

Ming Yellow

Excerpt

Kendrick and Matt bump along the cobblestone streets riding in a rickshaw pulled by a tall and powerful fellow. Kendrick is awe-struck by the sights and sounds of this oriental city: teeming with beggars, peddlers, pedestrians, and helter-skelter traffic—a cacophony of sounds, innumerable rickshaws recklessly criss-crossing every which way. The panting man pulling their rickshaw maneuvers it deftly through the traffic and maze of narrow streets. Finally, they stop in front of a nondescript shop in a dark, narrow alley. The sign over the door simply reads “Antiks.”

“This is it, Kendrick. Since I know the proprietor of this shop, Wuhan Wu-ku, I’ll make the introductions and handle the initial inquiries. Please, Kendrick, do nothing and say nothing. Just watch and listen. Wuhan has knowledge of English. However, as a courtesy I’ll speak in Mandarin at first.”

Kendrick, somewhat miffed by such a stern request from a subordinate, pouts, “Nonsense, I’ll talk whenever I want.”

Matt freezes his hand in mid-stroke just as he is about to open the door. With clenched fists he commands, “No you won’t. Not as long as I have the responsibility to make negotiations or when I deem it best for you to keep your trap shut. Your bluster and vile treatment of these people will squash my efforts to facilitate our trip and purchase the yellows. Understand?”

Retorting with a vengeance, he commands, “No. I do not understand. I’m in charge.”

“Very well.” Matt turns and walks down the alley. “Get yourself a lackey. I’m through with you.”

Stung by the Australian’s rejection of him and his authority, Kendrick simmers with bitter exasperation. As he sees Matt walking away, his better judgment kicks in. He realizes that his quick-temper and narcissism are about to destroy his quest for the yellows and is driving away one of the best men he’s ever met. Drummond’s on-target comments ring true. He shouts, “Drummond, you are right. Accept my apologies. I’ll defer to your suggestions.”

Matt returns to the Antik’s door. “Absolutely? No more finagling?”

“Absolutely. You have my word.”

They shake hands to conclude the deal. Kendrick comments, “You’re a man of many talents, Drummond—a jack of all trades.” He nods toward the door, “Let’s get with it.”

As the pair enters the shop, a small bell attached to the door tinkles softly. Seemingly out of nowhere, a strikingly beautiful female with an exquisite body clad in a skin-tight, crimson cheongsam greets them. An embroidered golden-dragon design winds around her body. Its open mouth hovers over her left breast. She bows deeply, and Matt returns the bow.

Kendrick gapes in awe at this oriental enchantress.

“Matt ignores his employer’s rudeness and speaks, “Good afternoon Mistress Yen. I am pleased to visit with you again. All goes well, I assume?”

Yen Hei-lan speaks in her low, raspy voice. “Welcome, Mister Drummond to my uncle’s poor shop. She looks at Kendrick and knows who he is from his photographs. We are honored to have you and your associate grace our humble place.” Her faintly rouged lips form a thin smile. “You have come possibly to do some small business? Perhaps we can be of service.” Her inference speaks perhaps of something more intimate than a professional relationship with Matt.

The Antiks shop is jammed with bric-a-brac, posters, old books, and tourist souvenirs. There is barely enough room for one to move about. The light from a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling casts a chiaroscuro ambiance. However, the shop’s ramshackle appearance belies its wealth of rare Oriental treasures.

Matt smiles professionally. “Your day is pleasant?” He meets her jet-black eyes. “It is we who are honored to be here. Is it possible that we may speak with your uncle? My colleague has expressed some interest in rare porcelains.”

With a smile that now breathes of wicked sin, Yen speaks in near-perfect English. "Please. I will see after my uncle." She moves to the rear of the shop.

Kendrick locks his eyes on her derrière that swings in erotic syncopation. She parts a beaded curtain and disappears into another room.

Matt notices Kendrick's reaction to the striking Yen Hei-lan. With his stern voice he cautions, "Forget it, Kendrick. She has a dangerous reputation."

Shortly, the proprietor, Wuhan Wei-ku, emerges from behind the beaded curtain. He is of indeterminate age and short of stature. He wears a spectacular green dressing gown, and a black skull-cap that covers his short black hair. His deep black eyes dominate his lean, expressionless face. With his alert manner, he projects no nonsense business.

Kendrick tries to appraise Wuhan from his American perspective—without much success. Wuhan is more discreet and accurate in his evaluation of Kendrick.

Drummond opens the conversation in Mandarin. "This humble one has deigned to bring an associate so that he may be permitted to see fine porcelains, perhaps a thing or two from the Ming Dynasty. If that would please you."

Wuhan responds, "Your friend does this simple one honor. He comes, I suspect, from the Excellent Country."

Matt turns to Kendrick. "Wuhan has spotted you for an American."

"Tell him I'm pleased to meet him."

Drummond complies.

Wuhan returns with a perfunctory bow.

Drummond says, "We would ask a favor of you, also—to look at the calligraphy on a yellow saucer."

Yen Hei-lan appears and speaks to Matt, "Please invite your friend to join us for tea and cakes in our reception room. Today we have a special oolong tea imported especially for us from Ceylon." She makes a point to work the hip-high slit in her cheongsam to expose fully her long sensuous leg.

Drummond wonders if her coquetry is meant for him or Kendrick. No matter, he knows that it's prudent to ignore any after-hours activities. "It is our pleasure to join you and your uncle."

Yen leads the pair into a softly-lit lounge behind the jumbled shop. It is furnished with thick silk carpets, soft leather chairs, and a large teak and ebony coffee table. An étagère holds a collection of exquisite Sung celadons, and a magnificent brush painting of a karst mountain landscape hangs on the paneled wall.

Kendrick, not much impressed with the setting and the verbal parley, tugs at the hem of his jacket in frustration at these time-consuming customs. "Ask Wuhan when will we see the porcelains? We can't take all day."

"Kendrick, be quiet and learn," Drummond whispers. "This is the customary way to do business. Your boorishness is close to nixing any deal we might make. Be patient. I know that's not your style but follow my lead—your word, recall."

Yen, pretending not to understand the exchange, indicates the pair should sit in two large soft leather-covered teak chairs. She has a faint, knowing smile as she prepares the tea service.

Wuhan slides into a high-backed rosewood chair covered with bright pink silk.

Matt Drummond makes small talk with Wuhan in Mandarin as Yen brings tea and scones. She pours. Matt addresses Wuhan, "I have told my associate that your knowledge of Ming porcelains is extensive. That, perhaps, you might know of a yellow or two that were sold a few years ago."

Wu continues in English. "Yes, Mister Drummond, I was privileged to be the intermediary in that sale of yellows. A magnificent tea set. Thirteen cups, saucers, and the teapot. The finest yellows I have ever seen." Wuhan sips his tea and his blank affect continues. "Thanks to your photographs of the calligraphy on the museum's Ming porcelains, I am able to authenticate many more of these rare pieces. Unfortunately, there are many fakes. One has to be most careful."