

## The First Two Pages: “China Mary”

By Marilyn Todd

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Why are writers permanently cold? Because they're surrounded by drafts.

Don't hit me, don't hit me. I didn't coin that, I'm just quoting! But groan, smile, roll your eyes all you like, it's the truth. There's rarely a quick fix to beginnings, especially when it comes to short stories. And for all of you who routinely travel without bags in the hold, you'll know exactly how tight you have to pack that little carry-on.

“Sister Mary Joseph?”

That was the first surprise. How, after all this time, his voice hadn't changed a note. Still deep. Cultured. Soft as brandy butter.

“When the boy told me a Bride of Christ, an English one no less, wanted to meet me on Boot Hill, I feared it was a leg-pull.”

I dragged my eyes away from the rooftops of Tombstone, shimmering in the desert sun half a mile below. Rooftops which, until eight years ago, housed more than twenty times the current population. And witnessed far too many killings.

“Not a prank, I assure you, Mr. Bradbury.” I turned. “Thank you trailing all the way up here on such a fiendishly hot afternoon.”

He chuckled. “Obviously you are new to the Arizona Territory, Sister, or you'd know that all our afternoons are fiendishly hot.”

I let my breath out. Very, very, very, very slowly. He didn't recognize me, but why would he? Eleven years had passed since our paths last crossed, and let's face it. How many men look twice at middle-aged nuns?

I forced a smile. “Two days is not *quite* enough to become familiar with the climate.”

Much less adapt.

“No doubt you find our terrain somewhat alien, as well. All this prickly pear and sagebrush. Not quite the majestic oaks and beech woods you’re used to, is it?”

“Personally, I am more concerned with your majestic scorpions and rattlesnakes.”

“Surely,” he laughed, “they are all God’s creatures?”

“Which, I am convinced, He placed in this inhospitable corner of the universe expressly to remain undisturbed.”

His laugh deepened. “Spring cannot be the easiest of seasons to cross the Atlantic. Was it rough?”

I focused on a butterfly taking nectar from the yellow flower of a cactus. Listened to a wren trilling from the top of a rickety post. Pretended the black creatures circling in the sky to the north were not vultures.

This is the introduction to “China Mary” from the May/June 2017 issue of *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, and see what I mean about packing? In just 300 words, you know exactly where the story’s set, when it’s set, what that setting feels and looks like, plus you’ve met the two protagonists and already know things are not quite what they seem, and that this is no ordinary meeting.

You also know the undercurrent here is dark.

How?

Well, for a start, we’re in... Tombstone.

At a time when the town itself has died.

On Boot Hill, surrounded, quite literally, by death.

With talk of scorpions and rattlesnakes, of multiple killings, and let’s not forget those vultures circling close by.

The story hinges on the real-life character Sing Choy, better known as China Mary, who single-handedly ran Tombstone’s extensive Chinese

community. Which, by the way, was called Hop Town, on account of the tunnels they built to “hop” between districts.

China Mary controlled everything. Gambling, prostitution and opium dens obviously weren't time-consuming enough, because she also ran a store, not to mention a restaurant, and no one in Tombstone could hope to employ Chinese labor without going through her. No mean feat for a woman, especially a Chinese woman, and she earned massive respect through her pledge “they steal, I pay.” But there was one other quality for which she was famous. Chinese or white, rich or poor, man or woman, she never turned anyone away who came to her for help.

Who wouldn't put an English nun in that?

But all stories start somewhere, and with this being a slow-burner that builds to a shocker of a conclusion, I needed subliminal messages about horror and death right from the very beginning.

Incidentally, China Mary is buried in Boot Hill. Unlike most Chinese, whose bones were exhumed after a year, then returned, wrapped in silk, to rest with their ancestors, China Mary's wish was to remain with her friends.

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Marilyn Todd is probably best known for the superbitch heroine of her “I, Claudia” series, as well as her High Priestess Iliona series set in Ancient Greece. She is also a prolific writer of short stories, more than 40 of which have been published in *EQMM*. British born, Marilyn now lives with her husband in France, surrounded by woods, rivers, vineyards, and châteaux. And, of course, lots of drafts.