

NOW
15¢

SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES

BLACK MASK[★]

SEPT. 1934

**THE
HEAVENLY
RAT**

By
**ERLE
STANLEY
GARDNER**

**A
FLASH
CASEY
Story**

By **GEORGE
HARMON COXE**



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Heavenly Rat

Date of first publication: 1934

Author: Erle Stanley Gardner (1889-1970)

Illustrator: Fred Craft (1882-1935)

Date first posted: Mar. 24, 2023

Date last updated: Mar. 24, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230341

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Luminist.



The Heavenly Rat

By
ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Illustrated by Fred Craft.

First published *Black Mask*, September 1934.

He was minus one eye and one leg, but he was all there with a knife.



studied his face, and didn't like it.

His eyes shifted, and he looked me over, carefully. My coat was threadbare. He saw it. My vest was spotted. His eyes catalogued the spots, one by one. He studied the frayed bottoms of my trousers, the shoes that were run over at the heels.

He nodded, and his nod was that of approval.

"At nine o'clock," he said, "at the door of *The Yellow Lotus*."

I knew then that he knew his Chinatown. But few people knew of *The Yellow Lotus*. The name, in fact, was contained only in Chinese characters that appeared on a sign which was thrust out over the dark side street.

His eyes held mine. I hesitated. Dare I arouse his suspicions by refusing?

I felt that my disguise was perfect. Perhaps it was too perfect. I felt certain that the police, for all they wanted me, would never recognize me in the shabby figure that prowled around Chinatown—the figure of a white hanger-on who had been crowded out of the society of his own kind and into the dark poverty which fringes Chinatown.

There was a glitter in his eye as he saw my hesitation.

His thumb flipped back the lapel of his coat, slipped through the arm-hole of his vest and pulled out the elastic strap of a suspender. Pinned to the strap was a gold badge.

"You don't want to work?" he asked ominously.

"Sure," I told him. "Sure I want to work, Gov'nor. I'm taking the job all right. It's just tryin' to figure things out that was bothering me."

"Figure what out?" he asked, with belligerent skepticism.

Embarked upon a career of falsehood, I strove to act the part.

"Aw, jeeze!" I told him. "I had a date for tonight."

His laugh was scornful.

"A date," he said, and then added with explosive sarcasm, "*You!*"

His thumb remained suggestively beneath the lapel of his coat, hooked about the suspender, which had now been pushed back through the arm-hole of the vest.

"Okey," he said, "nine o'clock at *The Yellow Lotus*, and if you're not there I'll know what it means."

"Can you tell me what the job is?" I asked.

"There you go," he told me, "beggars wanting to be choosers. You're prowling around the streets, apparently without a dime in the world. You haven't got a job and you have no prospects of getting one, and yet you start being particular about the first job that's offered."

I was treading on dangerous ground and knew it. My clothes were the clothes of a man who is down and out, one who has sought the cheapest possible strata of society. But my fingertips were the fingertips of Ed Jenkins, The Phantom Crook.

If this man picked me up as a vagrant, took me to the jail for booking, my fingerprints would be taken, as a matter of routine. I'd be thrown in a cell and the officers would forget about me.

Within twenty-four hours the fingerprints would electrify the whole department. The classification of those fingerprints would scream my real identity.

I'd be dragged from my cell, thrust under bright lights. Questions would be shouted at me. Half a hundred crimes, which had been blamed upon me because the police needed some official fall guy, would be marked as closed. . . .

"I'll be there," I told him.

"See that you are," he said, and turned away.

I started shuffling down the long street lined with store windows in which were displayed the goods of the Orient at prices that were intended to bring money from the tourist, no matter how penurious he might be.

Of course I didn't need to keep that appointment. I could change my mind and not show up at *The Yellow Lotus* at all. But I felt that this contingency had also been prepared for. The man who had offered me the "job" knew what he was doing. He'd planned his stuff in advance. He wasn't a regular officer, nor was he a regular detective, I knew that. The badge that he showed was either one of the "courtesy" badges passed out by various sheriff's offices in the state, or else it was an imitation, pure and simple.

I could, of course, have told more about that badge by a close inspection. But even that wouldn't have helped me much. Whether that badge was real or false, the idea troubled me that somewhere, somehow I had slipped. This man who had just picked me out on the street might be an officer or a crook; but I had the uneasy thought that someone, some stool pigeon or some dope, had pointed me out to him for what I really was.

I shuffled slowly along the pavement, twitching occasionally, as a man twitches who has been denied a drug to which he has grown accustomed, mulling over this unpleasant and highly dangerous possibility. If I kept that appointment, I might find out if there was any truth underlying my fear—a fear that must be ever present with me. If I did not keep it— But immediately I had the answer to this.

I heard steps approaching from behind, and slowed my pace.

There was a window on my right, displaying jades and ivories. A huge mirror was in the back of the store, a mirror bordered with twisting dragons, squirming about in frozen pursuit of the pearl, the symbology of which is variously interpreted by Chinese sages in order that the true philosophy may ever escape the unbeliever.

This mirror was placed in such a position that I could stand apparently staring into the window, but in reality seeing over my shoulder anyone who might pass on the sidewalk.

The steps shuffled, hesitated, and a figure paused at my side, to peer through the window at the display of carved ivory.

I shifted my eyes to the mirror and saw that I was staring into the reflected eyes of a gaunt, haggard individual, his own clothes somewhat seedy, his eyes peering out from above shaded half circles, from under bushy brows.

He started to speak the moment my eye caught his in the mirror. His words came in a low, rumbling monotone out of one side of his mouth:

“Listen, Bo, never mind who I am, see? And I don’t want to know who you are, see? I’m just handing it to you on the level. You’re wearing a tail. The bird you talked with put a finger on you, and the twist is getting your smoke.

“It’s none of my business, but I want to see a guy get a square deal. I’ve been down on my luck, myself, and I know what it’s like when they start riding a guy, so I’m just giving you a tip.”

I lowered my eyes so that I was staring steadily at the carved ivory.

“A woman?” I asked.

“The twist in the blue coupé,” he said. “And she’s clever as hell.”

I heard his feet drag along the pavement as he moved away with a peculiar hesitating step, that lagging of the lower limbs which shows a loss of coordination and speaks volumes to the trained eye of a physician.

The dragging steps diminished as he rounded a corner. Fog came swirling in on the wings of the night wind. I casually turned around to take a look at the woman in the blue coupé.

That car was a sporty looking job. The woman was as classy as the car—a neat little figure, a close-fitting hat cocked on one side of her head, hat, eyes and waist all matching the car in color.

I reached an instant decision. There was a cheap hotel about five blocks away. I had a room there. I also had rooms in three other hotels, under three different names. Two of them I’d paid rent on for more than a year.

I slouched along the sidewalk, dropping my neck down into the collar of my shabby coat as the first cool touches of the damp fog stroked my skin with moist fingers.

Apparently the woman in the blue coupé didn’t pay any attention to me. She seemed to be having trouble getting her car started. Her head was bent forward and her eyes were fastened on the starter pedal. I could hear the whirr of the mechanism.

I rounded the corner and acted the part of one who doesn’t think he is being followed, but wants to take every precaution, just as a matter of habit.



It took me fifteen minutes to get to the hotel. I didn’t look behind me and had no means of knowing whether the blue coupé was anywhere in the neighborhood. The hotel clerk spoke to me as I came in. I gave him rather a curt nod. I didn’t want him to inspect my shabby clothes too closely. The personality that I’d used in that hotel wasn’t one that went well with shabby clothes. On the other hand, it was a cheap hotel, and if the clerk thought I’d been out on a five-day bat it wouldn’t have caused him any undue amount of consternation.

Once inside my room, I climbed up on a chair where I could look through the transom into the corridor, and waited.

I had less than five minutes to wait. The loose-lipped lad who acted both as elevator boy and bellboy came down the corridor with a light bag dangling from his hand, his loose lips twisted in a flabby smile of vacuous amiability.

The woman in blue was walking behind him.

I listened and heard the door of the adjoining room on the east open and close. I could faintly hear the click of light switches through the connecting door. After a while I heard the door close again and the sound of rapid steps in the corridor, after which there was the noise made by the clanging of the elevator door.

I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes before eight.

There was a very faint scratching sound—the sound that might have been made by the teeth of a rat scratching surreptitiously against dry boards. I flattened myself against the wall and inched my way over towards the connecting door between the rooms. I knew where to look and what to look for, and I didn't have long to wait—just a matter of seconds, and the point of a small gimlet protruded from the corner of the panel in the lower half of the door.

The woman in blue was either an expert or had been instructed by an expert. She had drilled the hole neatly in the one place in a door where it is almost impossible to detect it—the upper corner of a lower panel where it would be in shadow.

I held my position and waited a minute. The scratching sound was repeated, and a moment later I saw the point of the gimlet appear in the other upper corner of the door panel. The holes had been bored on slightly different angles. Between them, they commanded a pretty fair view of my room.

I slid along, keeping flat against the wall until I came to the bathroom. Then I picked up a towel and emerged from the bathroom door, wiping my hands.

I moved around the room casually. Once or twice I looked at my watch ostentatiously. I was more worried than I cared to admit. Someone was taking quite an interest in me. It wasn't someone who thought I was simply a bum hanging around the fringes of Chinatown— Who was this man? Why had he put the woman on my trail? What did he want with me? And who did he think I was?

I made up my mind I was going to interview that girl in blue before the night was very much older.

I walked back towards the bathroom, banged the bathroom door, flattened myself against the wall and moved slowly and cautiously towards the connecting door, keeping so far to one side that I was out of the range of vision of anyone who might be looking through those holes in the door.

Standing almost against it, I bent forward to listen.

The door was a thin, flimsy affair, in keeping with the cheap furnishings of the second-rate hotel. I could plainly hear the sound of breathing through the thin board. Then I heard the sound of surreptitious fingers touching the bolt on the other side of the door. There were two bolts—one on my side, one on hers. I knew she had turned hers and would shortly try to see if the door was open on my side. Thinking I was in the bathroom, she figured she had a clear field.

The knob slowly turned. There was tension on the door. The bolt on my side held.

Abruptly, I heard a gasp, the sound of the outer door in the next room banging shut, then a woman's voice coming from beyond the door: "Sam, why didn't you let me know you were coming up?"

A man's voice said something I couldn't get. There was a low, throaty laugh, a man's laugh, with a gloating note about it.

I heard the first two or three steps as the woman on the other side of the door moved away from it. Then the conversation was lower and I could get only an occasional word here and there.

I was already standing by the connecting door. I had only to drop to my knees and apply my eye to one of the peep-holes in order to see what was taking place in the room.

The woman had slipped off the coat of her neatly tailored outfit and was attired in waist and skirt. The man was rather tall, with broad shoulders and a peculiar method of moving his arms. I figured that he'd been a pug at some stage of the game. When he moved his feet, I was

certain of it. For a moment I had a good glimpse of his face—a battered face that had, nevertheless, something to it—a certain grim determination, a certain indication of mental ability along lines of animal cunning. I could see his lips move and hear the rumble of his voice. His gestures were threatening.

The girl stood up to him, white-faced and defiant. Her lips made futile attempts at speech on three different occasions, and on each occasion the rumble of the man's voice drowned her words.

The man advanced threateningly, his left foot tapping forward in advance, which was followed by his right foot. He was on the balls of his feet. The girl stood her ground for a moment, then took three swift steps backwards. The man thrust his head forward and followed. That put them outside the range of my vision.

I remained crouched by the door, putting my ear against the hole. I could hear the sound of the woman's voice, speaking swiftly. The man's voice said something—a low-voiced, guttural comment. There was a peculiar sound, a sound that might have been caused by the impact of a fist. I put my eye to the hole in the door again just in time to see the striding legs of the big man as he crossed the room. I heard the bang of the door, then quick, cat-like steps in the corridor, after a few moments the clang of the elevator door.

I remained at my peep-hole, waiting for the woman to come back.

She didn't come back.

After a moment I caught the flicker of motion and stared intently through the little peep-hole. For a moment I was puzzled at what it was that was making the motion. Then I realized it was the tips of her fingers on the carpet, moving with a peculiar clutching motion. A moment later the hand itself crept into view. She seemed to be lying flat on the carpet, pulling herself along, her fingers acting as claws.

I had decided that I was going to talk with her. I could think of no time that was better than the present. I got to my feet and silently twisted the knob on my side of the door. Noiselessly, I opened the door. I could hear the sound of steady, hopeless sobs.



My feet made no noise on the thin carpet. The woman was stretched at full length on the floor, sobbing as though her heart would break. Once or twice she beat her hands futilely against the carpet, then clawed into the faded, worn cloth with the tips of her long, sensitive fingers.

“Why don't you get up on the bed if you want to bawl?” I asked her.

At the sound of my voice she rolled swiftly to her side, stared at me with incredulous, red-rimmed eyes, then with a lithe motion, got to her knees, and, on her knees, stared up at me.

Her lips were quivering, both with rage and grief. Her face was white as a sheet, save for the round spot on her cheek-bone, which showed a flaming red, the spot, evidently, where a man's fist had thudded against her flesh, and which accounted for the sound of the blow that I had heard.

“D-d-d-don't think I'm b-b-b-bawling,” she said, “I'm c-c-c-crying because I'm m-m-m-m-mad.”

That was a good start. I liked it. I leaned forward and placed my hand beneath her elbow.

“All right,” I told her, “go ahead and be mad.”

She got to her feet. The tips of her fingers explored the sore cheek. She crossed the room to the wash-stand, which had once been white, and which showed a long streak of yellow, where water had trickled from the leaky faucet. She turned on the cold water, dashed it over

her face and into her eyes, groped around for one of the thin, worn towels, with the name of the hotel emblazoned on it in red thread.

“Well,” she said, “say something.”

“I thought,” I began, “I heard the sound of a blow, and. . . .”

She wiped the towel across her eyes and face with a last vigorous motion, wadded it into a ball and flung it down on the bed so hard that it sounded as though she’d thrown a pillow against the wall.

“Oh, I know you,” she said. “You’re Ed Jenkins, and you out-smarted me. You caught me drilling a hole in your door and trying the bolt on the inside. So you turned the tables, when Sam came in, and spied on me, and then came on through the door.”

The words ripped from her lips with the harsh rapidity of sound which comes from tearing cloth.

“Since you know so much,” I told her, “you might as well go ahead and tell me the rest.”

I was watching her narrowly. The information that I was The Phantom Crook, was something I had flattered myself she couldn’t have known. And yet, here she was, blabbing it out as casually as though she had been telling me that she had seen my picture in the society column of the paper.

“Go on,” I told her, “tell me some more.”

“There isn’t any more to tell. What are you going to do with me?”

“Why should I do anything with you?”

She stood very stiff and very straight, her eyes staring steadily into mine.

“I know,” she said, “you’re on the lam. I was spying on you. You figure that you’ve got to rub me out in order to keep your secret.”

“Look here,” I said, “you’ve been going to too many movies. You’ve seen too many gangster pictures.”

She shook her head. There was a scornful smile playing about the corners of her lips.

“Don’t fool yourself,” she said, “I’ve seen too many gangsters, that’s all.”

“Who is your boy friend?”

“The one who socked me?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes held a scornful glint as she said, “Want me to rat?”

“You’re evidently in something of a spot,” I told her. “You’re not getting along so well with your boy friend, you were put on my tail by a man who probably wasn’t a blood relative of yours. You might just as well come through and give me the low-down, as to go out and do what you’re intending to do.”

“How do you know what I’m intending to do?”

“I’m guessing,” I told her.

“What do you want?”

I was studying her as she spoke. The more I saw of her, the better I liked her.

“I might be able to help you,” I said.

“Help,” she repeated, and there was contempt in her voice. “How long it’s been since I heard *that* one.”

I didn’t say anything, but tried to draw her out by silence, where words had failed.

She stood staring at me for a moment, then her eyes shifted to the door. I could see that she was quivering, that every nerve, every muscle was tense.

“Frightened?” I asked.

She stared at me with that hard, scornful expression on her face.

“Mad,” she said.

“Because he bopped you?” I wanted to know.

“I’m not mad at him at all, I’m mad at myself.”

“Go on,” I told her.

She was like some animal in a trap, holding herself with every muscle tense, wanting to lunge against the steel, yet, knowing that if she did, she’d simply hurt herself and that she couldn’t get away in any event.

“Say, what’s *your* game?” she demanded. “You found out I was trailing you. If you’d simply wanted to get away, you’d have ducked out of the door and beat it. The fact that you came in here shows that you’re wanting something with me. What is it?”

“I want to find out about the man who put you on my trail and why.”

I saw her lips tighten into a firm line. Her eyes shifted from mine, stared at the door as though she might be weighing some course of action in her mind and didn’t want her attention distracted. I kept silent.

After a moment she started to speak.

“I’ve been a fool!” she said. “A damn’ little fool! The people that I love have been betrayed by me. I gave everything I had as a sacrifice to what I thought was love.”

She broke off and laughed bitterly.

“*Love!*” she said, and, after a moment added, “*Bah!*”

I kept on waiting. I knew the significance of that peculiar tone in her voice. I’d heard it before. She was more or less thinking out loud. For the moment she’d virtually forgotten me. I was simply someone to talk to, someone to use as a target in throwing the words that she spat bitterly from the end of her tongue.

“Ever hear of Frank Trasker?” she asked abruptly.



There was no one in the underworld who hadn’t heard of Frank Trasker. Trasker had been killed. A man by the name of George Harris had been arrested, charged with the murder. The police figured they had a perfect case against him. It looked that way. George Harris was a miner who had a quartz mine somewhere up in Nevada. Trasker had induced Harris’ daughter to go away with him to San Francisco. Harris had followed and Trasker had been killed.

Trasker had been mixed up in a big bank robbery the day of his death. The identification had been absolutely cinched while the body lay in the morgue. Trasker must have had something like fifty thousand dollars in new, crisp bank notes in his possession when he was killed. His clothes had been ripped open and a money belt had been pulled away from his skin. The police had evidence that the belt was filled with the new bank notes. The money wasn’t on Harris and hadn’t been found. It might still give a new angle on the killing if it could be turned up.

“Go on,” I said, “what about Trasker?”

She wanted to tell me, wanted to talk. I knew that she’d been weighing some course of action in her mind, hesitating between two decisions. Now she’d decided. I couldn’t tell why, and I didn’t care why, but I knew suddenly that she was going to throw in her lot with me and was going to appeal to me for some sort of help.

“I’m Harris’ daughter,” she said. “Bernice Harris.”

Somehow, I wasn’t surprised.

“Go on,” I told her.

She walked over to the bed and sat down. She seemed to relax. Her voice still held that dreamy tone that characterizes the voice of one who is making a clean breast of everything—the tone of voice that is so well known to officers and prosecutors.

“Gawd, how tired I got of that mine!” she said. “It was just a little sun-bleached shack out on the side of a hill, with nothing but sunshine and cactus to look at. The light was so white-hot it burned your eyes. Every day was like every other day. Twice a month we got to town for provisions and mail. I looked at the magazines in order to see what the well-dressed women were wearing. The only clothes I had were a pair of overalls, boots and a faded blue shirt that I wore around the mine. I had one dress to put on for state occasions, when I went to town. ‘Town’ was half a dozen stores and about five or six shack houses.”

I kept absolutely quiet, not even moving a muscle.

Her voice went on:

“There was a Chinese cook, an old, broken-down prize-fighter and a hard rock man who had lost his right hand and wore an iron claw strapped to his wrist. Those three comprised the mining crew. Dad was in charge. There was money in the mine, all right. Dad kept putting more and more money in the bank. He was working it himself. He wouldn’t sell out. I got tired of it. I ran away.

“I came here to San Francisco. I had a little money. I had my one baggy, shapeless, old-fashioned dress. I looked like hell.”

Once more she paused, and I knew that she wasn’t thinking of me, but was conjuring up in her mind the vision of the young girl who had hit the roar and bustle of San Francisco, a girl whose skin was tanned by the desert sun, whose eyes were bulging with surprised appreciation of the life in the city.

“I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the windows,” she said. “I looked just what I was—an unsophisticated country girl—not so damned unsophisticated, you understand, but I’d been lying dormant for so long I’d forgotten what it was like to live. I met Trasker. He had a glib tongue and that way of easy assurance that means so much to a girl who is starving for experience. He led me on, and I fell in love with him. I mentioned marriage to him, and he laughed. I’ll never forget the sound of his laugh that night.”

Her voice was now harsh and bitter.

“That was the night I found out about the gang.”

I started to ask a question, but checked myself.

“Father found me. I don’t know how he found me. He found Trasker. You know what happened after that.”

This time I asked the question:

“Did your father kill Trasker?” I asked.

She hesitated for a moment without even looking at me, her eyes fixed thoughtfully on the wall of the room.

Slowly she shook her head.

“No,” she said.

“Who did?”

“I don’t know. Oscar Milen knows.”

“Who’s Milen?”

“The man who put the finger on you.”

“The man I met on the street?”

“Yes.”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know exactly. He’s the big shot in the gang.”

“Was he the man who came in here?” I inquired, knowing that he wasn’t, but wanting to see what she would say.

“No, that was Sam Reece.”

“Who’s Sam Reece?”

“Another one of the gang.”

“How much do you know about the gang?”

“Plenty,” she said bitterly.

I waited for her to tell me, but she wouldn’t explain.

“I presume,” I said, “Milen promises to clear your father at the last minute if you’ll do exactly as he tells you.”

She shook her head and said slowly, “Milen tells me that my father killed Trasker.”

“It was your father’s gun that did the killing,” I told her. “They’ve got the bullet and fired test bullets from your father’s gun. Your father claims he didn’t shoot, but the gun was in his possession and had been fired, and the bullet that killed Trasker came from it. They can show plenty of motive.”

She nodded once more, slowly.

“And Milen says your father killed Trasker?” I asked, trying to get her to elaborate the statement.

“Yes, Milen swears to me that’s what happened.”

“What makes you think that wasn’t what happened?”

“Sam Reece says it wasn’t.”

“Just how does Reece fit into the picture?” I inquired.

“Reece,” she said, “is the one who is going to meet you in front of *The Yellow Lotus* at nine o’clock.”

“Does he know who I am?”

“You mean about being Ed Jenkins?” she inquired.

“Yes,” I said.

She nodded her head slowly.

“Sure,” she said, “they both know about it. Oscar Milen told me.”

“What does he want with me?”

“He’s going to put you in a spot some way. You’ve got to do something for him; I don’t know just what it is.”

“And,” I said, holding my eyes on her, “I presume Sam Reece dropped in without Milen knowing anything about it, to pay a purely social call.”

She looked up at me, and it was then that I read the misery in her eyes.

“They all have tried to make love to me,” she said, “ever since Frank Trasker was killed, from Milen on down.”

Once more the bitterness was in her voice, once more she clenched her fists in white-faced rage.

“Gawd, how I hate myself!” she said. “How I hate the selfish little rotter I was! I know now that my father was doing everything for me. He was working that mine because he was trying to put aside a stake, so that I could have money. All the money I wanted! He wanted me

to have good clothes, but he wanted me to get them all at once. He was planning to send me to Europe. And I ran away, and . . . and look what I did to myself. Look what I did to my father!"

"What are you going to do now?" I asked her.

She got slowly to her feet.

"You're Ed Jenkins," she said. "You're a slick crook. I was supposed to get on your tail and keep on your tail until you are on the spot. I thought I'd have to keep working for the gang until I could get something that would clear my father. But that seems hopeless. I'm going to fight. I can't fight alone. The gang is after you. I'm going to play ball with you!"

It might or might not have been true. I didn't get too enthusiastic. It might have been a damn' clever build-up.

"Why is the gang after me?" I asked.

"Now that prohibition has gone," she said, "they've switched to dope. There's some kind of big deal on in Chinatown. I don't know just what it is. You're mixed in with *Soo Hoo Duck*, the real head of the Chinese tongs, and they've an idea you might hear about it and block their deal. Some Chinese told them that."

"How did they find out who I was?"

"I don't know."

"What do they want with me?"

"They're sticking up the Gamay Jewelry Company," she said. "They want you for a fall-guy. Your fingerprints are going to be all over the job. They figure that will put you out of the way for the dope deal. I don't know what's going to happen after that."

"The man I was talking with was Oscar Milen?" I asked.

"Yes."

"He stopped me," I said, "and told me that he was a detective; that he had a job for me; that it was a real, legitimate job; that I was to meet his man in front of *The Yellow Lotus* promptly at nine o'clock. He said he knew all about me. I didn't know what that meant."

"You know what it means now."

I stared steadily at her. Her eyes didn't flinch. The red spot on her cheek was turning a purplish hue.

"You have," I told her, "made a damn' good build-up. It's a shame it isn't going to work."

With that, I turned on my heel, walked to the connecting door, banged it shut and slipped the bolt.

I dropped to my knees and put my eye up against the peep-hole. I wanted to see how she was taking it.

She sat there on the bed for a moment, staring steadily at the door through which I had vanished. Then she got to her feet, walked towards the wall telephone. I heard her pick up the receiver and give a number in a low, cautious voice. Then she put her mouth up close against the transmitter, and I couldn't even hear the mumble of conversation. I heard the click of the receiver when she hung it up. She had been talking for four or five minutes.

I had done all I could here, had learned one thing definitely; this gang, that man who had made the appointment for me, knew my real identity. There was no alternative now. I had to keep that appointment, discover what they planned with me.

an Francisco fog slid silently past the towers of Chinatown, clutching with slimy fingers at the moisture-beaded cornices, swirling in vague eddies to temporary oblivion, only to reappear again in twisting wraiths.



Here on the corner was a Chinese street stand selling dried abalones, salted fish, candied fruit, sugared ginger peel. A drug-store offered dried lizards, horned toads preserved in wine, bits of sliced deer horn, the less expensive grades of ginseng.

Neon signs burnt into the night sky with gaudy brilliance, their colored lights illuminating the fog which seemed to cluster directly above them.

The Yellow Lotus had no electric sign. It was a resort of Chinese—of and for Chinese. It catered to no white trade. The nature of the place could be told only by the man who knew his Chinese and his Chinatown. A doorway with Chinese characters scrawled on it, opened upon one of the less popular side streets where darkness seemed to stick to the doorways like soot to the inside of a stove pipe.

The hour was nine o'clock.

I looked up and down the street and saw no one, yet I had the feeling that I was being observed.

I listened to the sound of my steps echoing mournfully against the dark fronts of the buildings which seemed so deserted—buildings which I knew could tell many weird and bizarre tales if they could only talk.

I heard other steps, a peculiar *slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump*. The sounds were not loud, but there was little noise in that dark street.

I heard another vague sound behind me, and turned.

A broad-shouldered man, walking almost noiselessly upon rubber-heeled shoes, was moving swiftly along the sidewalk, coming towards me. He had slipped silently out of a doorway.

I felt that I could recognize that cat-like tread anywhere. The man was big-boned, heavily fleshed, and yet light on his feet. He walked with the tread of a professional pugilist—a man who has strengthened his legs by hours of rope skipping, by miles of road work.

It was the man I had seen in Bernice Harris' room—Sam Reece.

I turned to listen to those other sounds—that peculiar *slap—clump*. They were coming from a wooden passageway between two buildings—a passageway which was masked by a door, so that it appeared to an observer on the street as just another entrance.

I stopped, swung so that my back was towards the street.

The broad-shouldered man veered towards me. His right hand slipped suggestively to his coat pocket.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," I answered.

"In about ten seconds," he told me, "there's going to be a machine swing around the corner and pull in close to the curb. When it comes to a stop, you get in it, see?"

There was no further need for disguise. I saw no reason to simulate the whining voice of a street beggar.

"Just why," I asked him coldly, "should I get into the machine?"

"Because," he said, "you're going to get your hide pumped full of lead if you don't."

I hoped the man would come closer. A gun isn't such a deadly weapon as most people think, if the man at whom the gun is pointed gets to close enough quarters, is quick enough with his hands, and knows what to do.

Sam Reece didn't come close, he stood about six feet away. Six feet was too far for what I had in mind.

Headlights danced along the street above.

The door which concealed the passageway banged open. A heavy-set Chinese clumped into view.

For a moment the vague light, diffused through the swirling fog, caught him. I had a weird impression of a dead-white eye, of a high forehead, of thick lips twisted back, of a fleshy face that was not fat; the face of a man who could love and who could hate.

I caught the glitter of light on silk, saw the long gleam of a polished crutch. I realized then that the man was one-eyed and one-legged; a broad shouldered, burly individual, different from most of the slender Chinese who move so unobtrusively about through the shadows. He had banged open the door with aggressive vigor.

His right hand moved. Lights from a distant *Neon* sign slithered along the polished steel of a knife, reflecting as redly as though the metal had been stained with blood.

Reece, whose hand was in his right coat pocket, gave a rasping ejaculation, whirled from the hips. I saw his right shoulder brace itself against recoil.

The Chinese said nothing. His face twisted somewhat into a set expression of grim hatred, and, in that tense moment, I saw the peculiar manner in which he was holding the knife. He had wrapped two fingers of his right hand about the long steel just where the blade joined the handle. His thumb was on the other side. His other two fingers seemed to guide the point with a caressing gesture. The whole touch was indescribably delicate.

The hand and arm flicked into perfectly coordinated motion. The red *Neon* sign glittered in swift reflection as the blade started on its way.

Flame spurted from the right-hand pocket of the coat which covered the broad shoulders of Sam Reece.

It seemed incredible that a knife could travel so fast, yet I feel certain the haft was protruding on one side of the throat, about two inches of the steel point out back of the neck, when the gun roared.

Doubtless, if Sam Reece had fired at me, the bullet would have sped through to its mark.

His bullet didn't strike the Chinese.

It is one thing to shoot at an unarmed man, one thing to shoot at an animated target—quite another thing to shoot at a man who flits knives with the casual ease of a stage magician flipping cards from a deck.

The haft of the knife was pressed so tightly against the skin that the spurting blood from the severed jugular vein sprayed out like water from a garden hose. Sam Reece staggered, groped with his left hand at the foggy darkness as though trying to find something to give him support. Twice more flame spurted from the right pocket of his coat. The bullets were wild.

The thick-set, one-legged Chinese seemed to ignore my presence. His one eye fastened itself upon the dying man. The red *Neon* light struck against the white emptiness of the bad eye, and gave it a peculiar bloody tinge.

He bowed and mouthed a phrase in Cantonese.

I didn't get it all, but I got the last two words. They were *T'ien Sheuh*, the last word muttered explosively, sounding as though he had started to shout "sugar" and then had violently arrested his voice at the end of the first syllable.

The headlights which had been dancing along the upper street crawled around the building as the automobile slowed and began to turn the corner.

The big Chinese jerked open the door, made a pivoting turn on his crutch, hurtled into the darkness of that passageway as though he had been a pole vaulter springing over the cross bar

and into a sawdust pit.

Sam Reece had fallen heavily to the sidewalk. Blood pumped from his arteries, hit the cement and made a spreading pool.

There was but one thing for me to do, and only one thing. I did it. I slipped through the doorway after the one-legged Chinese.

The door was controlled by a powerful spring. It slammed shut behind me. The darkness of the passageway closed me in. I listened to hear the peculiar *slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump* of the one-legged man. I heard nothing, not even the sound of breathing.

From the street behind me came abruptly the scream of brakes, the sudden shout of a man's voice, the banging of an automobile door, then the roar of an accelerating motor, and the sound of a departing car.

Sam Reece had had an appointment with Ed Jenkins. Sam Reece was dead, a knife protruding from his throat. I knew what the gangsters thought. I knew what the police would think—one more murder that would be chalked up against the account of The Phantom Crook.

And what of this man who had thrown the knife? Well as I knew my Chinatown, I had never seen him before. Yet he was a compelling figure. Once seen, he would never be forgotten—this man who had called himself *T'ien Sheuh*.

T'ien Sheuh, literally translated, means "The Rat of Heaven." It is a term of respect which the Chinese use in describing the bat—an animal which slips silently about through the darkness of the night, making no sound, exterminating insects.

I had reason to think of the peculiar significance of that name as I stood in the dark passageway, certain that the one-legged Chinese, moving as he must, with one foot and a crutch, could not move without banging heavily upon the boards.

Yet he had flitted away into the darkness, with no sound that I, almost upon him, could hear.

I took a pocket flashlight from my coat. The beam showed the passageway. It was empty.



standing there in the dark passageway, I could feel perspiration oozing from my skin.

Ahead of me lay darkness and I knew not what— The mysteries of a strange house in Chinatown. Back of me lay the sidewalk, with the dead body of a man who had come to keep an appointment with me.

The gangsters had speeded their car into motion and ducked for safety when they realized what had happened. But it wouldn't be long before some passing pedestrian would sound the alarm and the police cars would be rushing to the scene.

Was all this part of the build-up? Was all this a part of the scheme of things? Was it intended that I should walk into the trap in just that manner? That the one-legged, one-eyed Chinese should throw his knife with such deadly accuracy? And, was it possible that the girl was ready to testify Sam Reece had gone to keep an appointment with me?

Evidently the sound of the shots had been taken for the backfiring of a car coming down the steep hill. Standing close to the door, my ears strained, I could hear no sound of commotion from the sidewalk.

I used my flashlight once more. There was no sign of human habitation in the corridor. It was a long, narrow passageway flanked on either side with the walls of buildings. There were

cobwebs festooning the sides. All about it was an air of dry mustiness which seemed to indicate that the passage was but little used.

In my line of work a person must reach quick decisions. Frequently those decisions are wrong. When they're wrong, it's necessary to reach other quick decisions to rectify the initial mistake. There's no time to stop and turn things over in one's mind in order to get the very best possible solution.

I reached a quick decision and put it into immediate execution.

I jerked open the door, propped it open with a piece of loose board. I stepped out to the sidewalk and grabbed the dead body of Sam Reece by the shoulders. I dragged him into the passageway. There was a pool of blood left behind and a long, red tell-tale smear pointing towards the passageway where I'd taken the body, but I couldn't help that. That was one of the chances I had to take. A passing pedestrian would be much less inclined to notice a red stain on the sidewalk than a body slumped on the cold cement.

It was a side street, damp, dark and clammy. Occasionally Chinese customers came to *The Yellow Lotus*, but, for the most part, those customers had come, partaken of their evening meal, and gone. Later on, perhaps, there would be a few old cronies drop in to discuss philosophy over a cup of tea. Right at present it was a slack time, and the street was deserted.

I kicked out the board from under the swinging door. The door banged shut. I walked rapidly around the corner, found a telephone, and called *Soo Hoo Duck's* private number.

Soo Hoo Duck was the uncrowned king of Chinatown. *Ngat T'oy* was his daughter, a highly Americanized product of the Western universities, yet, nevertheless, pure Chinese.

It was *Ngat T'oy* who answered the telephone.

I gave her the address from which I was talking.

"Can you get in your car and bust all speed limits getting here?"

"Will five minutes be soon enough?" she asked.

"Can you make it four?" I inquired.

"I'll try it," she said, and I heard the receiver slam up at the other end of the telephone.

She made it in three minutes and forty seconds—a trim little figure clad in modish clothes that showed off her form. Her eyes were dancing, sparkling and mischievous. Smiles quivered about her lips. She was all alert vivacity—all frivolity.

She knew my real identity. She had seen me in various disguises. She came to me at once without hesitation.

"Something bad?" she asked, and smiled.

"Pretty bad," I told her.

"What can I do?"

"We both know," I said, "how little the Chinese like to have murders committed in Chinatown."

"What do you mean, Ed?"

"I mean that there are bloodstains on the sidewalk around the corner. It may be well to have those bloodstains removed."

The smile faded from her lips as though it had been wiped from her face with some invisible towel. Her eyes became lacquer-black, utterly without expression.

"This is around the corner?" she asked.

"Yes."

I'd telephoned from a Chinese book store. I could see that the proprietor knew *Ngat T'oy*. In fact, everyone in Chinatown knew her. Their manner towards her was that of beaming

pride, mingled with reverential deference. As long as I had known the Chinese, I had never really discovered what connection *Soo Hoo Duck* and *Ngat T'oy* had to Chinatown.

It had been said that *Soo Hoo Duck* was the head of the Chinese tongs. Yet the Chinese tongs did not cooperate, and there were times when their interests were distinctly adverse, one to the other. But *Soo Hoo Duck* and his daughter held virtually undisputed sway.

Tourists in the quarter would see a wrinkled old man with bright eyes, his age apparently so great that the young woman at his side might have been his grand-daughter rather than his daughter. They would have seen *Ngat T'oy*, happy, carefree, alert and vivacious, very apparently a Chinese character emerging from the cocoon of Oriental impassivity into a gaudy-colored Occidental butterfly.

To have told the average tourist who passed the pair on the street that these two ruled Chinatown with an iron hand would have provoked a patronizing smile.

Nevertheless, such was the case.

Ngat T'oy opened her mouth, and Cantonese sentences spilled forth. The Chinese proprietor of the book store exploded into voluble action. Half a dozen men appeared almost as by magic. There were quick, shuffling steps. Men pushed their way out through the doors into the fog-filled night, and I knew each one had been carefully instructed in just what his mission would be.

Two of the men sauntered to opposite corners, shuffled aimlessly about. No one would have suspected them of being lookouts.

Other men slid into the foggy darkness.

The fog had settled now, until it was thick. The pavement was moist and slimy. But few people were abroad, even on the main streets.

I heard the slosh of water on cement.

Ngat T'oy led the way towards the back of the store.

"Tell me about it," she said.

"I think," I told her, "I'm being put on the spot. I think it was intended that I should either be framed with murder, or that I should be taken for a ride, and somewhere Chinatown is mixed up in it. Tell me, do you know a heavy-set Chinese who walks with a crutch, and has only one eye?"

She looked at me expressionlessly, then shook her head with grave negation.

"No," she said, "I know no one who is like that. Moreover, if there was a man of that description here in San Francisco, I would know of it."

I nodded.

"It is probable," I said, "that he came recently from China. He was possibly sneaked in in a shipment that contained dope. What his game is, I don't know."

"Why?" she wanted to know.

"He just killed a man," I told her, "and . . ."

I was interrupted by a shrill, monkey-like scream, the sound of pattering feet. A young Chinese lad came to a stop before *Ngat T'oy* and started spilling words about a dead man in the passageway.

Ngat T'oy turned inquiring eyes to me.

"Ask him," I said, "if the stains on the sidewalk are all washed away."

His eyes regarded me with suspicion, but he slowly nodded his head and said, in English, "The stains are all gone."

“I want silk,” I told *Ngat T’oy*, “some kind of heavy silk cloth that’s got a lot of red in it. Can you get it?”

She didn’t answer the question directly, but clapped her hands. A man sprang to do her bidding. She transmitted the order to him.

I turned to the wide-eyed Chinese lad.

“And you,” I said, “are going to help me roll up that body and put it on the running-board of *Ngat T’oy’s* machine.”

He answered me in Chinese, mouthing a proverb in a low voice; and added, to *Ngat T’oy*:

“The police of the White Ghosts will be angry with me if I do this thing.”

She answered him with terse, cutting words:

“My father,” she said, “will be angry if you do not do it.”

For a moment their eyes locked, then the young Chinese turned without a word and shuffled away.

“Where’s he going?” I asked apprehensively.

“He is going to roll the body in silk, as you requested.”

“Okey,” I told her, “let’s go.” As we went out I said:

“I want you to get me a live chicken, wait exactly fifteen minutes, ring up the police and report your car as having been stolen. That will put you in the clear, in the event the police should catch me in the car. But after I’ve left that body where I want to leave it, I’ll run the car down pretty well towards the waterfront and leave it. One of the cruising cars will pick it up some time along in the morning.”

“What are you going to do, Ed?” she asked.

I faced her lacquer-like eyes.

“Plenty,” I told her. “The gang, of which the murdered man was a member, planned to frame me for a crime. I’m going to undo that frame, let it work back on them through this man who can be identified.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Yes.”

“Can my father send men to help you?”

I shook my head at her, saw the troubled look come over her face, and grinned.

“Forget it,” I told her. “I’ve got to do it alone. Any other would spoil it. And get that chicken.”

Her face was a mask of Oriental calm. Her eyes stared steadily at mine without the faintest flicker of expression. All of the glitter seemed to be on the surface. It was impossible to read what was underneath.

“I go,” she said, “to get the chicken,” and the words were spoken in Chinese.

Abruptly she turned and moved swiftly away.

I lighted a cigarette and waited.



slid the car with its gruesome burden into the dark shadows of a particular alley, and thanked my lucky stars that the night was so foggy. Thick fog had settled down like a gray blanket, enveloping the streets with a white mystery, muffling the sounds of night life on pavement.

Ten feet above the stones of the alley was a large circular grille. During the daytime, high-pitched humming sounds came from behind this grille. Now it was silent. I had “spotted” this

grille some time before. It was the opening back of a ventilator fan, and the ventilator fan was part of a system by which the Gamay Jewelry Company ventilated its sumptuous showrooms.

I adjusted my thin gloves, climbed to the top of *Ngat T'oy's* little coupé, and set to work on the grille. It was built for ornament rather than strength, and I didn't have much trouble lifting it out, and setting it softly on the pavement. There was hardly room for a man to squeeze between the blades of the fan, but I bent the blades back and crawled along the narrow metal-lined tunnel; the metal creaking and snapping beneath my knees, but holding my weight.

There was another grille on the inside, and through it I could see the vault room of the jewelry company.

I waited for the watchman. As I waited, I took a small glass phial from my pocket, also a section I had cut from an automobile tube. I cut the section of inner tube, tied one end to one side of an opening in the grille, the other end to the other. By putting the little glass phial in the center of the rubber, I improvised myself a powerful little sling shot.

I waited five minutes. The watchman showed up on the opposite side of the room. He was yawning with boredom. I nestled the glass phial into the center of the rubber and pulled well back, taking careful aim.

The watchman turned his key in one of the boxes.

I let go the rubber. The phial whizzed across the room, struck the wall not more than three feet from the watchman's head. I heard the crash of glass, saw the expression of startled surprise come over the features of the watchman as he turned to stare about him in incredulous consternation.

I saw his hand raise to his eyes, saw him swipe the back of his hand across his forehead, then saw him start groping his way along the wall.

I braced myself and kicked against the circular grille-work. It came out and clattered to the floor below.

"Get your hands up," I told him, gruffly. "You're covered by a dozen men."

The tear gas had blinded his eyes. He turned towards the sound of my voice. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. His face was white and frightened. He raised his hands.

I slid down the face of the wall, hanging with my hands until I was within three or four feet from the floor, and then dropping.

"Walk this way," I said, "and keep them up."

The watchman was blinded by gas, staggering about with knees that buckled in fright. I herded him into another room, tied his hands behind his back, took his keys, opened the door which led to the alley and carried the body of Sam Reece into the vault room, putting it on the floor without sound.

Then I stepped into the room where I'd left the watchman and started a conversation, as if with an accomplice, using a rather shrill, high-pitched voice for one, alternated with a gruff, guttural voice that spoke in a hoarse, half-whisper for the assumed other robber.

The show in my two-character part that I put on for that blinded, helpless watchman, in the next few minutes, would have done credit to the quick change artists in the old vaudeville stunts, or for a comic strip, if it hadn't been so deadly serious to me. I had to provide evidence to which he would later swear, evidence that could reach him only by his ears and that would be logical and convincing with the facts of robbery and a murdered body to be discovered later.

I started an argument between my two assumed characters, moving my position slightly each time I made a change in tone. I announced in my high, thin voice that I would go upstairs and crack the safe, as the vault was too difficult, and for my assumed companion to wait and watch out for things. I made noise going up, and came back immediately, on silent, stockinged feet, to growl a gruff comment of double-cross suspicion and wish to see what the man upstairs was doing.

With my shoes on, I ascended the stairs a second time noisily.

From the top I looked at the watchman. He was too frightened to try to turn in any alarms. He was sitting huddled in a corner, his hands tied behind his back, his knees up under his chin, his eyes streaming tears. It would be an hour before he could see anything.

I went to work on the safe in the upper office and got it open. There wasn't a great deal of stuff in there, about a thousand dollars in currency, and some rather distinctive unset stones.

However, it was all I needed; I didn't want to let it appear that the robbers had made too good a haul. I left the safe door open.

I came back down the stairs, shuffling my feet on the treads and starting an argument in my change of voices. Gruff voice accused high voice of having opened and looted the safe upstairs. High voice denied it, said it was hard to crack; it would be better to tackle the vault. This went on until I was near the watchman, writhing with the pain in temporarily sightless eyes.

Then, high-pitched, I said:

"Wait. I wantta get some dope from this guy."

I walked over to the watchman. He shuddered and cowered away from me. I rolled him over with ungentle hands, pulled a .38 Smith and Wesson Special from a holster in the vicinity of his hip pocket.

I put in a little time looking over the knots in the rope with which I tied him. While I worked, I talked.

"Listen," I told him, "that vault is a tough one, but my pardner and I can get it open. What time are you supposed to punch your control boxes?"

"I punched one of them," he said, "just before you came in. The other one I punch at quarter past and . . ."

He suddenly realized that he was giving valuable information, and became quiet.

"Quarter past," I said. "My Gawd, it's that now! Where's the box? I'll punch it now."

He clamped his jaw tight:

"Go to hell!" he said.

"You can either tell me where that box is," I shrilled at him in a voice that I strove to make quavering with excitement, "or I'll give you the works right here! You feel this knife?"

I opened my pen knife, let the point press against his throat.

"That knife," I told him, "has got a blade eleven inches long. I'll drive it through your throat and pin you to the wall."

His face was white, the lips were blue, the eyes, with the funny look about their pupils that comes to eyes that have been gassed, streamed tears down his cheeks.

"Go to hell!" he said, and braced himself for the thrust of the knife.

I quietly stepped back a foot or two and said, in the hoarse voice I'd assumed for the man who was supposed to be acting as my accomplice, "You — damn' liar, quit yer foolin' with that guy. You got that box open and got the stuff out of it. You're holding out on me."

I whirled and screamed in the falsetto, "You damn' lug. I told you I didn't."

“The hell with that line!” I said, making my voice gruff again, but raising it above the whisper. “Kick through with my share of the swag you got from the safe upstairs, or I’ll . . .”

I made noises with my feet.

“Keep back,” I yelled. “Keep back, damn you, or I’ll cut your heart out!”

I jumped, came down on the floor with heavy feet, lunged, grunted, gave a half-scream, and then said in the shrill, falsetto voice, “Damn you! You asked for it, you double-crossing spy. You’ve got it now, right through the neck.”

I stumbled around moaning and groaning, ran with staggering steps from the room. Then I let myself fall to the floor with a heavy thump.

I got the live chicken from the automobile, its wings tied so that it could make no move. I clamped a hand about its neck and shut off its wind, carried it with noiseless steps, into the vault room and made a quick, clean cut with my knife. Blood started to spurt. I held the bleeding body over Sam Reece’s body, then let blood drop in a trail to the adjoining room where the watchman sat blinded and in white-faced horror.

“You going to tell me what box to plug in?” I asked him, in the high-pitched tone.

Twice I saw his lips move as he tried to speak. He was too frightened to say anything. He thought the end had come. But he did manage to roll his head from side to side in mute negation.

I slipped out of the side door, got in the coupé and moved into the foggy darkness.

So far my plans had carried. The trap was laid for Oscar Milen’s gang. It was almost certain that when the police identified Sam Reece and heard the watchman’s story, they would pick up some of the men known to be working with him. They might not, and probably would not, get Milen, the big shot, and I couldn’t wait.

I left the roadster in a deserted place near the waterfront, wrapped the fowl and a loose cobblestone in the red silk cloth and threw them into the water.

Then I went to a phone and called *Soo Hoo Duck*, whose word in Chinatown was law. I told him of the rumor that Milen was engineering a big dope deal and said that I wanted to get in touch with a man who could lead me to someone who might be dealing with him.

Soo Hoo Duck gave me an address and a name—*Gow Chek N’Gow*. He said:

“He will be told of your coming; for much danger surrounds him. Except for both eyes and both legs, he looks not unlike the one whose description you gave to *Ngat T’oy*.”

“*Gow Chek N’Gow*” was a nickname, and signified “Nine Oxen,” and he was so called because he was reputed to have the strength of nine of the huge oxen that are used for burden bearing in China.

Most of the Chinese who come to this country are the small-boned, wiry individuals who hail from the south of China. But there is a breed in the north of China that travels but little; that is heavily muscled, big-boned, tall and dignified.

Gow Chek N’gow had come from the north of China, but he had learned the southern dialect, until he could pass for a native of Canton, or of the Say Yup district, where a harsher modification of the Cantonese dialect is spoken.

I conversed in Cantonese with *Gow Chek N’gow* because I was more familiar with it than he was with English.

“Is it possible,” I asked, “that a Rat of Heaven could be a brother of Nine Oxen?”

His face stared at me with expressionless scrutiny.

“My ears,” he said, “have heard words that my brain cannot understand. Speak more clearly that my own mind may have the bright flash of understanding.”

I have always liked that word for understanding used by the Chinese “*meng bāt*,” which means “a bright flash.”

This is, perhaps, as typical of the process of understanding as anything I know of.

“There is,” I said, “one who describes himself as *T’ien Sheuh*, a man of one leg and one eye, who is very expert in throwing a knife. He is a big man, broad of shoulder and heavy of bone. Because he is so big and strong I thought perhaps he was your brother.”

We were talking in *Gow Chek N’gow’s* room. The outside was dingy and dirty. The windows were grimy, but the interior was finished with the lavish hand of luxury. There were thick carpets, expensive tapestries, carved Chinese marble; and a small teakwood shrine, containing a painting of *Gow Chek N’gow’s* paternal ancestor, held offerings of bits of choice Chinese food served in bowls of delicate Chinaware. On either side of the food offerings were ornate incense burners from which smoke curled lazily upward in twin streams, to blend together in a filmy halo about the top of the picture.

On a table before me was a pot of tea. One of the tiny Chinese bowls nestled in a circular saucer, with a hole cut in the center to hold the bowl steady. To my right was a plate of dried melon seeds, and on the left was a small dish of dried ginger, candied watermelon peel.

“I have heard of this one,” *Gow Chek N’gow* said. “He has come to *Tai Fow* from no one knows where.”

It is difficult for the Chinese to say “San Francisco.” For that reason, they invariably refer to the city merely as “*Tai Fow*,” which means “The large city.”

I stared thoughtfully into my tea cup. “How long has he been here?”

“No one knows.”

“He has some definite purpose to fulfill?”

“As to that I cannot say.”

“How does he keep out of sight?”

Gow Chek N’gow’s voice was cautious, and I could tell that he was fearful lest he should give information which might later turn out to be inaccurate.

“I do not know,” he said. “But this much I do know: The man has friends in Chinatown, and they are powerful friends. He seems to know all that goes on, yet he is never seen. He is hiding somewhere in one of the secret rooms of the tongs. There are those who bring him food and bring him information. He comes forth at times for the purpose of doing that which he desires done. He calls himself ‘The Rat of Heaven,’ and, as you know, with the Chinese, The Rat of Heaven is entitled to much respect. The bat is a silent animal that flies without noise through the darkness.”

I nodded thoughtfully.

“And you, First Born,” went on *Gow Chek N’gow*, “know of this one. You have information which but few of the Chinese possess. Could you enlighten my mind as to the means by which you secured this information?”

“I saw the man,” I said. “I saw him for a moment, and that was all.”

Gow Chek N’gow’s voice was bland.

“By any chance,” he asked, “did you see a knife at the time you saw this Rat of Heaven?”

I answered him after the Chinese fashion, using a language which contains no word for “yes”:

“I saw a knife,” I said.

There was a moment of silence. I munched a melon seed. *Gow Chek N'gow* sipped tea.

After a moment I went on:

"I search," I said, "for men who have tried to make trouble for me. These men are connected with the opium business. I think they are new to *Tai Fow*; that they have, therefore, tried to get business away from those who already have the business."

Gow Chek N'gow's eyes showed the faintest suggestion of a twinkle.

"But there is no opium business in Chinatown."

"My nostrils," I told him, "have smelled the peculiar sweetish smell of opium smoke."

Gow Chek N'gow ceased his Oriental indirection.

"You wish," he said, "to find the men who are making trouble in the opium world?"

"I wish to find them."

His eyes surveyed my shabby clothes approvingly.

"My countrymen," he said, "are suspicious of those whom they term the *Bak Gwiee Loe* unless they seem those who wish to woo the smoke of the poppy."

"I will go then," I told him, "as one who wishes to woo the smoke of the poppy."

"It is well," he said.

He pushed the tea cup slightly back, waited for me to arise.

I got to my feet and crossed the room towards the door.

Gow Chek N'gow turned out all the lights, save a small one which burned perpetually over the shrine where the spirits of his ancestors were worshipped. My last glimpse of the room showed the smoke seeping upward over the picture of his paternal ancestor. Then I turned from the room. The door closed behind me. At once I found myself in a narrow passageway, grimy and dirty, the building shabby and ill-kept, the hallways filled with the peculiar odor which is indicative of crowded human occupancy. All about me were the sounds and smells of Chinatown.

Our feet pounded down the creaking boards of the uncarpeted corridor.

Gow Chek N'gow led the way—down a flight of stairs, across a strip of fog-filled street, along a narrow sidewalk, pausing before a door, entering a room filled with tobacco smoke, where half a dozen Chinese were playing *Hie Goot Pie* at a table.

The room was a narrow storeroom, and experience had taught me that this narrow storeroom furnished merely an air of respectability to the front of a building which contained many diversified forms of nocturnal activity in the rear.

I had my shoulders hunched forward, my eyes downcast, my fingers twitching, my head jerking. Beady eyes stared at me in uncordial appraisal. *Gow Chek N'gow* vouchsafed but few words, a word of swift greeting, a statement that I was a friend of his. Then he moved towards the green curtained doorway in the rear of the small storeroom.

There was a passage back of the green curtain. At the end of the passage a man sat indolently on a stool. He might have been merely lounging there, passing away the time. I knew him, however, for what he was—watchman for some of the illegal activities that went on behind the closed doors at the rear of the passageway.

The glittering, black eyes of the guard slithered from *Gow Chek N'gow's* countenance to my own.

Gow Chek N'gow said something to him that I didn't catch. The guard stood to one side, pulled a string that was cunningly concealed beneath a piece of matting that hung from one side of the passageway. A spring lock clicked somewhere. A door slid smoothly open. What had seemed to be part of the tongue and groove walls of the passage became an opening.

I followed *Gow Chek N'gow* through the door, down a flight of stairs, along a cement passageway, until we came to an iron door. The door opened. We climbed many stairs to another door.

A bell rang.

After a moment the door opened. I could see no one, nor could I see by what mechanism the door had been opened. We crossed to another door. That too opened. The smell of opium smoke assailed my nostrils.

A small Cantonese with cunning eyes and shriveled countenance sat behind a little table working an abacus with deft fingers. In front of him was a Chinese account book, a camel's-hair brush, and a box containing *mak bit suey*.

Gow Chek N'gow motioned me to wait. He moved over to the man who sat behind the desk and talked with him in low-voiced Cantonese.

The man behind the desk ceased working the abacus. He became, apparently, much excited. He waved his hands in quick, nervous gestures, talked volubly. I caught phrases—he knew of no one who dealt in opium with the white men; but he had heard of white men who were trying to make trouble for the regular dealers.

Gow Chek N'gow watched him calmly. After a while he interrupted with a few more low-voiced comments.

The excitement of the man back of the desk seemed to subside slightly. He glanced across at me, and I thought I could see a quick flash of shrewd cunning in his eyes.

I tried to look indifferent, staring down the long line of bunks, on many of which lay sleepers, either dead to the world, or lying in a quiescent stupor, their nerves dulled by an overdose of the drug. Here and there, little flickering lights from peanut oil lamps shone redly through the smoke-filled darkness. A slave girl, attired in silk trousers and embroidered coat, slipped along the aisle, carrying an opium pipe on a tray, and half a dozen *t'oy's*, as the small Chinese opium portions are designated.

The man behind the desk stood up. *Gow Chek N'gow* performed the introduction with a single word: "*Ah Wong*," he said.

I nodded to *Ah Wong*. Once more, *Gow Chek N'gow* vouched for me as a friend:

"*Ngoh hoh pang yeu*," he said.

I could see that *Ah Wong* was excited. He shuffled down a long, dark corridor, illuminated here and there with peanut oil lamps. From the darkness came that peculiar deep gurgling sound which marks the inhalation of a pill of opium that has been properly cooked and is held over the flame of a peanut oil lamp, causing it to bubble and sputter.

Gow Chek N'gow spoke to me in low-voiced English: "One piecee white woman sell opium," he said. "She make much trouble. Other people make much trouble this woman. You come, you talk. Maybe she what you want."

Ah Wong led the way to a door. He tried the knob. It turned, but the door didn't open. He tapped with his knuckles, then scratched lightly with his long fingernails.



woman's voice said: "Who's there?"

Ah Wong answered in a shrill, high-pitched voice: "*Ah Wong*."

There was the sound of a bolt clicking back. The door opened. *Ah Wong* stood to one side and motioned to me. *Gow Chek N'gow* stepped to the other side and stood, watching.

I entered the room. A white woman was sitting on a couch. She looked up at me with sudden apprehension in her eyes and said: "What the hell do you want?"

She was about twenty-six, with intense black eyes, hair that was plastered down on either side of her forehead, a pale face which she had made no effort to color, and vividly crimsoned lips.

I pushed on into the room. *Ah Wong* and *Gow Chek N'gow* came in behind me.

I saw her look sneeringly at my clothes, then her eyes came to my face, and I saw quick interest in them. I felt certain that it couldn't be recognition.

"I'm interested in dope," I told her.

"Hell!" she said slowly, "we all are. Dope means money, and we're interested in money, aren't we?"

The room was fixed up as a private opium room. There was an opium couch, but it was equipped for an exclusive white trade. There was a mattress on it and a pillow which was not too soiled. A peanut oil lamp flickered on the stand by the side of the bed, and there was a long opium pipe with a large can of opium near the lamp. The dead-white color of the woman's skin, the peculiar look of her eyes, convinced me that she was more or less under the influence of the drug.

I doubted very much that *Ah Wong* knew too much about what I wanted or could give me too much information. He had furnished me with a contact; I decided to find out for myself just what that contact could do for me.

"Know a man by the name of Oscar Milen?" I asked.

Her face seemed to stiffen.

"Asking questions, or just being sociable?" she inquired.

"Both," I told her.

"Look in the back of the book, then, and find the answers."

"Oscar Milen," I told her, watching her narrowly, "stuck up the Gamay Jewelry Company about an hour ago. He got away with a little swag, and had to bump a guy in doing it. I could help him, and in return he might let me in on that big deal he is swinging. I want to talk with him."

"Who's Oscar Milen?" she asked.

I stared steadily into the somewhat dazed-looking eyes.

"You know the ropes," I said. "You know Oscar Milen. I want to get in touch with him."

She started fumbling under the pillow.

"Big boy," she said slowly, "I've got something to show you."

There are times in my life when I make bad mistakes. This was one of them. I had paid altogether too much attention to the comments of *Ah Wong*. I was banking too heavily on the good faith of a Chinese whom I had never seen before.

My eyes were on the hand which came out from under the pillow. Too late, I realized what it was she intended to show me.

It was the business end of an automatic.

I stared at the black hole in the center of the ring of blue steel and said slowly, "You act impulsively."

"You're damn' right I do," she remarked. "*Ah Wong*, in case you don't know it, is getting his hop from Oscar Milen's gang, and I'm in with the mob. I'm telling you this because it isn't going to make any difference. You want to see Milen and you don't want to do him any good. All right, you're going to see him. Stick your hands behind your back."

She nodded to *Ah Wong*.

"Tie his wrists," she said. She swung the pistol a little to cover *Gow Chek N'gow*, then back to me. "You keep out of this," she told him, "and you won't get hurt."

Ah Wong's face was utterly bland and expressionless. He opened a little cupboard, took out a very businesslike looking coil of fish cord.

I hoped she couldn't shoot straight. There was no time to waste on her. *Ah Wong* had the cord. I wasn't certain whether he intended to put it around my wrists or around my throat. I didn't intend to wait to find out. It was an occasion that called for action.

I went over backwards in the chair. The gun thundered. A bullet crashed into the wall behind me. I grabbed *Ah Wong's* legs. He came down to the floor in a pile. I heard the rat-like squeal of excitement which came from his lips, caught the flash of his hand as he reached for a knife in the front of his blouse.

My fist connected with his chin. It jarred him. My knee caught him in the stomach. I caught his neck in a strangle-hold, and looked up to see what had happened to the girl with the gun.

Gow Chek N'gow had lived up to his name. He was supposed to have the strength of nine oxen. He'd picked the girl up as casually as though she had been a feather pillow. He held her under one arm, his right hand clamped about the wrist that held the gun. His left hand slowly twisted the gun loose from her fingers. He dropped it and kicked it under the bed.

"*Ngoh hie m' on leong*," he said.

I accepted his apology. I was none too happy, myself. It looked as though we had walked into something.

Ah Wong gave a couple of last fluttering struggles and lay still. I took the fish cord, tied his wrists and ankles.

Gow Chek N'gow started to say something, but he was interrupted by the words that poured forth from the lips of the young woman. They were words that I had heard before. I am not certain that I had heard them in exactly that combination. Her crimson lips seemed to give fire to them, making them sear the ear drums.

Gow Chek N'gow casually swung her up in the air, over his shoulder, clamped his hand over her mouth. She tried to bite it. With complete disregard of all customs of chivalry, *Gow Chek N'gow* proceeded to throttle her into insensibility. I sat on the unconscious form of *Ah Wong* and didn't interfere. They, both of them, had it coming.

Gow Chek N'gow tossed her on the bed, reached for the fish cord. He tied her up with neatness and precision.

"The Master has orders?" asked *Gow Chek N'gow*.

"I would like," I told him, "to find where *Ah Wong* keeps the supply of black poppy which he sells to his patrons. It would be some place where the police would not be likely to look for it if they should make a hurried raid, and yet somewhere where *Ah Wong* could get to it readily when there is an opportunity to sell it. That might lead to the men I want."

Gow Chek N'gow nodded slowly.

"There was a string, a very little string, by the side of the desk," he said. "I noticed it as I entered. My eyes saw, but did not heed."

We carefully closed the door, making certain that the pair were so bound that they could not move. The man who had the strength of nine oxen led the way back to *Ah Wong's* desk.

All about us, the opium house slumbered in drugged tranquillity. The gunshot had not penetrated the heavy walls of the den. Here and there from the darkness came the sounds of

the feet of the slave girls *slip-slopping* about, ministering to the wants of the smokers. Occasionally there would be the sound of cash making a silvery tinkle.

Gow Chek N'gow moved to the desk, inspected the little string which hung from a small hole in a thin board on the side.

Carefully, he split that board with the blade of a heavy knife. He ripped apart the two pieces, followed the string down to a trap door in the floor, a trap door which was cunningly concealed by the desk itself. *Gow Chek N'gow* raised the trap door and disclosed a peculiarly balanced container held precariously over a black drop.

Gow Chek N'gow pointed to the end of the string. It was tied to a trigger-like arrangement holding back a powerful coiled spring. It was but necessary to pull the string to release the trigger and send the container of opium plunging down into the depths of that black hole.

Gow Chek N'gow nodded thoughtfully.

"At the end of that passageway," he said, "which is, perhaps, three buildings away and two floors down, there will be a man waiting always by the base of that chute. He will receive the opium and run with it. In that way, no matter what happens here, the *a peck yen* will be saved."

"If you could find out where this passageway ended," I told him, "and I could pull the string, you would be in a position to follow the man who took the opium. To learn where this man went with the opium, might be of some advantage to us."

His face was without expression, but I could see that he was concentrating, despite the unscowling smoothness of his forehead.

"It would be difficult," he said. "It would not be impossible. There is a store where I have noticed a man who always sits in one position. I have wondered about this man before."

He glanced uneasily around him at the opium den.

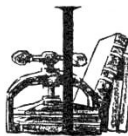
"You could not go to the place where this man sits," he said. "If I go to the place it leaves you alone here with men who are strange to you and who do not like the white men to interfere with their rose-colored dreams. There would, perhaps, be some danger."

"It is a danger which one must take," I answered.

Gow Chek N'gow turned towards the door.

"But a few short minutes," he said, "and I will return and report to you. In the meantime, carry on no conversation with the slave girls. Pretend that you do not understand Chinese. They are curious why *Ah Wong* has not returned."

He moved swiftly through the doorway.



stood by the desk, waiting, looking over the long, dark corridors between the opium bunks, watching the flicker of the peanut oil lamps, seeing the vague, grotesque shadows cast by the sloe-eyed slave girls as they flitted about, disposing of the sacks of opium which they had previously purchased from *Ah Wong*.

I heard the faint sound of surreptitious conversation in Cantonese from the far end of the room, words that were spoken in the artificially trained, high-pitched voice of a slave girl. There was the guttural tone of a man's answer, then the restless stirring of bodies.

I didn't like it. There was something brewing, a gradual building of tension which became apparent all through the opium den.

I could hear the shuffling of feet, the vague rustling of bodies as they stirred upon the hard board couches. There was no more gurgling of the black opium pills as they sputtered over the

peanut oil lamp.

A strange restlessness, a peculiar psychic tension gripped the place.

An opium smoker is inclined to get peculiar ideas. The opium is in the nature of a hypnotic. Ideas which are suggested to the smoker strike his mind with the force of reality. Then there is no telling exactly what an opium eater is going to do.

I heard the sound of a man sliding from a couch to the floor, could hear his feet stagger for a step or two before he secured control of his legs.

A slave girl said something to him in a whining voice. Steps shuffled along the boards into another dark corner. There was the sound of throaty Cantonese, words that were edged with impatience, as though the man was trying to arouse some particularly sound sleeper.

The Chinese, as individuals, are non-aggressive. But let them get touched with the smoke of opium and with a mob psychology, and there is no telling to what lengths of violence they will go.

I started towards the door which led to the room where *Ah Wong* had taken us.

The dark shadows at the far end of the corridor seemed to swirl into motion. I caught the sound of staggering steps, of grunts, the shrill voice of a slave girl rising in excitement. Then half a dozen men came charging forward in a compact shuffling group. A glint of light played on steel.

I moved hastily across the floor, jerked open the door, stepped inside, slammed the door and shot a heavy iron bolt into place. I noticed, with satisfaction, that the door was heavy, that the bolt would hold it except against a pretty vigorous sort of assault.

I sighed, stepped back, and my foot seemed to stick to the floor. I put it down and pulled it up again, then glanced down to see what had happened.

One glance was sufficient.

I was standing near the edge of a thick, viscid pool, the nature of which there was no mistaking.

I looked over at the opium couch where we had left the woman. It was empty. There was no sign of the woman, nor, on the other hand, was there any sign of the cord which had been used to bind her. Evidently she had been spirited away bodily.

The form of *Ah Wong* lay on the floor. It needed but one glance to tell what had happened to him.

His head was tilted back. The expression on his face was one of terror. His lips had reflexed into a horrible snarl, disclosing the yellow teeth which protruded from his mouth. Below his chin was an area of gaping red horror, where the neck had pulled back from the clean cut which had severed his gullet, cut neatly through his big throat arteries. It was a neat, workmanlike and thoroughly efficient job of throat cutting.

From the other side of the door came the faint sound of excited voices. Bodies banged against the door.

I stood staring at the floor, thinking.

It was a question of time only before that door would open.

These Chinese were not the type who would appeal to the police. They would, instead, appeal to the hatchet men of their tong. There would be no question in their minds but what I had been the one who had slit the throat of *Ah Wong*. They doubtless figured that *Gow Chek N'gow* had been my accomplice. There was no time to warn *Gow Chek N'gow*, nor was there any opportunity.

The worst of these tong trials is that they take place in the absence of the defendant and there is no opportunity for the defendant to present his side of the case. I was trapped by circumstantial evidence.

The men banged at the door, followed by a moment's lull, while apparently they debated upon some method of getting the door down.

I glanced around the room.

In the distance I heard a peculiar *slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump . . . slap*. I frowned, and tried to remember where I had heard that sound before.

Recollection flooded my mind with an illuminating flash. The sounds which I heard were the same as those made by the one-legged Chinese who had been so adroit and deadly in the handling of a knife.

I cocked my head to one side, the better to listen, trying to locate just where the sounds came from.

They seemed to be coming from beyond what appeared to be the blank wall of the room. I ran to the place. It was tongue and groove. That is the construction that the Chinese most strongly favor, since it makes it almost impossible to penetrate the secret of hidden doorways, which can be cunningly concealed.

I had no time to waste in looking for hidden springs. I raised my foot and crashed it against the thin partition. Board splintered and crashed. I saw the line of the hidden doorway then, worked my fingers in through the crack, pulled out boards, wormed through the hole and found myself in a dark passageway.

Ahead of me I could hear the peculiar *slap . . . clump . . . slap . . . clump*.

I put my head down and ran, heedless of pitfalls which might lie ahead.

I rounded a corner in the passageway, got a glimpse of light at the far end of the passage. The illumination was sufficient to show the form of the broad-shouldered, one-legged Chinese hobbling along on a crutch. Over his right shoulder was thrown what appeared to be a shapeless bundle, but what I knew to be the body of the woman who had been tied on the opium couch.

I called to him.

The figure didn't even turn.

One moment I saw it silhouetted against the illumination at the far end of the passageway, then it slumped side-wise, hesitated for a moment and disappeared.

I figured that the fingers of the one-legged Chinese had found a secret spring that manipulated a concealed door.

I ran towards the place, rapidly.

Of a sudden, my feet pounded down, not upon the floor, but upon empty atmosphere. I felt myself hurtling downward. Air whizzed past my ears. My head struck a glancing blow against the side of a chute. Then I went down like a ton of coal being dropped into a basement.

I felt that the chute down which I was speeding was smooth, worn either by the passage of bodies, or cunningly constructed and polished. I was glad that this was so.

The chute went on a sharp slope for perhaps thirty or forty feet, then straightened out into a more gentle incline. It was pitch dark. I tried to claw with my hands and exert sufficient pressure on the sides to arrest my progress. But it was impossible to get sufficient purchase without tearing off the skin of my palms. I held my feet ahead of me, rigid, so that when I struck I could brace myself against the impact.

The chute swung in a well-banked curve, then dropped abruptly. My feet struck something that might have been padded board, something which was worked by a resistance spring, which swung outward and downward. I felt myself shoot through this padded obstacle, and then the foggy night air struck my face. I had a whirling glimpse of red *Neon* lights, of streamers of fog that swirled about the buildings—and my feet banged down upon cement sidewalk.

Above my head, something slammed shut with a muffled thud. Evidently, the padded, hinged obstruction worked by a spring which had been pulled back into place after having dropped me to the sidewalk.

The drop had been none too gentle. My knees hurt. The bottoms of my feet stung. I had bit my tongue where my teeth clicked together under the impact. Aside from that I was unharmed.

All about me was San Francisco's Chinatown. I was on a side street, still breathless from the running, with only a vague idea of direction. I felt as buffeted about as do passengers who have been lurched and jerked through the tunnel of a chute-the-chutes, and I had as confused a sense of direction.

There was only one thing to do.

I started walking off with casual nonchalance.

Yet there are those who will tell you that San Francisco's Chinatown is free of all tunnels, man-traps and secret passages!

I was angry, but that was an emotion I could ill afford, and I sternly repressed it. I had tried to get in touch with Oscar Milen, seen too late that the approach which I had opened would be fatal to me, and even then persisting on that line, had nearly lost my life. And through me, *Gow Chek N'gow* would find himself in trouble. But I had firm belief that the man with the strength of nine oxen could take care of himself.

My mind switched to the one-legged Chinese, and a sudden thought struck me. Could it be possible that he was on the same quest as myself?

Already, two of Oscar Milen's henchmen had fallen to his knife; one a gang member; the second, Milen's contact man with the Chinese. But it did me no good to puzzle over that riddle. There was only one thing left for me to do. To try to trip Milen in his opium dealing was now closed to me. The murdered body of *Ah Wong* had settled that. But I had still another plan, another trap to lay, and the first steps could be taken through no other than the girl he had set to spy upon me.



Bernice Harris sat on the edge of her bed. Her dress was ripped across the shoulders. She held her hands in front of her face. Blood trickled through the fingers.

A chair had been overturned. A small table lay on its side. Blood had dropped to the worn white spread on the bed.

She took her hands from her face to stare at me with hunted eyes.

"What happened?" I asked.

She beckoned to me with a bloodstained finger.

"Take a look," she said thickly, "and see if my nose is broken."

I crossed over to her, felt of the cartilage. Her nose had been flattened, but the bones were still intact.

“You’re all right,” I said. “You’ve had a bad bloody nose. You’re going to have an awful black eye, and there are finger marks on your throat.”

She tried to grin. Blood squeezed out from a cut in her lip. She quit grinning.

I crossed to the wash-stand, sopped towels in cold water and went to work on her. The swelling reduced somewhat. I cleaned up most of the mess of blood.

“Who was it?” I asked.

“Harry Crager,” she said.

“Who’s Crager?”

“Oscar Milen’s right-hand man.”

“What did he want?”

“They think you killed Sam Reece, or had him killed by one of your Chinese friends, and that in some way I tipped you off,” she said, and then started to curse.

There was bitter hatred in her voice. She ripped out words that she must have heard around the mine, husky, he-man curses, without the obscenities which had characterized the gutter talk of the woman in the opium joint.

“Don’t do it,” I told her. “There’s a better way. Is he coming back?”

“No,” she said, “but Oscar Milen, himself, is coming.”

I sat down on the bed and tried to talk to her. She interrupted me, to mouth more bitter, vindictive curses. I grabbed her by the shoulder and shook her.

“Shut up,” I said, “and listen to me. It’s important.”

“Hell’s bells!” she said. “All I’ve been doing is listening to somebody ever since I hit the damned town! That’s the trouble with me—I listen. I listened to Trasker. His voice was like music to the ear drums. That gave me the habit. I’ve been listening to some mealy-mouthed slicker ever since.”

I saw that I couldn’t do anything with her by getting rough.

“Do you want to get your father out of jail?” I asked.

That silenced her. She looked at me with her one good eye. The other one was swollen almost shut, giving her face an expression of lopsided humor; although there was, doubtless, nothing funny about it to her.

“Go ahead,” she said.

I took out a cloth bundle from underneath my coat, where it had been strapped around my side.

“In this bundle is a gun and some jewelry,” I told her.

She looked groggily at me.

“The gun,” I said, “came from a watchman at the Gamay Jewelry Company. He thinks that the man who took it was a murderer. The jewelry came from the Gamay Jewelry Company. It can be identified.

“If you listen until you hear Milen at the door, and then pretend that you’re trying to make a sneak through my room, he’ll grab you, find the bundle and take it away from you. Don’t tell him where the stuff came from. He’ll figure that you’ve been double-crossing him.”

“And bump me off,” she said. “That’s what Crager threatened.”

“No,” I told her. “About that time I’ll arrange a little commotion that will distract his attention. You do just what I tell you. Be trying to sneak out through the connecting door just about the time he gets this door open.”

“What’s the sketch?” she asked.

“He’ll take it away from you,” I said. “You throw up your hands and scream. I’m going to have an officer here ready to make a pinch. He’ll catch Milen with the stolen goods and the revolver in his possession.”

“Then what?” she asked, her good eye showing interest.

“Naturally,” I said, “Milen is going to find himself in a spot. He’s going to get the best lawyer he can get.”

“He’ll do that, all right,” she told me.

“Lawyers cost money.”

“Well, he can get the money.”

“Yes,” I told her, “that’s exactly what I’m figuring on. He’ll send Harry Crager after the money. The money will probably be in nice, crisp, new bills, bills that can be identified as having been taken from Frank Trasker when he was murdered. They buried those bills somewhere, or hid them in a safety deposit box. They won’t use them unless there’s an emergency. It’s going to be a little difficult for them to pass off that money. A prominent criminal lawyer, however, wouldn’t have very much trouble. Moreover, it’s good, hard cash. When Milen gets in a jam and has to have money, he’s going to think of that money first. He’ll send Crager after it.”

“Then what?”

“Then I’ll follow Crager, and I’ll have someone with me who has authority to act. Crager will spill his guts.”

She shook her head.

“No he won’t,” she said, “Crager’s hard.”

I laughed at her.

“Any man who would beat up a woman the way you’re beat up,” I said, “would talk when the officers get to work on him right. I’ll see to it that they work on him. Is it a go?”

She stared at me, her lower lip puffed out and split, her left eye almost closed, her right eye glowering.

“It’d be so damn’ much better,” she said, “for me to use that gun and pump five shots right into Milen’s stomach. Then. . . .”

“Then,” I finished for her, “you’d be arrested and charged with murder. Your father would still be in jail, charged with murder. The probabilities are you’d both be convicted. This other way Crager talks. He’ll blame the Trasker crime on Milen. Your father gets out. You are finished with both of them.”

She nodded her head and extended her hand.

“It’s a go,” she said.

I gave her the package and some more instructions. I went to the end of the corridor, down a half flight and waited in the shadows.

I’d waited nearly half an hour, and was getting plenty tired of it, when the elevator came up. Milen got out and pounded down towards the room occupied by Bernice Harris.

I beat the elevator down.

At the desk I was excited.

“Where’s the house detective?” I asked. “I’ve got to see him right away. There’s a robbery taking place in the room next to mine!”

“What room?” asked the clerk.

I told him.

“There’s been a hell of a lot of disturbance in there,” he said. “I had to telephone them and tell them to keep quiet an hour and a half ago.”

“This is something different,” I said. “This is robbery.”

The clerk pressed a button. A second or two later, a heavy-set man with lots of stomach stared suspiciously at me. I gave him the name I had registered under and the room number, told him there was a robbery going on in the next room, that I distinctly heard the woman scream and a man’s voice say, “Stick ’em up!”

The house detective wasn’t particularly enthusiastic. He took me by the arm, piloted me to the elevator, and we started up.

Bernice Harris was screaming when we got the elevator door open. The screams got the house dick into action. He pulled his rod and started down the corridor. I turned and sprinted for the stairs. I made it breathlessly down to the desk and flung myself against the partition.

“They’re killing the house detective!” I said. “Get the reserves, quick!”

The clerk grabbed up the telephone. “Police Headquarters!” he said.

I slipped out while his head was turned and soon lost myself in nearby streets. Then I set out to put the bee on Harry Crager.



One-Lung Willie was a stool-pigeon. Virtually everyone knew he was a stool-pigeon. He got away with a lot of petty crimes simply because he turned information in to the cops. He never had any big-time stuff. He was too well known for that.

One-Lung Willie looked at me suspiciously and was seized with a fit of coughing. I waited until he had finished, and was digging at his eyes with the knuckles of his hand.

“I don’t know you,” he wheezed.

“Sure you don’t,” I said, “but I know you. The whole damn’ town knows you. I’m giving you an opportunity.”

“How do I know you are?” he asked.

“Because,” I said, “you’ve got sense, or should have. It’s time you snapped out of the small-time racket and got into something worth while. You haven’t peddled a piece of information that’s been worth a damn in the last six months. They’re getting ready to put the lid down on you. That’s straight gossip that I got from Headquarters.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“To you,” I told him, “I’m just Santa Claus, standing on the edge of the chimney with a sack full of Christmas presents. Do you want them or not?”

“What you got?” he asked.

“You tune in on the police broadcasts?” I asked.

“Sure. What about it? Anyone can listen to a radio.”

“Did you notice that Oscar Milen was arrested for the robbery of the Gamay Jewelry Company and the murder of Sam Reece?”

“Yeah, I noticed, but that won’t mean anything. Oscar Milen is a big shot. He’ll get in and he’ll get out.”

“He’s in pretty bad,” I told him. “The watchman’s testimony against him is deadly as hell.”

“May be,” he said, “but he’s got the best mouthpiece there is in the city.”

“That,” I said, “is where the catch comes in. The mouthpiece has got to be paid.”

“Milen can do it all right.”

“Sure he can,” I said, “but there’s a chance for a wise dick to earn himself a promotion. Think of the nice spot that would leave you in.”

One-Lung Willie was getting excited now. I could see his eyes glitter, and he started to breath more rapidly. Any excitement sent his breathing up, and started him coughing, but he’d been like that for years and was good for years more. He was a tough bird.

I waited until he got done with the second fit.

“You know Harry Crager?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “I don’t.”

“Your friend on the detective force will,” I assured him. “If he doesn’t, he can find out all about him without much trouble.”

“Go on,” Willie said. “For gawd’s sake, spill it. You’re getting me all excited, and excitement isn’t good for me.”

I waited until the interval of silence should make my words impressive.

“This is a straight tip. It’s something you can peddle anywhere for the gospel. You don’t need to pass on where you got it. Tell your detective friend to put two men on the tail of Harry Crager. Don’t let him get away, no matter what happens. He’s going to get some money this morning to sweeten the mouthpiece who is going to represent Oscar Milen. It may be in a safety deposit box, but it’s stuff that the police want. It’s red-hot. If they’ll tail Crager they can make the pinch.”

“It sounds right,” Willie wheezed.

“It is right,” I told him. “It may not be right if you keep on arguing about it. Things sometimes happen quickly.”

Willie looked at his watch and said, “It’s two o’clock in the morning. Nothing’s going to happen now.”

“The hell it ain’t,” I told him. “There’s more stuff happens after two o’clock in the morning than at any other time.”

He wrapped his thin, threadbare coat about him, turned up the collar.

“Cripes!” he said, “I hate to go out in the night air!”

“Perhaps you’d rather let me play Santa Claus to someone else,” I told him.

“No, no, no,” he said, with excited rapidity, “it’s all right. I’m going. Keep your shirt on, brother. Don’t get so damned upset.”

I let him get out of the joint, and tailed him to the corner. He was looking up and down. I knew that he had his contacts all right. I let him go, and started getting a line on Crager.

That wasn’t so easy.

Crager was relatively unknown. The mob hadn’t been in operation too long. I wasted more than three-quarters of an hour getting on Crager’s tail. When I did, men from Headquarters were already there. That suited me down to the ground. I realized that the police must have had some intimation of what was happening or they wouldn’t have fallen so readily for One-Lung Willie’s story. It was a sweet chance for some detective to earn himself a promotion.

Crager was in one of the little dumps that keep open all night. He looked haggard and worried. One of the plain-clothesmen was waiting outside in a car. The other one was inside at a table, flirting with one of the girls who rustled drinks for the place on a commission basis.

The plant was good.

I went out and got a taxicab. The cab-driver didn’t like the kind of clothes I wore. I had to put up a cash deposit. I sat back against the cushions and smoked. I figured that my work was

done, but I just wanted to be in at the finish and it was worth the long wait.

Crager came out shortly before daylight. It was a foggy, clammy dawn. I hoped that One-Lung Willie wasn't abroad. It would have taken a year off his life.

Crager was more careless than any crook I've ever seen. Perhaps it was because he was worried. He got in his car and started out without so much as a backward glance. The dicks took up his trail, and I tailed along behind in the taxicab.

Crager headed out towards the beach, running out on Geary. He was only hitting around thirty miles an hour, which was slow for that time in the morning. The dicks got a little careless, themselves.

Crager's car slowed. He craned his neck out of the side window, apparently looking for a house number. The dicks slid on past, planning to stop in the next block. Crager speeded up and hit the corner in a screaming turn, his throttle down on the floorboards. He was going fifty miles an hour down the side street before the startled dicks woke up to what had happened. They raced for the next corner.

I tried to speed up the cab and used a lot of fancy language that didn't do any good. Crager had been wise all along. He'd simply laid a trap for the dicks, and the dicks had walked into it. He was out in the clear now, and the whole scheme had gone hay-wire.

I might as well have been sitting home in an armchair as out there in a taxicab, for all the good I could do. I doped out what Crager was going to do, which was something the dicks failed to do, but that was about all the good it did me.

I knew that Crager would turn once more to the left at the next corner, because that would give him just one more block head start on the police car. If he turned to the right, he'd be running right into the cops. If he went straight ahead, he'd only have a block lead. By turning to the left, he made it two blocks.

He turned to the left, and the two blocks start was all he needed.

I tried to do something with the taxicab, but the driver was dumb and he wasn't too enthusiastic, anyway.

I had the cab-driver prowl around a bit, just for luck. It wasn't any good. Once we saw the police car screaming down a side street. They saw our headlights and skidded into a turn, throwing a spotlight on us. When they saw it was a taxicab, they went tearing on by.

Crager had a light eight-cylinder car, with lots of soup under the hood. I figured he was laughing at the whole outfit of us.

I didn't want to stick around in the neighborhood and run into the cops again. I figured that when they saw the taxicab the second time, they might stop and ask questions. Cops are just that dumb. They might try to tail Crager, lose him, get savage, jerk a private citizen out of a taxicab for a shakedown.

"Go on down Presidio Avenue," I told the cab-driver, "and head out through the Presidio."

He was a little suspicious by that time, but he was perfectly willing to get away from there and head towards home. Perhaps his own conscience wasn't any too clear, and he didn't like the cops any better than I did.



W e ran out Presidio Avenue. I wasn't thinking of anything in particular, except the fact that I'd made a fool out of myself trying to work a scheme that made it necessary for me to rely on the cops. I never had got along with them, even when

I was trying to work with them.

All of a sudden I snapped to attention.

A car was parked over at the curb. It looked a lot like the car that Crager had gone away in.

“Stop here,” I told the cab-driver.

I got out, went over and felt the hood of the car. It was warm. I started back towards the cab.

The cab-driver had taken a deposit from me to cover the cost of the meter. I supposed he recognized the car, the same as I had. The whole thing didn't look good to him. He figured he had his money and there was no use sticking around to get into trouble. He was off before I was half way to him.

I started to yell, and then thought better of it.

The cab went purring down through the Presidio grounds.

I let it go, and began looking around.

A thin daylight was just commencing to filter through the fog. There was no one in sight.

I prowled around the block, and still couldn't find anything. Then I saw a light flash on in one of the houses, and the window became dark once more.

It was just at that stage of dawn when the illumination of an electric light gives a sickly hue to everything. There was enough fog in the air so that it would be a long time before there was any sunlight.

I started up to take a look at the house.

I thought I heard steps behind me, and turned around.

I got just a glimpse of a cop patrolling around the border of the Presidio grounds. Where the devil he had come from was more than I knew. I didn't have any time to stop and wait. If I was on the trail of what I thought I was, I was going to get some action.

I ran around to the side of the house, where there was a porch. I'd seen enough to know it was the place I wanted. It was a peculiar type of place, ramshackle, run-down, unpainted, seemingly vacant, but the fact the light had switched on in the window showed that someone had signed up for electricity.

It looked as though some Japanese had occupied the place at one time. On the porch was one of the big Japanese drums, the type that were used as an alarm drum in the olden days in Japan.

I climbed up the porch and had just pulled my legs above the gutter when I heard inside the sound of a man's voice screaming some sort of a warning. There was the roar of a shot, then the sound of running feet.

And then I heard the peculiar *slap-clump . . . slap-clump . . . slap-clump* of the Chinese, from somewhere close, inside the house.

Damn that fellow! Was he everywhere?

The door burst open. Harry Crager sprinted across the porch.

I wondered whether he had the stuff on him, or whether the one-eyed Chinese had got to him before he'd pulled the stuff out of the hiding place.

Slap-clump . . . slap-clump . . . slap-clump.

The one-legged, one-eyed Chinese came to the edge of the porch. He was just below me. He slipped a knife from beneath his coat, and once more I had an opportunity to see the peculiar manner in which he held it. He flung his arm around in a complete half-circle, like a discus thrower. The knife slid out into the foggy dawn like some bird of prey, sliding from its perch to swoop down upon an unsuspecting victim.

I watched the progress of that blade with wide-eyed fascination.

Crager was running. He was running fast. It took the knife a part of a second to get there. There was a nice problem of judging speed and distance. The Chinese had judged it perfectly. The knife struck Crager right in the side of the neck. He spun half way around, flung up his hands and tore at the knife, screaming in agony.

The one-eyed Chinese slipped another knife from beneath his coat.

“Stick ’em up!” said a gruff voice.

The officer in uniform swung around the side of the house. A .38 Colt in his right hand held steadily on the stomach of the one-eyed Chinese.

I knew what was going to happen; the officer didn’t. The Chinese was going to let that knife fly.

I kicked out from the edge of the porch and jumped.

My feet came down on the cop’s shoulders. He went down like a sack of meal. The gun went off once. I kicked it out of his hand. It skidded down a cement walk and rolled over in the fog-moistened grass.

The one-eyed Chinese took a good look at me. He held the knife still in his right hand. His white eye seemed to match up in some subtle way with the glittering eye on the other side of his face, giving his features a peculiar leer. For a long moment he held the knife, then he flipped it back under his coat, turned and started through the house. I heard him go *slap-clump . . . slap-clump . . . slap-clump*.

The officer was out, but not for long. I could feel the quiver of his spasmodic breathing. He began to stir as I started to run.

Harry Crager’s car was by the curb. The ignition keys were in the lock, the motor was warm. The morning was filled with thick fog. I don’t know what more any ordinary crook could ask—let alone The Phantom Crook.

I stepped on the starting pedal and jerked in the clutch.



he newspapers made quite a big thing of it. The officer on the beat was credited with having disrupted a powerful gang which had just come out from Chicago and was planning to operate extensively in the vicinity of San Francisco and the Bay Cities. That line is always eaten up by the home readers. It makes the police force seem so much more efficient than the Chicago cops.

The officer admitted that he had come on two men and the Chinese, engaged in a fight over loot. He had tackled them single-handed. The Chinese had flung a couple of knives at him that had missed. He had shot once and had felt certain that the Chinese was wounded. A third man had sneaked up from behind and hit him a terrific blow with a club. The money that had been taken from Trasker’s body was found on the man who had been stabbed, and who was identified as Harry Crager.

He had died in the ambulance, but not until after he had made a complete confession. The confession had implicated Oscar Milen in the murder of Trasker. Because it lacked some of the formalities of a dying statement, officers were inclined to believe they couldn’t use it in convicting Oscar Milen of the murder of Trasker, but the testimony of the watchman at the Gamay Jewelry Company was such that the police were satisfied they would have no difficulty in convicting Milen of the murder of Sam Reece, known to be one of his men.

Such are the intricacies of the law.

My telephone rang. *Ngat T’oy’s* voice came over the wire.

“You know who this is?” she asked.

I told her I did.

"I have found out," she said, "about the Chinese concerning whom you inquired. He is a Chinese cook in a mine in Nevada. He has very powerful friends in Chinatown. He came here on a mission of vengeance. He is a very strong man and his friends are very, very powerful. There was a woman engaged in the opium business. She was known as 'Chicago Mary.' This Chinese got information from her. She says that he tortured her. I guess perhaps he did. Anyway, he got the information that he wanted. He calls himself '*T'ien Sheuh*,' 'The Bat.' He is very expert at throwing a knife."

"And he's a cook in a mine in Nevada?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "he's finished the thing he came here for, and he's going back to Nevada."

"Thanks," I told her. "I got most of the information myself. But tell me, why did he call himself The Bat?"

"It is with the Chinese a symbol of nocturnal cunning. You understand that we do not look down on the rat the way you people do. We look upon him with some respect, and in our country the bat is supposed to be better than the earth rat. It is a heaven rat."

"You Chinese," I said, "have some queer ideas, haven't you?"

That was always good for a rise out of *Ngat T'oy*. She snapped back at me, "How about you Americans! You won't walk under a ladder; you won't light three cigarettes from one match; you are afraid of snakes; you eat oysters raw; you think toads give you warts on your hands. . . ."

"You win," I told her. "I haven't got time to argue. I'm going over to Oakland to see the Overland Limited off. There are some friends I want to say good-by to."

I didn't tell her any more than that, but went down to the Ferry Building, crossed the Bay and hung around the Oakland Terminal until the Overland Limited pulled out.

The newspapers were on the job. They got Harris and his daughter on the observation platform, grouped them for photographs.

I hung around on the outskirts of the crowd, watching the flashlights booming.

Bernice Harris had a pretty bad face on her, but the one eye which wasn't bruised and discolored was laughing and happy.

Her father was the type that I'd imagined—a rugged, desert-burned man with a grim, determined jaw, a cold, clear eye, and no more sense of sociability than a rattlesnake.

I didn't stick around there too long. I was afraid Bernice might recognize me. I went on up to the front part of the train and entered the first car, intending to walk back looking the passengers over.

I found him in the first car—a one-legged, one-eyed Chinese bundled up in a long coat, with a felt hat pulled low down over his forehead. How he had eluded police search, was a mystery. But there he was.

I stood by the seat.

He tried to keep his eye averted, but after a while he had to turn and encounter my glance. I noticed that his right hand had slipped surreptitiously up the left sleeve of his coat.

He stared at me for a minute, and then I saw recognition in the one good eye.

I placed my hands in front of my chest, clasped together, Chinese fashion, agitated them gently.

"*Hoh shai kai mah*," I said.

For a second he hesitated, then I caught the glimpse of sardonic humor.

"*Sup fun hoh shai kai*," he said—meaning that the world was very good, indeed.

The train bell was clanging. The long line of cars creaked slowly into motion. I pushed a porter to one side, swung wide from the iron steps and let go as the train gathered speed.

I waited until the observation car rolled past. Bernice Harris caught my eye. She gave a startled, half-scream of recognition, got to her feet.

No more of the city underworld for her. She was going back to the sun-swept silences, the clean, dry air of Nevada.

As for me, I had cast my lot in life. No sun-swept spaces called to me. I was headed back towards the only life that I could live—the foggy, mysterious streets of San Francisco’s Chinatown—the underworld, where men were ruled entirely by selfishness, where men double-crossed one another with unceasing regularity.

I pushed my way through the smoke-filled depot, elbowing the crowd which was shifting towards the boat.

I heard a peculiar hacking cough at my side. To my ears there was something familiar about that cough. I turned around and looked into the eyes of One-Lung Willie. He was surprised.

“Willie,” I said, “I’ve got another break for you.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’ve got some friends,” I said, “who have a mine up in Nevada—up where the air is high and dry. I’m going to write them a letter and tell them that I’m sending you out. They’ll take care of you.”

One-Lung Willie’s eyes got big.

“Cripes!” he said. “Are you stringing me along or are you telling me the truth?”

“I’m telling you the truth,” I told him.

One-Lung Willie’s shriveled shoulders heaved in a sigh.

“Cripes! Ain’t it a good world?”

“Yeah,” I told him, and repeated the words of *T’ien Sheuh*.

“What’s that?” he asked with sudden suspicion.

“It’s an expression,” I said, “that the Chinese have.”

“Aw hell,” he remarked, with the contempt of a certain type of white man for everything that isn’t American, “the Chinks are crazy anyway. *I’m* handin’ it to you on the square—it’s a good world.”

[The end of *The Heavenly Rat* by Erle Stanley Gardner]