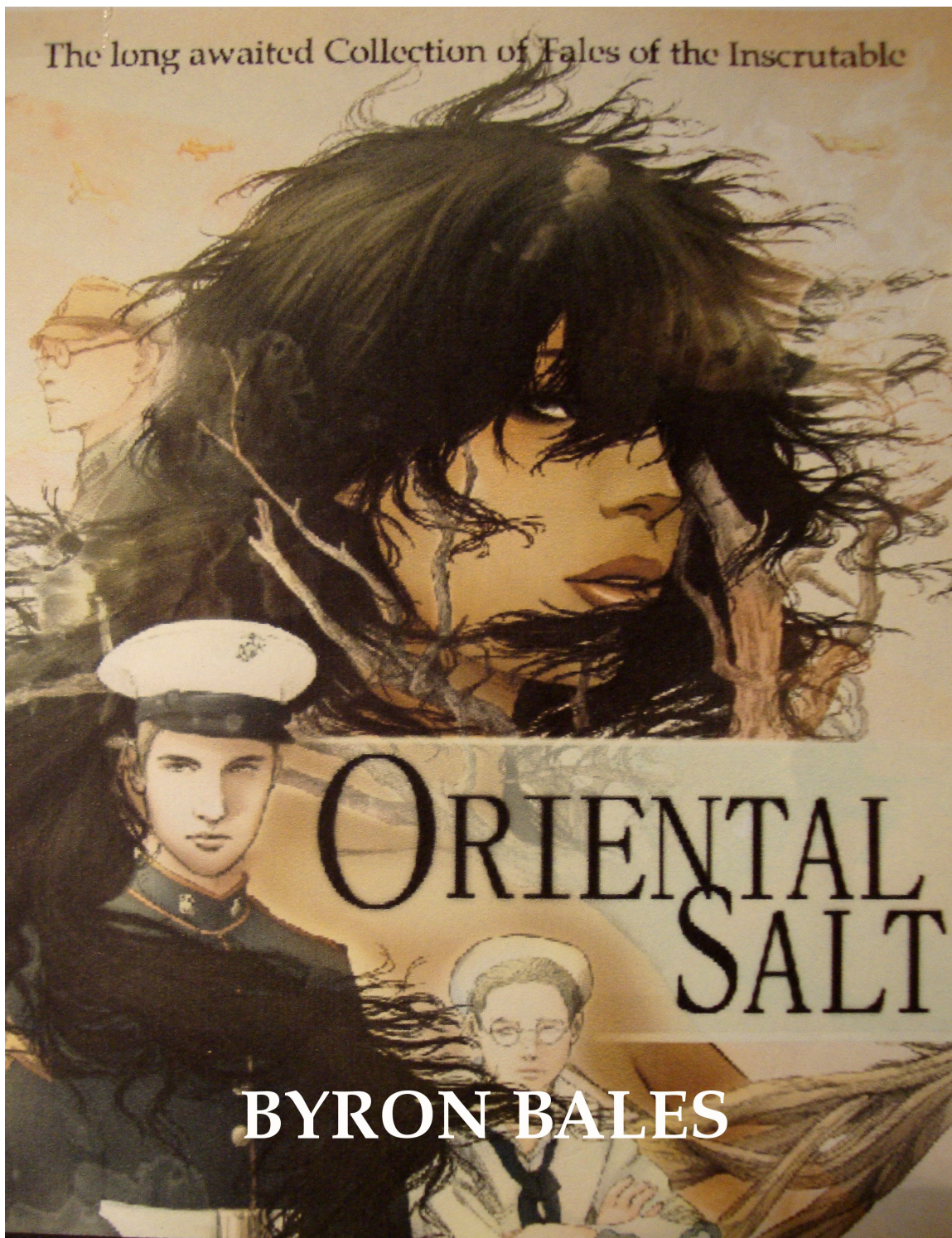


The long awaited Collection of Tales of the Inscrutable



'Oriental Salt'

By Byron Bales

<http://www.byronbales.com>

CHAPTER ONE

I was born the year World War I ended. 1918. I never knew my parents. They were taken shortly after by the great pandemic. So, an aunt on a farm in Indiana raised me. My father had been a United States Marine. A lifer. He'd fought Boxers in China, campaigned in Banana Wars, and then whacked a bunch of Krauts in France during the Great War, as it was called then. I understood that he was one fighting sonofabitch.

But he died at home in bed, taken by influenza. Ironical, huh?

As I grew up, some of his buddies stopped by as they criss-crossed America, adventurers on their way to fascinating exploits to my way of thinking. They were wildcat oilmen, musicians, even carnies, all with two things in common; the Corps, and the Orient, that mystical region of the globe that captured my imagination just from listening to their stories.

Little was known about Asia back then. A traveling evangelist once preached to us about those mysterious lands: "Yea, there is evil, brothers and sisters. Eeeeeevil," he boomed, his voice resonating across the meeting hall as he wove his signature spell, his hot, piercing gaze cutting through the congregation who stared hypnotically, as though looking upon the sole agent of Our Maker. "The devil patrols the rice fields and muddy villages, lurking

within unenlightened heathens, peering out through their dark, inscrutable eyes..." He slammed his Bible on the podium and everyone jumped. "... Recruiting souls too ignorant to rise up to salvation."

Wide-eyed children trembled; their parents horrified by his tales of sin, corruption and depravity, shocked into emptied their pockets for the Lord's work. But I was enthralled, my young imagination churned, especially when he railed against unspeakable perversions and wanton women. It was an enlistment talk, and I was ready to join up right there. Not the church; the Marines. But I was nine years old and I'd have to wait. An eternity, it seemed.

I enlisted when I was fourteen. Underage, but it was a different world back then. Marine recruiters didn't ask questions when they saw a prime cut, for I was a big, strapping kid even then. By the time I was seventeen—the legal age to have joined anyway—I was reenlisting for my second hitch and stood six, two. By the time I stopped growing, I'd added two more inches, and tipped the scales at two hundred, thirty pounds.

After recruit training—they call it boot camp now—I pulled security duty at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, then did a tour as a weapons instructor before getting posted to that place I'd dreamed about ever since I could remember. China.

China Marines were special, a breed apart. Salts of the Corps; a bold, cocky bunch befitting what sailors called 'China Hands'. And the missionaries were right there with us. Missionaries and Marines. Strange bedfellows; convert 'em or kill 'em. Medieval, I suppose, but there you have it.

Before shipping out, I returned to Bloomington on leave. My uncles slapped me on the back and my aunts fawned over me while a few local girls fell in love with my uniform. Mary Elizabeth Hunkler, at nineteen, was three years older than me, and just about the prettiest thing I'd even seen. She wore tight dresses that showed off every impressive asset she kept beneath, hinting that her knickers could be dropped—if I only whispered the right words, one being matrimony. So I right smartly beat it out to San Francisco to debark for Asia. What a girl wouldn't do for a guy's allotment checks in those Depression years!

I arrived in China in November, 1934. The voyage across the Pacific while interesting didn't compare to my first impressions of Asia as I overlooked the pier in Woosung, Shanghai's deep-water port. I was a brand new corporal with the Fourth Marine Regiment. Although my service record said I was approaching twenty years of age, I was actually a non-commissioned officer at sixteen. Not bad for an Indiana plowboy. Corporal

was good rank in those days. There wasn't another NCO in the Fourth younger than twenty, and most were pushing thirty. I'd never again swab another deck or polish another crapper. Now all I looked forward to was a nice little war.

My seventeenth birthday arrived in China shortly after I did. On the very day, I was called into the skipper's office. He chewed a rather huge chunk out of my ass, railing that my true age had just been discovered. "How dare you sneak into my beloved Corps under the legal age", he bellowed in my face, accompanied by a liberal spray of spittle. The clerks in the outer office had their ears pinned to his door for this yell-fest. The captain regained his composure, which I realized later he'd never actually lost. "However," he added with magnanimity, "Since you are now of legal age and already in China at the government's expense, the Corps will allow you to remain in uniform."

I was sworn in again, my service record amended, and my corporal stripes forfeited. That was for appearances sake; I got them back a few months later under what they called a meritorious promotion. When I left the company office with my reinstatement certificate, the old man was chewing some serious butt from a miserable private from the Tientsin detachment: "How dare you slither your sixteen-year-old pimples into our glorious Corps. However, since you've turned seventeen—"

The Corps was small, plenty shy of twenty thousand Leathernecks, and that's how things worked then. The horseshit would come later, during WWII, when our ranks swelled to nearly half a million.

Over the next few years, I pulled duty all across China, guarding legations and convoys, chasing down bandits, and running messages from one end of that great, ancient land to the other.

I drew first blood there. Bandits were ravaging a missionary convoy when my patrol came trucking over a ridge. Most of those yellow bastards ran just at the sight of us, but one heathen was so busy chopping a coolie into hamburger that he didn't spot me barreling down on him. At the last instant, he turned and hurled his meat cleaver at me. It sailed past my head, missed by inches, and I ran up and popped a .45 round into his chest as he was reaching for another ax in his belt. Those fellows certainly loved their meat cleavers—they'd hacked up two coolies pretty good. One thing I noticed over the years; the Asians take a fancy to mutilating their victims. Never understood why: dead is dead, why bother to butcher if you can't sell the meat.

Anyhow, that night we camped outside of Wuxi. That was the old capitol of China back around the time Christ was a corporal. I was

extraordinarily charged, and inexplicably hungry for a woman. But aside from a few toothless old crones, there was little in the offing. Just the same, I banged a washer-lady senseless for an American dollar—thrice the going rate. But she earned it; I left her balled up and cursing me on a pile of dirty laundry while I rustled up a dinner of warm beer and cold rice. Best meal I ever had. Not sure why. Maybe from just being alive while those Chink bastards weren't.

Two days later, the laundry gods exacted their revenge, for that dollar bought me the worst case of gonorrhea known to man. There was no penicillin in those days and a course of sulfa drugs took its sweet time kicking in, not to mention having tubes shoved down my johnson to suck out puss. I waddled around for two weeks, afraid that Lieutenant Johnson—as I proudly call it—would just drop off, snake down my trousers and plop out in the dust. I nearly cried whenever I took a whizzer, it was so damned painful. I half-expected the next time I whipped the Lieutenant outta my pants for a night infiltration, he'd look up at me, ask, "Hey, Idiot; you sure you wanna do this?"

I learned Mandarin. Most of us could speak enough Chink to negotiate prices for the jinrikshas and the painted ladies, but I wanted to learn more. Even took lessons from a Russian émigré. She was a middle-aged lady, but none too hard to look at, and like every other Russky who bolted when the Reds took over, was reputed to be nobility. If she was, she never let on, never put on airs or anything like that. Didn't matter; I hadn't a prayer of exploring her knickers because I believe she had eyes for some little sing-song gal.

I also studied every weapon in the Corps' arsenal and foreign armaments and munitions as well; pistols, rifles, crew-served machine guns, mortars, and small artillery pieces. We were getting ready for the Japs. Everybody knew that show was coming.

I pulled courier duty up to Manchuria once. The Nippers had overrun that province in '31. They were a belligerent bunch of bastards who'd kill a Chinaman just because they could. Never understand why they hated the Chinks so, them being out of the same fuckin' tree. The Nips were slovenly kept with oversized uniforms who glared at me like they wanted some of yours truly next, which woulda been just hunky-dory with me. 'Course, they wouldn't have jumped me without first rounding-up a gang. That's how those cowardly little Nippers were; yellow, just like their skin.

The best duty I ever pulled in China was at our consulate in Shanghai. The consular offices were in a hotel and my uniform of the day was usually civvies. Yet, what few of us there were, we did the morning run, jogging

along the Bund, a wide commercial boulevard running parallel to the Whangpo River. Our small, tight formation always drew gawkers, and sometimes hecklers, on whose feet we took measures to stomp on.

A bunch of us chipped in for a flat a few blocks away. The apartment came supplied with an ancient amah named Wang, like she was part of the furniture. She refused to speak English, but kept the place absolutely shipshape. If six guys seemed crowded, our schedules precluded more than a few of us being there at the same time, except for poker nights, which was the object behind this arrangement. Wang kept us stocked with booze, did the cooking, cleaning, the laundry, and controlled the girlie traffic, which at times was annoying because the little darlings wanted to hang around forever. They liked American boys. Probably because we didn't beat them and always paid for services, as agreed. Wang also ran a little opium on the side, but she had no takers with our bunch. No siree, we knew better'n to touch that crap. Glassy-eyed Chinks lying around the streets was a common sight in those days. The police, mostly former western detectives and Sikhs hired by the Shanghai Municipality, never even bothered to scrape 'em out of the gutter. We didn't mind Wang's enterprise, providing she didn't peddle it to the girls, either. Not that we cared about debasing those already corrupt darlings, it's just that a toked-up babe floating on an opium cloud is about as useful in bed as a wet mop. So, out the tokers went. Aside from that, Wang was free to operate her vile enterprise; everyone fills their own rice bowl as they see fit, I always say.

Wondrous women, those Shanghai gals, decked out as they were in those Mandarin necked, body-hugging cheongsams, slits running up the sides. Their faces were made up as white as porcelain, their black doll's eyes expressionless, lips carefully, precisely painted fire-engine red. Little heart breakers to look at 'em. Most were teenagers, like us, but few reached five feet. Still, they had special talents like no women I'd known before or since. Contortionists would be an apt description for most, and one peculiar little darling could suck the eagle off a silver dollar without getting feathers in her mouth. My, oh my, the tricks they worked on the human body!

But enough about them. And about me. This isn't my story, although I elbow in every now and then. It's about some of the people I served with, some others I didn't, both during and after devoting a quarter century in our glorious Corps.

A buddy of mine, Corporal Albert Vale, was transferred down to the Philippines in early '41 along with a few other guys from the Fourth Marines. Vale held high-flying theories of international conspiracies, one being that power brokers in America wanted into the European war that had

cranked-up in '39. Being Marines, we were pretty much apolitical, but Vale mapped it all out for anyone who'd listen; Roosevelt and his commie cronies—both in Washington and in Moscow—were gonna take on the Nazis and the Nippers, preferably one at a time, maybe both together if it came to that. Vale reckoned that America would maneuver those kindred spirits into throwing the first punch, so we could jump in and kick hell outta everyone. Looking back at it, maybe Vale wasn't so whacky. For one thing, war clouds sure ended the Depression.

But this isn't Vale story, either. There was a kid we'll never forget, a young Marine named Turner. He was a hayseed like myself, and outside of his duties, wasn't the quickest scooter on the block. He'd been in China for a year, then got himself transferred along with Vale down to Subic Bay Naval Station, a few hours outside Manila. There were even rumors that the whole regiment might be transferred out of China soon.

Turner was a tall, thin kid with a generally good disposition, unless somebody pissed him off. He was the kind of Marine who'd come through in a fight, bust heads with the best of 'em. But a soldier's life wasn't for him. He was preoccupied with the fair sex, though I've come to learn there's nothing at all fair about them. He went dippy over a little honey down in the 'Peens'. Even married her. Imagine that! Marines in those days were married to the Corps, so why a guy would wanna up and do that was a mystery to all of us.

<http://www.byronbales.com>