



## The Fortune Teller

*by Constance McCutcheon*

Bernard was a New York City policeman who had won a supreme battle against his superiors in getting them to grant his request to walk his beat instead of driving it in the police car. But then again, he won only to a certain extent, because after a month he had to give some kind of measurable evidence to prove that walking was not just as effective, but more effective than driving. He had been given a month and he was expected to produce results.

An unexpected problem had arisen now that two weeks had passed blissfully by: he had absolutely no proof that walking was effective at all. The city dwellers, even the rowdy ones, had become docile and congenial ever since he began meeting them face to face on the street. They chatted, talked about what was good about the city, what was bad, what was going on, about their problems. But everything seemed to get resolved through heart-to-heart exchanges and by the time Bernard continued on his way, everything was fine again. He knew what his superiors were going to say about it: walking was too slow; the vandals and no-goods could do as they pleased just by keeping one step ahead of him. He had to be quick enough to catch the trouble and that was only possible in a police car.

“Gotta find a no-good,” Bernard mused to himself. “Don’t know as I’m gonna come up with one, but it would sure help my case. Two would be better.” He glanced into a garbage can on a particularly desolate street corner on the north side of Chinatown and noticed with surprise that the can was brimming with garbage. No one lived in the area to produce such a quantity of garbage and certainly no one would be so neat about packing it in. He sauntered on, staring up at the cloudless winter sky, trying to recapture his thoughts of a moment before.

Within a dozen steps, he came across another garbage container and saw that it, too, was overfull, yet neatly stuffed. Excitedly, he made a note that the sanitation department was not aware of its responsibilities and would have to start making more frequent visits to the area. Bernard moved on, preoccupied with working his note up into a significant item of proof that walking a beat was not only effective but critical, but he knew he was trying to pound pork into beef Wellington.

Later, on his way back through the blocks of rubble and broken streets, he noticed a crowd of bums gathered on a corner. As he approached, the swarm evaporated, each

mote drifting as if listlessly in another direction but never in his direction. The focus of attention, the trash can, was left exposed. Napkins had been strewn about and were scuttering away in the wind, scraps of food littered the area, but the trash can itself was nearly empty. Reluctantly, Bernard pulled out his notebook and scratched the word URGENT from his previous note.

“How am I going to come up with proof, for Christ’s sake?” he asked himself. “How in the blankity-blank Sam Hill am I going to ...” He drifted from the thought yet again as he peered into one end of a short pipe of a dilapidated hurricane fence. No building obscured the blue patch visible as sky through it. For an instant his view was cut off and then, as suddenly, he saw blue again. On looking up, he glimpsed a movement at the top of the subway stairs and then nothing. As he walked passed the garbage can, he noticed it was neatly filled.

Bernard began to spend more time around the lifeless corner and came to discover how lively it really was. A faint, but definite trickle of people came up and down the dirty subway stairs, but not to travel with the trains: the people that went down were always the ones who came up after half an hour or so. Periodically, a Chinese man emerged from the entrance heaving up a child’s wagon before him to carefully pack the two neighboring garbage cans with whatever it was he toted in the wagon. Afterwards, the corner became animated with bums who gathered about the garbage cans and feasted.



Bernard easily located the subterranean attraction of the comings and goings by picking out a handsome young couple, obviously dressed for a luncheon date, and following

them at a careful distance through the subway tunnels. He spied on them as they ordered their food and watched ashamed as the young man bawled out the bowed Chinese man whom Bernard recognized: it was the man who brought the garbage up to the street every day to feed the bums. Bernard could only stand by the low entranceway and watch the frightful encounter; it outraged him, but he had no right to interfere. When the couple left, he slipped in and seated himself at the single table.

From out of the half-dozen Chinese entries on the soiled menu, Bernard made his choice and placed his order. As he waited for his meal, he pondered gravely what he should do. The longer he reflected, the more indignant he got. The man was a criminal. He had no right to be there. Bernard would never have found out about it if he hadn't been walking a beat. It was wonderful. This vagrant was Bernard's way out of the police car forever. The circulation in his legs would continue the improvement it had shown in the past two weeks and his wife would stop her yakking about his being overweight. He wouldn't be overweight. It was wonderful. The Chinaman was a vagrant and a no-good, using the city's space without permission for his own profit, sucking up the dust and grease as deliberately as a snail sucked up the guck on the sides of an aquarium, unashamedly feeding on shit so he—and who was he?—could breathe. Worse, there he stood, sidling before them all as if he were worth it, breathing on them all with his shit breath and they were paying for it. The man would have to go. It was wonderful. Bernard's problem was solved.

When the lunch came, Bernard's mood darkened. Three pieces of toast lay on his plate over which a thick layer of viscous cheese sauce had been poured. "Waiter!" he called, but the man had mysteriously disappeared. "I thought this was a Chinese restaurant," he got his chance to ask a while later. He indicated the food on his plate, now cold and looking worse than ever.

“No Chinese food,” the man replied and moved away.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Bernard called him back, as much irritated by how the man answered as by the answer he gave. “That’s false advertising, isn’t it? I mean everyone thinks this is a Chinese restaurant, with fortunes and all this Chinese writing.” He drummed his fingers on the menu he had laid beside his plate to prove his point.

“Fortunes. You get fortunes.”

“But the damn food!”

The Chinaman leaned close, exuding a smell of smoke and oriental metabolism, sour and strange to the New York City policeman’s buttery constitution. “In menu, here.” He placed a boney, brown finger alongside the menu. “Here say what is.”

“And what is it?”

The finger shifted gently to indicate the food on Bernard’s plate. “Here. What you get. Here.”

“I mean, what is it?”

The man intoned something in his own language.

“Hmph! You have different entries here,” Bernard responded, “but everyone seems to get the same thing.” An image of the garbage in the cans on the street came back to him. He was no longer feeling the least bit fit to follow his own argument.

The Chinaman grinned unexpectedly. “All say same thing. Okay? You want fortune now? Five minutes, please.” He left, came back after what seemed to be a lot longer than five minutes, and left a scrap of paper by Bernard’s plate. Bernard lifted the scrap and stared at his fortune. ‘Your expectations are uninformed,’ it read. He grunted and put it aside.

“Maybe you better show me around a little bit, wha’da’ya say to that?” Bernard demanded rather than asked, having called the Chinaman back to the table. “Just give me a little confidence that you know what you’re doing down

here. You know these aren't the best circumstances for a restaurant, don't you? I mean, you're not really allowed to be here. I could report you *real* fast. Why don't you go to Chinatown where there are a million—" He stopped midsentence as the Chinaman invited him to put his head through the wall, then saw that the Chinaman's hand had in fact disappeared into the wall and that it couldn't be a wall but, yes, a beaded doorway, and Bernard stuck his head through. But by that time he had lost his train of thought.

Bernard was in a lightless, smoky closet. Two little fans, painful investments made by the Chinaman, chattered away on either side of the doorway, but layers of smoke remained lapped around the uneven edges of the cardboard panels he had carefully replaced against the narrow passageway to seal it off from the dining room. Alone with the Chinaman in thick smoke, Bernard panicked slightly to hear him intone his strange language, the lilt and screech of Chinese, to the empty room, as a lonely bird would in a solitary wood. Intensifying Bernard's unpleasant surprise, the melancholy sound fluted back from out of the smoke. Then dimly, the shape of a kneeling figure became visible as it turned from where it had been working at the center of the smoke, a makeshift stove. As the face inclined toward the Chinaman, Bernard could see it was a woman. On glimpsing Bernard, she lowered her head in shame and shifted herself back to her work.

After a rapid glance at the long blocks of cheese and bread stacked against one wall and a look in the steaming kettle where the water for tea was heated, Bernard left, uncertain of what he thought or felt. It was a miserable hole and they were miserable creatures and their situation made him and the whole world miserable. And it would all be that much worse if he had to crawl back into one of those police cars.



After groping through and finally quitting the tunnel, Bernard was surprised to find himself hating the vaulted emptiness of the public platforms. But once he reached the street and came into the natural light, he breathed a sigh of relief. As he continued making his rounds in the fresh cold air, he began to feel more himself and his appraisal of the Chinese man's circumstances took a more practical turn. His thoughts continued to dwell late into the afternoon on the Oriental pair as he absent-mindedly rubbed the palm of his hand; it still felt pleasantly cool from the firm grip he had had on the railing in the tunnel.

The next day Bernard went back, and the next and the next, unable to make up his mind whether to report the scofflaw or not. Every day he ordered the same terrible food, and every day he received the same fortune: 'Your expectations are uninformed.'

By the end of the week, after receiving the same fortune for the fourth time, Bernard approached the Chinaman. Considering himself by this time to be unquestionably in the right, he gave the meager brown man a round of sound advice while the Chinaman looked sadly towards the ground. But as soon as Bernard had finished, he got a slap in the face: the Chinaman only said, "The fortune, I cannot change it." The remark was not at all to the point of the circumlocutions Bernard had been making, and then again, it struck the nerve. A new fortune was exactly what Bernard wanted; he just hadn't mentioned it.

"Well, I guess my expectations are informed now, wouldn't you say?" Bernard retorted. As he lost his temper, the scene of a few days before came back to him. Now Bernard was the red-faced player bawling out the bowed man, but with little sympathy for either himself or the Chinaman, he blustered on: "How can you possibly expect

to do any business here if you don't change the fortunes? Nobody comes for the food, Mac. They come for those fortunes. You've got to give them new ones, a little variety, or they're not *going* to come back!" He was already sorry he had mentioned business: the man had no business. Maybe he gave everyone the same fortune, maybe everyone's expectations were uninformed. On the other hand, how could they be informed? This man went out of his way to misinform them with his Chinese self and that absurd menu. Perhaps the Chinaman's actual crime was fraud: setting up people's expectations to be wrong, and then establishing a reputation for himself as a teller of true fortunes by pointing that fact out to them. Bernard exhaled slowly and abandoned the anger he had so patiently accumulated throughout the week. The food was as it was. The whole consideration of a restaurant here was absurd. The man had no chance.

By this time, Bernard, abashed, had simply stopped and was staring down into a grave Asian face that was taking him in with two very remote, very intelligent, enduring eyes. The Oriental scrutiny did not waver; it emanated from a face extraordinary for all the lines and arches the concern of centuries seemed to have etched into it. Bernard stoically bore the man's examination without looking away. It was not a look that shamed or embarrassed; it was in some way dignifying. Yet the eyes were dull, the centuries of suffering dampening their shine and leading Bernard along a path of reflection he was unwilling to follow. Who was this man? Was he really a snail thriving on filth? How had he come to lodge himself so deep, where the roar of the trains shuddered through your very bones, here where there was more grease and tar and mold than air, to pass each day in lightlessness? But Bernard didn't want to know.

After a weighty pause, Bernard whispered hoarsely against his will, "Why can't you change the fortunes?"



“You same today, you same tomorrow,” the man responded. “Good bye.” He disappeared behind the beaded curtain.

“Same today, same tomorrow,” Bernard repeated under his breath. “God-damn it!” he yelled when he got to the street and grasped the cold railing of the crooked fence to shake it.

In the smoky kitchen-closet, the man and his wife engaged in a rapid exchange in their Oriental lilt which ended in humiliated silence for both. The Chinaman returned to the lunchroom sadly. It was late afternoon. There were no guests and he expected none. His only surprise was to find Bernard standing in the doorway, the pinks and blues of the entranceway’s modest neon lights reflected in his wrist and cheek propped as one against the concrete.

Bernard came forward, slapping his cap against his thigh. The Chinaman waited.

“You know,” Bernard finally began. “You’re not allowed to be here.” He blew his breath out very slowly before he began again. When he did continue his voice was loud. “Did you hear me? You’ve got no right to be here! How in hell’s name did you think you could ever come here? You’ve got nothing to cook with, you don’t have enough room, you’re in the god-damned subway for christsakes what’s the matter with you my god you don’t even have a toilet and that’s the law, you know. You don’t even have a god-damned toilet. That’s it, that’s law.” He took a breath and looked at the man. “My god,” he repeated softly. He slapped his cap against his thigh again, made a face showing his embarrassment, and left. He returned the next day at lunchtime and looked with dismay at the empty room. The Chinaman stood in the corner by the beaded curtain, a dingy towel in his hands, as if waiting for him.

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” Bernard began. He seated himself at the table and made a show of making himself comfortable. “I can understand that a man can’t change his nature. My wife tells me that every day. And as far as that goes, sure, I can understand that you can’t change the fortunes. But, hey, listen, you can tell a man a couple of different sides of his nature, now can’t you? He gets something a little different, but still true. Now how about that?” He sat back and looked up expectantly, drumming his fingers once on the table.

“The fortune, I can’t change it,” the Chinaman said.

The scraping of a chair over cement sounded, the echo of a thud of a fist slammed onto a cheap tin table already dead, and the Chinaman stood staring from his corner not into the empty room but through to the black tunnel beyond. The roar of a dozen trains thundered in through the narrow channel before he disappeared behind the beaded curtain.

“Look, maybe you don’t know enough English to express what you mean—what *all* you mean when you write those fortunes.” Bernard was back the next day sitting at the table with the Chinaman standing impassively by. A party of four who had apparently enjoyed themselves very much had just crowded their way out of the room. They had been loud and had laughed frequently; even the men had squealed from time to time. They had all worn sunglasses and one man had worn a walkman which he refused to take off despite the attempts of his friends to rip the earphones from his head; he had only smiled and jogged his head energetically in time to his music. They had thought ahead, had brought a large bag of corn chips and several cans of beer.

When they were gone and the room had once again receded to its raw surfaces, Bernard whispered up to the Chinaman from his seat: “Do it in Chinese. You know. In Chinese you can express attitude and culture, all your stuff better.” The Chinaman rewarded him with a slow turn of his

head and a steady, intense look. “Yeah,” Bernard nodded and smiled. He put his hand on the table and moved it as if he were writing. “Do it in Chinese and then,” he paused, flushed with excitement, “translate it for them for so many beans an hour. Teach them Chinese while you translate their fortune—their true fortune now. Their true one.” He rapped gently on the table for emphasis. “Show them which little squiggle means what. Hey, they’re going to believe it a lot more when they get it that way, I can vouch for that. I still remember the French stories I got in the fourth grade. I didn’t take anything with me after that. But I remember those damn French stories.”

“You say I must leave.”

“I did not! I said you can’t be here. Never said you had to leave.” As the Chinaman scrutinized him without answering, Bernard nodded. “Yeah, but you couldn’t do worse somewhere else.”

“We cannot pay,” the man said and disappeared behind the curtain.

“Hell, I knew that,” Bernard said to himself as he left.

Bernard had been given a month to make his rounds on foot and collect his statistics before making his report to the precinct chief in which he was to prove—*numbers, Bernard, you have to talk numbers*—that the pedestrian style was more effective than the car style for patrolling an area. Although Bernard felt he was experiencing a refreshing new orientation within his context and true relationships with the life forms that prowled around in it, he couldn’t very well find out how much better he was doing than if he were driving; he had no idea what potential incidents he was missing because, pure and simple, he wasn’t there. His reports were alarmingly low, but he didn’t expect his boss to

believe that the mere introduction of his misshapen self into his territory dispelled trouble, placated souls, and soothed outbursts before they began—he was not Francis of Assisi—although that, Bernard was convinced, was exactly the truth of the matter. No, the absence of reports would be understood to mean that he didn't get around fast enough to get to the trouble when it occurred. That had been the precinct chief's argument against his making rounds on foot in the first place.

Bernard's only possibility was the Chinaman. Because he now walked a beat, he had been able to ferret out those tiny, powerless—but malicious, chief!—elements that crawled into places they had no business being, lodging there to make a living, paying no taxes, tapping illicitly into the city's resources, and thumbing their noses to city regulations. It might carry some weight. Then again, it might do nothing more than tack up a weathered Asian hide that had already seen more than its share of hardship.

On the day before his report was due, Bernard was so preoccupied with rehearsing what he would say that he didn't realize he had been standing in the Chinaman's doorway, in the shadows, waiting while a surprising number of patrons queued and took seats, queued and took seats. When the Chinaman's face floated from out of the dusty twilight searching his face, Bernard did not start. The mood the wizened brown skin and clouded eyes evoked mirrored the image of his own thoughts so intimately that Bernard didn't recognize them as external to himself. The voice, however, gave him a frightful start, ripping him out of his reverie.

"Fortune?" the Chinaman asked, and held out on a plate a roll of paper held together by a thin wire carefully wound around it. Bernard took the fortune, slipped it out of its wire hoop, and unrolled it. A beautiful script of tiny Chinese characters ran across the strip of paper.

“Oh! Not bad,” Bernard acknowledged shyly. He was thrilled to see that his idea had been good enough for this inscrutable man to accept, thrilled to see what he had done with it, and thrilled to see that it had such a positive impact on business. People were standing in the miserable windy loud dangerous tunnel waiting their turn for the single table, and it wasn’t to eat the food, Bernard knew that. “What does it say?” he asked.

“Translate free. Come.” Bernard was led behind the beaded curtain and given a seat on a stool in a corner of the kitchen, the air thick with smoke that did not circulate. Bernard was dimly aware that the figure at the stove had shifted slightly in his direction to watch. When the Chinaman sat on a stool opposite him, their knees touched. Along the wall behind him a board had been laid across two bricks. It held brushes, books, papers, and jars of sticks. A lone battery-driven light bulb bonneted with brown paper cast the light within which the Chinaman hunched to study the work he held in his lap. His face remained impassive as he paged rapidly back and forth through books he pulled occasionally from the shelf. From time to time, he stopped to stare intensely at a character, as if it, a living thing, had changed color in the very moment he had pierced it with meaning, and now it was dead, killed and dead to lie in the wrong color forever. It was an awesome task and the Chinaman seemed to feel the gravity of his work. When he finally looked up, his face was severe.

“Well?” Bernard asked a little fearfully. “What is it?”

The man remained silent although he continued to look steadily at Bernard.

“Well?” Bernard asked, none too pleased. “What is it?”

Gravely the Chinaman reached out and tapped him insistently on the arm. “Bah-nad.”

A joyful reverberation coursed through Bernard to hear the earnest little man speak his name. How had he found it out?

“Bah-nad,” the Chinaman intoned ceremoniously. “Your expectations are uninformed.”

With a slap and a grunt the moments of anxious anticipation were dispelled. “That does it!” Bernard exclaimed, but was arrested by the sight of the Chinese face suddenly split by a wide grin. Bernard had never a soul before, but he believed he was seeing one now.

“Yeah?” Bernard asked grumpily. “What?”

“You not changed,” the man beamed beatifically. “You still same. Fortune different here,” he indicated the flowing Chinese script. “Not here.” He firmly stroked Bernard’s forehead once with his thumb.

Bernard laughed in spite of himself. He hadn’t met his match. He had never been a contender. When he made his report the next day, he mentioned to the mustachioed precinct chief that doing rounds on foot gave him the chance to police the zoning enforcements set down by the city of New York City and check the performance of city services. He could see when the trash cans were overfull, for example, and request more frequent garbage pickups. The chief guffawed. But, Bernard continued earnestly, it was better, truly better, simply because he had the chance to get to know the people who lived in the area, conducted business in the area, frequented the area. He was aware when they needed help. Most important, he added modestly, they felt they could come to him, talk to him, give him news about daily events because he was a part of their daily lives, just plain more approachable on foot and not a phenomenon that passed through stinking things up in a predatory police car. He lived in the world they lived in and shared that world with them. “Statistics have nothing to do with it, doncha see, chief? I could get mugged, too. They know that. I need their protection as much as they need

mine. It's got to do with sharing quality. Sharing quality." But that was the same old stuff his boss had found inadequate the month before. "And I saw a soul, chief. For the first time in my life, I saw a soul. An Asian one. It looked at me. I looked at it. I would never have seen a soul from the patrol car. I'll never see one again if I have to drive the beat."

"Count your blessings, Bernie. Most of us never see any."

The following week Bernard was wedged behind the steering wheel of his police car, feeling his girth and the beginning of an ache in his idle legs, counting the red lights he got within each quarter hour. He pondered the trick played on him, "The fortune. I cannot change it." Then a rueful thought slowly formed between the stops and starts of the traffic; the reds, yellows, and greens of the lights; the groans and farts of the New York City engines: his expectations *had* been informed, hadn't they? He had known all along he was going to land back in that police car, but he had tried to change his fortune. He had made an honest and diligent effort to change the god-damn fortune. So what did that guy mean his expectations were uninformed? They had been only too well informed! Or ... had they only been fulfilled? That was a kick in the ass. Getting them fulfilled didn't mean he had known a Sam-hill thing, did it? Were his expectations informed now? Bernard began to weave his way through traffic to the network of narrow, shabby nonstreets and the hole in the asphalt that led down to sandwich heaven.

The End