

The Pink Pagoda

**Isabel Ecclestone
Mackay**

**Illustrated by
Charles L. Wrenn**

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THE PINK PAGODA

Would It Know Your
Heart's Desire?

By ISABEL ECCLESTONE MacKAY

ILLUSTRATED BY CHARLES L. WRENN

This is Ewing's story. If you ask me to place it, I should say that it belongs properly to the Middle Ages. Told a few centuries ago, its interpretation would have presented no difficulty. Telling it now is a different matter. Ewing himself believed it. He said he had to. But not in any whole-hearted way. This may be accounted a point in its favor, since the ordinary victim of delusion is always absolutely sure.

Ewing accepted what his senses compelled him to accept. But his mind was open. Short of distrusting his own sanity, he would have been profoundly thankful for any reasonable way of getting around his facts. He wanted the truth. But, toward the end, he adopted the attitude that truth did not matter. Truth or fantasy, the results were the same.

If I were to use Ewing's real name, you would probably recognize it. It is a name which has become widely known upon this continent—and that quite outside of his own profession, which is that of medicine. Many of his cures, notably those which marked the beginning of his astonishing career, were of that class whose “news value” endears them to a lively Associated Press. They were eagerly “written up” and sent broadcast over an admiring country.

But in the days when I knew him first, Ewing was an unknown young doctor, fresh from college, with a keen mind, a burning ambition and a cold determination to use the one to satisfy the other. He was utterly keen upon his chosen work, holding that, of all the professions, medicine is the most capable of inspiring devotion as well as the most lavish in rewarding the devotee. He was, indeed, almost naïve in his desire to be great, refusing to consider any other fate as remotely possible, yet not less sincere in real devotion to his calling because of an implacable determination to use it as a knife to the world's oyster.

With this definite end in view his course of action was also definite. Since a reputation was what he wanted, it was necessary to stay where reputations were made. No small-town practice for Henry Ewing, no going out west. He had, I suppose, a belief in his star. At any rate my last memory

of him in his pre-famous state is one of excellent cheerfulness under difficulties.

My absence from this country for five years explains why I did not follow the beginning of my friend's success. Travelling, as I was, in out-of-the-way corners of the earth, I did not attempt to keep up ordinary correspondence. Naturally, I came home to many surprises. One of these was the continual mention of a new physician of note whom I wonderingly identified with the Ewing I had known. He had, it seemed, climbed high in five years. I scented the story of some extraordinary chance. But travellers lose the emotion of surprise and, as no one seemed aware of anything strange in this young man's sudden prominence, I allowed my mild curiosity to wait until it could be satisfied by Ewing himself.

I had been too rushed since my return to look him up and our reunion was a chance meeting in a busy street. We were, I think, delighted to see each other and exchanged the appropriate exclamations. Ewing, I saw, had all the outward signs of prosperity, tempered by good taste. I congratulated him heartily.

"I have heard of your notorious doings, you see," I said. "All that remains is for you to tell me how you did them. 'Famous in five years' would be a fitting head-line for your remarks."

It was not intended as a question. One does not expect successful men to explain how they "did it" to enquiring friends on street corners, a smile and a modest shrug would have been answer enough. But Ewing did not smile, nor shrug. Instead, he replied quite seriously: "Three years—not five. Perhaps I may tell you some day." And then abruptly he changed the subject.

I was really curious now. But it would have been useless to question. We talked of other things, and after this first meeting, our friendship sprang healthily from its old roots. We saw much of each other, but I never asked for the promised story. Confidence between friends is a ticklish thing. It must be given, not sought.

Ewing gave me his in the autumn of the same year, just after his sensational cure of a pulp-wood millionaire. The millionaire had been given up by every specialist in Europe and was feeling very much annoyed about it. So when Ewing cured him he made rather a fuss. The news was being talked over in the club when I heard of it, and I went home in a fine glow from listening to much admiring comment, to find the hero of it waiting for me in the library.

He did not look like a man who had just cured a millionaire. He looked more like a man who could have murdered one. I interrupted my congratulations to tell him so.

Mack,” he said, without preliminaries, “I’d like to tell you that story now. I’ve come to the point where I must tell someone, and you are the only man I am not afraid to tell.”

“That’s flattering!”

“You don’t believe it—yet it happens to be strictly true. I am counting on your cool judgment and your knowledge of me to save you from the obvious (and easy) explanation of insanity.”

I smiled. It would have been difficult, indeed, to couple Ewing and insanity.

“Go ahead,” I told him. “But remember, I have been off the map for five years. You will have to begin at the beginning.”

“If I know the beginning myself, I’ll give you facts. If I seem inclined to theorize, stop me. We can discuss theories afterwards. Not that there are any, unless—” he let his voice trail off and recaptured it with visible effort.

“I think I can date what I have to tell you from a night three years ago this month. I had been sticking things out here in the city, determined not to budge until success came. It showed small signs of coming. But I was hopeful and I worked hard. One night when I was busy even later than usual, the telephone rang. It was a call to an exclusive part of the city. The voice on the ’phone addressed me merely as ‘Doctor’ and requested me to hurry. It was evident that there had been a mistake but I was given no time to correct it. And naturally, I was not at all loath to go.

“This was how I came to attend Madame Adrien Lycette—chance or fate, call it what you will.

“I found my patient in a dim and gorgeous room, propped up with pillows in the midst of a huge four-poster. She was very small, very vital, very old and so near death that an unconsidered movement would have opened the door to that strange spirit which still looked, alert and birdlike, from behind her too-bright eyes.

“‘Monsieur is not the doctor of my intention,’ said she in a thread-like voice. Adding instantly, with great politeness, ‘It is not monsieur’s mistake. And it is of small importance. Monsieur is doubtless a physician of intelligence. And finds me in immediate need. I am satisfied.’ I bowed, and she continued.

“‘It is necessary that I remain a reasoning being for some small time longer. Twenty-four hours will be sufficient. Monsieur can arrange this—is it not so?’

“She was dying, as I saw at once, from a well-defined form of heart trouble. There was little anyone could do. But, fortunately, I had observed this particular disease intimately and knew the possibilities. After a brief examination I told her that by use of a certain stimulus I could assure her of consciousness for the twenty-four hours she required. After that—‘After that it is no matter,’ she stopped me with some impatience. ‘Understand it is not death which distracts me, Monsieur. It is the time death chooses which I find inconvenient. I can not be hurried. It is not my temperament.’

“She spoke of death as of some officious menial who must be shown his place.

“‘Very well,’ I said. ‘I can help you to hold on. But there must be no excitement. The slightest movement, even, might prove fatal.’

“Her birdlike eyes snapped at me.

“‘That, too, is understood. Others besides Monsieur possess intelligence. And death is not exciting. One has doubtless died before—it is banal. But give me nothing which will obscure the faculties. I have sent for people. I must see them. There are papers also which I shall trouble Monsieur to select from my *escritoire*—and, afterwards, to post, if he will be so kind. It will be necessary that Monsieur shall remain within call for the twenty-four hours. Monsieur is not too busy?’

“I assured her that I was not too busy. And settled down to my long watch. Her eyes, brightest and blackest of eyes, observed me narrowly as I did what I could to make her more comfortable. She had a very complete understanding of her own case and was pleased to approve.

“‘Monsieur is clever,’ she said. ‘Fate has selected Monsieur with discrimination. It is permitted that I confess—yes? One’s brain may move, though one’s hand may not?’

“There was no reason why conversation should harm her. So I encouraged her to talk, keeping up my own end as well as I might. And a most interesting old heathen she proved to be. I have never met anyone so utterly selfish, nor so entirely willing to admit it. Her philosophy of life, as she said, had been simple.

“‘I have believed,’ she told me, ‘in finding out what I have most desired and in obtaining those things. It is not impossible. Not at all. If one is single-minded one may obtain. It is a law. True, one must pay sometime. That also is a law. But so that one pays gracefully it is a trifle.’

“‘You do not think that one may find the bill too heavy?’ I asked.

“Her bright eyes blinked.

“‘Monsieur tempts me to the shrug of the shoulder which is forbidden. For how shall it be that one can pay too heavily for what one truly desires? Only if the desire be small, shall the payment outweigh it.’

“At the moment this seemed true enough. Perhaps she saw agreement in my face for she went on with satisfaction.

“‘It is plain that Monsieur is not of those poor, cautious souls who desire not fortune’s favors. And Monsieur can desire greatly. It is not so?’

“‘Yes,’ I said.

“‘Think then of that desire. Is there a price too high to pay for it?’

“‘Perhaps not,’ I said indulgently. ‘That is, if I could be sure that the payment should fall to me, but—’

“She interrupted with a low cackle of laughter.

“‘Do not proceed,’ said she, ‘for certainly no man can choose the coin he pays in. That is for fate. And fate is, of all things, a humorist. It is fate, I think, who brings you here to-night. Approach me, my friend.’

“I came close to the great bed and, since gesture was impossible, she directed me with her eyes to a carved cabinet which stood upon the opposite side of the room. It displayed one ornament only—a beautiful delicate thing which shimmered gently against its carven background.

“‘Look at it carefully, my friend,’ she said. ‘It is the “Pink Pagoda.”’ I fancied a touch of awe in her voice.

“Crossing the room, I lifted the ornament from the cabinet. It was indeed a lovely bit. A Chinese pagoda in pink porcelain. It was very ancient, I think,

though I know little of such things. Its color alone was delightful—a transfused bloom, as if the porcelain blushed. Sitting in the doorway of the lowest storey of the pagoda was the figurine of a Chinaman—tiny but perfect. His hands were hidden in his flowing sleeves. He stared straight before him with bland eyes.

“‘Monsieur admires?’ asked the voice of Madam.

“‘Very much,’ I said. ‘It is rather wonderful, I think.’

“‘Then Monsieur will be pleased to accept it as his fee?—I offer it, you perceive, in exchange for my twenty-four hours?’

“I turned in amazement. But the old lady was very much in earnest.

“‘Why—’ I stammered, ‘I—that is—’

“‘There is no need for thanks,’ she interrupted tactfully. ‘I do what pleases me—as I always do. There will be Monsieur’s accustomed bill also. But anyone can repay with money. Only I can bestow—the Pink Pagoda.’

“There was a slight pause before that last word and Madam’s voice dropped upon them. I felt embarrassment.

“‘I am afraid,’ I said, ‘that the ornament is somewhat valuable.’

“A ghost of a smile twitched her lips.

“‘Only from one who gives to one who takes,’ said Madam blandly. ‘In any other way its value departs.’ Then as I still looked undecided, ‘I fear I shall excite myself if Monsieur hesitates.’

“I placed the ornament upon the table. ‘And why?’ I questioned.

“‘Because I am an autocratic old woman, my friend. You please me. I am pleased with anyone who combines assistance with discretion. You give me the thing which is the one favor more I ask of life and refrain from comment. In return, I bestow—your heart’s desire.’

“I smiled at this.

“‘Your gift is charming,’ I said. ‘But my heart’s desire is built of sterner stuff.’

“Madam chuckled. ‘We shall see, we shall see!’ murmured she, like a benevolent old witch. ‘No,’ as I looked at her anxiously, ‘I am not wandering. And I am not mad. Of whatever stuff your heart’s desire may be, the Pink Pagoda will know it. You shall see, my friend! Only remember,

there is but one desire which is truly of the heart and the Pink Pagoda knows no second choice.’

“I remember her words because they were mingled with peculiar emphasis but, at the time, I saw no meaning in them. It was important not to ruffle her, however, so I merely smiled and thanked her for her unique gift. She became intensely practical at once.

“‘Call Rosa,’ she commanded. And when the maid had come, ‘Rosa,’ she said, ‘I have bestowed upon Monsieur, the Doctor, the Pink Pagoda. Fetch its case and pack it most carefully. Then despatch it by special messenger to Monsieur’s address—or stay, convey it yourself, Rosa. You will be a careful custodian, I am sure.’

“The maid, for some unknown reason, looked oddly frightened. But, beyond a well-trained, ‘Oui, Madam,’ said nothing.

“The bright eyes of the old lady watched her pick up the ornament with something of a twinkle in their depths.

“‘Rosa does not like my bric-à-brac,’ she chuckled. ‘She is charmed that the Pink Pagoda disappears. Is it not so, Rosa?’

“‘Oui, Madam,’ said Rosa stolidly.

“There was no explanation of this by-play. Rosa telephoned for Madam’s car and departed carrying the parcel. And I dismissed the whole incident as a vagary of a whimsical old woman.

“For the remainder of the night my patient and I conversed upon various subjects and in the morning, having done all that was possible to safeguard her frail thread of life, I retired to an adjoining room while Madam received her expected ‘people’ and variously arranged her affairs. She was, I believe, able to do all that she felt necessary, for when I was again summoned, her exhausted old face wore a look of grim satisfaction.

“But her thinning thread was now but gossamer. I might have tried another stimulation but Madam would not have it. She had accomplished her purpose. She had compelled Death to await her pleasure. Now, with complacency, she awaited his.



The bright eyes of the old lady watched her pick up the ornament with something of a twinkle in their depths. "Rosa does not like my bric-à-brac, she is charmed that the Pink Pagoda disappears."

"It is always strange to me, in spite of much experience, to see the fully conscious human soul go out into the unknown! Madam would go that way. It is the peculiarity of her disease. There was no dimming of the birdlike eyes—yet any instant that which looked out of the windows would be darkened. Inexplicable! She could scarcely speak now, but I talked to her a little of casual things, refraining from doing little, futile services which might disturb. Rosa wept quietly in a corner of the big, dim room.

“Suddenly Madam moved—the tiniest movement, just enough to bring my eyes to hers. They were brighter than ever, but so changed in expression that I hardly knew them. It was as if at this moment, the very last, something far underneath had struggled through.

“She spoke rapidly in French, dropping altogether the formal ‘Monsieur’.

“‘You are a nice boy,’ she said. ‘You are kind, most kind to an old woman. I am sorry that I have given you—’

“The change came then. In her sudden and unexplained concern for me she had forgotten the penalty of motion and had raised her hand. I saw the light die out of her eyes as a small, bright flame is extinguished by a hidden wind.

“That is all there is to that part of the story,” finished “It is most interesting,” I ventured cautiously. “Were you in good health at the time?”

“Excellent. Both physically and mentally keen. I’ll get on with the facts. There’s much more to come.

“When I reached home I found the eccentric old lady’s gift awaiting me upon the table. I was too sleepy to unbox it and went at once to bed. But a few days afterward I remembered and took it out of its wrappings. The beauty of it struck me with new surprise. It seemed to light up the whole room. Do you remember that old room of mine?—half bedroom, half study? If you do, you’ll remember the book case which ran across one end—the end facing the bed. I had never cared for knick-knacks and there was nothing on top of the case, except dust. I placed the Pink Pagoda there. It was a charming object upon which to rest my eyes as I lay in bed. I grew quite fond of it. That peculiar, living pinkness behind the glaze, was a fascinating thing. I got so that I used to look for it the moment I came in. . . . It cheered me.

“I needed cheering, too, for the chance I was waiting for seemed long in coming. I was doing fairly well in a small way—but small were not the ways I wanted. I began almost—almost—to despair.

“One night I lay in bed very wide awake and facing the fact that I was nobody and likely to remain so. My thoughts for no particular reason drifted to Madam. I lived through the hours I had spent with her. I remembered the

things she had said. It was an unusually vivid effort of memory. Every word stood out with astonishing clarity. I remembered the giving of the Pink Pagoda and, as if in mockery of my present condition, the words came back. ‘Of whatever stuff your heart’s desire may be, the Pink Pagoda will know it. You shall see, my friend.’ The very voice of Madam seemed to whisper in my ear, followed by a great uprush of desire—my burning, ever-present desire—to get somewhere, to be someone.

“The room was dark. I could distinguish nothing, but my eyes turned naturally toward the invisible object of my thoughts. And there, on the bookcase top, *I saw it*.

“A moment before it had been part of the darkness, now, suddenly, it emerged! Beautiful, gemlike, it emerged, softly glowing with an inward radiance which illuminated nothing save itself.

“You will see why I should not care to tell this story to an alienist. But if, as a layman, the possibility of it disturbs you, we may say that I had dozed and that this was a dream. Or we may take it that some reflected light from somewhere—”

“You mean,” I interrupted shortly, “that you were not dreaming and that there was no reflected light?”

“Yes, that is what I mean. There was another odd thing. All sense of distance had vanished. The Pagoda was on the bookcase with half the room between it and the bed, yet I seemed to be looking directly into it. I saw every tiny exquisite detail as I had never seen them before. And especially the figurine of the Chinaman squatting in the doorway. He, the Chinaman, was looking into my eyes. One glance of serene intelligence passed from him to me. Then the light withdrew itself, not part by part, but altogether, fading slowly until there was nothing there but darkness.

“I did all the usual things—jumped out of bed, snapped on the lights; examined window and mirror for possible reflections, and ended by deciding that my health was suffering from overlong dwelling upon one idea.

“A week later, Dr. Hector Mackenzie, who to me had seemed as remote as a fixed star, sent me an invitation to dinner. Do you fully realize the importance of this? If you remember Mackenzie, you will. He died last year. But his name is potent to all who know it. He was one of our best men on this side of the water—a wonderful diagnostician. I had met him—once. The dinner invitation was nothing less than a miracle. There was, of course,

some purpose behind it, a purpose which he made plain to me with a few words in the library afterwards.

“He wished, he told me, to try an experiment. There was a case which puzzled him. Other specialists had been consulted. They had disagreed. His idea now was to call in some promising young man, who, knowing nothing of the case, would be at least unbiased by any theory (as he conceived some of the specialists to be). There was a chance, a bare chance, that the new viewpoint might bring new light. ‘For,’ said Mackenzie, ‘I feel the man is curable. I must leave no chance untried.’

“I asked him how he had come to think of me. He seemed puzzled.

“‘Your name came to me,’ he said. ‘I think I remembered your face. Chance, I suppose.’

“‘A lucky chance for me,’ I said.

“He smiled. ‘Perhaps.’

“I went home walking on air. My way had opened at last! But as my excitement cooled, my hope cooled also. I remembered the great doctor’s cool ‘perhaps.’ After all what chance had I, when Mackenzie was puzzled and specialists had failed? I was to see my patient at ten o’clock next morning. Rest and a clear mind were essential. Yet I could not sleep.

“I lay awake in the dark room—furious with myself for an excitement which I knew to be unwise yet could not control. And then (without any connecting memory this time) I saw the Pink Pagoda begin to glow. I sat up in bed and stared straight into the eyes of the squatting Chinaman with the hidden hands. The eyes spoke to me. There is no other way of describing what happened. For there were no words. Or, if there were words, my own brain supplied them. It was simply that, under that bland gaze, I absorbed knowledge. I knew, where before I had not known. And the things which I knew were those things which it was necessary I should know at the consultation next morning. The only thing to which I can at all compare the experience is a subliminal uprush—when one is clearly aware of understanding what a moment ago was a mystery. Also the thing happened with the same incredible swiftness. A moment; two moments and I was lying in the dark, my heart beating heavily.



And then I saw the Pink Pagoda begin to glow.

“I tried to analyze the experience. But it defied analysis. It had happened, that was all. Presently I fell asleep.

“You were out of the country so you missed the mild sensation of that first cure of mine. Mackenzie was a generous man. He took no credit which was not rightly his. And, almost at once, he offered me a chance to work with him—later, a partnership. We were together two years. He was a man in a thousand. I think I—loved him.”

Ewing was silent so long that I roused him.

“Is one permitted to comment?” I asked.

He nodded abstractedly.

“Then do you not think that you indicate the solution of your problem when you say that your knowledge of the patient’s symptoms came as a kind of subliminal uprush? That is probably exactly what it was—a pushing up of the subconscious under the stimulus of your vivid—er—thought of the Pink Pagoda.”

Ewing made no comment.

“I’ll get on with my tale,” he said. “The summing up of the whole matter is that every diagnosis of note which I have made has been made not by me but by the dweller in the Pink Pagoda. He has brought me fame, success,

money, position. He has given me, literally, what Madam said he would give me—my heart's desire.”

“My dear Ewing—”

“I haven't finished yet. In order to be completely intelligible, I must add that the gaining of my heart's desire has landed me in hell.”

I decided to humor him a little and inquired dryly, “Why?”

“That is somewhat difficult to explain. For it is true that I did desire these things more than anything else. It is only that, having them, they do not satisfy . . . not that either . . . it is more that the whole thing is a fraud . . . It is not *I* who succeed . . . it is that damned Chinaman!—I am still no one—nobody . . . I am less than I ever was. . . . I have lost what I had. I am losing myself. . . .”

“And talking utter nonsense to boot.”

“Yes. It will seem like that. But it is ghastly nonsense. . . . Listen! In any case where success will count my Familiar never fails me. But in any case where it is I who count, myself, my manhood, he will do nothing. . . . and worst of all, *I* can do nothing! My natural skill deserts me, I make blunder upon blunder. . . . it is frightful!”

He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“I treated a poor woman's only son last week,” he went on more quietly. “It was a simple case. He *should* have recovered. Last month there was a young girl just coming into womanhood but she was obscure, of no importance. . . . She died. The pulp-wood millionaire—you have heard of his recovery? It brings me fame, you see, my heart's desire. Oh, damn that Chinaman! damn him!”

“By all means,” I said. “But my dear fellow, why don't you think this matter out? You have been going through a strange psychical experience. There are periods when your subconscious self takes charge. It is more clever, more subtle, than your normal self. But it is yourself, none the less.”

“Then I, too, am damned,” said Ewing softly. “But you are wrong about that. It is not I. I know it. There are things which one does know beyond question. I have fought. I have refused to believe. I have seen my poor patients die and still refused. In that matter my reputation has protected me. It is incredible how blind the lay mind can be where a well-known doctor is concerned. They bury a child whom I have blundered over and say ‘If

Ewing could not save him, no one could.’ Oh, Heaven! What I have suffered all this time!

“Do you remember my old dreams? Selfish enough but not altogether so there was room in them for the service of humanity. . . I wanted to be great but I always intended to help, afterwards. . . I fancied I should make the rich pay for the poor . . . a great hospital, perhaps. . . many dreams . . . where are they now? I am famous . . . I am rich . . . I cure stricken old men who might be better dead. . . I provide new stomachs for the gorging rich . . . I cure hectic women who scarcely know the faces of their own children . . . but those whom I love . . . die.”

“Is that last an exaggeration?” I asked coolly, “or is there an instance?”

His face grew ghastly.

“There is an instance,” he said. “Ask anyone who it was who attended Dr. Hector Mackenzie.”

“You!”

“He would have no one but me. He believed in me. I would have given my life, I think, to justify that faith. But the Pink Pagoda was silent.”

“Which rather argues against your theory, doesn’t it? Dr. Mackenzie was a well-known man.” (I tried to meet him on his own ground.)

“Yes. But, with Mackenzie dead, I, his partner, am hailed as the greatest diagnostician on this continent.”

“Horrible!”

“Yes. . . . I see you are beginning to understand.”

“I mean, your explanation is horrible. Man! Can’t you see that you are hypnotising yourself into this?”

“Self-hypnotism was one of my earliest theories,” he said without interest. “But I had to abandon it. It is not auto-hypnosis.”

“Then what under heaven is it?”

“There is one name which seems to fit,” said Ewing slowly. “But it is the name of something which is supposed to have perished off the face of the earth—Can you guess what it is?”

“I could—well enough.”

Ewing leaned forward, his eyes burning. "You have been in strange places," he said in a low voice. "Sometimes your traveller's tales hint at strange things. Tell me now, and tell me honestly—have you been able to explain everything that you have seen?"

"Certainly not," said I, relieved. But I was not to escape so easily.

"Can you swear that you have never seen the thing I mean—the thing with the lost name—black magic?"

I was silent.

Ewing sighed with a kind of relief. "That was why I felt I could tell you," he said.

"Look here," I said roughly. "It is true that I have seen inexplicable things. But it does not follow that there was no explanation for them. Wireless telegraphy would have been called black magic once." (This was weak and I knew it.)

"If there ever was black magic and there is good evidence that there was," went on Ewing, paying no attention to my futility, "it is quite possible that it may survive in certain places and in particular objects. The Pink Pagoda, of unknown age and origin, may be such an object."

"Such a supposition is the height of extravagance," I objected, "and is only to be considered after every other conceivable theory has been tried."

"I have tried every other theory."

"We will try them again," I said, dryly.

All the rest of the night we argued, and at the end of it I was thoroughly out of temper. Every man knows the irritation which comes from slapping up against the inscrutable. It is a sort of helpless rage. Ewing watched me with a tired smile.

"I've been through that stage," he said. "It didn't get me anywhere."

"Well," I said at last, "let the explanation go. Let us attack the thing from your own highly unscientific standpoint. Let us suppose that the Pink Pagoda has an influence, an influence entirely evil. All that you need do is to reject its aid entirely. You are your own, man. If the thing is a devil—smash it?"

The pause which followed this was a long one. For the first time, Ewing did not meet my eyes.

“Can you smash a devil?” he asked at length drearily. “Perhaps one can—if one is strong enough. But I am not strong enough. If the pagoda goes—all that I have gained goes with it. My career as a physician will be ended. And it is my life—‘All that a man hath will he give for his life’. No. . . . I can’t risk it. . . . I must go on. . . .” He passed his hand feverishly across his forehead. “Perhaps this inhibition of my own power is only temporary. . . . my original skill and judgment may return. . . . perhaps the whole thing is an illusion”. . . . His voice trailed off.

It was plain that nothing could be done. The man was in the grip of an extraordinary experience and lacked the moral urge to get himself out. I watched him go with regret. I knew that our friendship would never be quite the same again—that is the worst of confidence. It changes things. One so often regrets having given it. In the weeks that followed I felt sure that Ewing regretted.

Meantime his fame grew. From being national, it became international. Since he refused to go to Europe, Europe came to him—and went away very much puzzled. They simply could not see how he “did” it! But they were generous in their praise.

All this had its effect, of course. Adulation is a heady drink, and Ewing’s cup was always full. The restrained, almost sad, look which had characterized him when I returned, began to yield to one of smug satisfaction as the old disturbing ideals dropped away. He began, I fancy, to look with indulgence, even with pride, upon himself as a physician of the rich. The poor, the undistinguished, he could not help, therefore he no longer attempted to do so. This was commented upon sometimes, but always with reserve as the regrettable eccentricity of a great mind. Only I, who had known him so well, saw the blight which crept over the man’s real character and knew that in gaining the world he was losing his own soul.

I do not know just how he happened to meet Mary Oldcott. Their ways, in the ordinary course, lay far apart; but once again we credit fate with their introduction. Ewing had never cared seriously for a woman. Mary was a revelation. He loved her, I think, in every way a man may love a woman. Their romance was a sudden and beautiful thing. I do not intend to tell of it here. But when one night, he spoke to me of her, in the shaken manner of a man who has found the innermost of life, I felt a growing consternation. For Mary Oldcott was a woman who from childhood had devoted her life to the helping of humanity. Did Ewing realize the service she would demand of him? Somehow, I blurted out the question and saw the happiness pass from

my friend's face as light dies out behind a mask, leaving it grey and set. It was only too evident that he had hesitated to face this issue.

"She loves me," he said doggedly; "She will not expect the impossible."

"She will not believe that what she expects is impossible," I said. "No doubt she already takes your sympathy and active aid in her special work for granted. You know upon what Great Physician Mary Oldcott has based her ideal. You will have to reckon with that, my friend."

"I am rich," said Ewing. "I shall endow her institutions. She shall give as she has never given before."

"Mary has always given all there is for anyone to give herself," I said. "She will expect—"

He sprang up with an oath. His eyes blazed in a white face.

"Be silent!" he stammered. And indeed, more words would have been foolishness. I saw that he intended to take the risk.

The climax of the tale comes very quickly now, for, only a month after their engagement, Mary fell ill. I read the news in my morning paper, coupled with the announcement ("Dr. Ewing is in attendance.") I think my heart missed a beat. The whole fantastic story of the Pink Pagoda flooded back into my mind, swamping common sense in waves of wild conjecture. Would the Pink Pagoda speak? I found myself abjectly thankful in remembering that Mary was a person of importance. I decided that she was safe.

But next day's paper bore no good news. Miss Oldcott was worse. "Grave fears," it said, "were entertained." I remembered suddenly the fate of Dr. Mackenzie. What was that impossible thing Ewing had said? "Those whom I love—die."

That day I stayed at home. I thought that Ewing might come. He did. If ever I have seen a man who bore visibly the mark of struggle with the infernal, Ewing was that man. I can't tell you what the mark was, for a mere description of his distraught appearance would convey nothing of the shock of it. It was the abysmal dismay of his eyes—perhaps.

"Mary is dying," he said.

It was no time for standing upon the sanities of every day.

"But you can save her," I said struggling for conviction. "The Pink Pagoda—"

"The Pink Pagoda is silent."

"Command it, then?"

"I have commanded. And I have prayed it as a man may pray his god."

"But, it is not consistent! Mary Oldcott is—"

"The woman I love!"

I felt a cold grue.

"Look here," I said, "You are a sick man yourself. You are not fit to attend anyone. Give up Mary's case. Call in the best specialists—"

"I have already done that. They cannot help her. She is dying."

Again a rage of helplessness swept over me—but a certain stubbornness came too.

"I don't believe it," I said. "Unless you let her die through sheer paralysis of superstitious terror. I don't pretend to be able to explain the Pink Pagoda. But I can explain you. And I tell you now that this is the chance to shake yourself free. You have been a slave to an idea—your obsessing idea of success. You have not really wished to be free. You wanted too badly the thing you despised yourself for wanting. You could not smash your devil because your devil was your god. Is it the same now? You placed success before humanity—do you place it before Mary Oldcott?"

He looked at me out of those tortured eyes and smiled. It was an answer more convincing than any protestation.

"Too late," he said in a toneless voice. "She is dying. . . . I let humanity go. . . . now she is going. . . . the Pagoda?. . . . It is gone too. . . . I smashed it. . . . I broke it with my hands. . . . the little Chinese devil. . . . I killed him. . . . broke him with my fingers. . . . too late. . . ." His head fell forward on his torn hands.

A wave of utter relief swept over me. Whatever was lost, something had been saved!

I stepped from the room and rang up Dr. D—— who would, I felt, be the specialist consulted by Ewing. From him I asked the news of Miss Oldcott, stating briefly that Ewing was collapsed under the strain of his terrible

suspense. Dr. D—— was most sympathetic and, I thought, a trifle pleased. He was, he said, just leaving for Miss Oldcott's flat, and, though he feared there would be no reassuring news, he would call me presently and let me know.

I went back to Ewing. He was lying as I had left him—his head in his hands. I touched his shoulder but he did not stir. Utterly worn out, he had fallen asleep.

For perhaps fifteen minutes I sat quietly beside him and then, suddenly as he had slept, he awakened. He sat up, instantly, his eyes meeting mine with all that dreadful horror gone. They were Ewing's own eyes again, steady and sad.

"I must have slept," he said in his usual tone.

"But I feel better for it. I must go now. Mary may need me. She has been terribly ill, you know. But . . ." He walked to the door without finishing his sentence.

"But you think she may recover?" I asked quietly.

"She may. I feel more hopeful—since I slept. People do, you know." He seemed to notice with surprise the condition of his hands. "What have I been breaking?" he asked. "None of your valuables, I hope?" A dazed look came over his face, followed by a half smile. "Ah. . . . I remember. . . . the Pink Pagoda. . . . I seem to have made rather a fool of myself over that. . . ." His eye questioned mine.

I collected myself with difficulty.

"Nothing worth mentioning," I said.

He hesitated for a moment longer and then seemed to dismiss the matter as unimportant.

"I will let you know how Mary is," he said gently. "And don't give up hope. We may save her yet."

Thirty minutes later, Dr. D—— rang me up in no very good humor.

"I thought you said Ewing was collapsed," he grumbled. "Never saw him more fit. But for once he took someone else's advice. Consented at the last moment to try a new treatment suggested by Forbes. It seems to have done the trick. Miss Oldcott will get better but it was a close thing. And it won't be Ewing's name that is featured this time. Can't say I'm sorry—terribly opinionated fellow, Ewing. As if a most uncommon run of luck—"

I did not listen to the rest of it. Putting up the receiver, I hurried around to Ewing's rooms. His housekeeper had orders to let me in at any time. In his bedroom I picked up the pieces of the Pink Pagoda, devoting special care to the fragments of the tiny Chinaman whose head had been broken neatly off by a hand which had left its blood on the delicate porcelain. With almost indecent haste I made up a parcel of the remains, weighting it with a paperweight and, without loss of time, argument, or scruple of hesitation, gave myself the pleasure of sinking the whole in the deepest water I could find.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this eBook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Pink Pagoda* by Isabel Ecclestone Mackay]