

The Black Cat

Copyright, 1901, by The Shortstory Publishing Co.



September 1901

Gentlemen Unafraid.

Florence Guertin Tuttle.

Born Tired.

James D. Ellsworth.

The Invisible City.

Frank Lillie Pollock.

The Strayed Finger.

John Walcott.

The Man Who Found Zero.

Ion Arnold.

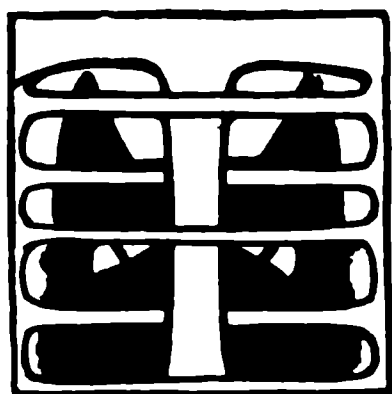


No. 72. Copyright, 1901, by The Shortstory Publishing Co.

THE SHORTSTORY PUBLISHING CO 144 HIGH ST BOSTON, MASS.

Born Tired.*

BY JAMES D. ELLSWORTH.



THE Pacific Mail Steamship *Peking*, which sailed for Hong Kong last month, carried three hundred and forty-seven passengers of various nationalities. In that whole number there was one, a Chinaman, who left no friends behind, and yet he will be missed, from Maine to California.

Ah Wong, the exceptional man among several hundred ocean voyagers, would be exceptional in any community on the face of the globe. He carried with him, in letters of credit, a fortune that will keep him in luxury for the rest of his days, earned without work in a unique profession which he invented himself. He belongs to a race that has long been credited with a peculiar aptitude for ways that are dark and tricks that are vain, but Ah Wong's ways have been so much darker than those of his fellow-countrymen that he is the most cordially hated man that has ever been smuggled over the Canadian border.

Ah Wong is the son of an actor, since dead, who performed in one of the minor theatres of Canton installment-plays that lasted for a month. Ah Wong is also the grandson and great-grandson of actors, and from his earliest youth has shown marked ability in the same line, as he made devil faces at his mother, frightening her half out of her diminutive shoes, before he was a year old. He soon became unpopular with his family, who regarded him as having been born tired, but it was thought that his inherited talents could be counted upon to provide handsomely for his parents in their old age. But disappointment attended their expectations at every step. When the boy was old enough to go to school he began to limp so badly that he had to be carried in the arms of a servant. Soon afterward he appeared to be subject to sudden attacks of blindness, so that all thought of providing him with a regular education had to be indefinitely postponed. Then his father, in his leisure time, undertook to teach him by

* Copyright, 1901, by The Shortstory Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

rote the text of the ancient Celestial tragedies, and would harangue at the top of his voice for hours together. It was all breath wasted, for after the first few words Ah Wong's hearing would become blunted, and he would sit in passive somnolence, with a curtain of silence between himself and the noise of talk.

Ah Wong's stomach seemed to be the only part of his anatomy that remained in good working order, and in this the family rejoiced, believing that if his appetite remained good, the time would come when he would outgrow his physical defects.

Many years passed, the actor-father was gathered to his fathers, and Ah Wong, instead of being a prop for the support of his widowed mother, was a troublesome burden. He was now believed to have been born lazy. He was more unpopular than when he made devil faces at her as a baby, so his mother, exercising her right as head of the house, called a family council to sit upon his case. The wise old lady strongly hinted that it might be well to put him out of his misery permanently. Possibly she might have found some one to hold a sword, if he would consent to fall upon it, but the uncles and cousins had another plan. They took up a collection among themselves and with this money Ah Wong was sent across the ocean to America. Doubtless he would be well cared for there, and in any event he would be unable to return.

It all turned out as they had said. Ah Wong was unloaded in Boston from the "underground railway" like a lump of lead. Taken to some distant relatives, he ate their rice, drank their tea and smoked their tobacco for several years, and earned the title of the laziest man in the world. When told that he must go to work he was too lazy to refuse, but somehow he never did the work. When he was kicked out of one store he quietly settled himself in another, and when his distant relatives said disagreeable things, his hearing became dulled so that he was not disturbed. His needs were few and the burden of his food and tobacco was not a heavy one, but his perpetual idleness was a constant annoyance to his cousins, who at last lost patience and began to talk of sending him back to China.

Then the deafness left Ah Wong. He did not want to hear that talk, but in spite of his infirmities he could not help it. With China came thoughts of falling on swords and all that sort of

thing, so he promptly told his cousins that he would soon be able to do something for himself, but he did nothing until Sam Chin got caught pounding a neighbor with a flat-iron and was sure to get six months in the house of correction. Sam Chin could not afford to waste so much time, as it would mean the loss of all his laundry customers. While he was out on bail, awaiting trial, he said that he would rather pay a lazy Chinaman five hundred dollars to go to jail than go himself. With laughs and jeers Ah Wong was advised to apply for the place, and when he gravely nodded his head his cousins laughed till they doubled up like jack-knives. Nevertheless, it was all arranged, though the price was only half of what Sam Chin had jokingly offered.

When the day of the trial came, Ah Wong was in the clothes of the other, the painted face of Ah Wong was like the face of Sam Chin and the deception was not discovered. Ah Wong was pleased with his bargain when the money was paid and securely hidden, for six months is not long in a man's life and he was told that in the house of correction a good bed and plenty of food are provided. He had not been told that Sam Chin's sentence demanded hard labor, and for the first time in his life, to his disgust, Ah Wong had to work. From this work came thought, angry thought at first, but calm and satisfying afterward, because before the six months were up he had invented a new profession.

When released, he asked his cousins to write to New York, San Francisco, Denver, and other cities, to say to the leading Chinamen that Ah Wong would go to jail in the place of other men for not less than a thousand dollars and expenses. His cousins laughed again and said that Ah Wong had learned to work, but he said nothing about his secret invention.

In two months he went to Providence, where Yee Get was arrested with smuggled opium in his jacket. The sentence was a year at hard labor, but when it was interpreted to Ah Wong he only smiled broadly. He did not smile in the jail, but when the time came for him to go to work, he was found all doubled up with some strange disability, and both wrists and one shoulder were out of joint. The doctor reduced the dislocations and sent the prisoner to the hospital to recuperate. The food was better in the hospital, the bed was better, and Ah Wong recovered — as slowly

as he could. When at last he was sent back to work the strange sickness attacked him again and the joints of his arms were again dislocated. He never left the hospital after that, and, as he had become a burden upon the authorities, he was released in nine months, earning his thousand dollars more easily even than he had expected. This time when he returned to his cousins he found that he was wanted in Philadelphia and San Francisco at the same time, and he kept both men waiting until the price was bid up to three thousand dollars. At the beginning of his professional career he was so thin that he could only take the place of laundrymen and laborers in the penitentiaries, but with arms out of joint he lived on the fattest of hospital fare, and as he gained weight he took the sentences of rich merchants who were able to pay more. He permitted himself to be tried for any crime, only drawing the line at murder cases, because, as he said, he was now a rich man and could not afford to leave his money.

Last fall he decided that he was rich enough to retire. He had served in twenty jails and as he could not do his contortion specialty in any one of them a second time, his field of usefulness had become restricted to cities where there were but a few, and those generally law-abiding, Chinamen. Therefore he decided to return to the land of his fathers to enjoy the fruits of his laziness, and was planning to reach there in time for the celebration of the Chinese New Year. At the last moment, however, he was summoned to New York by a letter from a man who was about to be deported for being illegally in the country and whose rich friends were willing to pay liberally for a substitute to be sent back to China in his place. The new arrival, then out under heavy bail, was a comparatively thin man, but Ah Wong agreed to take his place for two thousand dollars and reduce his weight till he fitted the other's clothes. So Ah Wong enjoyed the New Year's festival on a starvation diet of rice and water. When, with his snug fortune, he embarked on the *Peking*, his passage paid by the Government of the United States, he was awaited by a patient little almond-eyed bride, secured through the good offices of his repentant family.

