced anything like it before, and since he had no history of heart trouble, he thought he must have eaten something which disagreed with him. Being a cautious man, he got the chauffeur to take him to hospital. It was a lucky precaution, for he soon collapsed from the pain. It turned out to be a case of acute pancreatitis and he had to be placed immediately under intensive care.

During the hazy periods of his tussle with that debilitating illness, when he drifted between semi-consciousness and drugged oblivion, he seemed constantly to hear the cries of fish-owls. Nightmares of desperate struggles by shadowy shapes recurred. But they had become more terrifying because the dark settings for the struggles now appeared drenched in blood.

It was several weeks before Cranshaw was discharged from hospital. He was ordered to take a further period of convalescence. But his discomfiture around the house intensified. He felt its strange chilliness more acutely than could be accounted for by his weakened state.

As he took the breeze on the balcony, or strolled in the garden, he began pondering why an ailment supposedly common only to those who drank excessively should suddenly afflict a moderate drinker like himself. Tests had uncovered no organic cause. Could the attack really be linked in some way with the cries of the fish-owls and the mysterious history of the house? Were there really happenings in the East that Westerners could never hope to understand?

One morning, he discovered that the plant Sim had placed in his bedroom had turned yellow. When he drew this to Sim's attention she became greatly alarmed.

"Master, you must leave this house. There is much evil here. You will die if you remain."

"What are you talking about, Sim?"

"You will die, Master, like Mr. Morrison and Mr. Courtney. You must leave."

"Are you telling me that something in this house caused the deaths of Mr. Morrison and Mr. Courtney?"

"Yes. I tried to warn them but they ignored me. Their wives thought me a crazy woman. You have been kind to me. So please leave to save yourself."

"I don't understand any of this. What is in this house that can harm me?"

"Evil spirits."

"Evil spirits? What are you talking about? Why should they harm me? What about you? After all, you have been here longer than any of us."

"I know the spirits and who they are. According to our beliefs, such knowledge protects me."

"What spirits are you talking about? What is going on in this house? I'm not going to leave till I know the truth."

A tear rolled down Sim's cheek from her single eye. She sighed. "Long ago I worked here as a maid," she began. "My husband was the gardener. The house was rented by one of your countrymen. He was quite an ordinary man, not at all the kind you link with passion and violence. But he got involved with a Malay girl from a nearby village, in the way that Europeans often do when they come East for the first time. She was a very pretty girl, and no one could blame him for being smitten.

"They started meeting secretly in a hut on the outskirts of the village. As time went by the master became more and more attached to the girl. Some said he behaved as if under a spell. He grew reckless and open about the affair. He even wanted a divorce, but his wife would not hear of it. Thus quarrels filled the house.

"Late one night, about two weeks before the master was due to return to England at the end of his tour, I had difficulty getting to sleep. Something troubled me. It was a sticky night, so I left my bed to cool myself in the garden. I remembered the night because the cries of fish-owls filled the air.

"As I walked around the house, I noticed that the kitchen door was open. That surprised me because I had closed it, as was my duty, before leaving for the night. When I went to shut it again, I heard some strange sounds. I became frightened. I thought thieves might have broken in.

“I woke my husband and told him of my fears. He told me I had better be sure. Otherwise the master and mistress might get angry over a false alarm. My husband picked up a heavy *parang* he used for cutting wild grass and followed me back to the kitchen. Since I was more familiar with the house, he told me to see if anything was wrong while he stood guard outside.

“I went upstairs. The door to the master bedroom was open. The bedside lamp was on. Inside the master was holding his struggling wife down on the bed while the Malay girl pressed a pillow over the face of the mistress. I could not help crying out.

“The cry alarmed them, so I turned and ran. The Malay girl picked up a pair of scissors from the dressing table and came after me. In my fear and haste, I fell down the stairs. The girl caught up with me and began stabbing at me wildly. Some of her blows cut my head but one of them took out my eye. My screams brought my husband rushing into the room. When he saw the girl about to stab me again he swung his *parang* and at one stroke lopped off her head.

“Before my husband could help me out of the house, the master came charging down the stairs like a raging bull. He had killed his wife. When he saw his lover with her head cut off, he lost all control. He went for my husband and the two fought like tigers. I never knew how long they fought because I passed out. It was only later that I learnt they had both died from the wounds they had inflicted upon each other.”

Sim broke suddenly into heavy sobs and covered her face with her wrinkled hands.

As Cranshaw listened to Sim’s terrible tale, the meaning of his nightmares dawned on him. The fierce combats, the screams of women, the blood and the images of Sim with both eyes intact all fell into place. What he had taken to the sounds of wind in fact represented the gushing of blood. Something supernatural had transported him back in time to witness the murderous happenings of so many years ago and for the first time in his life he felt a fear of something he could not put a name to.

“Oh, you poor woman!” Cranshaw said, in a voice that betrayed an unfamiliar uneasiness. “But why should the spirits of those long dead want to harm those who had nothing to do with their tragedy?”

“Because they are still being tormented by their passions and their hatreds but are left without means to do away with one another. So they take it out on the living.”

“I see. But since this house holds such terrible memories for you, why do you stay?”

“Look at me, Master. Am I the kind of woman men find attractive, even when I had both eyes? And yet I had a man who not only married me but gave up his

life for me. How can I leave this place when I know his spirit is not at peace? Until it is time to join him, the least I can do is to soothe his suffering with offerings and incense.”

Sim’s reply filled Cranshaw with a mixture of admiration, pity and excitement. It spoke volumes about the poor woman’s love and devotion. But if her explanations contained the germ of truth, then the entire rational basis of his life was being turned upside down. He recalled Ferguson’s remark about the scientific attitude being one of systematic doubt and, suddenly, he began to see the Eastern chaos of castes, creeds, cultures and conflicts in a fresh light. A new universe of mystery and speculation lay before him and he knew he only had to find the courage to plunge into it to gain rewards far richer than being on the main Stapleton board in London.

The Company House has appeared in the **Regent** magazine in Hong Kong.