

*The
Whore
Of
Lemuria*

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never appeared elsewhere.

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"Get this heap moving!" It wasn't so much the huge guy's oratory skill that made me turn the key over, as much as the hard medal pressed up against my side.

"Where too gov'nor?" I said, trying to keep my hands steady on the unfamiliar wheel.

"Straight until I tell you otherwise," he said as he pushed his fedora low on his face.

I pointed the Packard south on Amsterdam, heading towards Chinatown.

"You know why we're taking this little jaunt, don't you?"

"Something to do with the Sailor?"

"You're a bright boy, hope you can swim better than him."

I saw my opportunity, a trolley car idled at a stoplight. I angled the car toward it, hit the breaks at the last second, watching with satisfaction as the huge man sailed through the windshield, making a popping sound as he connected with the advertisement for a vaudeville act as limp as the body sliding down the side of it.

I looked down at the seat of the car, noticed the gun hadn't flown with the hood. I put it in the pocket of my over coat, hopped out of the car and walked away from the crowd gathering around the accident scene, wondering for the third time that day why I had bought the sailor that drink.

Maybe I should have waited a few blocks before giving out flying lessons. I was headed to Chinatown anyway.

It was a Saturday afternoon, and I was spending it with a half dozen dark

beers at McSoorleys. The sailor next to me looked into his empty wallet, cursed. I ordered another round, for the both of us. I'd hit an exacta at the track earlier in the morning, had a little walking around money for the first time since I had lost my job as an insurance investigator nearly six months ago.

He was one of those guys who stopped aging from the age of twenty to forty; sandy colored hair, bleached dry by the salty ocean wind. I don't know how I knew he was a sailor. He wasn't wearing a uniform or anything. Maybe it was the slight smell of ocean that hung to him like cheap perfume after a night in a New Orleans brothel.

"Thanks for the drink mister," he said, sipping the foam off. He held out his hand. I noticed he was missing the last section of his middle finger.

"Name's Reilly, used to work in insurance, but with the way things are..."

"I know what you mean. I've been stuck in this city for weeks waiting for a ship, I feel lucky that I've got my flop paid up for a week."

We had a few more each before he took a small object out of his pocket, undid the cloth it was bundled in. "Do you know where I can unload this?"

It was a small idol, greenish with some small red flecks covering it at irregular intervals. It depicted a woman, dressed in a simple short one-piece dress. Her eyes, wearing a look of wanton expectation, had a vague Oriental cast to them. Her hands were behind her neck, unclasping the one button that held the dress together on her ripened body. If the sculptor had waited a second, he could have put the modeling clay away, broke out the paintbrush and added a few pages to the Kama Sutra.

He handed it to me. "I picked it up at a bazarre in the Philippines. The guy who sold it to me said it's called the 'Whore of Lemuria', whatever that means."

I don't know what compulsion overcame me, maybe something about the almost obscene curves of the statue, or the feeling of the cool weight in my hands. In any event, I reached into my wallet, took out two fins -separating them from their last surviving brother- and handed them to the Sailor.

"Thanks bud," he said as he pocketed the money and pushed himself away from the bar. "I'm going to take a run to the automated cafeteria on Times Square."

I wrote my address on a bar napkin and told him we should get together for drinks some time. I ordered another drink and happened to look out the doorway as another patron was pushing in. The Sailor was talking to a woman on the sidewalk. I couldn't make out her features from my position, but I could see a look of vague surprise on his face.

I was stumbling to my flop on Houston Street, feeling pretty tight, when a Packard pulled up next to me. A large man got out of the passengers seat and grabbed my elbow.

"Better remove the catchers mitt before I take offense," I said.

He slugged me, hard in the face with the petrified log that passed for his hand. "If I'd have plugged ya you'd be leaking," he said, as he muscled me into the back seat of the machine. At least I assume he muscled me into the back of the machine because that is the only way I could have gotten there in my condition.

When I returned from my little mental side trip to the Jurassic, I noticed the Asian man sitting next to me. He was dressed in a dark suit, immaculately tailored. His hair was full of some type of expensive pompadour gel, and he had his hat, a pistol and his hand in his lap.

"MacDargough Reilly; and I thought my illustrious ancestors had weird names," he said as he ran his spare hand through his hair.

"And you are...."

"I think it would be a little more karmic if I asked the questions, Oh mighty

Stalker of the Depraved." He pulled a silver cigarette holder out of the interior of his suit and lit two, handing one to me. "Left a perfectly good job on a New Jersey Police force to investigate insurance fraud in the big city."

"There was good money in it before the crash," I said around the cigarette.

"Look at you now. It's none of my business, but maybe you should shave once in a while, pay some attention to your hygiene. A man whose out of work should look his best, especially when he's interviewing for a job."

"You offering one?"

"You got references?"

"I don't know if I can work for you. I'd have a hard time keeping my hands off your secretary," I said, pointing the cigarette to the thug driving us around.

"You were talking to a Sailor, at that Irish bar on East 7'th Street. Friend of yours?"

"Never met him before. He looked like he was more down on his luck than I am, so I bought him a couple of beers."

He took a large wallet out of his jacket, unfolded it, handed me a sawbuck. "I can double it if you give me a good address."

I put the bill in my pocket. "Sorry, I don't know where he lives. I'd try the merchant marine hiring hall if I was you. He mentioned he was looking for work."

The car pulled up in front Dunwich Arms, the apartment building I was in imminent danger of being evicted from. The Asian man handed me an expensive looking embossed card, with 'Kinitchi Wong, Importer' written on it. "If you run into him, make sure you get a hold of me."

I stepped out of the car and began the three-flight walk up to my flat.

"And Reilly," I looked back at Wong as he leaned against the top of his car, "you might be a little too small for a city of this size. I'd seriously consider moving back out to the sweet land of Jersey if I was you."

Someone shaking my shoulder brought me to a semi state of consciousness, a glass full of water thrown on my face finished the job.

"Finney my lad, I'm surprised walking three flights up hasn't burst your overgrown heart. How'd you find me?"

Detective Seamus Finbar was sitting in the chair next to my bed, wiping his oversized melon with a handkerchief. "You should lock your door before you crash. I just followed the smell of the alcohol you left from the speakeasy."

Finny and I had worked on a couple of insurance cases together, back in the days when I was swimming in the shekels. "I'd offer you a drink, but you're on the job."

He picked up a rocks glass full of rotgut off the nightstand and took a swill. "I hope you don't mind. I kind of helped myself."

I got up out of bed, gauged the strength of my hangover, poured a double for myself. "If it's about that sawbuck I owe you...."

"You'd better get dressed. It's not about the scratch."

The flophouse where they found the Sailor's body wasn't that bad. That's what I kept telling myself, mentally preparing for the day, probably within two weeks, when I'd be occupying one just like it.

One of the detectives who worked with Finny uncovered the Sailor's face. "At least he died with a smile on his face."

He might have been smiling, but he didn't look happy.

Finny handed me a bar napkin with my address written on it in my own handwriting. "We found this on him."

Finny's partner pulled the cover back over Sailor's head. "His lungs were filled with water. Salt water."

"Salt water; what do you make of that?"

"Best I can make out, he drowned himself in the East River-we've had a lot of that recently with the way the country is these days-then he walked up 42nd Street, climbed up the two flights to his flop, though of something funny, and passed out on the floor right where you see him," Finny said.

"I don't know him all that well. I met him at McSoorly's yesterday and stood him up to a few drinks. Some Asian guy named Kinitchi Wong was asking around about him."

Finny and his partner exchanged glances. "Kinitchi 'the Korean' Wong?"

"He doesn't look Korean."

"He isn't." Finney said. "He's half Japanese and half Mandarin. The first flat-foot who ever brought him in, at the tender age of twelve, figured a Korean was what you get when you mix a Jap and a Chink. The name kind of stuck. He comes from quite a pedigree. His father was an enforcer for one of the tongs in San Francisco. They had a turf war with a Yakuza gang in LA. He was sent down to kill a female assassin working for the Japs. They fell in love, killed everyone in both gangs and consolidated the Oriental underground on the West Coast for a couple of years. Rumor has it they sent junior out East to finish up his education, keep an eye on their east coast operations. I think they sent him out here because they were afraid of him."

"I suppose I've got to go downtown with you," I said.

"Don't sweat it Reilly, I'm extending a professional courtesy, just don't stray too far."

I was walking down the street towards a trolley stop when I noticed a large figure walking towards the Sailor's flop come towards me on the opposite side of the road. It was the Korean's hired thug. I idled up to a newsstand and picked up a paper, using it as a prop to watch the guy. He stopped short when he saw the police cruisers in front of the flophouse. I put the paper down as the thug rooted around in his pocket while heading to a pay phone on the street.

I gave the newsie a nickel for the paper and hustled across the street, taking up a position in the phone booth next the one the thug was using. I could only pick up a few words from the bustle of the street, but I got the impression that he was surprised that there was a crime scene before he arrived to create the circumstances requiring police tape.

I had nothing better to do after ringing the bulls and leaving a message for Finney about what I had overheard and my suspicion that, whatever crimes the Korean and his thug were involved in, the Sailors unconventional drowning was not one of them, so I stopped in at McSoorly's for a mid-afternoon nightcap.

Mid afternoon soon morphed into early evening, and I was tight again when I felt the person who had taken a seat next to mine tug me on the arm.

I turned around to face a dark overcoat and a low-slung hat hiding any facial features.

"You were a friend of the Sailor's, right?" The voice was husky, accented with a flavor I had never heard; and feminine.

"You must be mistaken Miss..."

"We were close, the Sailor and me. He had something of mine, and I want it

back. I think he may have given it to you."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I met this Sailor person once, and all he's given me is a case of indigestion."

"What's this, a dame?" The bartender had come over to pour me another one.

"Sorry Miss, no woman allowed. How'd you get in here?"

"Nothing's changed in the last 3,000 years," the woman said. "Is there someplace we can talk?"

"I crash a few blocks from here, we could go there," I said as I put some money up on the counter.

I could hear the bartender berating the bouncer about letting a woman in as we walked out the door. The bouncer looked at us, confused, and said there was no way the woman had snuck in on his shift.

It had been a long time since I had a dame up to my place, and since I thought it would still be a couple of ice ages till that happened again, the place was a mess. I was too drunk to care though.

I poured us a couple of rocks glasses, and sat down in the armchair across from her, seated on my couch.

"You can take off some of the clothes, sister, I've seen a woman or two who wasn't dressed for Byrd's Expedition in my lifetime."

She took a sip from her rocks glass, tilted her hat back a little. "The object I'm looking for is a small statue, greenish, depicting a woman."

"The Whore of Lemuria," I said.

She paused her drinking. "That's what he told you it was called? What a crude

little man."

"The title seemed appropriate to me." I stumbled out of the chair, sat down next to her on the couch.

"It's a religious artifact, and it depicts a temple maiden about to administer one of the ancient rights of Lemuria."

"If they did stuff like that at my church I'd probably go more than once a year at Christmas." I removed her hat, saw long straight dark hair, olive skin and the slightest hint of Asian ancestry in her eyes.

She put her hand on my cheek. Her expression was impossible to read. "Please; the idol."

"He showed it to me, but took it with him when he left the bar." I don't know what compelled me to lie to this girl I didn't know.

She leaned in to me, our lips connected. The first couple of seconds were swell. She tasted good, slightly salty, reminded me of a nice breeze coming off the ocean. Then the salt taste increased, overwhelming my senses. She grabbed the back of my head with both of her hands and opened her mouth up fully. My mouth began filling with water, salt water. I was paralyzed, powerless. I tried to keep the increasing volume of water out of my throat, but it was no use. I felt the first drops of the water entering my lungs when I heard a loud knocking on my front door.

The woman released me, and I fell to the floor, coughing the seawater out of my lungs.

"Reilly, are you OK?" It was Finney. He knocked louder.

I could hear the woman scrambling around my apartment, throwing things onto the ground. I retched up some more salt water, tried to say something, some more salt water came out.

"I'm breaking the door down Reilly, if anyone is in there with you, I'm coming in with my gun ready."

I got to my knees, just in time to see the woman open the window and climb out on my fire escape. Finny came through the door; gun at the ready as promised. I managed to get to my feet, and although I was still incapable of speech, grabbed him by his arm and dragged him over to the window.

We both looked out. The woman was walking rapidly down the street, glancing nervously from side to side. A Packard jumped the curb and came to a stop right in front of her. A dark figure got out of the back seat, and punched the woman square in the chopper. The figure leaned down and hoisted the woman onto his shoulders before she had a chance to get acquainted with the pavement. He deposited her, almost gently into the back seat before climbing into the passenger's seat.

I went over to my nightstand, opened the door. "She's gone, the Whore is gone." I said.

Finney said, "Is that such a bad thing? She sure made a mess out of your apartment."

The thug had pulled up in his Packard after I was through with Finney at the police station. He had deposited me in the drivers seat, forced me to drive, and wound up looking like something you'd have served up for free at a soup kitchen for his efforts.

I glanced down at the address on Kinitchi Wong's card as I hailed down a cab. I had one stop to make before my trip to the Forbidden City though. I told the cabbie to keep the meter running, letting it eat up what remained of my pennies, as I searched the street in front of my apartment. Wong wouldn't have sent his boy to nick me if he had what he was looking for.

I found it between a pair of garbage cans just under my fire escape. She must have spotted the Packard the second she stepped off the fire escape and wedged it

there. I picked up the Whore of Lemuria and put it in my overcoat.

I always find it hard to believe that I'm still in the US whenever I stop down at Chinatown for a cheap meal, or a night at Hop Sing's Pagoda of Pleasure back in the day when I was rolling in the loot. I had a hard time finding Wong's noodle warehouse, most of the signs were in Chinese and most of the people acted like English was a foreign language when I stopped anyone for directions.

I watched the entrance for a while after I finally tracked it down. He had a guy there, just behind the door. And one of the bums who was warming his hands in a trash can fire off to the side looked a little too clean to be a legit hobo. I walked around the back just in time to see a truck back up to the loading dock.

I leaned down low and snuck up the opposite side of the truck. The driver hopped up on the back of the truck and knocked hard on the roll down door. He sung some song in Chinese for the couple of seconds it took for someone from the warehouse to open up the loading dock door. I waited for the driver to unlock the truck's door before I hoisted myself up on the truck's bed, pointing the gun at the driver and the warehouse man. I motioned them into the back of the truck and snapped the lock.

I found her tied to a chair in an office overlooking the warehouse floor. The room was dark, except for the bright light from a lamp focused on her face. The over coat had been removed, and her green dress torn up in places, but she didn't look too bad for

wear.

I opened the door, and looked down at her. "Nice trick with the water sister, how'd you manage it?"

"Untie me you idiot, Wong and his goon will be back here any second." I went behind the chair and started working on the ropes.

I heard someone coming up the stairs from the warehouse behind me. I had just enough time to duck into the closet next to the large desk. I left the door opened a crack so I could see.

Wong and one of his thugs, could have been the twin brother of the one I left limp as a noodle on the other side of town, stood facing the girl down. Wong sat down in a chair across from the girl. The thug took off his suit jacket, rolled up his shirt-sleeves.

"We've been almost gentle with you so far Miss, but our patience is coming to an end. I require the idol, now." Wong said.

"It's mine and you'll never have it."

"We might never have the idol, but we'll have you," the thug said. I had enough when I heard the girls dress ripping. I opened the closet door and pointed the gun at the thug.

"Hand's off Piltdown Man." He released the girl, took a step back.

"This is none of your concern Reilly, why don't you run along to Jersey while you still have use of your legs," Wong said. I looked over at him, and that's when his thug showed some initiative and gave me the bums rush. I managed to squeeze off a few rounds and put some much-needed iron in his diet.

I turned around to cover Wong, only to be tackled by him. The force of 200 pounds of Asiatic muscle knocked the gun out of my hand. Wong and I rolled around the floor for a couple of seconds before he reached into my overcoat and pulled out the Whore of Lemuria, and bashed it against my delicate hat blocker, adding a couple of

new dots of red to it's worn green surface.

I didn't really lose consciousness, but I wouldn't have been raising my hand to answer any questions in Mrs. Lehane's third grade class either.

Wong held the idol up to the light. The expression on his face matched the look of wanton expectation on the idol's. "At last, the secret of immortality in my grasp."

I propped myself up on my elbows just in time to see a pair of feminine hands grab Wong by his head and spin him around. The statue fell to the ground, as the woman pushed Wong up against a file cabinet, and place her mouth over his.

I watched in helplessness as Wong drowned in the woman's embrace. She picked up the idol after Wong's lifeless body fell to the ground next to the gun. The woman lifted it over her head and began chanting in a strange language. A preternatural light engulfed the woman and the idol. The lamp in the room flickered and I felt the hair on the back of my head pick up.

After a few seconds of this, she dropped the idol and approached me with a contented look on her face. "At last my suffering is over." I tried to scramble away from her, but I guess the scaffolding was still erected around my belfry.

She crouched down in front of me and said, "Even after all these centuries I want one last taste of life." She placed her lips on mine and kissed me. There was no taste of salt this time, no pressure of water filling my lungs. I kissed her back and we both flopped onto the hardwood floor, entwined in her last embrace.

Finney and his boys found me in the morning, lying on the floor of Wong's office, an inch of salt water covering the floor. The Whore of Lemuria was nowhere to be found.

The End