

DRAGON'S JAW

Frank L. Packard

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Title: The Dragon's Jaws

Date of first publication: 1937

Author: Frank L. Packard (1877-1942)

Date first posted: Aug. 27, 2022

Date last updated: Aug. 27, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220856

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Pat McCoy & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpcanada.net>

THIS book, like *TWO STOLEN IDOLS* and other Packard stories, is one of the author's deservedly popular novels of intrigue in the Far East. This thrilling story of action tells how young Roy Melville goes to China to save his kidnapped father, who is being held for a million-dollar ransom in diamonds. On the voyage over he meets Myrna Lang, whose father is murdered in mid-ocean, and learns from her that their tragedies have a common instigator—the evil, mysterious Lan Chao-tao, a Chinese star bandit, whom few have ever seen but whose appalling activities have spread octopuslike throughout the world. These two young people unite in a valiant effort to best their mysterious enemy, and the result is a story of breathless incidents which hinge on such unusual things as the action of tides in Chinese rivers, the architecture of a certain deserted temple or the anticipated actions of Chinese militia.

Here is a story packed with action, excitement and romance, and highly tinged with the color and mystery of the Orient with which the author is so well acquainted.

THE DRAGON'S JAWS

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FRANK L. PACKARD

The Dragon's Jaws

A MILLION-DOLLAR RANSOM
IN DIAMONDS



GARDEN CITY, N. Y. PUBLISHED FOR
The Crime Club, Inc.
BY DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.
1937

PRINTED AT THE *Country Life Press*, GARDEN CITY, N. Y., U. S. A.

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FIRST EDITION

To

HARRY E. MAULE

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PART ONE: STACKED CARDS

CHAPTER I

Advance Information

Two bells. Five o'clock in the afternoon.

The SS Shansi, crack British liner, outward from Vancouver to Hong Kong and Manila, had left Kobe the previous evening with Shanghai the next port of call and, taking the outside passage, was now running into what promised to be increasingly dirty weather off the coast of Japan.

It was stuffy in the lounge and smoking rooms by reason of closed windows, and the decks were uncomfortable by reason of the driving rain that seemed to be coming from all directions. Roy Melville made his way along the alleyway of B deck toward his cabin suite, it was too early to dress for dinner, but meanwhile a quiet pipe in the seclusion of his own quarters appealed to him. Tomorrow he would arrive in Shanghai. And then—*what?*

A violent lurching of the ship brought his broad shoulders into ungente contact with first one side and then the other of the alleyway. Yes, quite so! The night augured none too well for comfort. It might even delay the Shansi's arrival at Shanghai, incident to the tide and the bar at the mouth of the Whangpoo River of whose vagaries he had no personal knowledge, but some of the old-timers in the smoking room who were returning from furlough were already making bets on it one way or the other. Well, did it matter particularly? Whether the Shansi was on time or twenty-four hours late nothing of vital moment could happen so far as he was concerned until he had put his foot ashore at Shanghai.

He reached his door, unlocked it, stepped over the threshold, closed the door behind him and switched on the lights against the murk of the leaden skies.

He was standing in the diminutive sitting room of his small suite. On the table confronting him and propped conspicuously against a matchstand was an envelope. He crossed the room and picked it up. It was a ship's envelope, sealed and addressed to him. Probably an invitation from the purser to a farewell cocktail party before dinner—a parting attention to those leaving the ship at Shanghai tomorrow.

One liked the ship for these little friendly gestures! He had not participated intensively in the ship's festivities on the voyage out. Not that he had ostentatiously stood aloof or had deliberately striven to be labeled a cold blanket—far from it! Youth, if the age of twenty-eight could still be called youth, had demanded a headlong plunge into everything that was going on. But since that fateful morning in London he had seemed to be looking perspectively at the world in a way that he had never known before. He had not been inclined toward gaiety on board; he was not on a holiday. But tonight, the last night, it would be almost churlish to refuse. He had no intention of refusing. Rather, it appealed. A jolly cocktail party, a lifting of glasses to the toast: "Somewhere, someday, may we all meet together again!"

Roy grinned suddenly, his sense of humor to the fore. A valiant toast, hoary with age, rampant throughout the seven seas yet always drunk with momentary high-spirited abandon by a gathering of entities who had been quite unknown one to another before the voyage began, and who were now on the eve of being scattered as wide apart as the world was wide! Well, why not? Why stop to realize that it could never be? Or, granting the miracle, how few would recognize each other's faces, let alone remember the names or how many had been present on the resurrected occasion! Tonight, as on all similar occasions, was tonight, and sufficient unto tonight was the spontaneity thereof!

He tore the envelope open, extracted the contents, and abruptly his face hardened as furrows gathered between his eyes. He held two small typewritten sheets in his hand. He read them swiftly as he stood swaying with the roll and pitch of the ship. He had, to put it mildly, been a trifle premature in his diagnosis of the contents of the envelope that had been propped against the matchstand on the table. It was a very long way indeed from being an invitation to a cocktail party! It was an ugly thing—sinister, diabolical.

He pushed the bell, pushed it again in sudden, bitter impatience, and then turned as a soft knock sounded on the door. His boy, noiseless in felt-soled shoes but trim in his tight-ankled trousers and immaculate white jacket, entered the room.

"Sen Lu," snapped Roy, holding up the envelope, "I found this on the table when I came in a few minutes ago. When did you put it there? And who gave it to you?"

Sen Lu shook his head.

"I not put him there, master. No one give him to me."

"You mean you don't know anything about it?"

"I not know, master."

"When were you last in here?"

"While master at tiffin. Make tidy-up."

"Did you lock the doors when you went out?"

"Always lock doors when master not here," Sen Lu stated simply.

There was a grim set to Roy's lips. He had not been here since lunch time himself. Sen Lu was reliable and trustworthy. He believed Sen Lu, and that made it all the worse. Sometime during the afternoon someone, by some means, had unlocked the door of the room, had deposited the envelope on the table and had departed after relocking the door.

Roy sat down at the table that served also as a writing desk and taking one of his cards from his pocketbook wrote a few hurried lines upon it.

"Sen Lu," he said as he opened the table drawer and reached for an envelope, "I want to go up and talk to the captain for a few minutes. Give this to the captain's boy, or whoever you have to give it to, so that I will have an answer at once."

"Mabbe no can talk to captain," replied Sen Lu placidly, though he bowed profoundly. "When bad weather and off coast, captain never leave bridge."

"Right! That's so!" agreed Roy after an instant's thought. Then he picked up his fountain pen again and wrote and underlined the word "urgent" on the card. He slipped the card into the envelope, sealed the envelope and handed it to Sen Lu. "But perhaps this may prove an exception. See that Captain Carroll gets this anyhow."

Sen Lu slid from the room and closed the door silently behind him.

Roy flung himself into a chair, his dark eyes hard as he reread the typewritten pages:

To Roy Melville, Esq.:

Before the Shansi reaches Shanghai one of your fellow passengers, a rather prominent passenger, will be murdered. This regrettable occurrence has no connection with you or anything to

do with your own case. It is merely a coincidence that you are a fellow passenger with one whose span of life will have expired.

But coincidences oftentimes, if not despised, have a value all their own, as witness the present occasion when I trust that this advance information will serve as a salutary warning to you not only to refrain from committing the same mistake twice but as evidence that you have been watched from the moment you left London and also as further evidence that I do not indulge in idle threats.

The credit I demanded from you has, I know, been established in Shanghai. But in London, contrary to explicit instructions, you went to the police. Do not repeat that offense in Shanghai! You may choose any hotel on your arrival or live elsewhere as you please. I shall know where you are. After that—wait. Contact will be made with you.

As for this letter, you are entirely at liberty to make it public if you see fit, for it will be known in any case, since I so intend it to be known, that the untimely departure of your fellow passenger was occasioned by me.

Meanwhile, I look forward with happiest anticipation to meeting you personally.

I bow to the ground.

Lan Chao-tao.

P.S. You need not look for this unworthy writer aboard the ship, for he is not there.

P.P.S. I used the word “murdered.” I think it would be more appropriate if I had written “executed.”

Roy was on his feet again, his fists clenched. Who was this Lan Chao-tao? He did not know. Was the man really a Chinese or merely posing as one while he wrote with his tongue in his cheek? He did not know that, either. But he had reason to know only too well that the swine meant every word he had written. What could Captain Carroll do? Nothing! The murder would be committed in spite of any precautions the ship's commander might take, or else this damnable piece of “advance information” would never have been forthcoming. Perhaps the murder had even already been committed—several

hours ago. In any case, he had obviously had no choice but to communicate instantly with the commander and——

Sen Lu was again in the room.

“Captain say please come topside,” he announced impassively. “Captain see you now.”

Roy thrust the letter into his pocket and with an appreciative nod to Sen Lu hurried out into the alleyway.

At the head of the ladder to the lower bridge he was met by the captain’s boy. A moment later he was standing in what did duty for the commander’s combined living room and office. A glance showed him that Captain Carroll, obviously just down from the upper bridge, had tossed his cap and uniform greatcoat on a settee and was now standing in front of his flat-topped desk, his brows lined in a puzzled way as he twirled in his fingers the card that he, Roy, had sent him.

“Ah, Mr Melville!” Captain Carroll waved toward a chair opposite his desk and sat down himself. “This is far too grave a matter to suggest anything even approaching a hoax on your part. I am quite sure of that. But it is so bizarre that it is almost incredible. You have written on your card: ‘A murder has been or will be committed on board before the ship reaches Shanghai.’ Admitting your good faith, which is beyond question, surely that is an astounding statement, but one that, of course, at your own request, you have come here to explain.” Captain Carroll pushed a cigarette container, fashioned out of an ancient Chinese water-cooled tobacco pipe, across the desk. “Have a cigarette?”

“Thanks,” said Roy quietly as he helped himself and handed Captain Carroll, without comment, the letter he had received.

Through the smoke of his cigarette Roy studied the other as Captain Carroll became immersed in the two typewritten sheets. He liked the spare little gray-haired man sitting opposite to him. Who wouldn’t? Captain Carroll was acclaimed as the most popular skipper of the fleet. Genial blue eyes, a genial face and a genial smile—but eyes that in emergency could become steel, and a face when occasion demanded that could become as adamant as though it were sculptured in stone. A sailor from the soles of his shoes to the crown of his head. He liked Captain Carroll; he liked him a lot—liked him, for instance, for being shy and diffident about that string of ribbons on his breast awarded for gallantry and services in the Great War, a display that, were it not for the regulations which required them being worn

when in uniform, would have been, though none the less treasured, modestly hidden away somewhere from all eyes. He had come to know Captain Carroll perhaps more intimately than he knew anyone else on the ship from brisk turns around the deck together on numerous occasions and up here in this room numerous bouts at cribbage—a passion with Captain Carroll—at which he, Roy, had, with the possible odd exception, been ignominiously defeated.

Captain Carroll looked up from Lan Chao-tao's rather grisly missive.

"You believe that this murder has been or will be committed?" he asked laconically.

"Absolutely!" Roy replied with finality as he took out his pocketbook and handed the ship's commander two telegrams. "I received these just before we left Kobe," he added briefly.

Captain Carroll read the telegrams aloud:

" "STILL UNABLE TO TRACE ANY CABLE COMMUNICATIONS.

THORNTON.' "

" "REGRET CAN REPORT NO SUCCESS FROM ANY ANGLE.

ANDERSON.' "

"The first," Roy explained, "is from Inspector Thornton of Scotland Yard. The other is from the manager of the British-Asiatic Bank in Shanghai."

Captain Carroll shook his head.

"I do not like the looks of this," he admitted. "But I do not understand. What is the connection between these telegrams and this damnable boast of murder? I have been at sea for—well, never mind how long—but for many years, and I have never run into anything like this before. Personally, I would attribute this epistle to some crackbrained ass with an insane idea of what was a joke. But you, apparently, very definitely do not. Why are you so sure that this notification of murder, either already accomplished or to come, should be accepted at its face value?"

Roy drew deeply on his cigarette then crunched it viciously in the ash receiver.

"I'll tell you," he said in a hard monotone. "You know, of course, as I suppose practically everyone else on board who has read the newspapers

knows, that my father, John Melville, was presumably kidnaped in Shanghai a few weeks ago—or, in any event, suddenly and mysteriously disappeared from there.”

“Yes.” Captain Carroll’s face was at once sympathetic. “It is common knowledge, the newspapers were full of it. But you did not broach the subject, and I felt that you did not wish to have any reference made to it.”

“Thank you, Captain.” A warmth had spontaneously crept into Roy’s voice. “I realized that all along and appreciated it. I *didn’t* want to discuss the matter before, but it is different now in view of that letter, and you are entitled to an answer to your question as to why I am so sure that—well, that someone aboard here has been or will be done away with before we reach Shanghai.”

“You sound forbidding.” Captain Carroll’s twisted smile held no mirth. “But the whole thing takes on the aspect of a nightmare! A prophesied murder! Here! On my ship! It somehow doesn’t make sense!”

“I wish to God it didn’t,” responded Roy seriously, “but I am positive that it does. And the worst of it is that I am equally positive there is nothing you can do to prevent it. But, at the same time, there was nothing else that *I* could now do under the circumstances but spread all my cards out on the table since it is for you to decide what action to take. Right?”

“Go on,” prompted Captain Carroll crisply.

“Well—” Roy shrugged his shoulders disparagingly—“I suppose it is equally well known that my father is a more than ordinarily wealthy man. I speak of this only because of the apparently extravagant sums of money that I shall have to mention. Roughly speaking, I fancy my father is worth five million pounds sterling, and translating that sum very roughly indeed into Shanghai money at the current, but always fluctuating, rate of exchange let us say that it represents something in the neighborhood of seventy-five million Shanghai dollars.”

“You can check that up with the purser,” observed Captain Carroll wryly. “It’s a little out of my province.”

“Accuracy doesn’t really matter,” Roy answered. “The calculation is close enough for the moment to serve the purpose of measuring my father’s wealth by the Chinese yardstick.” He reached for another cigarette. “I hope I am not being too incoherent, but there are explanations to make so that you will understand just what happened. Let us go back to London. Father, naturally, had a great many interests. These were scattered all over the

world. He had large investments in the Orient. He had never been in the Far East but had always wanted to go there. We were alone, Father and I. I had had no brothers or sisters, and my mother had died when I was too young to realize the loss.” Roy dragged on his cigarette. “I’m wandering I know, but I don’t seem to be able to give you the picture in any other way. When I left Cambridge I went into Father’s office. It wasn’t just father and son—we were pals. But I was no more than an office-boy at first. However, never mind about that. Six years of it have made a difference. He taught me that controlling companies all over the lot is not all beer and skittles. In the last two or three years I’ve done most of the traveling that he used to do in order to check up at first hand on some project in which he was interested, whether it was a metal-working concern somewhere near at hand in the provinces or a copra plantation somewhere in the South Seas.”

Roy pushed his hand across his forehead.

“Sorry to be so long-winded about all this,” he apologized, “but I didn’t know any other way in which to set the stage. I think I can go to the crux of it all now. Sometime ago Father became interested in the oil situation in China. And then, out of the blue, Japan stepped in and set both Great Britain and the United States by the ears on account of its oil rulings pertaining to Manchukuo, in which newly founded state, as you know, the Rising Sun had established Pu Ti, heir to the Dragon Throne of the Manchu dynasty, as emperor. Well, Father, who, as I have said, had never been in the Orient but had always had a desire to go there, decided to go out and look over the situation for himself. So, a month or so after having announced his decision he took passage for Shanghai with the intention, in due course, of traveling north from there to Peking and then into Mongolia and Manchuria.

“But, apparently, he never got any farther than Shanghai. He couldn’t have been in Shanghai more than perhaps a week when I received in my mail one morning a letter, postmarked London and dated the night before, which contained almost as ugly a bit of ‘advance information’ as this one here does.

“I’ll summarize its contents for you. The letter stated that my father was being held for ransom in China, and that within a few hours of my receipt of the letter this fact would be publicly known. I was instructed to establish at once a credit of one million dollars in Chinese money, roughly again between three hundred and fifty thousand and four hundred thousand dollars in gold, in any bank of my own choosing in Shanghai. I was then given six weeks in which to appear in person in Shanghai where contact would be made with me and the payment of the ransom arranged, the writer stating

that he would deal with no intermediaries, and that, my father's life being my bond, I alone would be trusted in any contacts that were made. Further, the letter coolly informed me that the amount demanded was not exorbitant since it was less than one and a half per cent of a conservative estimate of my father's wealth. Also, I was emphatically warned to keep away at all times from the police. And finally my attention was called to the fact that I was being given this information in advance as proof that I was dealing with one who was in a position to carry out the threat that it would cost my father his life unless the instructions I had been given were followed minutely. And —" Roy smiled grimly—"the signature on the letter was exactly the same as on the one I have just handed you: Lan Chao-tao."

Captain Carroll's chin was pinched tightly between thumb and forefinger.

"What did you do?" he asked gruffly.

"I thought it was the work of a crank," Roy answered tersely. "Our mail rarely failed to produce at least a daily letter from a crank—one of the penalties for the possession of money, I suppose, to which all men of known wealth are constantly subjected. But there was something about the letter that was so unusually preposterous, where the preposterous in dozens of different letters was always to the fore, that instead of in the wastepaper basket I put the letter in my pocket and went over to Scotland Yard. How could a letter, posted in London the night before, foretell that something had happened to my father in Shanghai, say eleven thousand miles away, within the past twenty-four hours without my having received any cable advice to that effect, whereas on the day before, which had happened to be my birthday, I had received a cheery cable of congratulation and good wishes from him? It seemed to me to have originated in the perverted mind of some lunatic, probably a dangerous one, whose activities, for the public good, would best be relegated to the confines of a padded cell.

"Scotland Yard agreed with me. But I was scarcely on my way back to the office when I changed my mind—and so did Scotland Yard. The letter was only too genuine. Newsboys were crying extras on the streets. Big scareheads. Cursedly lurid things! The prevailing note being to the effect that my father had been kidnaped by bandits in Shanghai and was being held for ransom. The details were vague and unsatisfactory. It appeared that my father had failed to keep several important engagements extending over a period of some eighteen hours, but no fears were entertained for his safety until, as time went on, suspicions were aroused. Then, as still no trace of him could be found, the alarm became general, and the cables began to hum.

There was no doubt as to the authenticity of these press reports. A cable of much the same tenor, but giving no additional details, was waiting for me at the office—the cable being from the British-Asiatic Bank, our banking connection in Shanghai, where Father had made his business headquarters.”

Roy jerked his hand abruptly toward the two cables on the table.

“That about brings us down to the present moment. Let me be sketchy in order to be brief. That hiatus of eighteen hours between, presumably, my father’s actual disappearance and the broadcasting of the alarm! And in the interval that letter to me in London! Scotland Yard’s theory was that, capitalizing the hours before any anxiety was felt on Father’s account, the kidnapers, the moment they had got their hands on Father, must have cabled in code to a confederate here in London either direct from Shanghai or by relaying the cable from Japan or, for that matter, from almost anywhere else—if the intention was to muck up the trail. Scotland Yard, therefore, has concentrated on all messages received by the cable companies on or around the date involved. That wire from Inspector Thornton so far spells defeat. The wire from Anderson of the British-Asiatic Bank speaks for itself. Meanwhile, as you will have gleaned from that filthy epistle of Lan Chao-tao, I have placed one million Shanghai dollars to my credit in the British-Asiatic Bank. I found that the quickest way of reaching Shanghai, taking into consideration all current sailing dates, was to cross Canada by rail and catch the Shansi at Vancouver—and here I am, with Shanghai our next port.”

“With a murder promised aboard before we reach there!” Captain Carroll brought a closed fist down with a smash that made the desk quiver.

“Yes.” Roy nodded soberly. “And as I said before I’m convinced in my own mind there is nothing you can do to prevent it.”

“By God,” swore the gray-haired little commander fervently, his blue eyes suddenly steel, “I’ll see about that! This Lan Chao-tao may be the devil incarnate himself, but I can’t bring myself to believe that his cold-blooded boast of murder on this ship will——”

Captain Carroll came to an abrupt pause. A knock had sounded on the door.

“Come in!” the commander rasped in his sea voice.

The door opened. Captain Carroll was instantly on his feet, as was Roy. In the doorway stood a girl whose lustrous, jet-black hair seemed by contrast to make the whiteness of her strained face the more pronounced. Roy

bowed. It was Myrna Lang who with her middle-aged father, Morton Lang, sat at the captain's table.

“Oh, I am so sorry!” she exclaimed tremulously. “I—I—did not mean to intrude. And—and I am afraid you will think it was childish of me to have come up here, but I—I am terribly worried.”

“Worried!” Captain Carroll was at once paternal and concerned. “Good gracious, Miss Lang, whatever about? It surely can't be anything serious. Could you tell me what is the matter in the presence of Mr Melville, whom I know you have met, or would you prefer——”

“No—oh no,” she protested hastily. “It is nothing that Mr Melville should not know. It is only that—well, that since shortly after lunch I have been unable to find my father anywhere on the ship.”

CHAPTER II

The Long Arm of Lan Chao-tao

ROY's eyes instinctively searched Captain Carroll's face. For the fraction of a second there was an almost imperceptible tightening of the muscles around the corners of the trim little commander's mouth, and then his lips widened in a reassuring smile.

"Oh, but really!" he protested cheerily. "You shouldn't be alarmed over anything like that. Your dad is probably tucked away in somebody's cabin or suite, having a game of bridge or a yarn or something of that sort. There are a hundred possibilities. I heard him say at table the other day, for instance, that he was going to make an engine-room tour with the chief sometime, and —" he laughed pleasantly—"I am sure you haven't looked in the stokehole. Now have you?"

"No," she answered gravely, "I haven't. But I asked the chief engineer a little while ago if he had seen Father this afternoon, and the answer was 'no.' "

Captain Carroll laughed outright, but the laugh was a little forced, Roy thought.

"That was only a stab in the dark, my dear. I'll ask the staff captain to have an unobtrusive search made for your father, and I promise you we'll find him within half an hour. Meanwhile—" he turned to Roy—"with this bit of sea on and the bridge ladder and decks a trifle perilous for young ladies I'm sure you'll see Miss Lang safely to her cabin."

"With pleasure," Roy answered genuinely.

He glanced at Myrna Lang. She seemed somehow—and most strangely—to have changed. She no longer showed any trepidation. Her features were almost immobile—calm and composed. But curiously he had a vague feeling that this was not due to any relief that the captain's words had brought her.

"Thank you, Captain," she said unemotionally, "but I have already interrupted your business enough, and——"

“Business is all finished,” Captain Carroll lied with bluff heartiness. “Trot along, Mr Melville, while I get hold of Captain Marle and have him set this young lady’s anxiety at rest.”

Roy reached the door. Myrna Lang had already started along the short alleyway that gave on the lower bridge. He turned and looked back at Captain Carroll. The commander’s face had lost all traces of geniality as he motioned toward the letter and telegrams on his desk.

“I want to show these to Captain Marle,” he said in a hard voice.

Roy nodded.

“I thought you would. That’s why I left them there.”

He caught up with Myrna Lang at the head of the bridge ladder, and there for a moment they stood close together as he took her arm firmly against the roll of the ship. And yet she still seemed remote. She had always struck him that way from the moment he had first seen her on board when the ship had sailed from Vancouver. Not ungracious—quite the contrary. She had a smile that when it sparkled in her black eyes seemed to light up her whole face—only on the few occasions that he had talked to her that smile had rarely come. Not morose. Trouble of some sort, he had fancied, that was deep-rooted. She had been an onlooker rather than a participant, even as he himself had been, in so far as shipboard festivities were concerned. Her father had practically been her sole companion.

He was conscious that he had admired her in an impersonal way, just as one might admire any woman for her poise and beauty. He was conscious now that she made an alluring picture as the wind, mocking the wardship of her beret, tossed her hair into truant strands and, not content with that, proceeded to freshen the color in her cheeks while it wrapped her skirt possessively about the contours of her slim, graceful figure.

But he was conscious too at this moment of something that was a world apart from all physical attraction. He turned his head away for an instant and bit at his lip. This was pure, unadulterated hell. As surely as he knew that he was standing beside her here at this minute he knew that her misgivings and anxiety not only were not imaginary but were warranted in far uglier measure than she perhaps could ever have dreamed they could be. And when the blow fell—— He did not like to think of that. A great sympathy welled up within him. If only in some little way he could protect her—stand between her and the worst of it.

The ship lifted out of the trough and momentarily rode on an even keel.

“Here’s our chance, Miss Lang,” he prompted gaily. “Come on!”

They raced down the bridge ladder together and across the deck and gained entrance to the main lounge.

“This is nice of you, Mr Melville.” She smiled gratefully. “But really you shouldn’t have troubled to——”

“Nonsense!” he broke in heartily. “Jolly glad of the opportunity. And of course I shall make the most of it now—acting on the skipper’s orders—by seeing you safely below to your cabin.”

She glanced at him swiftly, and there was suddenly something in her eyes that he could not fathom, for swift as the glance had been it had not been casual.

“Yes,” she said unexpectedly, “I rather wish you would.”

“Right!” he applauded, and presently they were standing before a door on B deck not far from his own rooms.

He reached out to open the door for her, but with a quick, and it seemed almost an avid, movement she forestalled him, and opened it herself.

“Please wait a moment for me, Mr Melville,” she flung out hurriedly over her shoulder as she crossed the threshold and disappeared from view.

She had left the door open, and the interior, he could see, was the sitting room of a suite. He searched a little uneasily for a cigarette, wondering a bit at the cause of the rather intensive way in which she had acted.

But he had not long to wonder. She was back almost on the instant, and her wind-whipped face seemed to have lost some of its color as, framed in the doorway now, she stood there facing him.

“I just ran through the rooms,” she said with a little catch in her voice. “I thought that possibly Father might have come back while I was away—but he hasn’t.”

Her words stabbed at him. She had grasped at a straw. He could read the suffering in those black eyes, though they were none the less fixed steadily upon him. What could he say to her? He found himself saying soothingly:

“Now look here, really, you know, Miss Lang, you mustn’t be upset. Why, there are dozens of explanations to account for the way your father has spent the afternoon—just as Captain Carroll told you. They’ll find him for you in short order.”

Traitorous words! They had not come glibly nor, was he at all sure, convincingly. How could they when he knew in his heart there was no hope? But, great God, he couldn't tell her—could he?—that he as good as knew her father had been murdered!

She laid a hand impulsively on his sleeve.

“That's very kind of you,” she said quietly, and then, abruptly: “Mr Melville, have you ever been out here before?”

“No, Miss Lang.”

“You think I am needlessly anxious,” she said almost monotonously, “but strange things happen in the Orient.”

“I have already had only too good reason to know that myself,” he returned with a sudden surge of bitterness in his voice.

She nodded.

“Yes,” she said, “I know. Your father. I won't ask you to come in now, but later on in the evening, if—” she hesitated—“if the search has proved fruitless, will you come here and see me, Mr Melville? I would like to talk to you.”

“Of course I will,” he promised readily.

“Thank you,” she said simply as she closed the door.

Roy lingered for an instant before the closed door and became suddenly aware that his hands were tightly clenched. He turned then and made his way along to his own suite. As he opened the door of his sitting room and switched on the lights he glanced involuntarily toward the matchstand on the table. He laughed harshly. What did he expect to find? Another abomination hatched by Lan Chao-tao? Well, there was nothing there.

From outside in the corridor came the clangor of the dressing gong. Crescendo as it approached his door. It made a perfectly hideous noise. He sent a hand rumpling in protest through his light-brown hair. He had never paid any attention to the infernal gong before. But now its clash and clatter was a concatenation of merciless discords.

He went on into his bedroom. Sen Lu had laid out his dinner clothes on the bed. Mechanically he began to undress. As he shaved he was conscious that the brown eyes staring back at him out of the mirror were hard and somber. Well, why shouldn't they be? This was a cruel, abhorrent thing. And he was powerless—impotent to intervene. There was not a thing he could

do. Nothing! He couldn't, for instance, go barging all over the ship on a search of his own. The ship's officers not only would not thank him but wouldn't permit it. And anyway, it would be futile.

He flung his six feet of stature savagely into the bath that Sen Lu had drawn for him. "Strange things happen in the Orient." He couldn't get those words of hers out of his mind. She couldn't be more than twenty or twenty-one. Courage. She had all of that. Something gallant about her. She *knew*. It was only because it was inborn in everyone to do so that she still clung to a thread of hope. How or why she knew was another matter, but he was convinced that she did. His own affairs, his own father's life, this satrap of Satan that called himself Lan Chao-tao barbed at his mind. Something tigerish rose up within him. His father's life came first but after that——

He dressed and went up to the smoking-room lounge. The usual cocktail hour. Only a sprinkling of passengers had gathered there. Perhaps this was because of the weather that seemed to have grown worse, the pitch and toss of the ship as she battled with the heavy seas sorted out, as it were, the seasoned and hardy travelers, together with those who basked, possibly, in the immunity afforded by seasick remedies!

But the offerings of hors d'oeuvres spread out on the long table were as lavish and varied as ever. As Roy helped himself and ordered a cocktail, a fellow passenger standing beside him, a man of whom he had seen little on board, but whose name he knew to be Travers, nodded pleasantly and spoke as he munched caviar.

"Noticed anything out of the ordinary in the last little while?" he inquired. "The passengers getting the wind up a bit over something that isn't the weather—that sort of thing, if you know what I mean."

Roy knew a sudden uneasiness though he eyed the other impassively.

"No, I can't say I have," he answered. "As a matter of fact, I have only just come from my cabin."

"Well, take a look at that group of dowagers over there. They've got their heads together. Something queer going on. Ran into a rather queerish thing myself. I braved the boat deck a little while ago for a better look at the bounding billows, and what do you think I saw?"

"I haven't the faintest," Roy replied. "What did you see?"

"There were four or five sailors up there—not any of the Chinese crew—white sailors, and there was one of the officers with them. The third officer, as a matter of fact. They were undoing the lashings of the canvas

covers on the lifeboats, lifting up the covers, peering inside and then lashing the covers back into place again. I asked the officer what it was all about, and frankly I must admit he didn't seem pleased to see me there. He said we had been shipping a lot of heavy seas during the last few hours, and they wanted to make sure that the boats were dry and shipshape."

"Well?" invited Roy.

"Well!" Mr Travers snorted. "Dry, my eye! I could have done better than that myself. They were looking for something, that's what they were doing. The question is—what? And among the passengers there's a lot of whispering been going on. Dashed queer, I call it. Something's up—that's a certainty."

Roy did not answer. He had no opportunity to do so. Mr Travers had been joined by a boon companion and was beginning to recount the story all over again.

Roy retired to a spacious lounge chair. One of the Chinese barboys brought him his cocktail. His chair was not far from the group of dowagers that Travers had indicated, though he had had no thought of choosing it on that account. And then he became suddenly aware that this coterie of ladies of uncertain age was most certainly not whispering, and that he could not help but overhear snatches of their conversation.

"Fancy sending those pert little bellboys around to page the cabins for Mr Lang! . . ." "Yes—" with a snicker—"one of them came to mine. . . ." "That daughter of his is at the bottom of it, of course. She has always struck me as being rather upstage, but she evidently knows her father and keeps a tight rein on him. . . ." "Rather on in years for intrigues and philandering, this crafty old rascal—wouldn't you say? . . ." "I wonder whose cabin he *was* found in, and what *her* name is? . . ."

Roy had an accident. The stem of his cocktail glass snapped between his fingers. A barboy retrieved the debris and brought him another cocktail. The dinner bugle sounded. Thank God, it wasn't that jangling gong! He drained his glass and went down to dinner.

There was a scanty attendance. From where he sat the captain's table was in full view. Myrna Lang did not come down. She and her father were the only ones who sat at the table with Captain Carroll, and there was no one there tonight. He discovered that he was telling himself inanely that Captain Carroll never came down for meals when off the coast or in dirty weather.

No one was at his table either, save himself. He was thankful for that. He was in no mood for conversation. Nor was he hungry. Forced feeding! He had a feeling that he shouldn't be sitting here at all, pushing dishes away from him almost untouched. *She* hadn't come down. Of course she hadn't! Perhaps she had had something served in her sitting room. He hoped so. He wished he had had the right to have insisted upon it. Alone there, facing what she knew to be certain horror with a brave heart and uplifted chin! Damn those catty women who wallowed deliciously in the muck of their own foul imaginations! What was the matter with him? A bit jumpy, wasn't he? He poised a full glass of water in his hand and inspected the procedure critically. His hand was as steady as the figurative rock. . . .

Crackers and cheese.

The second steward approached with an envelope in his hand.

"The commander's compliments, Mr Melville," he said.

"Thank you," Roy acknowledged.

He tore the envelope open and extracted a slip of paper on which were scrawled a few obviously hurried words: an apology for intruding on the dinner hour, but a request that he, Roy, come up to the captain's quarters as soon as possible.

Roy, grim-faced, pushed back his chair and left the dining saloon. What had happened? Had the search ended? Had Mr Lang been found? Not alive. He knew that. Mr Lang would not be found alive. But——

He knocked and entered the commander's room. Captain Carroll was alone and standing beside his desk. Their eyes met, Roy's questioning.

Captain Carroll shook his head.

"Nothing," he said gruffly. "Not a sign of him. I'm liking this less every minute. And I wish to God I didn't have the elements on my hands at the same time!" And then, briskly: "I'm sorry if I interrupted you at dinner, but I was sure that under the circumstances dinner mattered little or nothing to you."

"My answer to that is obvious," Roy responded tersely.

"Yes. Quite so. Well, the reason that I asked you to come up here is because we have been honeycombing the passenger list. I have just discovered that a man by the name of Charles Barr joined us at Kobe—tourist class. He has sailed with me several times. I do not know him at all well in a personal way, but I know a good deal about him. If there is any

white man who has the ins and outs of China at his finger tips he is the man. He has lived out here all his life. In fact, I rather fancy he has a strain of Chinese blood in him. Anyway, he is familiarly known as Chinese Charlie, and——”

“Do you mean,” Roy interjected, “that there is some significance in the fact that this Chinese Charlie came aboard at Kobe, and that it was not until then that——”

“A suspect?” Captain Carroll pushed his hand through his hair in a worried way. “No, I do not mean that—any more than in the sense that at the present moment everybody aboard the ship is a suspect. The point is that I have sent for him because I want to question him about this Lan Chao-tao. And I have asked you to be present because I do not want my questions to arouse any suspicions that—well, that anything out of the way has occurred aboard here. I don’t want the passengers to get on edge. Chinese Charlie may be able to give us some information that might be of vital moment to us, and if that is so, delay in questioning him would be unpardonable. So I sent that chit to you at once, in order that I might have a word with you first. I have but just now sent for Chinese Charlie. He ought to be here shortly.”

Roy looked a trifle puzzled.

“I can quite see the possibilities,” he said. “But I am afraid I do not altogether understand the role I am to play.”

“My fault,” acknowledged Captain Carroll. “What I want is any information I can get about this Lan Chao-tao without any indication that my interest might apply to anything connected with what might have happened on the ship. It is common knowledge that your father has been kidnaped in Shanghai. And it can be no secret since Scotland Yard was put in possession of all the facts, and you have made no secret of it yourself that this Lan Chao-tao is at the bottom of it. I want to question Chinese Charlie apparently on *your* behalf alone.”

“I see,” Roy nodded. “That’s excellent! But I think it is only fair to tell you that the passengers, as one of them very definitely stated to me before dinner, are already whispering among themselves.”

“I know that,” admitted Captain Carroll through set lips. “But it hasn’t yet gone beyond the stage of irresponsible shipboard gossip. And——” he lied not too convincingly—“I am still hoping that we are hunting only the proverbial mare’s-nest, and that everything will turn out all right.”

Roy did not contradict the other. Why should he? Why put the spruce little commander, already harassed, on the defensive?

“Who is this Chinese Charlie?” he asked.

“He is a buyer of antiques and curios of every description, some of which, I understand, have been found to be extremely rare and valuable. He travels constantly all through the Orient—as far north as Mongolia and Manchuria. He’s been at it for years. He sells his wares to the so-called ‘gift shops’ all the way from Manila, Hong Kong and Shanghai to Peking—to say nothing of the coastal ports of Japan. He is reputed to be able to converse fluently in more dialects than any Chinese-natural could ever acquire, and though he always travels tourist class it is said that he has amassed a fortune. But—” as a knock sounded on the door—“here he is now, I imagine.”

Roy unostentatiously studied the man who entered. There was a slight slant to the black eyes, the glossy black hair was a trifle stringy and the cheekbones almost imperceptibly high, but the skin was indubitably white, and the clean-shaven face was admittedly not uninviting. A small man—not over five feet six. Crossed blood? Well, perhaps. Did it matter?

The amenities and introductions over, they seated themselves around the commander’s desk.

“You are wondering a bit, no doubt, Mr Barr,” said Captain Carroll abruptly, “why I requested you to come up here?”

“Well, yes.” Chinese Charlie’s voice was quiet and contained. “Frankly, I must confess I am.”

“The explanation is simple. I have only just learned that you were aboard, and I have told Mr Melville here that if there is any man in the Orient who could be of assistance in the way of supplying him with some information it would be yourself.”

“I’d be glad to, of course,” responded Chinese Charlie pleasantly; “but I hope you’re not overrating me, Captain. What is it, Mr Melville?”

“It’s in reference to my father, John Melville,” Roy replied, “who disappeared from Shanghai some weeks ago.”

“Was *he* your father?” Chinese Charlie thrust out his hand impulsively across the desk. “I’m sorry to hear that, Mr Melville. I am indeed.”

“Thank you,” Roy responded and was vaguely disturbed at the iron grip of so small a man. He glanced at Captain Carroll. Captain Carroll’s eyes

were eloquent. They said: “The witness is yours.” Roy leaned back and lighted a cigarette. “I take it, from what you have said, that you had already heard of what happened?”

“Naturally. Everybody out here in the Orient has. How could it be otherwise with a man of such prominence as your father? The Chinese go in for kidnaping a lot among themselves; it’s a sort of perverted national sport with them, I’d say. But generally they leave the whites alone; they don’t like the foreign police barging down their street, you know. But this time they seem to have gone the limit. I understand that the ransom note you received in London and which you handed over to Scotland Yard was signed Lan Chao-tao.”

“How did you know that?” demanded Roy quickly.

Chinese Charlie shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s the talk in all the clubs, and everywhere else for that matter. I don’t know how it leaked out. I don’t even know whether it’s true or not.”

“It is true,” Roy stated bluntly. “And it’s about this Lan Chao-tao that, at Captain Carroll’s suggestion, I wanted to ask you a few questions. Did you ever hear of the man before? Do you know who he is? Do you know anything about him?”

Chinese Charlie was silent for a moment.

“Yes,” he said finally, “I’ve heard of Lan Chao-tao before, but it’s only a name. I’ll try to tell you what I mean. No one knows who Lan Chao-tao is. No one that I know of has ever seen him. And until your father’s disappearance there were very few foreigners, I am sure, who had ever even heard the name. I travel a great deal in China—live with the Chinese in small villages, as Captain Carroll has doubtless told you. There in the village inns, among the Chinese, where I live as they do and am almost accepted as one of themselves, and where I am sometimes fortunate enough to pick up rare pieces of this-and-that whereby I make my living, I have, in the last four or five years, heard the name of Lan Chao-tao many times. There are incredible stories about him. He is a bugaboo with which the parents frighten their children. According to some, there is no crime in the decalogue of which he is not held guilty; by others amazing acts of generosity and relief of the poor are attributed to him. A bandit? The supreme lord of crime in China? I don’t know. They talk of a mysterious island somewhere that is a fortress where he stores his loot and stealings. But he is real—as you, Mr Melville, have only too good reason to know.

Anyway, it is certain that he has a long arm, and I would say that his acts of mercy, if any such have ever had any existence in fact, are the exception.”

“And that is all?” Roy spoke disappointedly. “No details of any sort? That is all you know about him?”

“Details?” Chinese Charlie smiled unmirthfully. “No, I have none. I do not think anyone in China has, either. I do not want to offer you any gratuitous advice, but if you make contact with him watch your step, as the Americans say. My impression is that he is a devil incarnate with alibis enough to outdo even the devil himself. God, if I do say it myself, I know China, and I doubt if, no matter on how many occasions you talk to him, you’ll ever recognize him a second time or ever succeed in putting your finger on him.” He grinned queerly. “What I mean is that I might even be Lan Chao-tao himself.”

Zero! Roy gnawed on the end of his cigarette. . . .

Another knock at the door. Captain Carroll, requested on the bridge, was struggling into his greatcoat.

“Thanks very much,” he said courteously. “Most kind of you, Mr Barr. Perhaps Mr Melville had hoped for more, but I am sure he has appreciated all you have said.”

Chinese Charlie departed.

Roy, lingering an instant, laid his hand on the commander’s sleeve.

“Red light!” he said. “But we knew that before.”

“I’m afraid so,” Captain Carroll admitted reluctantly. “But the search isn’t over yet. We can only wait and see.”

Roy shrugged.

“I’d like to come up here for bulletins from time to time during the evening.”

“Right!” Captain Carroll replied succinctly. “If I am not here I’ll see you on the bridge at any time.”

The hours were remorseless, agelong in their passing as though they were lingering to brood with Machiavellian glee on what the night might hold.

Nine o’clock. Ten o’clock.

The night was vile. The crash of crockery all over the ship.

Again and again Roy went to Captain Carroll for the latest bulletins. Nothing.

"I'm afraid we're for it," the bighearted commander had finally admitted. "God help that poor little girl!"

Six bells—eleven o'clock.

Roy knocked at Myrna Lang's sitting-room door.

She was seated at the table. Her eyes were tearless, but her face was ashen.

"I know," she said as she motioned toward a chair, and he sat down beside her. "I have known from the beginning. It was only that I refused to believe what I knew was true. Captain Carroll has been very kind. He has been down here several times. Always cheery, always telling me not to worry. But it is the end now. The ship has been searched from stem to stern. I know. In whatever way it may have been accomplished I know that my father has been murdered. Do—do you know why I asked you to come here if—if the search had proved unsuccessful?"

Her hand was resting on the table. He laid his own over hers a little diffidently but with utmost sympathy.

"No," he said gravely. "But—well, I am afraid I am an egregious stumbler with words, but I consider it a very special privilege to have been asked to come. And now you just mustn't give up, you know. The game is never over until the whistle blows."

She withdrew her hand—but only to clasp it convulsively over his.

"No," she said, "you do not understand. It is because we have a common cause."

"A common cause?"

"Yes. Your father and mine. A devil who hides under the name of Lan Chao-tao is responsible for what I am certain now is my father's murder and probably is or will be for *your* father's, too. Your father is held for ransom. But what does that mean? You'll pay a million Shanghai dollars; Lan Chao-tao will see to that all right. But your father back again? I'm sorry to say it—" her fingers firmed over the back of his hand then, lifting, covered suddenly quivering lips—"but I—I doubt it."

He stared at her disconcertedly.

"How do you know all this?" he asked, his throat strangely dry.

"I'll tell you," she replied, almost instantly in command of herself again. "So far as your father is concerned everyone in the Orient and elsewhere, I am sure, knows what happened. Everyone knows that the letter you handed over to Scotland Yard was signed by Lan Chao-tao. In my father's case it is a longer story, but still I can put it into a very few words. We are Americans, you know, though I was born in China and have lived there all my life. My mother died when I was two years old. I was taken care of by an amah, and I suppose I spoke Chinese even before I did English. I'll bridge the years between. Father had started an exporting and importing business when a comparatively young man. He prospered and owns today one of the largest concerns of its kind in the Orient.

"Less than a year ago—nine months ago to be exact—I found on the table of our living room in Shanghai a short, typewritten note. I don't know how it got there. Father was out at the time. No envelope. It just lay there on the table spread out for anyone to read. I read it. It said: Have you ever read your Christian Bible, Mr Lang? An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Hide yourself away in Paris if you like; it will not matter. This is the third month. You have still nine months to live. May they be happy ones! And it was signed: Lan Chao-tao."

The roll and pitch and pound of the ship—the crash of crockery again. She clutched at the table for support, but she did it mechanically. Roy's knuckles were white under tight-drawn skin as his hands likewise closed on the table's edge. The ship, the thunderous seas—all that was extraneous, wasn't it?

"Go on, please," he prompted and swallowed a catch in his voice.

"I asked Father about it the moment he entered the house. He was furious at first—said it was intentionally done to terrorize me. Then he tried to laugh it off. Oh God! Finally, I made him tell me the truth. I do not know the actual details, for they were far too technical for me, but all that matters is that Father had secured a contract for some machinery from the Nanking government that ran into a great many thousands of dollars. Shortly thereafter—he was then on a business trip up north in a small village—a young Chinese asked to see him. This young man gave his name as Lin-tao and demanded a 'squeeze' on the contract, failing which, he declared, the shipments would never reach their destination. 'Squeeze,' I am sorry to say, appears to be a national trait of China, but Father never did and never would have any of it. Lin-tao ended up by drawing a pistol and threatening Father's life. Father out-manuevered him and called in his own boys. Lin-tao was roughly handled, more so than Father, I know, ever intended. In any case,

Lin-tao was handed over to the Chinese authorities and would have been summarily executed as a bandit and communist except for the fact that he died within a few days from the wounds inflicted by Father's boys.

"Almost immediately after this Father received his first communication from Lan Chao-tao. It seems that Lin-tao was Lan Chao-tao's son. Lan Chao-tao gave Father twelve months to live—with the cynical suggestion that he employ the time in meditating on his approaching end. Then each month Father received a letter from this Lan Chao-tao—all couched in similar terms to the one I found in our living room. Father turned them all over to the police. It was quite useless. The identity of Lan Chao-tao was never discovered."

"But surely," Roy pointed out, "if this Lin-tao was a son the trail would be bound to lead back to the father."

"No," she said. "Having never been there you naturally do not know China. There are concubines, sometimes very many of them. And, besides, Lan Chao-tao and Lin-tao are both obviously assumed names. Lin-tao's ancestry was never traced."

The heave and toss of the ship again—a sickening roll from which it seemed there could be no recovery.

Myrna Lang laughed bitterly. Her hands grasped the arms of her chair as she leaned forward to preserve her balance.

"Father didn't run away from it," she asserted monotonously. "He had business in New York. We were on our way back to China. Father never took it as seriously as I did. That reference to Paris, or wherever he might be—if it meant anything, it meant everything. Today is the end of the twelfth month."

His arm went around her shoulders—as diffidently, as sympathetically as he had laid his hand over hers. Braver than any woman he had ever known, she was near the breaking point. He couldn't tell her about the letter he had received that afternoon, could he? Not yet! He couldn't pronounce sentence. The whole damnable thing was too bizarre to be true, but it *was* true.

He heard himself speaking fatuously; he knew it was fatuous.

"You mustn't take so black an outlook on——"

He broke off abruptly.

Strangely audible over the noises of the ship there came a dull, heavy thud from somewhere near at hand that brought them instinctively to their

feet together.

She pointed toward a closed connecting door.

“That came from Father’s room,” she said with a premonitive little cry.

Roy sprang to the door, wrenched it open and then stood with his back to her, blocking the way.

The light flooded in from the sitting room. The wardrobe door in the corner of the bedroom, obviously yielding at last to the pressure against it from within plus the violent motion of the ship, had burst open and was swinging and crashing back and forth.

And on the floor lay the crumpled body of Morton Lang. . . .

CHAPTER III

The First Summons

SLEEP would not come. Roy reached out to the bedside table, switched on the light and looked at his watch. It was still only five minutes after midnight, yet it seemed as though he had already been tossing here for countless hours. He switched off the light and flung himself restlessly back on his pillow.

He was worried, anxious and perplexed. It was a week now since Morton Lang had been murdered, and he had heard nothing from Lan Chao-tao, though the beast had shown his fangs again to Myrna Lang that afternoon.

Roy clenched his hand. There would sometime be a day of reckoning, wouldn't there? But meanwhile, why this waiting, this week of unbroken silence in respect of himself? What of his father?

Nothing! No clue of any kind to Lan Chao-tao's identity. No move to make. The cat playing with the mouse. But was he so sure that back somewhere along the way, unnoticed, unrecognized, there was not some faint blazing of the trail that had escaped them all?

His mind probed back. The unusual and crafty manner in which Morton Lang had been murdered . . . The investigation held on board by the police next day when the ship had arrived at Shanghai . . . Was there any little detail, apparently of no moment at the time, that had escaped recognition during the investigation as being the key to the unlocked door?

Doctor Mosley, the ship's surgeon, had testified that in his opinion, an opinion subsequently borne out by the autopsy, the murder had been accomplished by a blow with some blunt instrument over the right temple as was evidenced by the resultant contusion—a blow that had rendered the victim instantly unconscious. Then, due to the rupture of the meningeal artery and an ensuing intracranial hemorrhage, consciousness had never been regained, and Morton Lang had died, probably within an hour following this attack, from compression of the brain. Doctor Mosley had explained that the temporal bone was no thicker than an ordinary piece of

cardboard and was extremely vulnerable, that there had been no external bleeding, and, he had added with savage abhorrence, that the murderer had evidently known his business only too well. The murder, he judged, had been committed shortly after lunch, and this too had been confirmed by the autopsy.

Roy swore with bitter abandon under his breath. No outcry. No telltale blood spots on the floor. Who would think of looking for Morton Lang in his cabin wardrobe? But why the wardrobe at all? Why not have left him lying on the floor?

Roy answered the question to his own satisfaction at least. It was in consonance with everything this Lan Chao-tao had done. A villainous tongue-in-the-cheek sort of thing! To prolong the agonized suspense—and gloat. An incomparable swine!

The investigation on board, conducted by the commissioner and superintendent of the Shanghai municipal police, had been as thorough as was humanly possible. The ship, anchored in the Whangpoo River by order of the police, had been held incommunicado for twenty-four hours; no one was permitted to leave, no one save the police officials permitted to come aboard.

The letter he had found in his cabin had been produced in evidence. He had told his own story relative to the kidnaping of his father, but that was already known to the local police through the medium of Scotland Yard. Myrna Lang, a brave little figure under the ordeal, had repeated the story she had told him the night before. Captain Carroll and his officers had testified. The cabin passengers had been minutely questioned. The Chinese crew and Chinese passengers had been subjected to the most searching inquiry by the Chinese detectives attached to police headquarters.

And the result had been nil.

Finally, the passengers debarking at Shanghai had been permitted to land—those who were Chinese being carefully tabbed for identification purposes—and the ship, with police aboard detailed for further investigation, was allowed to proceed on her way to Hong Kong.

But before leaving the ship himself he had had a conference with Colonel Cogan, the commissioner, and Superintendent MacNulty. It had been a long conference. On the one hand they had given him in detail an account of the efforts that had been made from the outset to find his father—all of which had been of no avail. On his part, pointing out that any police

contact, as specifically stated in Lan Chao-tao's last letter, would almost certainly void any chance of obtaining his father's release, he had pleaded with them to let him play a lone hand.

They had demurred at this. MacNulty, a squat-built man with enormous shoulders and an iron face, but whose gray, kindly eyes belied his gruff demeanor, went even farther.

"And you'd be a damned fool, Mr Melville," he had asserted, "if you don't mind my saying so. This stinking rotter, Lan Chao-tao, whoever he is, will only get your money and gobble you up too. If I have my way you'll be covered night and day from the moment you put your foot ashore."

"But you do not seem to realize," Roy had protested, "that first and foremost my father's life is at stake, and that I can never expect to get anywhere if it is known that the police are always at my heels."

"We see your point," Colonel Cogan had admitted, "but we feel that you will be taking a very grave personal risk. You are dealing with the head of what now appears to be a devilishly well-organized and widespread gang of thieves, extortioners and murderers. There is no guarantee that they will play the game with you, and that once they have got the money you will not be the next victim. There is no guarantee, though I am sorry to say this, that your father is even still alive."

"That is exactly what I am driving at," Roy had answered. "The money in itself, intrinsically, means nothing, but they will never get the money unless I am satisfied that my father is safe. On the other hand, if I do not make contact you know as well as I do that my father's life is forfeit. This is my job. There is no other way. I'm asking you to give me the only chance there is."

And so the argument had gone on. Eventually he had, though with extreme reluctance on the part of the police heads, won through.

"Right, then," Colonel Cogan had decided, "we'll give you a free hand for the time being. I think you should know, however, that acting on our instructions the bank has set apart the ransom money and has secretly had every note listed by trusted employees. . . ."

A hot night. Even the single sheet that covered him was a sweltering thing. Roy smiled grimly. He remembered his answer almost verbatim:

"I'm wholeheartedly for that sort of staff work, and I hope the trap will eventually snare our man. But I have not paid the money over yet, and that is for the afterwards. Just let me get my father back first, and then I am

prepared to go to any limit to run this Lan Chao-tao to earth. And, wholly apart from whatever may have happened to my own father, I have not forgotten the murder of Mr Lang aboard here, which is also not measured in either pounds sterling or Shanghai dollars. . . .”

That was a week ago. And since then?

Nothing so far as he and Lan Chao-tao were concerned. Only an unbroken silence. No lead, no clue from the shipboard investigation that was helpful or encouraging.

His mind probed on.

He had gone ashore and had been met at the customs jetty by Henry Anderson, the manager of the British-Asiatic Bank, who was accompanied by a middle-aged Chinese gentleman. Mr Anderson had introduced his companion as Mr Hung Tchen, a director of the bank. Mr Hung Tchen, it developed, was a very wealthy man and the owner of not a few houses in Shanghai, one of which he had offered to place at Roy's disposal. The bank manager had explained that he and Mr Hung Tchen had talked the matter over and had both thought it would be an excellent arrangement. The house was furnished, could be almost instantly staffed, and Roy would not then be subjected to the publicity that would be unavoidable in a hotel. Furthermore, it would be more comfortable and quiet for his father, who, when released by his captors, might find the seclusion of a private house just what was most essential in order to recuperate from any possible hardships he had undergone. Indeed, Mr Anderson had declared earnestly, he had been so strongly impressed with the advantages that would thus accrue that he had accepted, tentatively of course, Mr Hung Tchen's offer, but it was, naturally, a decision that Roy alone could finally make.

He nodded to the surrounding darkness.

He had accepted. It had appealed to him. It was jolly decent of Mr Hung Tchen, and he had expressed his thanks and appreciation as adequately as he could.

Mr Hung Tchen had smiled deprecatingly. It was a humble and wholly unworthy abode. It was a gracious act on the part of Mr Melville to deign to occupy it. The house and all therein would be honored by Mr Melville's presence.

It was *not* a humble abode. It was a modern and quite extensive house that was set in its own grounds with a wall around it in the exclusive western section of the city not far from Bubbling Well Road. And here he was in that

same house tonight after a week's occupancy! It had been most satisfactory. He had a number one boy who was a veritable Aladdin's lamp, a cook who was incomparable, two other boys for general household work and a chauffeur for the small car he had acquired. One would think he had settled down here to spend the rest of his days in ease and comfort, whereas——

He crunched his pillow viciously under his head. Why couldn't he sleep? All this wasn't getting him anywhere.

These devils of darkness—thumping at his brain, keeping him awake!

Days of anxiety, days of waiting spent, when he had left the house at all, in visits to Myrna Lang and in conferences at the bank with Henry Anderson at which Mr Hung Tchen had sometimes been present—conferences that had been wholly nonproductive.

Myrna Lang!

Savagery assailed him again. It had been much worse for her than it had been for him through all these days, and this afternoon had had a diabolical ending. It was the first time she had gone out since her father's burial. He had taken her for a drive. On their return to her home she had found on the living-room table that cowardly message from Lan Chao-tao.

"Just where I found the one I told you about that was sent to my father," she had said as she had handed it to him.

The typewritten words still danced before his eyes:

Only half of the debt has been paid. You will pay the other half—perhaps tonight, perhaps tomorrow—but within no more than a month at most as you have already participated in the twelve months' grace that was extended to your father for meditation.

Lan Chao-tao.

He was afraid, very much afraid for her. She had come to mean a great deal in his life he was beginning to realize. She was there alone in the house except for her Chinese servants, and she had told him that she had no relatives in China. He had begged her to ask for police protection at once.

He could see her standing there now beside the table—a straight, slim little figure with hands knotted at her sides. Resolute. Her head held high.

"This has gone beyond all police protection," she had said quietly. "You know that as well as I do. But this time Mr Lan Chao-tao has made a

mistake. It is he, not I, who will pay.”

What had she meant by that?

He had asked her.

She had smiled at him, a little enigmatically he had thought, as she shook her head.

“I don’t know yet. Perhaps it is only a woman’s intuition. But somehow I am very sure of it.”

“But,” he had growled in agitated protest, “you can’t stay here alone at the mercy of that hound! And if you’ll let me, since you refuse to bring in the police, I’ll take over myself tonight in spite of the conventions.”

“That is good of you,” she had answered spontaneously. “I am not concerned with the conventions, for they are so often but the playground of perverted gossipers, and I should feel very safe if you were here. But you need have no fear about tonight. My number one boy is wholly trustworthy—as indeed are the others, for they have all been in the household for many years.”

“But after tonight?” he had demanded. “What then? Why not get away from here? From what you have told me you have no financial worries since your father’s estate has made you—shall we say?—a very wealthy woman. You can go anywhere. So for God’s sake, get away from this; get out of China before it is too late.”

“Europe? America? Or where?” She had looked at him with that illusive light in her black eyes that once before he had been unable to define. “Would it matter? Father was murdered on a British liner on the way out from Vancouver. But perhaps I *will* go—somewhere.”

If only he had been sure—sure that she cared a little! But, fool that he was, he had suddenly lost his poise, and the moment that might have meant all in all, the moment in which impulse had bade him sweep her into his arms, was denied. And instead, he had said like a gawky schoolboy:

“And if you do you—you’ll promise to let me hear from you no matter where you are?”

Ass! Rank idiot! Why try to justify himself with the argument that it had seemed like something closely approximating sacrilege to intrude himself, only a few days back an utter stranger, upon what must be closest to her heart—her grief and sorrow at the loss of her father scarcely a week ago?

"Yes," she had said earnestly, "I promise you that wherever I am you will hear from me. How could I do otherwise? For though you seem to have forgotten your own trouble in mine I have not forgotten that, as I said to you on the ship, we have a common cause. I hope, I pray that you will get your father safely back. But if you do, or if—if you don't, what will you do afterward?"

Bombastic? No! His answer had been far from that. He had meant it, sworn it to himself over and over again.

"Someday Lan Chao-tao and I will come to grips."

"And I would like to help you," she had said simply.

Was it any wonder that he could not sleep?

Was she safe tonight? Her number one boy sleeping perhaps on the floor at the threshold of her bedroom door? Who was Lan Chao-tao? How far-reaching was this long arm of his? How had that letter reached London almost coincidentally with the kidnaping of his father in Shanghai? Cables, camouflaged cables, from God knew where? Scotland Yard had got nowhere on that theory. A world-wide crime ring with its center in China? He did not know.

How had that second letter found its way to his sitting-room table on the Shansi? Who had murdered Morton Lang on the ship? Not Lan Chao-tao in person. Lan Chao-tao could not have been in London and Shanghai, for instance, at the same time, for, taking into consideration the thousands of miles that intervened, a few hours difference here and there meant exactly that—the same time.

Agents everywhere that murdered systematically and with hellish efficiency at the zero hour on instructions from H.Q.? Absurd! But it wasn't absurd. It had been done.

Why this week of waiting? Why no effort to obtain the million dollars that, too, was waiting in the bank? The silence had become both sinister and provocative.

Questions unanswerable, questions that plagued him, questions to which he could make no response rioted through his mind, one on the heels of another. God, for the dawn if he was to toss like this and pound his pillow impotently throughout the night!

He sat suddenly bolt upright in bed. He had heard a sound—at least he thought he had—as though his bedroom door was being stealthily opened.

Nonsense! Nerves! The night was playing hell with him. Why should the door be stealthily opened? Piffle! He had become childish. A bedtime story! Curse it then, turn on the light and satisfy himself.

He reached out for the light on the bedside table. The switch clicked, but there was no light. His lips firmed. This wasn't funny! How long ago was it that he had turned on the light to look at his watch? Well, it didn't matter; there was no light now.

A faint creak from the door. Utter darkness. He could see nothing. But he was sure of it now; the door *was* being opened. And, damn it, the automatic for which the police had more than readily granted him a permit was over there across the room in the bureau drawer.

He could not see. But he could sense the presence of someone in the room.

And then a voice spoke out of the blackness:

“Sorry to disturb,” it said softly, apologetically, “but look—see!”

A flashlight suddenly illuminated a hand that was thrust toward him from the side of the bed. And on the palm of the hand lay a small gold locket, the locket that since childhood he had never before seen elsewhere than on his father's watch chain.

CHAPTER IV

Before Daylight

BEHIND the flashlight was utter darkness. The hand that held the locket was that of a man—that of a Chinese.

Though startled for the moment Roy yet reached out for the locket and, lifting it from the outstretched palm, pretended to examine it minutely. The flashlight followed his every movement. He did not need to examine the locket; he had recognized it instantly. But a moment—two—in which to regain complete control of himself! His invisible visitor behind the flashlight was no ordinary midnight thief or marauder. A thug—yes, as all creatures of Lan Chao-tao must essentially be—but this was the summons for which he had been waiting.

He laid the locket down on the bedside table.

“I see,” he said. “This comes from my father.”

“And from the illustrious Lan Chao-tao,” the voice added quietly.

Illustrious! Hell! Roy snorted inwardly. The door and windows had all been securely locked. His number one boy always saw to that. He was particularly sure that such had been the case tonight, for he had made a tour of the house himself before going to bed.

“How did you get in here?” he demanded abruptly.

“Master,” the voice answered out of the blackness, “have you ever heard of a lock that could not be opened, if one knew how?”

Perfect English. Was the man a Chinese? Yes, definitely! The extended hand in which the locket had been displayed proclaimed that fact. It was not the hand of a white man. Well, the lock picked, then—a skeleton key—now unlocked from within. And what about the light on the bedside table here that would no longer function, as was doubtless now the case with all other lights throughout the house? A switch thrown? Snipped wires? Why ask? He did not ask.

“And now what?” he inquired coldly.

“Please get up and dress,” requested the voice placidly. “And please do not make any noise, and do not speak too loud. I will help you find your clothes with my flashlight.”

Refuse? How could he? There was no pistol held at his head. Why should there be? The velvet glove of suave politeness was sufficient. This very obvious emissary of Lan Chao-tao held all the trumps. Roy had already waited, hadn't he, through a week of misgiving and suspense for this summons? Well, here it was. He had certainly not foreseen that it would come in this way. But what of that? To obey was the only way to reach his father. He got out of bed.

“Please always keep in front of the light,” admonished the voice pleasantly.

“You're jolly careful not to expose your face, aren't you?” Roy flung out curtly.

“Master,” explained the voice patiently, “in Shanghai the executions take place in the yard of the Chinese jail. It is said that to kneel down and be shot in the back of the head is a painless death, but I do not seek as yet even a painless death.”

The flashlight hovered around the room, pointing out Roy's scattered wearing apparel. He began to put on his clothes.

“Your explanation was unnecessary,” he said grimly. “I can at least perceive the obvious. But would you mind telling me where we are going?”

Imperturbably the answer came:

“Yes, master. We are going to see someone you wish very much to see, and someone who wishes to see you.”

“My father?”

“That,” responded the other impassively, “I do not know. I know only that if you do not come you will have the misfortune of never seeing your father at all.”

“Where did you learn English?” Roy burst out in a sudden fit of exasperation. “From Lan Chao-tao?”

“I do not know the illustrious Lan Chao-tao.”

“You don't know him!”

“No one knows the illustrious Lan Chao-tao.”

"Then who sent you here? You've already said the locket came from him."

"The master is raising his voice," cautioned the other, "and I should be so sorry if his number one boy came to see if anything was the matter. It is true that I said the locket came from the illustrious Lan Chao-tao, for I had orders to say so. But I know nothing more."

"Who do you get your orders from, then?" persisted Roy.

There was silence for a moment, and it seemed as though he could almost see a derisive smile pulling down the corners of the other's lips.

"I am so sorry that I know nothing more," murmured the voice. "But the master, I see, is nearly dressed. Will he be gracious enough to hurry a little? My orders are that he is to be back here before daylight. And about my English—while the master puts on his coat—I am so sorry too that I cannot tell him where my meager knowledge was acquired; I am still thinking of the executions in the Chinese jailyard. Perhaps I was honored with a degree somewhere that might be traced."

"Damn your English!" exploded Roy. "I really don't care where you picked it up. It's almost as smooth as you are, and you can take that as a compliment or not, as you see fit. All right! I'm ready. Carry on! I'm probably more anxious than you are to get along with this."

"Then," instructed the unruffled voice, "please stand where you are for a moment."

Roy stood motionless. The flashlight went out, probably thrust into the other's pocket to give free play to the man's hands, for a second later something in the nature of a scarf of silken material was drawn across his eyes and tightly knotted behind his head.

A hand on his arm guided him. Again a caution to maintain silence. They passed, he knew, through the hallway and out through the front door. The door closed with scarcely a sound behind them.

He counted his steps now. They were out beyond the wall of his house and on the street. Another hundred yards and they turned a corner; still a few yards more and they halted.

"The car is here," explained Lan Chao-tao's emissary. "Please enter. Be careful, master. Lower your head."

Roy could see nothing, but he was assisted solicitously into what, he realized, was the back seat. There were a few quick-spoken words in

Chinese, and then the car started.

Well, he knew at least where the car had been parked—if that was worth anything to him! Not so brilliant! It had been parked around the corner. How clever of him!

His conductor had taken a place beside him, and now the latter spoke warningly.

“We will talk no more. We have a saying in Chinese that when there are listening ears whispers may become thunderous shouts to the multitude.”

Roy shrugged his shoulders. The proverb was not abstruse! There was a chauffeur driving the car, and possibly, for all he knew, another man on the front seat as well. But why talk to the man at all? He had gained nothing by it so far. As well talk to a mummy.

“No amendment,” he returned tersely. “I learned long before I reached upper school that a dry well was unproductive.”

The car traveled swiftly. It twisted and turned. It left paved roads and rejoined them. They might have threaded their way through both the Chinese cities or areas—Nantao, adjoining the French Concession, Chapei across the Soochow Creek. He did not know. His knowledge of Shanghai and its environs was vague in the extreme. He knew Shanghai mainly as he had visualized it from the study of a tourists’ map. But he was rather certain that a little while ago they had crossed a bridge.

In any case, if all this circling, now in one direction and now in another, was merely for the purpose of bewildering him it was labor lost.

An ironic smile crossed his lips. The blindfold could have been removed, and he would still not have had the vaguest idea of where he was. But they were gamblers, weren’t they? The type of gamblers that bet, or thought they did, only on a sure thing. Well, so far, they were betting on a cinch. Queer phrase, that! But most comprehensive. An Americanism that he had heard on shipboard. A shudder for the purists, but there was a punch in it. Most of the coined Americanisms had a punch—cocktail words that gave a zest to conversational repasts. What was that other pertinent phrase? Oh yes—Watch your step! And that wasn’t so bad, either!

What the hell!

He wasn’t going a bit balmy, was he, and heading for a plunge off the deep end? Not a word, not a sound now, other than the noisy shifting of the

gears from time to time, from those, he did not know how many, who were with him in the car.

How long had they already been on their way? An hour? It seemed much longer than that, but he took into account the mental confusion under which he had been laboring and decided that he had exaggerated the elapsed time.

But, whether in one direction or another, he was convinced that he was now outside the confines of Greater Shanghai. It might be only his imagination, but the *smell* seemed different—the freshness of open spaces as contrasted with the erstwhile odors, sometimes all too pungent, of the confined city streets. Also a quiet—the absence of even late-hour traffic.

Then the car came finally to a stop.

The man who shared the back seat helped Roy to alight. He heard a gate open, and a few moments later he was quite fully satisfied that it was the gate of a walled enclosure, for, with his conductor guiding him, he found himself walking across what was obviously a compound or courtyard.

Again Roy counted his paces. Seventy-nine. Roughly, a yard to a pace. Roughly, two hundred and thirty-five feet. Did that matter? Well, perhaps not. But he would remember. If it were a private residence it would be somewhat pretentious at any rate.

No word was spoken. From almost the moment Roy had entered the car this tool of Lan Chao-tao, this Chinese expert in locks who had boasted of his powers, though admittedly not without reason, had become as silent as a sphinx of Giza. He was still silent.

Came then the opening of a door, the sound so faint as to be scarcely audible. Roy was conscious that he was being led inside a house or building of some kind, and presently he found himself seated in a chair—somewhere on the ground floor, for he had mounted no steps.

The blindfold was suddenly removed.

For a moment, in the transition from utter darkness to what he realized was at most but a subdued light, he obtained but an indeterminate view of his surroundings. Nor was his vision thereafter much improved.

He rubbed his eyes. There was a light on a desk some three or four yards in front of where he sat. And it was not long before he quite appreciated the fact that the light was intentionally focused on himself. At the desk behind the light, hidden in the shadows, he could just discern the figure of a man in

Chinese dress, but the face was wholly indistinguishable. There was no other light in the room.

But he sensed the presence of someone standing behind his chair.

Theatrical? Yes, quite! But devilishly efficient. One could hardly identify a room because of a desk so indistinctly seen that it could not be definitely recognized again, to say nothing of the fact that furniture of any description was so essentially impermanent. But why, then, have removed the blindfold at all? It would have been so much more simple to have left it on.

His mental question was answered almost on the instant. Over his shoulder a piece of paper was thrust into his hand, and then a shadowy form glided away and was gone.

No sound. No word from the man at the desk.

Roy glanced at the paper in his hand and then pored over it with quickened pulse. The light was so adjusted that he could read the pen-scrawled words without difficulty.

Sonny:

Am in good health. Have been well treated so far, except that the Chinese food is un stomachable.

Understand that you're in Shanghai and have arranged for payment of the ransom. Infernal cheek, I call it, to demand any such an amount, but pay it over as quickly as you can, and let's get back into the saddle.

Have definitely decided, in view of the Japanese attitude in Manchukuo, not to put a penny into oil here.

Hope you've held a controlling interest in the Franco-Persian combine. A long pull—but good. Buy more by cable if present market price is below our average holdings.

I'm all right, but this is an unconscionable waste of time so speed up my release all you can.

*Your affectionate
Dad.*

“Sonny”—that was the way his father always addressed him. It was his father’s writing, and in tenor the letter, if it could be called a letter, was exactly as his father would have phrased it. Authentic beyond any doubt.

Roy looked up into the light, striving to pierce the shadows that enveloped the man behind the desk.

“We are now alone, Mr Melville,” the man at the desk announced abruptly in faultless English. “It is, I am well aware, an unreasonable hour, and I regret having put you to this inconvenience, but, since in London contrary to my definite instructions you contacted the police, you have only yourself to blame, and I have been forced to exercise the utmost precaution.”

“Please don’t apologize!” retorted Roy gruffly. “So you, I take it, are Lan Chao-tao—at last?”

“Yes,” the other affirmed briefly, “I am Lan Chao-tao.”

“Then,” said Roy curtly, “since I fancy that I am here tonight to arrange for the payment of the ransom money in exchange for the release of my father, let us come to the point at once. There has already been too much delay. The money as you know, since you so stated in that letter which I received aboard the Shansi, has been deposited here in the bank, and yet I have already been in Shanghai for a week without, until now, any word from you.”

“It is I,” said Lan Chao-tao coolly, “who should be impatient, not you. Must I again point out to you that your failure to obey instructions and your contact with Scotland Yard have brought about complications which, as a matter of fact, are still not at an end? I would not now, for instance, exchange a single Chinese copper, let alone the person of your father, for the entire million dollars you have deposited in the bank.”

Roy leaned suddenly forward in his chair.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked tensely.

“Simply that I consider my own life more valuable than your father’s,” Lan Chao-tao answered blandly. “Of what benefit would a million dollars be to me, if they led only to my death? Even a starving wolf, as they say in the north, avoids the ill-baited trap.”

“I am not very good at riddles,” countered Roy through tight lips.

“I give you credit, Mr Melville—” Lan Chao-tao’s tone had sharpened —“for being too intelligent to have misunderstood. You know as well as I do that the money has been marked—every note listed. This was done under instructions from the municipal police. I am well aware that you knew nothing about this before you reached Shanghai, otherwise we would not now be engaged in this amiable conversation tonight. So I do not hold you

directly responsible, but indirectly you are—I refer again to your contact with Scotland Yard—and for that you must accept the consequences.”

Futile to pretend ignorance! The man wasn’t bluffing. But why strike the flag at the first shot that was fired?

“How do you know all this?” Roy queried evenly.

The man behind the desk spoke tolerantly now, as though reproving a child.

“I am quite sure, Mr Melville, that you hardly expected that question to be answered literally, for I am still crediting you with a more than average degree of intelligence. I know, no matter how, many other things that involve you intimately. Shall I tell you that before you left the Shansi you had a conference with Colonel Cogan and Superintendent MacNulty of the Shanghai municipal police, and that you asked for a free hand in dealing with me? A request to which, though I was suspicious of their mental reservations, they finally agreed. You had begun to learn your lesson, and I had begun to put some faith in you. Let me say that my faith in you has not since been disturbed, but I was far from confident that the police would keep the pact. So, until I was sure they were not lurking around your doorway, I made no move until tonight, which is the reason for the week’s inaction of which you complain.”

“All right!” rasped Roy. “I can visualize the tentacles of the octopus. But implied threats get us nowhere. The main issue is my father. Where is he? I had hoped, at least, to see him tonight.”

A wide-sleeved arm from out of the lamp shadows gestured—somewhat impatiently, it seemed.

“In your hand is a letter from him. It speaks for itself. I was desirous you should know that he was well.”

Instinctively Roy studied the letter again, and then impulsively he squared his shoulders.

“I had not noticed the date before,” he said icily. “This is a week old. Perhaps you will explain that?”

“There are two possible explanations,” replied Lan Chao-tao calmly. “One is that your father may be at such a distance from here that, owing to the so backward facilities of communication in certain parts of China, it has but just arrived; the other is that it was waiting for you on the day you reached Shanghai, but delivery was withheld until I was quite sure that the

police were keeping their promise, and, as you say in your country, playing cricket.”

“And of the two explanations,” Roy returned sardonically, “I am, of course, at liberty to take my choice!”

“Precisely!” replied Lan Chao-tao smoothly. “But let us get to the point, for the hour grows late. I have told you why I will not now accept the million dollars in cash, and I am afraid that I would not be credulous enough to believe in even the bank’s guarantee that a like sum *unmarked* would be substituted for the original trap. And yet, of course, the equivalent of the amount must be paid. Shall we say in diamonds? It would be rather difficult to mark diamonds—unset diamonds—wouldn’t it? I suggest therefore that you buy unset diamonds with your marked money quite openly, for I shall see to it that the merchant who receives your marked money will in no way involve himself or, which is much more important to me, be of any assistance to the police. In proof of all of which I would like to have you extend a pressing invitation on my behalf to the police to accompany you when you make your purchases.”

“And where do you expect me to pick up these diamonds to the tune of a million dollars?” Roy demanded sharply. “Surely not in Shanghai! And meanwhile, how about my father?”

“It is too bad that this complication has arisen,” replied Lan Chao-tao with mock concern, “but, as I have tried so hard to explain, it was not of my making. A million dollars in Shanghai money, I regret to say, is far from a million dollars in gold. I think you will be able to purchase your requirements in Shanghai. India, the magic land of jewels, is not far away, and almost from the day you established the required credit here in Shanghai I knew that the actual money was being assembled and marked in the bank. I now understand that there has been an influx of unset diamonds into Shanghai due to a rumor that there would be a quite extensive market for them shortly.”

“Oh I see!” exclaimed Roy in a level tone. “Confederates! Well, what is it, precisely, that you propose I should do?”

“Buy!”

“And if I agreed how do I know that you would accept the stones at the price I paid for them? I know nothing about diamonds. I might, in perfect good faith so far as my intentions toward you were concerned, buy a large percentage of fakes.”

"If you follow the instructions that I now give you, you will buy no fakes, and there will be no argument about the price you pay. I have taken care of that. You will buy only from reputable Chinese firms in Shanghai, beginning, say, with Mong, Ling and Company. The diamonds will be sold to you at cost, otherwise if I accepted them from you at a retail price I should be the loser. But you are not favored with these brokers' prices in order to save *you* the retail profit, which you actually ought to be forced to pay since you ignored my original instructions. No, you are entitled to no consideration whatever, but I have again in mind the ubiquitous police who, whether they accept my invitation or not, would be advised anyway by the bank of the payments you are making. I prefer, however, that the police should have firsthand information, and that is why I invite them to accompany you. For, you see, if any of the dealers were suspected of benefiting by the ransom they might be classed, as you yourself just intimated, as confederates, and the transactions in which you are about to be engaged be stopped on the grounds of illegality. And that, as I believe your American cousins say, would be just too bad!"

Roy controlled himself with an effort. Some primordial instinct bade him leap from his chair and come to grips with this suave-voiced, self-sufficient hellhound who had murdered Morton Lang so vauntingly, and who now bargained so callously for another's life. But reason, cold and incisive, coming to the rescue, held him back. All he would accomplish, even if he killed the man, would be to bring about his father's death in retribution and very certainly his own as well.

"May I smoke?" he requested calmly.

"Yes, if you have pipe and tobacco, or cigarettes—according to your preference—and matches. I would prefer, though I deplore my inhospitality, not to interrupt our conference by calling in a servant."

"Thank you!" Roy lighted a cigarette. "And now might I suggest in turn, in spite of the lateness of the hour you mentioned a moment or so ago, that we are covering the ground a little too rapidly? I am prepared to buy diamonds or pay the ransom in any way, shape or form that is satisfactory to you, but though I admit that my father wrote this note it is at least a week old, so it means virtually nothing at the present moment. Where is he now? I want to see him."

"You are asking the impossible at, as you phrase it, the present moment." Lan Chao-tao's tones were dulcet.

"Then," stated Roy bluntly, "the rest is also impossible. I will not pay out a single penny until I have seen my father."

"You are impulsive," murmured Lan Chao-tao chidingly. "I have not asked you to pay out any money. I have only asked you to exchange your banknotes for a commodity of equal value. You will buy the diamonds, and you will then still have, though in another form it is true, substantially your million dollars. You will have paid me nothing until your purchases shall have reached the stipulated amount. You will be in no different position financially than you are at this moment. When you have the required value in diamonds in your possession, and before you hand them over, it will be time enough for you to insist on seeing your father, who, I promise you, you will then see."

"And if I decline to accept your mere word for this?"

"You cannot decline." There was a note of exaggerated patience in Lan Chao-tao's voice. "The purpose of your visit to Shanghai was to pay your father's ransom, wasn't it?"

Roy drew deeply, viciously, on his cigarette. To protest would only be to waste his breath. He was powerless.

"All right!" he shot out. "But the delay! I am thinking of my father. How long is it going to take me to accumulate these diamonds?"

"That," came the placid answer, "will depend entirely upon yourself."

"All right," gritted Roy again. "But when I have the bushel measure full and heaping over how shall I communicate with you?"

"You will not need to communicate with me. I shall know, and I will communicate with you."

"Don't you think you are making this rather difficult for me?"

"No. You have made it egregiously difficult for me as you will discover in due course. I trust, however, that you have learned your lesson, and that hereafter you will adhere rigidly to the instructions that are given you—rather than gamble with your father's life."

Roy's face was hard-drawn and set.

"I understand," he said tartly. "Well, I have no choice in the matter. I will obtain the diamonds as quickly as I can on your own conditions, the essential one of which, so far as I am concerned, is that I am to be satisfied my father will be released at the same time the payment is made."

“Yes,” said Lan Chao-tao laconically.

“Very well!” Roy clipped off his words. “Then, if you have nothing further to say, there is no purpose in prolonging this interview.”

“There is one thing more.” Lan Chao-tao’s voice was purring out of the shadows now.

“What?”

“Your intimacy with the daughter of Morton Lang.”

Roy stiffened.

“Go on,” he prompted hoarsely.

“You have been with her daily, and daily she has been with the police. You have exchanged confidences. The inference is obvious. A man in love is untrustworthy, particularly from my standpoint under the existing conditions. The liaison becomes dangerous. I understand you read and discussed together the short note your charming friend received from me this afternoon—yesterday afternoon. It is so hard to be chronologically meticulous when the hour of midnight has passed! Which one do you cherish the more in your heart? This girl with whom, even blind eyes could see, you are madly in love—or your father?” Lan Chao-tao sighed. “Love has been the source of so many tragedies in this world of ours! It is too bad; it is really too bad that you should force the issue and oblige me to look after my own defences!”

For a minute—perhaps two, perhaps three—there was silence.

Roy sat rigidly upright in his chair. His brain whirled. To ram back the words down the other’s throat! To strangle this spawn of hell! The blood surging upward suffused his temples. But again cold reason was to the fore. He was a man mentally gagged and bound. This was no time to throw down the gauntlet or antagonize the other, if he ever hoped to see his father again alive. To threaten? He was in no position to threaten—*as yet!* To tell this devil who wallowed gloatingly in the blood of his victims that a day of reckoning would come! That every penny he and his father possessed would be devoted, if necessary, to that end! That if a hair of Myrna Lang’s head was touched—Melodrama? *No!* That was in his soul. But it was bitterly hard to take this as though apparently cowed and lying down, meek as a lamb, while his blood boiled!

“Yes,” he said quietly, “I read the note you wrote to Miss Lang. But, look here! Her father’s death, so far as revenge goes, is enough, isn’t it?

What about a ransom in advance for her? Surely that should suffice.”

“There are some things that money cannot buy.” Lan Chao-tao’s voice had hardened again. “I wish you all speed, for your father’s sake, in the exchange of your banknotes. On my part there will be no delay. Be ready therefore at any moment you hear from me. Meanwhile—” he clapped his hands softly together—“that is all.”

Shuffling feet—from somewhere. Roy saw no one, but the silken blindfold was again bound tightly over his eyes. He was led from the room and across the compound. Once more he entered a car. But who was in the seat beside him this time he did not know, for, though his body rubbed against another’s, not a word was spoken.

An hour? Was it more or less? Had the return journey been the longer? He did not know that either. Bumpy roads, smooth roads. Camouflage? Or a direct route? He was perturbed, harassed. His mind refused to function incisively. His father . . . diamonds . . . Myrna Lang. A cycle of mental chaos over and over again.

The car stopped.

Again he was assisted to the ground.

Not a word from whoever had him in charge.

He heard the car speed away.

He tore the blindfold from his eyes. Where was he? It took him several bewildered minutes to orientate himself. And then it came. Of course! He was standing in exactly the same spot from which he had started—on the side street just around the corner from his own house.

A minute more, and then, as he passed in through the gate, he paused for an instant. All the lower windows in the house were ablaze with light. So his absence had been discovered! Queer, though, that it should!

He went on. The front door opened. But it was not his number one boy who opened it. It was Henry Anderson, the manager of the British-Asiatic Bank.

“Have you got Miss Lang with you?” Anderson cried out excitedly.

“At this hour and at my own doorway!” Roy exploded. “What the hell do you mean? Of course I haven’t!”

Anderson’s voice faded almost to a whisper.

“My God!”

There was something in the other’s exclamation that sent fear and a sickening dismay suddenly coursing through Roy’s mind. His viselike grasp on the other’s arm must have hurt.

“What is it?” he demanded fiercely. “What is it, man? Out with it!”

Anderson sucked in his breath.

“An hour ago,” he said, “Miss Lang’s number one boy was found murdered just outside the threshold of her bedroom door, and——” He faltered.

“And?” Roy’s jaws were clamped.

“Well——” Anderson pulled his hand across his eyes—“she—she wasn’t there. She’s gone.”

CHAPTER V

Police Superintendent MacNulty Sits In

ROY led the way into the already lighted living room and closed the door.

“Tell me all you know about this,” he urged hoarsely.

“Actually—” Anderson shook his head—“I know nothing beyond the bald facts I have given you. We will have to wait for the details until Superintendent MacNulty comes, and he ought to be here now. I’ve already been waiting for him nearly the hour.”

“Well then,” Roy prompted, “tell me how you yourself came to be here.”

“MacNulty telephoned me and told me what had happened at Miss Lang’s home,” Anderson answered in an agitated way. “He said he had first phoned you, but that you were not in the house. He asked me to meet him here. I think he was afraid that something had happened to you, too. Anyway, he said he would be along as soon as he could. When I got here I questioned Yen, your number one boy. Yen said you had gone to bed as usual; that he was awakened by the ringing of the telephone; that he answered it; that MacNulty gave his name and asked for you; that he, Yen, said that you were asleep; that MacNulty then ordered Yen to fetch you instantly to the phone; that he then went to call you and found that you were not only no longer in bed but were not even in the house. Yen said he reported this to MacNulty, and I think it was the fact that you had disappeared from your bed that put the wind up with the superintendent.”

“No word since then?” Roy bit off his words. “Nothing further about Miss Lang?”

“Nothing. But I think we would better telephone MacNulty that you at least are safe. If he is not already on his way here I fancy we can reach him either at Miss Lang’s house or at headquarters.”

“No need for that; I’m here.” The door had opened. Superintendent MacNulty, squat in stature, broad-shouldered, grim-visaged, stood on the threshold. “Your boy, Mr Melville, was evidently expecting me and let me in,” he explained. Then, having closed the door behind him, he strode across

the room and laid his hand on Roy's shoulder. "And I might say," he stated heartily, "it is no end of a relief to find that you are all right, for, coming on the heels of what had occurred at Miss Lang's, I don't mind saying I was beginning to be seriously worried about you. Would you mind telling me why, having once gone to bed, you got up again and left the house?"

"Yes," Roy replied tersely as he motioned his companions to be seated. "It was at the request—or shall I say command?—of Lan Chao-tao!"

Anderson, his blue eyes wide, stared blankly as he sat down.

Superintendent MacNulty swore fervently.

"Hell!" he snapped as he dropped into a chair. "The bloody blighter seems to have been making a night of it then, I'd say! Go on, Mr Melville."

"No," Roy countered quickly, "I want to hear from you first. It's Miss Lang who is important at the moment. I'm safe. She—well, at the best—isn't. For God's sake, Superintendent, tell me about her. All I know is that Mr Anderson says her boy was murdered, and she has disappeared. Is there any news of her? Any trace of her?"

"No, I'm sorry to say there isn't so far," MacNulty answered with an attempt at reassurance. "But you must remember that we have been on the case hardly an hour as yet and have barely got started. However, I can quite understand your anxiety to be told all that is known about her before considering anything else, and we will proceed in that way. So here, then, are the details:

"I was asleep at home a little more than an hour ago when the telephone awoke me. I got up and answered it. A man's voice suggested calmly that I might be interested to know that a murder had been committed in Miss Lang's home. I asked who was speaking. The reply I got was a drawling 'Lan Chao-tao,' and then I caught a mocking laugh as the receiver at the other end was hung up.

"I didn't know whether I was being spoofed or not, but I took no chances. I ordered the exchange to trace the call if possible. Then I rang up headquarters and sent some men at once to Miss Lang's house, and I followed them there just as soon as I could get into my clothes. There wasn't any spoofing about it—it was as cowardly a murder as I've ever run up against, and I've run up against a lot of them. Miss Lang's number one boy, who had obviously been sleeping on the floor at the threshold of Miss Lang's bedroom door, had been stabbed to death. And there is no question but that he had been killed in his sleep, for no alarm had been raised, and no

sound of a struggle had been heard, since the other servants were still asleep when my men got there.

“Miss Lang’s bedroom is on the ground floor, and the window was wide open. Whether that is how the murderers entered and is the explanation of how Miss Lang was spirited away it is impossible to say as yet. My personal opinion is, since there are no signs of forced locks or windows anywhere throughout the house and granting the trustworthiness of the servants, that a skeleton key or picklock was used to open either the front or back door. The murder was then silently committed, the bedroom door opened and Miss Lang, probably chloroformed, taken away through the window.

“That’s about all we have to go on so far, except, of course, the note from Lan Chao-tao, dated yesterday, that we found in the drawer of the living-room table. But of course we would have known that Lan Chao-tao was at the bottom of it all anyway, so the note wasn’t of much value to us as a clue.”

“I’m afraid you’re only too right about that,” Roy agreed somberly. “As a matter of fact, I was with Miss Lang late yesterday afternoon when she discovered the note which was then lying on the living-room table.”

“Oh!” ejaculated Superintendent MacNulty as he raised his brows. “I didn’t know that.”

“We had been out for a drive,” Roy explained. “She handed me the rotten thing to read. I begged her to ask for police protection, and when she refused I offered to take on for the night myself. But she said she was not afraid, that all her servants had been in the household for many years, and that her number one boy was wholly trustworthy.”

“And the poor devil proved it!” MacNulty mused grimly.

“May I ask—” Anderson had hitched tensely forward to the edge of his chair—“what was in the note?”

“I’ve just come from Miss Lang’s, and I’ve got it with me.” MacNulty thrust his hand into his pocket. “Here it is. Read it for yourself.”

Anderson read it.

“My God!” His voice was almost a whimper as he handed back the typewritten sheet. “This is ghastly!”

Roy rose abruptly from his chair, walked to the window, pulled aside the curtains and stared for a moment out into the graying dawn. Myrna! His father! This whole thing was incredible—a horrible phantasm. But it was

nevertheless real, existent, an actuality. He was letting himself get out of hand. No earthly use in doing that! He returned to his seat and spoke through tight lips:

“Is that absolutely all, Superintendent? A blank wall?”

MacNulty nodded.

“Yes—up to now.”

“No, perhaps not,” amended Anderson hopefully. “There is still the telephone call that you ordered traced. We may yet hear from that.”

“It has already been traced.” MacNulty’s laugh was bitter. “It came from the offices of a large commercial house on the Bund—Nordern’s to be exact. Obviously the offices were closed at that hour, and obviously someone broke in there and used the telephone. Not many holes in Mr Lan Chao-tao’s staff work, would you say?”

“And now?” Roy’s hands were clenched. “I know that everything possible is being done. But it seems damnable to be sitting here inactive. Sorry! I apologize for the outburst, but that’s the way I feel.”

“Steady the line!” There was something in Superintendent MacNulty’s gruff voice that was heartening. “I understand perfectly. But there is nothing that you or I or Mr Anderson here, individually, can do at the moment. Shanghai is being combed as it has never been combed before. The French, the Japanese and the Chinese police are co-operating with us to a man. So if—I hate that proviso—but *if* Miss Lang is still alive we’ll find her.”

“*If*!” Roy’s face was strained and set. “What chance is there? Perhaps you read in this morning’s paper that a gang of bandits were uncovered in Tientsin, and that the bodies of some twenty of their victims were found hidden under the floors of houses in various parts of the city. They had been strangled immediately after they had been kidnaped, then the ransom was demanded and collected—but not one of the bodies was even returned. And that is as nothing compared to the monster with whom we are dealing, who calls himself Lan Chao-tao. Retribution, yes! We can hope for that! But what hope is there of finding Miss Lang alive? What was her father’s fate? Why should hers be different?”

“I don’t agree.” Superintendent MacNulty’s voice struck a still more kindly note. “If murder and murder alone were intended why wasn’t she murdered in the house just as her boy was? What, when there must follow all sorts of attendant risks, would be the object of taking her away to murder

her elsewhere? No! You'll see that, should we fail to find her ourselves, there'll be a demand for ransom within a very few hours."

Roy shook his head.

"I wish to God I could believe it was no worse than that!" he exclaimed. "But I can't! I've been with this Lan Chao-tao tonight—talked to him. He warned me to keep away from Miss Lang, said her contact with the police was too close. He knew that I had read that note in Miss Lang's room yesterday afternoon. I tried to buy him off. His answer was that there were some things money could not buy. And even while he was talking this murder at Miss Lang's house must have been actually taking place at his orders. It's a case of perverted, fanatical revenge. I don't want to put into words the only answer I know of that would account for Miss Lang's removal from her home. I don't want to think about it! But it wasn't for ransom."

MacNulty reached into his pocket, produced a pipe and clamped it, unlighted, between his teeth.

"Not so good!" he admitted. "But your end of it now? Perhaps we can knot some of the threads together. Tell us about your contact with Lan Chao-tao."

Roy told them, briefly, succinctly.

"The entry into your house here seems to correspond in a marked degree with the mode of entry employed at Miss Lang's!" Superintendent MacNulty gnawed viciously on the mouthpiece of his pipe. "Your visitor suggested expert lock-picking, did he? Well, I'm inclined to agree. But there is always the possibility, as I have already intimated, that there might be inside collusion. We'll check up on that end of it, of course. You have no idea where this house is to which you were taken?"

"No," Roy replied savagely. "And even if I did know, my tongue is tied until I get my father back. After that I would and will go the limit. But meanwhile, since I think I have already made this clear to you, you know as well as I do that the moment I consort in any way with the police the chance of getting my father back is nil."

"Well," demanded Superintendent MacNulty with a wry smile, "what else are you doing now? I am here at the present moment. And you have even said that he invites the police to accompany you on your diamond-buying rounds."

“Yes,” returned Roy tersely, “and Lan Chao-tao probably knows that you are here. But *I* did not deliberately send for you, nor have I been in communication with you during the past week. This is not at all what he means. He means that I am not to countenance any surveillance, and that I am not to supply you with any information—if I have any—that might give you a clue to his whereabouts. Neither is he illogical, nor is there anything paradoxical about his attitude toward the police in reference to the diamonds. Naturally, as he said, you would know through the bank what was going on anyway. So, besides avoiding the trap that was set for him, he is rather laughing up his sleeve, I fancy, at forcing the police themselves not only to place their stamp of approval on putting the marked money back into ordinary commercial circulation again but also to protect those to whom it is paid out.”

“We are bilked, of course,” admitted Anderson sourly. “You said something a moment or so ago, MacNulty, about Lan Chao-tao’s staff work. I endorse your comment! You had a hand in listing at ungodly hours, and secretively as we thought, that million dollars in banknotes, and you know we put in a bit of a thick time, and now he has got us cold. Thumbing his nose at us, to put it less politely than Mr Melville has! Of course, the notes will have to go into ordinary circulation, particularly if Mr Melville draws that amount against his account during the next few days in payment for the diamonds he purchases, for our banks do not normally maintain in their tills money enough to carry on their daily transactions and pay out a million dollars in cash besides. That earmarked million will have to be used, and I see no reason under these new conditions why it shouldn’t. I am convinced now in my own mind that these ‘reputable Chinese firms’ that Mr Melville has referred to as the only source of supply that he is permitted to tap, except at the risk of buying at prices that will be unacceptable to this Lan Chao-tao and which might thus easily result in a large loss to Mr Melville, will show a clean bill of health. In a word, we’ve been done brown—that’s all.”

Superintendent MacNulty tamped down the dottle in the bowl of his pipe and, striking a match viciously, lighted it.

“Maybe!” he snapped. “But it looks queer to me! Unset diamonds to the value of a million dollars at wholesale prices, a large proportion of which, if not the whole, I’d say, has recently been admittedly accumulated in Shanghai for this specific purpose! H’m! Invites the police, does he, to guarantee the reputability of those with whom Mr Melville deals and likewise the legality of the transactions? Well, I’ll accept Lan Chao-tao’s invitation—personally!”

"I'm glad of that," asserted Roy heartily. He turned to Anderson. "How would you suggest that these transactions, for I imagine there will be quite a few of them, should be carried out?"

Anderson was pensive for a moment.

"I think the best way," he advised finally, "would be to have the dealer send any diamonds you have bought to the bank, accompanied by an order signed by you stating the amount to be paid out against the stones. We will accept the diamonds, place them in safekeeping and pay out in cash the sum you have specified. Would that be satisfactory to you?"

"Perfectly!" Roy agreed. "And C.O.D. should certainly be equally satisfactory to the vendor. We will consider that as settled."

Superintendent MacNulty grunted forcefully.

"And when the diamonds to the full amount have been purchased, what then?" he demanded curtly. "May I ask how you propose to pay them over with one hand and be assured that you will receive your father with the other?"

"That," conceded Roy, "has not as yet been arranged. But for that matter it had not been arranged when I left England, yet I came out here to pay the ransom in person—and whether it is in cash or diamonds makes no difference on that score. And since Lan Chao-tao very definitely wants the ransom I assume he will propose some satisfactory plan."

"Specious, not satisfactory, is the word I'd use," stated MacNulty bluntly. "You still insist that the police must keep their hands off. Well, I'm warning you again, Mr Melville, that you're running a hell of a risk—not only of losing your diamonds but your own life as well, to say nothing of your father—if you agree to any proposal that does not provide you with sure-fire protection. How far are you going to trust this murderous rat?"

"No farther than I can help," Roy answered quietly. "But he has the whiphand, and I——Well, the first consideration is my father. I admit all you say, but in the last analysis I know, and Lan Chao-tao knows, that I have got to carry on exactly as he directs, no matter what sort of objection or counterproposal I might advance. Surely you realize that, don't you?"

"Oh quite!" Superintendent MacNulty was grimly unenthusiastic as he rose abruptly from his chair. "However, we have not as yet reached that stage of the proceedings, and you are not yet barging into a rendezvous with your pockets stuffed with diamonds. Meanwhile——" he jerked his hand in the direction of the window—"it's daylight. We'd all better get an hour or

two of sleep. Come on, Anderson, my car's outside. I'll call back here for you, Mr Melville, around nine o'clock." He smiled cryptically. "I never expected to be engaged in buying a collection of diamonds worth a million dollars! I'm looking forward to it!"

The two men departed, but Roy had no thought of sleep. . . .

CHAPTER VI

Diamonds for Dollars

IT was near to ten o'clock in the morning.

"This, according to Lan Chao-tao," said Superintendent MacNulty as the car drew up to the curb, "is our first port of call. Mong, Ling and Company is a firm that stands as high as any Chinese firm in Shanghai, and one whose integrity has never been questioned. The balance of the list that, as I have told you, I have had headquarters prepare and endorse as coming under the category of 'reputable firms' we will visit in turn. But I fancy we'll get our fingers on the pulse of what's behind the curtain right here, and the rest will be only repetition. I know Mr Mong, the senior partner, slightly, and we'll see what he has to offer, and what he has to say. He speaks better English than I do, like so many of his class—Oxford at one time, I think."

Roy merely nodded acquiescence. He would buy diamonds today, of course. But how or where mattered little provided he acquired the requisite amount. What really mattered at the moment was the fact that there was no further news of Myrna, and that the dragnet spread by the police had so far yielded nothing.

They entered the establishment of Mong, Ling and Company. It exuded an air of prosperity and dignity. A Chinese clerk, one of many, who, like his fellows, was attired in Western dress, and who met them at the door, was affable and polite. Superintendent MacNulty asked for an interview with Mr Mong, and after a few moments' delay they were ushered into a private room at the rear of the store, a room that, Roy noted swiftly, was richly but unostentatiously furnished.

Garbed in a long coat of black brocaded silk, a tall, elderly Chinese, whose mustache, or rather, Roy mentally amended, whose few carefully nurtured graying hairs drooped downward from the corners of his upper lip, rose from a large, delicately lacquered table and bowed sedately as he shook hands with himself.

"Mr MacNulty and his friend honor me by their visit," he said softly.

Superintendent MacNulty had not unreceptibly served his twenty-odd years on the force in daily contact with the Chinese of whatsoever station in life, nor had he attained his present rank without having merited his promotion. He bowed deeply in turn.

“Those who are received by so great a personage as Mr Mong are favored indeed,” he returned politely. “May I introduce my friend? Mr Roy Melville—Mr Mong.”

Mr Mong’s wide, loose sleeves flapped as he again shook hands with himself.

“Please,” he invited, “please sit down.”

Tea appeared from nowhere.

Superintendent MacNulty sipped unhurriedly from a cup that was centuries old. Finally he spoke.

“Mr Melville wishes to buy diamonds,” he stated casually. “Unset diamonds. I have brought him here for that purpose. You have some, no doubt?”

“Yes,” responded Mr Mong pleasantly. “I have some diamonds. Would Mr Melville desire to see them?”

“Very much,” said Roy promptly.

Mr Mong was Oriental to his finger tips, but the massive safe, in the corner of the room, to which, rising from his chair, he now walked staidly, was Occidental and modern to the last degree. Mr Mong manipulated a series of dials deftly, swiftly, and the huge doors swung wide. And then Roy was conscious of a sense of disappointment, a feeling that Lan Chao-tao again had had his tongue in his cheek, and that, if Mr Mong’s stock was any criterion of what he might expect to find elsewhere, he would be a long time indeed in acquiring diamonds in Shanghai to the value of a million dollars, even in Shanghai money. He knew little about diamonds—nothing in fact—but he had somehow expected that Mr Mong would produce a tray or several trays lined, say, with black velvet on which would be displayed an assortment of dazzling and glistening stones; instead, Mr Mong returned to the table with a few, small paper packets that in size and shape reminded Roy, more than anything else, of so many Seidlitz powders.

Mr Mong evidently noted Roy’s expression of disappointment, for he smiled benevolently as he opened a drawer in the table and took out a small sheaf of papers.

“Mr Melville has not yet seen the diamonds,” he said. “These cost—” he consulted his papers—“roughly three hundred thousand Shanghai dollars.”

Almost a third of the required million! In those few small packets there! Roy stared.

“What!” he ejaculated incredulously. “Why, at that rate, you could carry around a million dollars worth of diamonds in your vest pocket!”

“Yes, almost,” Mr Mong returned benignly. “But ordinarily a wallet is used by the buyers and sellers of gems. You could certainly carry that amount in a wallet in your inside pocket, for stones that are of any size at all run into a great deal of money and do not take up much room—as witness these that I have here. I will show them to you.”

Roy and Superintendent MacNulty leaned over the table intently.

Mr Mong opened the packets one after another; there were four in all. In each case he unfolded an outer paper wrapping, then an inner wrapping of oilpaper and finally lifted back a doubled-over layer of sheeted cotton wadding on the lower folds of which, protectively separated from one another and resting on their white beds, the diamonds, now exposed, scintillated under the rays of the desk lamp that Mr Mong proceeded to focus upon them. They were obviously graded in their various packets according to size; some of the stones were small, some quite large, but all, even to Roy’s lay eyes, were of superb quality.

“You see,” explained Mr Mong, “the value of a diamond does not increase in direct ratio to its weight but rather, far in excess of that. For instance a small one-carat stone, let us say, is worth three hundred dollars in gold, whereas a stone of ten to twelve carats, depending on its quality, would be worth something like twelve thousand dollars in gold. This one here, for example—” he lifted a diamond from its snowy cushion and consulted his papers—“is priced at a little over twelve.”

“I see,” nodded Superintendent MacNulty. “And the price you are asking Mr Melville for the lot is three hundred thousand Shanghai dollars. Isn’t that a rather large amount for you to carry in stock?”

“It would be excessive,” replied Mr Mong, “if it were so. But it is not so. We carry very few unset stones in stock. The tourists are in too much of a hurry to wait for stones to be set. They buy set pieces. These diamonds are a special shipment from Calcutta. See!” He pushed his sheaf of papers across the table. “I am showing them to Mr Melville just as they were received.”

Superintendent MacNulty frowned over the papers.

“It would appear,” he said after a moment’s examination, “that you are offering these diamonds to Mr Melville at exactly the price you paid the broker for them in Calcutta. Is that right?”

“Yes,” said Mr Mong.

“Are you a philanthropist then?” Superintendent MacNulty’s gray eyes were smiling, his voice smooth, but his jaw had set a little. “Somehow—you will forgive me, Mr Mong, for saying so—it doesn’t seem to make sense that you would invest three hundred thousand dollars in these diamonds and then turn them over without any profit.”

Mr Mong shook his head soberly.

“I am making a profit,” he said. “In a personal sense, the greatest profit I have ever made.”

“H’m!” Superintendent MacNulty coughed. “I’m sorry, but I can’t see what profit you are making. What is it?”

Mr Mong’s face was impassive; he spoke in a monotone.

“My life,” he said.

There was silence for a moment. Superintendent MacNulty seemed to be suddenly engrossed in the diamonds that were displayed on the table. Through Roy’s mind, as though depicted on a cinema reel, flashed the scene of his meeting with Lan Chao-tao last night. And then Superintendent MacNulty hunched his broad shoulders.

“Look here, Mr Mong,” he said bluntly, “let’s take the gloves off. We all know that Mr Melville’s father is being held for ransom by someone who calls himself Lan Chao-tao. But you may or may not know that this Lan Chao-tao now demands diamonds in payment instead of cash. Was it on his instructions that you bought these diamonds, and, further, that you were to offer them to Mr Melville at the same price you paid for them?”

“Yes,” said Mr Mong.

“Then who,” MacNulty prodded, “is this Lan Chao-tao?”

“I do not know,” Mr Mong answered slowly. “But among my people there are many stories about him. It is said of him that he never threatens twice. He is known to be all-powerful.”

“To the extent that it would have cost you your life to have refused to buy these diamonds?”

Mr Mong inclined his head in quiet affirmation.

“But,” MacNulty objected, “you say you do not know him. And what proof have you that these stories about him, which I have no doubt are gory enough in detail, are really authentic? One does not ordinarily invest a huge sum of money in diamonds or anything else merely because he has heard bloodcurdling stories about some unknown bandit who has ordered him to do so.”

“There are two of the stories that Mr MacNulty himself knows to be true.” Mr Mong gestured patiently with his hand. “Mr Melville’s father is at this moment a prisoner in the hands of Lan Chao-tao, and Mr Morton Lang was murdered in his cabin on the Shansi by Lan Chao-tao.”

“Well, that’s a facer I’ll admit,” MacNulty granted frankly. He reached, through habit, into his pocket for his pipe and deferentially thrust it back again.

“Please smoke your pipe,” Mr Mong pressed cordially. “And perhaps Mr Melville will accept a cigarette?” He passed a jade container of exquisite workmanship across the table.

Roy helped himself to a cigarette and lighted it. Superintendent MacNulty lighted his pipe.

“Do the other stories,” Mr Mong went on, “those that are told among the Chinese, interest you this morning? If so, I will relate the ones that I have heard.”

With the mouthpiece of his pipe clamped between his teeth MacNulty seemed to have grown more affable.

“That’s good of you, Mr Mong,” he said gratefully. “I have great hopes that they will prove most helpful to us at headquarters, and sometime during the day we’ll take you at your word and obtain a record of them for our files. But at the moment, so far as you are concerned, you have already proved your case. There is, however, one rather important question that I would like to ask you. It’s this: Granting that this Lan Chao-tao’s commands are not lightly to be disobeyed, you would not, I take it, immediately buy three hundred thousand dollars worth of diamonds just because you might have received, say, a letter or a telephone call purporting to have come from him ordering you to do so. You do not know Lan Chao-tao, you say. How then would you know that this command which you apparently did not dare to disobey really emanated from Lan Chao-tao? It might easily have been—well, shall we say—” Superintendent MacNulty’s gray eyes were steel again

—“nothing but a hoax? Or perhaps a trick on the part of some one of your competitors to deplete your cash reserves. Or again, the move on the part of some brainy criminal to entice into your hands all these diamonds—in which case, if he cracked your safe, he would make a record haul.”

“All that you have said is true.” Mr Mong acknowledged earnestly. “I would not have bought these diamonds if I had not been very sure that I was dealing with this mysterious Lan Chao-tao, and that the only choice I had lay between buying the stones or of forfeiting my life, unworthy though it is.”

“That’s the point I am making,” returned Superintendent MacNulty stolidly. “And I fancy this Lan Chao-tao realized that too. So I’d very much like to know how such a convincing contact was made? Have you any objection to telling me about it?”

“None,” replied Mr Mong readily; “for the moment has now arrived when I have permission to do so, and——”

“The moment?” Roy interjected in a puzzled way. “I am afraid I do not quite understand.”

“It will become clear as I answer Mr MacNulty’s question; otherwise——” Mr Mong’s smile asked for forbearance—“it would be, as you say in English, to put the cart before the horse.”

“Oh I see.” Roy nodded briskly. “Please go on then, Mr Mong.”

Mr Mong inclined his head in a sort of stately acknowledgment.

“A few nights after the disappearance of Mr Melville’s father,” said Mr Mong, “a letter written in Chinese, and that bore the chop of Mr Tai Weng, was brought to my house. Mr Weng is an honored competitor of mine in the business of jewelry and precious stones. Also, Mr Weng is a friend that I have known for many years. I recognized the chop. The letter was very urgent and, though it was then quite late in the evening, asked me to visit Mr Weng at his house at once—on a matter of the greatest importance. I went immediately. As I approached the house, which stands alone in its own garden, the front windows were lighted, but as the door was opened the hall was dark, and as I stepped inside I was suddenly seized by two or three men and savagely warned in Chinese not to make any outcry. I knew that Mr Weng’s wife and children and the amah were away in Hangchow, and my first thought was that the letter had been used as a ruse to capture me and hold me for ransom, in which case I had also great fears for Mr Weng. We

are both of us men of some wealth and a double kidnaping would be more profitable than only one.

“It was not a nice experience.” Mr Mong’s voice was soft, but it was suddenly revengeful. “I was taken into a room at the rear of the house, placed in a chair, and my arms and legs were tied to the chair. I was again warned to keep silent. There was no light in the room, but even in the darkness I could make out the shadowy form of someone in a chair near me. I thought it might be Mr Weng and afterward this proved to be so. But this did not look so much like kidnaping. Why should I be bound to a chair, if I was to be kidnaped? But even so my mind was not relieved, and there was fear in my heart.

“I could hear low sounds—the movement of men about the house—but no voices. After a little while I heard the front door open and close; then someone else was brought into the room, placed in a chair beside me and also warned to make no noise. After that, at short intervals the front door opened and closed twice again, and two more were brought into the room.”

Abruptly Mr Mong swept out his hands before him.

“I speak at too great length?” he questioned apologetically.

“No, I’m learning things,” said Superintendent MacNulty with grim directness. “Don’t cut it short. What happened then?”

“Then,” continued Mr Mong, “a voice spoke out of the darkness in Chinese. The voice said: ‘I am Lan Chao-tao. You are five. Four of you accepted the pressing invitation that Mr Weng did not send. Mr Weng sits among you, and I am sure he will pardon any liberty that was taken in making use of his chop!’ ” Mr Mong paused for an instant meditatively. “I do not remember the exact words he used in all he said, so I will tell what he had to say in my own way. He said that it was hardly necessary to remind us, who were the five biggest Chinese jewelry merchants in Shanghai, that, since time was a factor, Bombay and Calcutta, comparatively close at hand, were two of the largest diamond-buying markets in the world, and that diamonds could be obtained from there quite quickly.”

“Meaning, of course,” observed Superintendent MacNulty quietly, “that it would take too long to obtain them from London or Europe?”

“Yes,” said Mr Mong. “We were ordered to buy at once diamonds to the value of one million dollars in Shanghai money and in due course to sell the stones to Mr Melville’s son, at exactly the brokers’ prices that we had paid for them. We all knew, of course—for all China and the world knew—that

Mr Melville had been captured by Lan Chao-tao, and that the ransom was fixed at a million dollars.”

“Do you know why the ransom was to be paid in diamonds instead of money?” inquired Superintendent MacNulty casually.

“No.” Mr Mong shook his head wryly. “We were not told, and we were not invited to ask questions.”

“H’m!” Superintendent MacNulty relighted his pipe that had gone out. “Well, no matter. Go ahead, Mr Mong.”

“We protested that we could not raise so large a sum of money at once. And then Lan Chao-tao laughed at us, and, sitting bound there in the darkness and with the knowledge that the house teemed with bandits, I would not care to hear that laugh again. There was the snarl of a wild beast in it. He told us he knew to a cent what each of our individual assets were. He called out our names in turn and allotted the amount each one of us was to furnish. Tai Weng and I were each to buy to the value of three hundred thousand dollars. The balance was divided among the other three. We were given two days in which to make our financial arrangements—the buying of diamonds of course being a cash transaction—and we were then to cable our respective orders either to Bombay or Calcutta, as we preferred, for immediate shipment. If anyone failed to comply, the others would be obliged to make up the quota, and the man who had failed would pay with his life instead of his dollars.

“We were given further instructions. The stones were all to be blue-white diamonds which, as I am sure you know, are the most valuable, and none was to be less than one carat or more than fifteen carats in weight. We were told that each one of us was to keep his purchases in his own possession until the son of Mr Melville came to buy them, and until then, on pain of death, to say nothing of the matter. When Mr Melville’s son came to buy them we were then at liberty to tell the story just as I have now told it to you—which answers the question that Mr Melville asked me a few moments ago.”

“How long have you had these stones in your possession, Mr Mong?” Superintendent MacNulty inquired.

“There was some delay,” Mr Mong replied. “I and Mr Tai Weng only received our shipment yesterday. But the other three who bought in much less quantity received their diamonds much sooner than we did.”

"I see," said Superintendent MacNulty. He turned to Roy. "That accounts, then, for the past week of inactivity."

"Quite!" Roy agreed.

Superintendent MacNulty spoke again, addressing Mr Mong.

"I take it from what you have just said that all five bought the quantity of diamonds that each was ordered to buy. But perhaps you have something still to add to the story of that night?"

"Yes," said Mr Mong. "We all bought them. We had no choice. Lan Chao-tao brought that home to us very clearly by pointing out that the manner in which he had snared us and made prisoners of us all was an object lesson of his power that doubtless would not be lost upon us. But there is, however, little more to add to the story. When we had all agreed to buy the diamonds Lan Chao-tao gave an order, and gags were thrust into our mouths. The last words Lan Chao-tao spoke were these: 'When many animals are caught in the same trap their yelps might be heard afar.' And then, in a little while, because of the opening and closing of the door at the back of the house, we knew that we were alone. I do not know how long it was before, while each of us struggled with his bonds, one of us—it was Mr Tai Weng—freed himself and then freed the rest of us. We turned on the lights and went through the house. Mr Tai Weng's boys had been gagged and bound even as we had been. That is all."

Superintendent MacNulty produced a pencil and the police list of dealers from his pocket. There were seven names on the list.

"Would you mind naming the other three who were with you and Mr Weng that night, Mr Mong?" he asked. "You said there were five of you all told."

Mr Mong named the other three.

Superintendent MacNulty consulted his list and drew his pencil through two names. The remaining five were those specified by Mr Mong.

"As I understand it then," he said, "you have now among the five of you one million dollars worth of diamonds awaiting purchase by Mr Melville?"

"Yes," said Mr Mong.

Superintendent MacNulty handed the revised list to Roy.

"Whether or not," he said, "Mr Mong bought these stones under duress he is none the less at the present moment their legal owner and is therefore

entitled to offer them at any price he sees fit. There is certainly no criminal conspiracy so far as Mr Mong is concerned since he is not profiting in any way in the payment of the ransom, so there is no reason why you should not buy the diamonds, if you want to do so.”

“I will buy them,” said Roy promptly. “If Mr Mong will send them over to the British-Asiatic Bank this morning Mr Anderson, the manager, will pay him in cash for them. Will that be satisfactory, Mr Mong? If so, I will give you an order to that effect.”

“My mind will be set greatly at rest, Mr Melville,” said Mr Mong gratefully. “I shall be very glad to do so, and the bank can check the diamonds against the descriptions and prices which I have shown you.”

“Quite all right,” Roy agreed. “And now if you will let me have a sheet of paper I will write out the order to Mr Anderson for you.”

The paper was brought. Roy wrote the order.

Mr Mong received it with many expressions of thanks.

“And,” he ended as Roy and Superintendent MacNulty stood up to go, “I deeply hope, Mr Melville, that your father will now be at once restored to you.”

“That’s good of you,” Roy returned appreciatively. “Thanks, Mr Mong. It’s been a queer meeting, hasn’t it?”

“May it have happy consequences!” prayed Mr Mong as he shook hands gravely with himself.

Out on the sidewalk Roy and Superintendent MacNulty stood for a moment beside the latter’s car.

“You didn’t tell him he was going to be paid in marked money. I noticed you evaded that. Why?” questioned Roy.

“Two reasons,” Superintendent MacNulty answered tersely. “In the first place, it isn’t marked money any more. In the second place, there’s no use shouting from the housetops that Lan Chao-tao has put a fast one over on us—nothing would please the rotten louse better. Well, let’s go! I fancy it’ll be the same story over again with the other four, but I’ll pay one more visit with you just as a checkup. After that you can carry on by yourself. Jump in.”

Superintendent MacNulty proved to be wholly right. Shortly after tiffin time the British-Asiatic Bank had paid out slightly over one million dollars

in cash, holding in exchange diamonds valued at brokers' prices at a like amount.

CHAPTER VII

Roy Plays a Card

AN hour later Roy was closeted with Henry Anderson behind the closed door of the latter's private office at the bank. On the manager's desk lay five small boxes, each one of which had been opened, and each one of which bore the chop of the Chinese jewelry firm from which it had been received. In front of Roy reposed twelve small, flat, paper packets which in shape and size were all practically alike, and which in his mind he had, at Mr Mong's that morning, likened in appearance to so many Seidlitz powders.

Roy produced a rather large, folding pocketbook of soft black leather. It wasn't, he knew of course, a diamond wallet such as Mr Mong had mentioned, though that had suggested the idea, but, empty now, the pocketbook would serve the same purpose admirably since its two deep pockets, one on either side, would hold all the packets of diamonds easily.

He spread the pocketbook open on the desk and proceeded to tuck the packets neatly away, distributing them as evenly as possible on either side of the pocketbook; then he folded the pocketbook and thrust it into his inside coat pocket. The bulk was negligible.

"Quite all right, wouldn't you say?" he inquired, "Nothing to attract attention?"

Anderson pursed his lips dubiously.

"Yes, it's all right on that score," he replied, "but, frankly, Mr Melville, I don't like this at all. It is certainly known that you *have* bought all these diamonds. They had to be checked against the invoices and the money paid out. *That* could not be kept a secret. No! I don't like the thought of you going around with a million dollars worth of diamonds in your pocket. It would be much safer to leave them here in the vault until the time actually comes to pay them over."

Roy shook his head.

"As I have already explained to you," he said quietly, "I do not know *when* I shall be called upon to pay them over. It may be this afternoon, this

evening, tomorrow night—I don't know. The bank might be closed; you have also such things as time locks, and the diamonds might easily be inaccessible at the very moment when it was imperative that I should have them. Eventually, I shall be obliged to carry them on my person when I keep whatever rendezvous is designated, and I cannot see that I run any greater risk in taking possession of them now—provided, of course, the fact is not broadcasted that they are all the time in my pocket.”

“I don't like it,” insisted Anderson.

Roy smiled grimly.

“I don't want you to think that I am jumping blindly off the deep end. I've thought this over a bit. Let's go back to, say, the marked money. Who knew that the money was being marked here in the bank? Who were the ones who actually listed the banknotes?”

“Why,” Anderson answered readily, “it was done, as you know, by order of the police. The actual listing was made by Mr Hung Tchen, our Chinese director, Superintendent MacNulty, two confidential Chinese clerks and myself. Nobody else knew anything about it.”

“And yet somewhere there was a leak. Lan Chao-tao knew from the start that the money was being marked.”

“Yes,” the bank manager admitted a little uneasily, “there was a leak. Either here or through the police. I don't know. But that's exactly the point. There might be another leak, and it might become known that you had taken the diamonds away with you today.”

“In other words,” Roy supplied, “what you mean is that my danger would be enhanced if it were known that I was running around Shanghai with a fortune in diamonds in my pocket. That I might be the object of attack from quarters quite foreign to Lan Chao-tao. Be at the mercy, as it were, of any crook in the city. Is that it?”

“Precisely.”

“No leak, no danger, then?”

“No added danger—no.”

“Well, about the original leak—— You weren't its source, were you?”

Anderson bridled—a little unnecessarily, Roy thought.

“Certainly not!” the bank manager asserted stiffly. “And I am afraid I do not understand what you mean, Mr Melville.”

“Simply that this time, then, there can’t possibly be any leak,” Roy pointed out calmly, “since nobody but yourself will know that I have taken the diamonds away with me.”

“You are quite wrong about that.” A tolerant smile crossed Anderson’s lips, but his voice was still brittle. “It is known that you are here with me now, and there is no doubt whatever but that a number of the clerks saw these packages—” he jerked his hand in the direction of the empty boxes on the desk—“being taken from the vault and brought here to you in my office.”

“Exactly!” Roy nodded. “And so much the better, for the same eyes will be just as alert in watching them being meticulously restored to the vault.”

“Eh—what?” Anderson jerked himself forward in his chair in a startled way.

“Of course! Why not?” said Roy. “It would be the most natural thing in the world for me to come over here to inspect and check up on the diamonds I bought this morning. It would also be logically expected that I would leave the diamonds in the custody of the bank until I actually needed them, as you, yourself, suggested a moment or so ago. And I think a very fair assumption would be that the *empty* containers, if I had taken the diamonds with me, would be consigned to the wastepaper basket and not locked up again in the vault. I will give you a receipt to protect both yourself and the bank; meanwhile, only you and I will be in the know.”

“Well—er——” The bank manager hesitated. “Well—yes. I fancy it might be done.”

“So we’ll do it,” declared Roy briskly. “Write out any form of receipt you like, and while you are doing so I’ll put the covers back on the boxes and make them look all shipshape again.”

Anderson pulled open the drawer of his desk and took out a pad of receipt forms. He wrote rapidly while Roy busied himself with the five small boxes. At the expiration of a minute or so Anderson tore off the receipt form on which he had been writing and passed it across the desk to Roy.

“This all right?”

Roy read it and signed it.

“Yes,” he said as he passed it back. “Perfectly in order.” He rose to his feet. “And now I’ll push off. I’m trusting you implicitly in this, Mr

Anderson. No one save you and I are to know that I have the diamonds on my person. And above all not a word to MacNulty. I think I'm near the end of the trail now, and police interference at the last moment would ruin everything. I can't have any one hanging on to my coattails. So it is understood then—all this is strictly between you and me?"

Anderson, too, had risen.

"Yes," he agreed with evident reluctance. "But I am bound to tell you again that in playing a lone hand with this Lan Chao-tao you are taking a tremendous risk, and I still don't like it."

"I know," said Roy genially, "and it's corking of you to feel that way about it, but there's no earthly good in looking at it purely from that angle. I might as well have thrown up the sponge in London and have stayed there. I've got to see this through, you know—that's all. And now just a last word. I would suggest that you personally supervise the return of those containers to the vault. A million dollars worth of diamonds is entitled to that much attention. It will impress the staff anyway, wouldn't you say?"

"Decidedly," Anderson answered promptly. "I'll see to that."

Roy held out his hand.

"Cheerio!" he smiled.

"Keep in touch with me anyhow," Anderson urged as their hands clasped. "And the best of luck to you!"

Roy paused on the steps of the bank to light a cigarette.

"I've always wondered, and I'm still wondering," he ruminated, "where that leak *did* come from? But I don't think—" he drew deeply on his cigarette as he tossed the match away—"that there'll be any leak this time unless——!" He went on down the steps toward his car that was parked at the curb. But was there anything incredible that emanated from China? How had that letter, bridging the thousands of miles from Shanghai, reached him in London within a few scant hours of the actual time his father had been kidnaped? The murder of Myrna's father on the Shansi forecast by still another letter! Who was this Lan Chao-tao with whom he had talked last night, and who spoke such unimpeachable English? A Chinese? China! Who could fathom China with its ageless mysteries?

A sense of impotence, hatched out of some impalpable source, mocked him. But his lips were a straight line as he entered his car.

CHAPTER VIII

The Second Summons

ROY's number one boy opened the door for him on his return home.

"Any telephone calls or messages, Yen?" he asked at once.

"No, master," Yen answered. "No telephone. No message come."

Roy nodded, went on into the living room and, closing the door behind him, stared for a moment speculatively at the telephone that stood on the table. Then he threw himself into a chair.

No good telephoning to MacNulty. He had talked to MacNulty just before going to the bank. There had been no news of Myrna then. Not a single clue had been uncovered. He could hardly have expected that there would have been any new developments during the short time he had been away from the house, though he had hoped desperately that there might have been. But MacNulty had promised to communicate with him instantly if anything turned up, and MacNulty had remained silent.

Roy sprang up abruptly from his chair and began to pace anxiously up and down the room. If only there were some move that he could make, something constructive that he could do! But what? He had racked his brain for an answer, and there had been no answer. The maze of lanes and alleys and narrow, crooked streets in the Native City and Chapei teeming with their hundreds of thousands of Orientals! The wall of Asia! If he were only able to speak even a few words of Chinese he would not feel so utterly helpless in a purely personal sense. Nor could he be of any assistance to the police. He was not wanted there; MacNulty had told him so in blunt though kindly fashion. And the abysmal irony of it all was that he, metaphorically caged, was the only man in Shanghai who, within perhaps no more than a few hours, was certain to be in intimate touch with this devil's spawn that the police were seeking, and who had now struck once more, this time at Myrna Lang, leaving murder again in his wake.

His father! His hands knotted at his sides. What could he do? If he permitted the police to trail him it was the end. Lan Chao-tao's words of last

night seared through his brain: "Which one do you cherish the more in your heart? This girl with whom, even blind eyes could see, you are madly in love—or your father?" The stake was life or death. His father's life and freedom certainly hung in the balance. And Myrna? Even if Lan Chao-tao were trapped, would it save Myrna? Fear was at his heart in an icy clutch, the fear that she was already dead—her father's murder as convincing evidence held up before him as in a mental mirror. There was only one thing that he could do. He knew that. Reason told him so. He must carry on. Keep any rendezvous that Lan Chao-tao made with him—and keep it subject to Lan Chao-tao's own conditions. But Myrna! A vision of her rose before him. Her black eyes shining bravely in the face of certain horror; her slight figure, erect, undaunted, facing odds with which she knew she could not cope; her

He made his way half-blindly to the table, which also served him as a desk, and sat down.

"For God's sake, compose yourself!" he muttered savagely. "This is getting you nowhere—except to near insanity. And you'll probably need all the wits you've got and a few over before you're through!"

There were letters on the table. The overseas mail had come in, but he had left it untouched since its arrival that morning just before he had gone out with Superintendent MacNulty. There were cables. London asking for instructions on various business matters of importance. Decisions to be made. He set himself to the task before him in the hope that he could immerse himself in his work, but though he stuck doggedly at it while an hour and still another went by he accomplished little. He could not concentrate. There was nothing incisive about what he did. No spontaneity. His mind was constantly astray. How much of the new government loan should he tell London to buy? Still no news of Myrna. A hundred thousand pounds of the short-term bonds seemed indicated, but he would like to consult his father about it. Lan Chao-tao undoubtedly knew that the diamonds had all been bought, so by tomorrow at the latest his father should be free, and . . .

The afternoon waned. It began to grow dusk. The telephone rang. Subconsciously Roy knew that he had been sitting here waiting for nothing else. MacNulty at last! But now, suddenly, in the face of something definite, dread was upon him. Good news? A chance in a thousand! The best he could hope for would be some evidence that, though a captive, she was still alive.

He reached out for the telephone, hesitated for an instant as his hand clenched, then steeled himself and lifted the receiver.

“Yes?” he said. “This is Roy Melville. That you, Superintendent?”

“Superintendent MacNulty is still searching. Every effort is being made, but no trace of Miss Lang has yet been found.”

Roy’s hand closed fiercely over the receiver. The voice of last night! He had recognized it instantly. Lan Chao-tao!

“Go on,” he invited in a flat monotone. “I know who you are.”

“That is well. I understand that you paid a certain visit after tiffin and returned from same with the requirements necessary to the completion of our agreement. Am I correct?”

So the cur knew already! Roy’s hand clenched even tighter. But nobody knew—except Anderson and himself. Damned strange! Damned queer! Anderson again! But again it was incredible!

“Yes.” Roy bit off the word.

“I am so glad,” murmured the other suavely, “for you will remember I promised that there would be no delay on my part. You are ready, then, to act at once?”

“Quite—provided I am satisfied with what you have to propose.”

“*I* am the one to be satisfied.” The voice at the other end of the line had sharpened. “I thought I had made that quite clear to you during our recent conference. It is now growing dark. Within the next half-hour you will leave your house and walk slowly by the shortest route toward the Bund. If you are shadowed by the police you will hear nothing further from me—nor from your father either. I am still willing to accept your assurance that the police are not in your confidence, but that is no guarantee that they are not watching you secretively. I am taking no chances. When I am satisfied that you are not being followed you will receive further instructions.”

“A bit one-sided, wouldn’t you say?” observed Roy caustically. “What protection, for instance, am I offered?”

“You are quite free to come armed.”

“And blindfolded, I suppose!” Roy amplified curtly.

“No. You leap at conclusions. There will be no necessity to blindfold you on this occasion.”

“But even so—” Roy laughed sarcastically—“what good would it do me to be armed if eventually I am in your power with a dozen or so of your followers around me?”

“Well—” Lan Chao-tao’s laugh was equally sarcastic—“you could shoot someone and have the satisfaction of knowing that you were not the only victim!”

“Which would not prevent you from taking the ransom from me and kidnaping me along with my father,” Roy, striving to keep himself under control, retorted evenly.

“Quite true!” Again the other’s voice had hardened. “But until now I had ranked you as a man of above average intelligence. I am afraid that I must now retract that impression. If anything happened to you, and it became known, as it would inevitably become known, that you, as you have just suggested, were yourself kidnaped when in the very act of paying your father’s ransom, do you think that in the face of such a precedent I am fool enough to imagine that a second ransom could ever be negotiated? What object, therefore, could I have in molesting you in any way? I would have nothing to gain by it. But I deplore the fact that I have misjudged your mentality to the extent that it has been necessary to point out the obvious.”

Roy’s lips were set. “Specious,” MacNulty had said. It was more than specious; it was wholly logical. But, specious or logical, what did it matter? He had to carry on in any case. He had meant only to convey to this bloody pervert the fact that he, Roy, was not a mere, blind puppet—a marionette dancing at the end of a jerked string! But instead he seemed to have given the other the impression that fear for his own safety was the thought that was uppermost in his mind. Well, did that matter, either?

“I will leave here within the next half-hour,” he said laconically.

“Very well!”

There came the abrupt click of the receiver being replaced at the other end of the wire.

Roy sat in his chair motionless for a little time. He had not mentioned Myrna, though she had not been out of his thoughts. What would it have accomplished?—except to make the other more wary, more inimical than ever! What answer could he have expected over the telephone from the man who was almost certainly her murderer?—except perhaps a snarl! He would see this Lan Chao-tao beyond question before the night was out. Better to

broach that issue when they were face to face and, if, please God, she were still alive, attempt to buy her freedom then—at any price.

The hours to come! What of them? God only knew!

CHAPTER IX

How Roy Paid the Ransom

ROY walked from the living room, crossed the hall and entered his bedroom. From the bureau drawer he took out the automatic he had obtained through the police and thrust it into the side pocket of his coat. Quite useless probably but nevertheless grimly companionable!

There were no preparations to make. The diamonds had never left his person. He returned to the hall, summoned Yen, his number one boy, cautioned the latter to attend carefully to any telephone calls while he was out and left the house.

As he passed out through the gateway he glanced up and down the street. It was a quiet, residential street. There were few pedestrians and scarcely any road traffic. If any of MacNulty's men were keeping a watchful eye upon him, despite his repeatedly urged plea to be allowed to play out the hand alone, there was certainly no sign of them, so far as he could see.

He walked leisurely along, turned at the first intersection—following instructions to take the nearest route to the Bund—and continued his unhurried pace.

The sidewalk became more peopled; the roadway itself began to approach the stage of near congestion, mingling rickshas, carts and automobiles that interminably honked their horns without excuse or reason. Noise. The cries of vendors. The whine of beggars. Occasionally he looked behind him; occasionally he halted, ostensibly to gaze with arrested, unaccustomed Occidental eyes at the commonplace in Oriental life that swirled around him but in reality to afford him a better opportunity to mark anyone that might be trailing him. But he was no adept in the art of shadowing. He marked no one. Yet he knew that he *was* being followed. If not by MacNulty's men, then by those whose business it would be to see that MacNulty's men were not following either!

A sense of the chimerical descended upon him. The Arabian Nights . . . Transported thousands of miles from his workaday life in London . . . His father kidnaped . . . A million dollars worth of diamonds in his pocket . . . A

murder that would make even the Grand Guignol shudder . . . A rendezvous with the bandit king of China . . .

No, he hadn't been opium dreaming. It was grim, stark, hellish actuality!

On he walked. A ricksha puller drew abreast at the curb and importuned him.

"No!" snapped Roy; then, descending irritably to pidgin English: "No wantee!"

The man, ill-clad, persisted. He thrust out his hand. The street lights were on. Something glittered in his palm.

Roy looked closer.

The object disclosed was as convincing as had been the locket. This time it was one of his father's gold, monogrammed cuff links.

There was no need for further words. The man had lowered the ricksha shafts to the ground. Roy placed the cuff link in his vest pocket and seated himself.

Fatuous to ask where he was going!

The route was devious. One turn, then another. The ricksha puller trotted, but he trotted slowly. If he were paid by the hour—even in Shanghai money—Roy smiled without mirth. MacNulty had already paid a tribute to Lan Chao-tao's staff work. It still gave one the impression of being flawless. How many of Lan Chao-tao's minions were watching every foot of the leisurely progress that was being made? Cross streets every now and then, comparatively quiet and deserted, where any of MacNulty's men, if any *were* following, would have to be superlatively clever to escape detection!

The ricksha turned finally into the one section of Shanghai with which Roy, like every other transient, was really familiar—the Nanking Road about halfway between the Bund and Bubbling Well Road. The sidewalks were crowded, the department stores ablaze with light, the street itself jammed with traffic of every description.

The ricksha puller—who, perfect as the impersonation was, Roy knew was most certainly not a coolie—set down the shafts.

Roy stepped to the sidewalk.

The man jerked his head in the direction of Bubbling Well Road.

"You walk," he directed tersely. "Not go fast. Keep on street side. By-and-by you see."

The ricksha vanished in the traffic. Roy, as directed, walked slowly along at the edge of the curb. Another checkup, of course. Lan Chao-tao very definitely had his fingers crossed and was taking no chances.

Westerners of all nationalities, Orientals, singsong girls with their attendant amahs—a potpourri of humanity, tatters and ermine! Subconsciously Roy was aware that he noted this living kaleidoscope around him in a general way, but he was not interested in the crowd as a whole. He was interested and tensely on the alert for something specific to come out of it. What was he to expect next?

Just ahead of him the flow of pedestrians had thinned a little for the moment. His eyes fell upon the figure of a Chinese beggar who, stretching out his hand imploringly to all whom he passed and all who passed him, was making a slow and limping progress in Roy's direction. The man was in rags, barefooted, filthy—a pitiable-looking object. Not an uncommon sight. Shanghai swarmed with them, as did all China. They differed only in the degree of misery and disease that each one depicted. No reason for concentrating on this one in particular. Hardly the next contact!

Roy's eyes shifted, searching—for he did not know what.

"*Cumshaw! Cumshaw!*" The beggar was whining at his side. Then in hurried, lowered tones: "Quick, master, hunt in pocket for piecee money." And as Roy, instantly responsive to the obvious cue, fumbled for a coin the voice continued: "Cumshaw! Cumshaw! Master in big danger. Cumshaw! Cumshaw! Master no pay ransom unless him sure. Master look out they no play very bad trick. Cumshaw! Cumshaw!"

Followed what Roy took to be a jabber of gratitude in Chinese for the alms received, and then the man had mingled with the passers-by again, his renewed, whining appeal still audible for a moment.

Roy continued on his way nonchalantly. It was a bit hard to be nonchalant! He hoped he was making a fairly good fist at it, not only for the beggar's sake but for his own as well.

Outwardly calm, Roy's brain was racing. It had all happened in the space of perhaps fifteen seconds—twenty at the outside—and it had been craftily accomplished. But who was the man?

When Roy had handed over the coin he had studied the other's features as best he could, but the light had been poor, and, besides, the man's face

had been unspeakably grimy. He had not recognized the man, but he had been and still was conscious that there was something vaguely familiar about the beggar.

The warning disquieted him. Had made him even a little jumpy, hadn't it? He did not doubt for a moment but that it was authentic. But what was its source? One of the Chinese detectives attached to MacNulty's staff who might—or might not—have craftily eluded Lan Chao-tao's spies? He did not think so, for in that case some indication of identification would surely have been forthcoming, in spite of the fact that MacNulty, though much against his will, had agreed to a temporary hands-off policy so far as the police were concerned. He did not believe that MacNulty's men had followed him. It was Lan Chao-tao who refused to accept Roy's word that the police were playing cricket.

No! Definitely the beggar had not been one of MacNulty's men. Who, then? He could not even hazard a guess. Only that intangible sense of familiarity, which was perhaps, after all, merely imagination on his part.

Questions that he could not answer were thudding now, one on the heels of another, at Roy's brain. Why had a Chinese been inspired to disguise himself in rags and grime and, at grave risk to himself, bring this sudden, secretive warning? How had the man known that he would encounter him at this hour on the Nanking Road? How did the man know *anything*, as he obviously did, about Lan Chao-tao's plans? And why, again, had the man risked so much, no matter how or from where his information had come, to deliver his warning?

Roy paused to light a cigarette and went on again. Unanswerable—all of it. The warning in detail had been somewhat indefinite, which might indicate that Lan Chao-tao's plans were only partially known, but in substance it was concrete enough. The personal danger the man had run was proof irrevocable of sincerity, and it would be only a blind fool indeed who ignored the warning. He could not draw back now; he must go on. It was the only chance there was, but——

A large closed car, a limousine in fact, had pulled up alongside of him at the curb. A Chinese chauffeur in livery stepped out and bowed to Roy with the deference of a well-trained servant to his master; then, reaching out to open the rear door, his hand, inadvertently to all appearances, brushed against Roy's.

Roy felt something pressed into his palm. There was no need for any examination. He could tell by the feel of it what it was.

The other cuff link.

All this had attracted no attention. Why should it? Roy, with a tightening of his lips, gave the devil his due. It was as though he had merely been sauntering along while waiting for his car to pick him up. That would be any onlooker's natural deduction. Lan Chao-tao's staff work was still flawless!

Roy stepped into the car. The interior was strangely dark, but he could see that the rear seat was already occupied by a man whose face was not discernible. The door was closed. The chauffeur settled himself at the wheel. The car started.

Roy glanced around him, striving to pierce the almost complete darkness. The glass partition of the limousine between the tonneau and the driver's seat had obviously been darkened in some way. He could not see beyond it and out through the windshield, though it was from through the windshield that there emanated what little light there was. All he could see was the blur of the chauffeur's back and the blur of the form of the man beside him. It was equally obvious that the side and rear window shades of the car had been drawn down.

The man sitting beside him spoke.

"The master will note," he observed smoothly, "that the illustrious Lan Chao-tao has kept his promise about the blindfold."

It was the voice of Lan Chao-tao's emissary of the night before.

"I am so grateful!" Roy jerked out sarcastically. "How far have we to go this time? How long shall we be?"

"If we are sure that we are not followed, the time will be shortened," the other answered evasively.

"I see!" ejaculated Roy curtly. "But with the shades drawn how are you going to know whether or not you are followed?"

"It will be known," replied the man enigmatically.

Roy lapsed into silence. There was no use talking to the fellow, no hope of obtaining any information from him. He had found that out last night. And very decidedly at the present moment he was not in the mood for any conversation that was foreign to the immediate issue.

The car was traveling rapidly now. It made frequent turns. Whether the destination was the same or not, it was last night all over again, for even had he been able to see out through the windshield he would not, after the first

few minutes of the journey, have known where he was. He knew nothing of the outskirts of the city, and except for the main thoroughfares in the International Settlement he did not know one street from another in Shanghai. Lan Chao-tao had again taken an unnecessary precaution on that account so far as Roy was concerned.

His mind reverted to the warning he had received back there on the Nanking Road shortly before entering the car. Danger? Yes, he knew that himself. MacNulty, too, had warned him on that score. All that was admitted. But the beggar had also said: "Master look out they no play very bad trick." What had his unexpected and mysterious ally meant by that? That was what was worrying him now.

A trick! The man hadn't said that meaninglessly. What sort of a trick? There could only be one sort of trick that was momentous—which was that he had been tricked into keeping this present appointment, with the ransom in his pocket, only to find that when he had paid over the ransom he still had not secured his father's release.

He bit suddenly at his under lip. Perhaps MacNulty had been right. But what else could he have done? His father came first and foremost. He had had no option but to depend on Lan Chao-tao keeping the faith.

Trickery? It had always been a possibility, of course, but it had taken on a more definite and sinister aspect now.

The car was speeding. . . . Jolting . . . ruts . . . Out on an unpaved country road, of course.

His thoughts, disrupted for an instant, synchronized again. Here he was with diamonds worth a million dollars in his pocket. Certainly the diamonds could be taken away from him with only a mocking laugh in return, in spite of his pistol in another pocket. He was irretrievably in the toils if trickery were intended. There was no turning back. Wasn't there? Draw his pistol; cover the man beside him; halt the car! And then what? What of his father? He had to see it through.

But trickery! He was mentally up in arms. It merited only one response—to counter it in kind. But how? If Lan Chao-tao kept faith, well and good. If not, why should he, Roy, hand over the ransom or, to put it more accurately, have the ransom which he trustingly carried on his person taken from him by violence? Why should he have the ransom on his person only to be robbed of it if things went wrong?

Trickery! He had thought of that as a possibility from the beginning, but he had discounted it because it would logically seem to be an unprofitable move on the part of Lan Chao-tao. But tonight—that warning! It was uppermost in his mind now. What was he to do?

Again the car swerved. Smoother going . . . Noise from without . . . Evidence of congestion . . . They were evidently back somewhere in Shanghai again.

If his father were surrendered according to agreement, he must be prepared to produce the ransom. Quite! But trickery! What could he do with the diamonds so that if a double-cross was being played Lan Chao-tao could not help himself to them at will? The answer, of course, came spontaneously: Hide them somewhere so that if trickery were intended the stones would not be found in his possession though, at the same time, be always within his reach if Lan Chao-tao kept his word. How simple! But how? Where hide them and still comply with such seemingly impossible requirements? Yet if the beggar's warning meant anything at all they must be hidden—somewhere.

The car was slowing. The noise of congested traffic was receding. They had turned into a side street.

“We have not been followed,” announced the man at his side presently. “I will take you now in a moment to the illustrious Lan Chao-tao. Will the master please be ready to get out?”

How long had the trip taken? Roy did not know. He had been too immersed in his own thoughts to pay any attention to the passage of time. And what difference did it make, anyway? By direct route the destination might have been only a few minutes away from where the car had picked him up on the Nanking Road, with, say, any amount of time expended in covering circuitous and precautionary miles.

The car stopped. The chauffeur opened the door. Roy stepped out. The street, more like an alleyway, was miserably lighted—almost black. But he could see a little—enough to satisfy himself that he was somewhere in one of the native quarters. Nantao or Chapei? How could he know which? He did not know. His pulse quickened at the thought of meeting his father within the next few minutes, but he was chilled the next instant by that now obsessing thought of trickery. That warning! The diamonds were still in the inside pocket of his coat. Hide them until Lan Chao-tao had spread his cards face up on the table. Yes—but how? . . . How? . . . Where? . . .

It wasn't the house to which he had been taken last night. There was no courtyard. His Chinese conductor, in Western dress, a soft, felt hat, that hid his face adequately enough in the semidarkness, pulled far down over his eyes was opening a door that gave directly on the narrow sidewalk.

"Please, master, come in," the other invited suavely.

The exterior of the house, so much as Roy had been able to see of it was drab, shabby and far from imposing, but by comparison with the interior it now proved to be strikingly deceptive. He found himself, as he heard the door closed and bolted behind him, standing in a quite spacious reception hall whose soft, rose-colored light from a ceiling fixture enhanced rather than detracted from the richness of its appointments. A priceless Chinese rug was underfoot. There were numerous Chinese vases of great beauty which he somehow felt a connoisseur would have unhesitatingly identified as belonging to the earlier dynasties. On a magnificent jade pedestal, as though in tribute to the glory of the workmanship and design of what it bore, was displayed a bronze dragon, rampant, some three feet in length, its jaws open and distended, inviting combat. Queer that it should appeal to him in that way. Inviting combat!

He heard the car drive away. His escort's face was hidden by more than a hat now; the man had slipped on a mask. Roy shrugged his shoulders. The light was better in here of course than it had been outside! And, come to think of it, the visor of the uniform cap had rather amply protected the chauffeur in the half-light on the Nanking Road as well as here when opening and shutting the door of the car. He was forced to admit that he could not with any certainty have picked out, in a police line-up, for instance, the man who had driven the car.

"If the master will please sit down and wait for a few minutes," purred the now masked Chinese, "I will tell the illustrious Lan Chao-tao that you are here."

Roy nodded. What else could he do?

"Go ahead," he acquiesced.

The man passed through a doorway at the far end of the hall, closed the door behind him and disappeared. But Roy did not sit down. His eyes returned to the bronze dragon. The thing seemed to fascinate him. Those open jaws! He was looking for some place to hide the diamonds, wasn't he, pending Lan Chao-tao's next move? The monster's belly would be hollow,

of course. There was something of exquisite irony in the thought of making Lan Chao-tao himself unknowingly the custodian of the ransom!

If things went wrong Lan Chao-tao would never find the stones in the dragon's belly. But in that case how would he, Roy, ever recover them himself? He smiled, tight-lipped. That was another matter. At least he would know where they were. If Lan Chao-tao was contemplating cunning, they were much safer there than in his, Roy's, pocket where they could be taken from him at will, in which case he would probably be fighting for his own life—but in which case, too, Lan Chao-tao would only whistle in vain for the diamonds.

A second, two, three—gone.

Roy's mind was working at lightning speed. If he was to act at all he must act at once—but not through the prompting of unbalanced impulse. Wasn't he overpessimistic, overpremonitive? If it had not been for that warning he would have answered with an emphatic "yes"; as it was, he now answered with an equally emphatic "no." But the other side of the picture? Suppose that all went right? Well, then what? Lan Chao-tao would not be overpleased at being obliged to perform an abdominal operation on an art treasure!

Roy's jaws clamped. Well, let Lan Chao-tao make the best of it then! It was a small matter compared with the weeks that his father had been held in captivity—to say nothing of the ransom payment of a million dollars!

Roy glanced sharply around him. The reception hall, as he had mentally designated it, was windowless, and there were but two doors—the street door and the door opposite, through which his guide had vanished. Both were closed. There was no article of furniture behind which anyone could be in hiding. A peephole somewhere? Possibly but not likely. Besides, though such a possibility was a chance that he would have to take, why should a peephole be used even if there were one? In the eyes of Lan Chao-tao he had obviously come as a helpless sheep to the slaughter—if it were to be slaughter.

He whipped out the pocketbook containing the diamonds, extracted the small packets and fed them swiftly into the dragon's jaws. The dragon was true to type; it was voracious. While it could not have swallowed the too-sizable pocketbook in entirety, it absorbed the twelve packets greedily and, its belly being still unfilled, appeared to be rapaciously demanding more. Roy returned the empty pocketbook to his pocket and, belatedly obeying instructions, sat down.

Not pleasant, waiting now. The minutes snailed their way into the past. Hope and premonition vied with each other for the ascendancy. He tried to force himself into a state of philosophic calm. He was here now and face to face with the final issue. What was the good of debating the pros and cons? And then despite himself the cycle was insistently to the fore again: He was not so defenceless now. What was paramount to Lan Chao-tao was the ransom, the diamonds and——

The door leading into the interior of the house opened. The Chinese, he of the masked face, beckoned from the doorway.

“So sorry for the long wait,” he said apologetically. “You will now come this way, master, please.”

Roy rose from his chair and passed through the doorway. The other closed the door behind them. Soft and shaded as the light had been in the outer room, Roy now found himself in comparative darkness. It couldn’t be the same room as last night, of course, but the stage setting was much the same. Lan Chao-tao, for he presumed he was now in the presence of Lan Chao-tao, seemed to have a predeliction for a desk and a craftily focused desk lamp behind which he appeared only as a shadowy figure. There was no other light in the room. A touch on Roy’s arm halted him within a few yards of the desk. He sensed the presence of others—how many he did not know—in the room with him.

“I congratulate you on the speed and energy you have displayed since our last meeting, Mr Melville,” said the man behind the desk abruptly. “You have, of course, brought the diamonds here with you?”

It was unquestionably the voice of the man of last night, the voice of Lan Chao-tao. There was something in its timbre that was not easy to define, and that Roy did not attempt to define. But, even as he had recognized it at once over the telephone, he knew it was a voice that since last night he could never mistake, no matter where or under what circumstances he might afterward hear it.

“Yes, I have brought them,” he answered briefly.

“Let me see them.” A hand was thrust receptively out into the light rays beyond the desk.

Roy shook his head.

“Let me see my father,” he riposted quietly. “I think we both of us very clearly understood the terms of the agreement made during the small hours of this morning. I was to be satisfied that my father would be released at the

same time that the payment was made. I insist that you live up to your end of that agreement.”

“You will see your father, and you will be at liberty to take him away with you on payment of the ransom,” answered Lan Chao-tao deliberately. “But first I want to remind you that you are now, as you were well aware you would be when you talked to me over the telephone, completely in my power. My men in this room surround you. If you accept the inevitable in a reasonable manner and hand over the diamonds voluntarily you will be sent back to your home, accompanied by your father. Otherwise, the diamonds will be taken from you by force, and the consequences, whatever they may be to yourself, will rest entirely on your own head.”

Ominous words! Something ugly hidden behind them! A sense of ill-boding beset Roy.

“I have not refused to hand over the diamonds,” he said in an even tone. “I asked only to see my father at the same time. What do you mean by the inevitable?”

“You will see,” replied Lan Chao-tao oracularly. “But remember, I have warned you.” He clapped his hands softly together. “Look!”

There came a slight sound, like the rustle of silk, a few feet away to Roy’s right. He turned his head sharply in that direction. A curtain or hanging of some sort was being drawn aside, and then a light from some unseen source played of a sudden upon the figure of a man sitting side-face in a chair. But the side view was enough to bring instant recognition.

“Dad!” Roy cried out eagerly and took a step forward, only to halt again in a stunned, dazed way.

There was no reply from the figure in the chair, no slightest turning even of the head.

Again Roy moved forward, this time until he stood beside the chair and gazed full into his father’s face. And then for a moment, his senses suddenly numbed, he did not seem quite able to understand. There was no wound, no sign of violence, but this man here in the chair was dead. . . . Yes, of course it was his father. . . . Therefore his father was dead. . . . Propped up in the chair and . . .

As though from some far distance there came a voice. A familiar voice. Lan Chao-tao’s voice. It seeped its way into Roy’s consciousness.

“It is regrettable that your honorable parent became sick during the delay caused by the listing of the banknotes. He died this morning.”

And then Roy’s brain cleared. Ill, sick, a natural death! Even if that were true it was still murder. There would have been no illness, no death if his father had not been taken and held a captive under God knew what conditions. It was murder as stark as a knife-thrust driven to the heart!

In a red haze the crumpled body of Morton Lang swam before his eyes. Then Myrna. And now his own father. A fury that knew its birth in every fiber of his being, a fury overriding grief and anguish incontinently, a fury that took no count of consequence to self so that this monstrous butcher killed no more surged upon him.

He whirled swiftly around, and as he sprang toward the shadowy figure behind the desk lamp he whipped his automatic from his pocket and, with no more than the width of the desk intervening, fired twice, in rapid succession, point-blank at the other. But the tongue flames leaping from the muzzle of his pistol were answered only by a contemptuous laugh.

Blanks! Instinctively Roy realized that. Someone, at this devil’s prompting, had tampered with the automatic while it had lain in the bureau drawer. It but increased his fury, turned it now into almost a maniacal lust for vengeance. That face! It was little more than an outline in the shadows, though the mouth seemed to be extended in a mocking grin. But the heavy automatic was still a weapon. With all his strength, from a distance so short that no aim could miss, he sent it hurtling full into Lan Chao-tao’s face.

Came a scream of agony and then a crash as the figure in the shadows toppled over backward to the floor.

So far he had not been molested—these tools of Lan Chao-tao had probably been told that the automatic was harmless—but now, panther-quick, Roy swung to meet the rush that came instantly swarming upon him. He could see around him. He was in the focus of the lamp, and so were these yellow, contorted faces, with slanty eyes, from whose lips came venomous squeals like the squeals of rats.

And now he was fighting for his life. How many of them? Five—six—were there more? The man with the still-masked face went down before a straight-arm blow to the chin. Knives! They stabbed at him, blades biting into the flesh, but he had no sensation of pain. His arms worked in and out like steel piston rods. There was one chance, one chance only, to reach the door through which he had entered, and which, too, was in the light path.

Blood streamed into his eyes, half-blinding him. They were small men, these Southern Chinese, but they were many, and now in a concerted attack they closed in upon him, clinging to his legs, his arms, his shoulders. He strove desperately to shake them off, but his strength seemed to be draining away from him. What was it? Loss of blood? They had never ceased to stab at him. Queer that their knives had not long ago reached a vital spot. Perhaps they did not want to kill him outright now; perhaps he was being reserved for a less easy death.

Hands were searching through his clothing as he struggled. One man seemed to be clinging to him for no other purpose. His pocketbook was snatched away. That door—surely he still had strength enough for that. But he could not last out much longer. It must be now or never.

With a supreme effort he tore himself free and, smashing right and left with his fists, broke through the ruck and dashed across the room. He wrenched the door open, crashed it shut behind him and, in the reception hall now, caught up a chair that was within easy reach and flung it down in front of the door. It might gain him a precious second or so if in their headlong pursuit they tripped over it.

His head was swirling as he sped down the length of the reception hall. Hazily, as he ran, he saw over there against the wall a bronze dragon with gaping jaws on a jade pedestal and laughed in an unstrung way. He did not know why he laughed.

He gained the street door, unbolted it and glanced behind him. Luck! The foremost Chinese bursting through from the inner room had pitched over the chair, and the man behind in turn had tumbled over the leader.

Screams of rage, high-pitched, the squealing as of rats again echoed in Roy's ears as he lunged out onto the street. He ran without thought or knowledge of direction. He could hear them following. He had only a short lead, and both his mind and legs were going wobbly now.

Here was a narrow, unlighted alleyway. He swerved into it. He must keep going. Perhaps this was only a cul-de-sac. No, here was another alleyway and—yes, he could just make it out in the darkness—it was an intersection. He could go straight ahead or turn to the right or left. The cries of pursuit snarled from behind him. He was beginning to stagger, becoming miserably weak again. But so far he was outdistancing them. How long could he keep it up! They couldn't see him, of course—at least he didn't think they could—in the darkness. He turned to the left.

The blood was hot and thick on his face; his clothes were sticky with it; his side burned as though a hot iron had seared it. Were they still following, or had they taken the wrong turning? He wasn't sure. He couldn't hear very well. There was a throbbing in his ears like the clang of myriad hammers pounding incessantly on resonant metal. Another turn—still another—and yet another.

They couldn't be following any more, could they? What was that? A light? More lights? Lights! Yes, that was it! If he could reach lights and traffic and people he would be safe.

He stumbled on. Dizziness overwhelmed him. His knees were giving under him. Faces seemed to be crowding around him. Those were rickshas, weren't they?—those queer things with the wheels going round. But the faces were going round too, going faster and faster, and——

He pitched forward on his face and was conscious of nothing more.

CHAPTER X

White Walls

FIGURES that seemed to Roy to emerge sometimes from troubled dreams and hover over him . . . Periods of nothingness. . . . Then periods of semiconsciousness in which his brain strove desperately for understanding. Something was wrong. Something was the matter. What was it? He did not know, and he could never find out because, before he could get to the bottom of anything, that cursed Chinese, whose gory face was battered and shapeless, and who was always mounted on a dragon that spat out fire from distended jaws, was in pursuit of him again, and he had to run for it to save his life, and hide in deep woods or caves or eerie castles with long, dark, winding passages—hiding places that were always discovered, so that, though exhaustion and weariness racked his body with pain, and every movement was a torment, he could never rest but must go on and on and on.

And then gradually the periods of near-consciousness seemed to become prolonged, drifting him nearer to the border line of understanding though never quite reaching it, and the Chinese and the dragon were not always there, and he could rest a little.

Came then the sunlight.

Roy opened his eyes and looked for a little while in puzzlement around him. The surroundings were strange. He was in a room that was all painted white. And, yes, he was in bed. What was he in bed for?

He wasn't comfortable. It was as though something tight and unyielding was wrapped around nearly every part of his body. He couldn't be tied to the bed, could he? That would be absurd. He groped with his hand under the covers. Bandages.

He closed his eyes again. He was very weak. Bandages. Memory came struggling faintly through a mental fog. He had had a fight with a number of Chinese who had been armed with knives—quite a desperate affair it seemed to have been. But he had made his escape. Had he? Where was he now, then?

Once more he opened his eyes. This time his survey of his surroundings was more critical, more inclusive. Not only the walls but everything in the room, the bed, the two chairs, the stand beside the bed, was white. On the stand were several bottles of medicine, and a clinical thermometer that stuck up out of a glass half-filled with some wine-colored liquid. Yes, of course! He was in a hospital. But how had he got here?

The door of the room opened and, followed by a girl in nurse's uniform, a tall man with a ruddy face, who wore a long white gown, stepped quietly over the threshold only to pause the next instant and give a perceptible start as, evidently unexpectedly, Roy's eyes met his. Then he moved briskly to the bedside.

"Hello!" he said cheerfully. "Even if you're not exactly sitting up I'm delighted to see that you are at least taking notice. That's fine, Mr Melville! I'm Doctor Colter. This is one of your nurses—Miss Tanner."

Roy looked from one to the other and smiled. It was good to see real faces, good to know that they were real and not the hideous apparitions that had tormented him in his dreams.

"I am afraid—" he found it hard to speak, and his voice sounded low and shaky even to his own ears—"I was in a bit of a doing last night. Hope I haven't given too much trouble."

"None at all," declared Doctor Colter genially. "But you mustn't try to talk, Mr Melville, and you mustn't exert yourself in any way for a little while yet. And just to bring that home to you—the necessity for complete rest, you know—I am going to tell you now that the 'last night' you speak about was a week ago. So this morning, you see, is your first definite step on the road to recovery, and we must be careful to see that you do not stub your toe at the take-off."

A week ago. Roy pondered this confusedly for a few moments, almost oblivious to the fact that the doctor and nurse were now busying themselves with the bandages.

"A week ago," he repeated at last aloud. "Did you say a week ago?"

Doctor Colter was suddenly professionally severe.

"Yes," he replied. "But I also said you were not to talk, and I mean that literally, Mr Melville."

The rebuke passed unrecognized over Roy's head. It was as though something wholly inessential and unimportant had been said. His brain was

clearing. He was beginning to remember—to remember details. He remembered his father that night. His father was dead. He remembered Lan Chao-tao, and that bizarre room, and the yellow faces, and the fight and the dark alleyways through which he had run until he had fallen to the ground somewhere and had lost consciousness. But that was a week ago. And since then? His mind groped for an instant. There was something else—something that was rooted deep within him—something that was striving to fight its way into his consciousness. And then in a flash he knew. And hope and fear battled for supremacy with one another in his mind. And his spirits sank, for fear seemed the stronger of the two. Myrna. A week had gone. And in that week?

“I want to ask a question,” he stated weakly. “I want to know——”

“Tut, tut!” protested Doctor Colter chidingly. “In a day or so you may ask all the questions you like, but just now you must positively——”

“A day or so won’t do,” Roy interrupted imperatively. “I’ve got to know now, and I shall keep on asking anyone who enters this room until I’m answered. I——” He was forcing his words; the effort to speak was, as the doctor had warned, exhausting him, but that was of no consequence so long as he could make himself heard. “I want to know if—if Miss Lang has been found?”

There was silence for a moment. Both Doctor Colter and the nurse, Roy could see, were bending over the bed, still busy with the dressings, and neither looked up.

“Well?” prompted Roy insistently. “Aren’t you going to answer me?”

Doctor Colter still did not look up.

“Yes,” he said gently, “since I see that I must. I am sorry to say that so far Miss Lang has not been found.”

“Thank you,” said Roy dully and, turning side-face on his pillow, did not move again until the two had left the room.

So that was the end of hope. All these days gone by and Myrna still not found could mean only one thing. Myrna was dead. But he had told himself that this was so, even from the beginning. This wasn’t a sudden shock. But why had the warmth and brilliance faded out of the sunlight that only a few minutes ago had been so hearteningly flooding the room? His father was dead. Myrna was dead. He was too weak to think beyond that. Loss. He seemed to be impregnated with a sense of loss, but there was no means of

measuring its greatness or its littleness because his brain only floundered hopelessly. Dreams troubled him again.

The day went by—another—and yet another. Strength was returning. But they were not good days, these days of convalescence. He had abandoned, he again and again asserted to himself, even the assumption that Myrna might still be alive. He had satisfied himself over and over again that logically he could believe nothing else but that she was dead, and yet, despite all reason, he could not deny that he still clung desperately to a slender, even if unwarranted, ray of hope. It was illogical, but it was human nature—and human nature was not always a logician. It brought little solace. No news of her. He found himself always trying to make the most of that. How could he be so sure that she was dead until something definite was known? And so he had constantly asked the doctor and the nurses, the only ones as yet admitted to his room, the question that was ever on his tongue: “Miss Lang?” And the answer had always been the same. Nothing had been heard of her.

But these hours and days of returning strength brought something else that was as intensely human as grief and sorrow. There was nothing of hysteria about it, no flaming outburst of passion that vented itself in even mental outcries or execrations. It went deeper than that—soul deep. It was cold, merciless, implacable. Something that knew no denial. Something that had to be. Lan Chao-tao! What else in life mattered now but to uncover and bring this Satan’s viceroy, who had murdered those he loved, to justice? Nothing else mattered. Nothing else could matter. It was irrevocable that he should dedicate himself to that purpose. But how to achieve that purpose? Plans? He made many, only to discard them. They were illusionary for the most part, impractical for the rest. It was not easy to make plans in which the finer details were the prime essentials while lying on a hospitable bed shut off from all contact with the outside world.

Came then the morning when, sitting up in bed, he received his first visitors. Superintendent MacNulty and Henry Anderson entered the room together. He was glad beyond measure to see MacNulty, eager to talk to and question him, but he rather wished that Anderson had not come. It was very decent of Anderson to show up, but——Wholly unjustifiable, of course, that he should in any way mistrust the man . . . Absurd on the face of it . . . A man in Anderson’s position . . . Unfortunate that anything of the sort should ever have arisen in his mind and thereafter would not completely down . . .

But there was no evidence of what was passing in Roy’s mind as he shook hands with the two men, thanked them for their congratulations on the

recovery he had made and asked them to sit down. And then he searched their faces. Anderson's mien, though composed, was sober. MacNulty, while his features were impassive, was obviously ill at ease; he fidgeted and did not seem to know what to do with his hands. Another glance Roy gave to Anderson, and then his eyes, questioning desperately, held on the police superintendent.

"I know about my father," he said unsteadily, "but—but Miss Lang?"

MacNulty suddenly averted his face and nodded miserably.

"Dead?" The monosyllable came in an undertone from Roy's lips.

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"Yes."

Roy's hands clenched as they lay on the bedspread.

"Why didn't they tell me the truth in here?" he cried out grievously.

"They didn't dare at first; you were too weak, and it was touch and go with you as it was. They didn't know until just lately anyway, and then they decided to wait until you had got your strength back sufficiently and have me tell you." MacNulty cleared his throat nervously. "I wish to God they hadn't!"

Roy turned his head away for a moment. He had never been justified in nursing that last frail thread of hope, but now, as MacNulty's words swept it utterly away, he realized that unknowingly it had grown to major proportions in his consciousness only to become at this final moment a blow, as it were, struck with culminating force in an effort to unman him. He fought with himself for composure. When he looked around again he was outwardly calm and self-possessed.

Anderson had risen from his chair and was standing at the window, his back to the bed. MacNulty, still sitting, was tight-lipped.

"Tell me about it, Superintendent," Roy prompted quietly.

"All right," agreed MacNulty with gruff reluctance. "But I won't go into all the details now; they can wait till later. Well then, sometime during the night after you went to pay the ransom to Lan Chao-tao—for we discovered later that that was where you went—Miss Lang's number two boy, Su Nan, and another of her houseboys, Tung Ho, disappeared. We didn't know anything about it until late the next morning when the cook boy telephoned

headquarters that the two had left the house together early the previous evening without saying where they were going and had not returned home.

“Ordinarily we wouldn’t have thought much about two Chinese houseboys being out overnight without leave, but in the circumstances of the case we thought a lot about it, for these two were known to be thoroughly trustworthy and devoted to the Lang family, in whose service they had been many years. We started a search for them at once—which got us nowhere. We traced down their friends and relations. No one had seen them or knew anything about them. And then the other morning, after they had been missing for nearly a week, they walked into my office.

“They looked gaunt and haggard, as though they had undergone a great deal of hardship, and were low-spirited and depressed—near to tears, in fact. Su Nan told their story, and Tung Ho corroborated him in every particular.

“Su Nan said that on the evening of their disappearance he had received a telephone message, the voice well imitated, that purported to come from a cousin of his inviting him and Tung Ho to a fan-tan party. There was nothing unusual about this, Su Nan explained, for he and Tung Ho had gone to this cousin’s house many times before for the same purpose. He accepted the invitation for both Tung Ho and himself.

“You know Miss Lang’s house or, rather, the neighborhood which is much like your own—quiet and with few about, especially after dark. It was long after dark—about nine o’clock Su Nan said—when he and Tung Ho left the house. He said that they had gone only a very short distance when a closed car drew up beside them, and a number of Chinese jumped out, seized them, threatened them with death if they made any outcry and forced them into the car. Su Nan says they drove after that for a long time—until it was nearly morning he thought—then the car stopped, and they could see water, but it was not light enough to tell whether it was a river or the sea. Then they were put in a sampan and taken out to a junk. Here they were thrust down into the hold, where they were tied hand and foot.

“Su Nan said they did not know how long they were in the junk, though they were sure it was at least two days, but they knew that during most of that time they were at sea, for the motion of the junk made them so sick they could eat scarcely any of the food that was offered to them. And meanwhile no one would answer any of their questions or tell them why they had been made prisoners.

“Finally they were taken ashore, again in a sampan and again in the dark. They were made to climb a short, steep hill at the top of which was a

house. Su Nan said they could see very little of the surroundings, but that there did not seem to be any other houses near by, and the only description they could give of the house in question was that it was a big house and did not have any wall around it.

“They were brought into the house and dragged into the presence of a man whose face they could not see because, as Su Nan described it, it was covered with a bandage. The man informed them threateningly that he was Lan Chao-tao. I suggested that it was more likely a mask employed for the obvious purpose of guarding against future recognition. Su Nan said he did not know, but that the cloth covered almost all the man’s face and even one of the eyes.”

“It was a bandage, not a mask,” stated Roy grimly. “It authenticates the story.”

“Oh!” ejaculated Superintendent MacNulty, his brows suddenly contracted. “I’m afraid I do not follow that. What do you mean?”

“You’ll know presently,” Roy answered briefly. “Meanwhile, please go on. Why did Lan Chao-tao go to all this trouble? What did he want with these two houseboys of Miss Lang?”

Superintendent MacNulty hesitated for an instant then flamed into sudden anger.

“The grisly brute!” he flared out with a savage oath. “He seems to have a penchant for this sort of thing. First your father, then Miss Lang. I’ve been dreading getting to the point all along—but trying to mince matters won’t help any. He brought them there to show them the dead body of their mistress, and that is what he did.”

“But why?” Roy demanded through set teeth.

“To put an end to the police search for Miss Lang, of course,” MacNulty rasped. “He chose men that he knew we would believe and whose identification of their mistress could not be questioned—and two of them that one might substantiate the other. It is quite possible that we were closing in on him, though we may not have known it ourselves, a bit more than he liked. But this move won’t get him anywhere, for now, more than ever, we’ll keep after *him*. Also there is another reason, the one that is inherent in most criminals of his type—to vaunt and preen himself on his hellish exploits and further, no doubt, to inspire added fear and terror and make his name still more awe-inspiring among the Chinese and therefore his power over them more absolute. Anyway, with orders to report to the police what they had

seen and at the same time to deliver a boastful message to the effect that he always carried out his threats and would continue to do so even if by some miracle the police became endowed with a few brains, Lan Chao-tao sent Su Nan and Tung Ho back the way they had come, set them down just before daylight a few miles beyond the outskirts of Shanghai and left them to make their way into the city as best they could."

Roy stared bleakly at the other. A question pounded at his brain, but somehow his lips refused to frame it.

But MacNulty anticipated it.

"She was shot," he said laconically. "Wish I could have made the telling easier."

"Thank you, MacNulty," said Roy in a flat voice, "I was afraid that she ——" He did not finish the sentence. He plucked with his fingers at the bed covering for a few moments, then he straightened up, stiff-backed. "I take it ——" his voice was steady and contained now—"that you are anxious to hear my end of the story."

"Yes," said MacNulty. "That is, if you are sure you feel quite up to it now; otherwise——"

"Quite!" said Roy definitely.

Anderson turned abruptly away from the window and resumed his seat.

"Before you begin," he said, "I think I ought to tell you that as soon as I heard you had been picked up unconscious by the police I went to Superintendent MacNulty here and asked him if the pocketbook containing the diamonds had been found on your person, and when he said 'no' I told him exactly what had transpired at the bank, and that you had then expressed the firm intention of carrying them with you in that way so that you would always be in readiness to keep any rendezvous that Lan Chao-tao might make with you. But perhaps, since they were not found in your possession, you changed your mind after leaving me and decided on some other plan?"

The diamonds! He had not thought of them until now, nor of the fortuitously rapacious dragon that had them in its keeping. Queer that the first mention of them should have come from Anderson. Always Anderson. Prejudice. Unfair. Even childish. But Anderson apart——Roy's brain was virile now, working in swift, incisive flashes, almost instant in its decision. He would keep his own counsel so far as the dragon was concerned. For, besides the almost certain futility of looking for what could be likened to little less than the proverbial needle in the haystack, it might easily prove

disastrous rather than further the police investigation to hunt for it. There were thousands upon thousands of bronze dragons in China, but if the police instituted a search, and even a suspicion of their purpose became known and the whispers spread, as was practically sure to result by reason of the very nature of such a search with its multitude of contacts, there would be only *one* dragon in all China indicated to Lan Chao-tao—the one already in his possession. Any such move therefore would seem to be almost like playing directly into Lan Chao-tao's hands. Far too great a risk. Nothing to be gained by it. Meanwhile Lan Chao-tao did not know where the diamonds were. Roy alone knew, and he would keep that knowledge to himself. Perhaps some day he would retrieve them. But it was not so much that possibility which interested him—far from it; in fact, supreme was the grim satisfaction wrapped up in the grim jest of knowing that, though they were in Lan Chao-tao's keeping, Lan Chao-tao would never profit by them.

Superintendent MacNulty was speaking.

"Yes," he said, "it may be getting a little ahead of your story, but I must confess I'd like to know about that, too. Did you take the pocketbook with the diamonds in it to your meeting with Lan Chao-tao?"

A second's mental review of the decision he had just made came to Roy. True, it went against the grain to be anything but wholly frank with the other, but his reasons were sound as he saw them, and his conscience was clear. It would do MacNulty no good to share and no harm not to share the dragon's secret.

"Yes," he answered. "I did."

"And then?" It was Anderson again.

Roy looked at the man dispassionately for a moment. Perhaps, after all, it was merely the other's nature—a touch of the busybody about him mixed with a dash of undue inquisitiveness.

"And then—— Well, as Superintendent MacNulty intimates," said Roy calmly, "that's getting a bit ahead of the story, but, to dispose of the question of the diamonds once and for all, I was attacked and searched in the house to which I had been conducted, and the pocketbook was taken from me."

"Well, that's that!" ejaculated MacNulty with gruff heartiness. "Thank God all the swine got were the damned diamonds! You were hanging on to your life by no more than your eyebrows when we found you; in fact, we thought it was all up with you then and there."

Anderson nodded mechanically.

“And now could we have all the story, Mr Melville?” he asked.

“Yes, here it is.” Roy complied and rapidly and concisely, leaving unmentioned only the dragon and its enforced custodianship, sketched in every detail of the night in question from the time he had received the telephone call from Lan Chao-tao to the moment when he had lost consciousness. “I knew,” he ended, “that I was in a busy street with many people and rickshas about when all went blank around me, but I didn’t know what street it was, and of course I don’t know where the house is to which I was taken—except that I am sure it was in one of the native quarters.”

“You are right about that,” affirmed MacNulty. “Both the thoroughfare where you were picked up by the police and the house from which you made your escape and which is on a side street are in Chapei and not very far apart at that—say, less than half a mile. Though God knows how you managed to run even that far in your condition.”

Roy stared in a puzzled way at Superintendent MacNulty.

“So you know where the house is!” he exclaimed. “I don’t see how you found that out. It sounds like a pretty clever piece of police work.”

“No,” said MacNulty with a sour smile, “you can put it down to Lan Chao-tao thumbing his nose at us more than anything else—though, of course, your escape forced the issue. That night everything was moved out of the house, but that didn’t mean anything to the neighbors, and they didn’t say anything about it at the time. But a couple of nights later two coolies of the beggar class, knowing the house was vacant, broke in to see if there was anything left for them to steal. What they saw frightened them to such an extent that they talked about it in spite of the fact that in so doing they were admitting a felonious entry. The news spread, and it wasn’t long in reaching the ears of the police. We investigated and——” MacNulty broke off abruptly and glued his eyes to the floor. “You’ve got to know, of course,” he rumbled deep in his throat, “but it’s not a nice thing to have to tell you. I ——” Again he stopped.

“Go on,” urged Roy. “It can’t make things any worse no matter what it is.”

“No, looking at it like that, I suppose not.” MacNulty swallowed hard. “Well, when Lan Chao-tao moved out that night he took with him everything the house contained except one occupant and one piece of furniture. In one of the rooms we found a dead man sitting in a chair—tied there of course.”

"My father." Roy's lips framed the two words without inflection.

"Yes."

Roy's eyes traveled to the window. There was a question he must force himself to ask.

"That was days ago," he said. "He—he has been——?"

"Yes," supplied MacNulty hurriedly. "Out here in the Orient, you know, the regulations are very stringent, and burial took place with the least possible delay. The autopsy disclosed the fact that your father died of dysentery."

A smile that held no mirth straightened Roy's lips.

"Dysentery," he repeated evenly. "So to that extent Lan Chao-tao told the truth. But, as you agreed with me a little while ago when I was telling you my story, that makes him no less responsible for my father's death, no less guilty of murder than if he had deliberately used a knife or a bullet. However—" he laughed shortly, not pleasantly—"all that is in the keeping of the future. Tell me—having found the house, did its ownership provide no clue?"

MacNulty shook his head.

"The Chinese are the Chinese," he growled sententiously. "The owner is a Chinese, and so was the lessee. The house was rented less than a month ago by one Hu Ching, an assumed name, of course; the rent was paid in advance, and that was all there was to that. We are convinced that the owner knew nothing about his tenant. The neighbors, all of the lower class, might as well have been deaf and dumb. The finding of your father linked the house with the dread name of Lan Chao-tao, and no amount of prodding could get anything out of them except the statement to which they all adhered: that they had never seen anyone enter or leave the house until after dark and so would not be able to recognize any of the inmates. A cagey bird, this Lan Chao-tao, and so far he's had it all his own way—but it's the old story of the long lane, you know. And speaking of that, there's a point or two I'd like to take up with you in your story that may be helpful. Obviously the reason you were so sure it was a bandage and not a mask that covered Lan Chao-tao's face when Su Nan and Tung Ho saw him, and which likewise identified him in your mind as Lan Chao-tao, was because of the wound you inflicted when you flung your automatic at him. Would you say that he had been permanently disfigured?"

"You know the type of automatic I had, and you know its weight," Roy responded thoughtfully. "I was only a few feet away from him, and I hurled it with all my strength. It must have smashed and cut him up badly. Yes, I'd say very definitely that he'll carry the marks of it on his face as long as he lives."

"Good!" snapped MacNulty with savage satisfaction. "As a description of the man, of course, it leaves a lot to be desired, but at least it's something. And now about that fake-beggar chap on the Nanking Road? You said you fancied there was something familiar about him. Are you sure you can't go any further than that?"

"I'm not sure that even *that* isn't going a lot too far," Roy regretted with a twisted smile. "In fact, the more I think of it the more I've come to the conclusion that it couldn't have been anything but imagination, after all, on my part."

"Too bad!" grunted MacNulty. "Damned mysterious! I'd give my next furlough to get my fingers on that fellow! But—" he stood up abruptly—"we're overstaying our time, and we'll have the whole medical staff down our street in short order if we don't look out. There's one other question though that I would like to bring up before going. About yourself, Mr Melville. I don't suppose that as yet you've given much, if any, thought to your future plans, but the doctor says you'll be able to leave here in another few days, and that a sea voyage would be the best thing in the world for you. And I—well—if you don't mind my saying so, I hope you'll consider that seriously."

"A sea voyage!" Roy echoed. "Where?"

"Home is what MacNulty means," Anderson, who too had risen to his feet, put in blandly. "England. He thinks that's the safest thing for you to do."

Roy looked inquiringly at the police superintendent.

"Yes," concurred MacNulty, "to put it bluntly, I do. This Lan Chao-tao, if he runs true to form, isn't likely to forgive that smashed face of his in a hurry."

"Oh—I see!" said Roy slowly. "Run for it, as it were, or, shall we say, chuck up the sponge?"

"You've no sponge to chuck up, Mr Melville," asserted MacNulty earnestly. "You've lost your diamonds, which we will do our best to recover, though I don't hold out much hope along that line; you've lost your father,

and we'll do everything that is humanly possible to get the man who is responsible for his death. There is nothing here that you could possibly do personally, no way in which you could be of any material assistance. All you would accomplish by staying in Shanghai would be to expose yourself to constant danger. That's not good enough. If I had my way you'd remain here in the hospital until the first sailing you were fit to take and then go abroad directly from this room."

"Mr Lang's murder on shipboard hardly sustains your argument," Roy pointed out quietly.

"Perhaps not altogether," MacNulty admitted, "but the point is that you would be safer *anywhere* other than in Shanghai. If there were anything you could gain by remaining here I'd be the first to back you up, but there isn't. You can see that for yourself."

Roy frowned.

"I'll think it over," he said evasively.

Anderson coughed perfunctorily.

"I am sure I can quite understand Mr Melville's feelings," he said. "One doesn't like to—er—well, even appear to 'run for it,' as he puts it. But I believe I have a suggestion to make that would perhaps make him feel that even if he were not here in person he would none the less be playing a very practical part in the efforts that were being made to corner and bring this Lan Chao-tao to justice. I did not say anything about this before, MacNulty, when we were talking things over, because I felt it should first be mentioned in Mr Melville's presence since it was essentially a decision that Mr Melville alone could make. A reward is what I have in mind—if Mr Melville cares to offer one."

"H'm!" cogitated MacNulty. "Not a bad idea, Anderson."

"Providing, of course," Anderson amplified, "that it was substantial enough to wean away one or more of Lan Chao-tao's followers from him. I think that is where the one chance of success would lie."

Roy's eyes sought the other's quickly. The man's words seemed to come so glibly—or didn't they? Anderson was suddenly intent on polishing his glasses with his handkerchief. Their eyes did not meet.

"What would you call substantial?" demanded Roy tersely. "How much would you suggest?"

"I'd hardly got that far, and I'm sure I don't quite know—" Anderson drew his brows pensively together—"but as Mr Melville is in a financial position to consider any amount that might be involved as purely secondary providing it obtained results, I should say—well, perhaps two hundred thousand Shanghai dollars."

"What!" exploded Superintendent MacNulty. "Why not offer a million or two and have done with it? And you a banker! You're losing your sense of proportion, aren't you, Anderson? Two hundred thousand dollars!"

Anderson smiled vaguely.

"Even for two hundred thousand dollars," he observed, "I think that if I were one of his followers I would still hesitate a long while before I took the risk of squealing, as you police phrase it, on a man like Lan Chao-tao. You can't ferry money across the Styx, you know."

"Roughly, that's thirteen or fourteen thousand pounds," computed Roy. "Well, I'll think that over, too."

The two men shook hands and took their departure. Roy settled back on his pillows.

Plans.

For an hour he lay there almost motionless, then with quiet deliberation he propped himself up in bed again. There was a telephone call to make. But there was no telephone in the room. He rang for his nurse.

Plans! One had germinated now. He knew why it never had before. Unable to speak a word of the language, abysmally ignorant of the people, their lives and customs, he had always realized, at least subconsciously, that, quite apart from anything MacNulty had said, he could only have been a hindrance—never a help, only a sore thumb in whatever attempt was made here in Shanghai to run down the man between whom and himself there lay an account that could be satisfied only by a personal settlement, and yet he had mentally continued to pit himself doggedly against these odds which from the outset were too great to be overcome. But now, clearly and bluntly, he was conscious of the fact that every plan he had striven to formulate hitherto had from its inception dashed itself to pieces on the rock of his refusal to leave China while there remained the faintest hope that Myrna might still be alive. He could not have left China—left her. It would have seemed like stark desertion, outraging his love—something unthinkable. But that was all changed now. Myrna was dead. There was nothing to hold him back now. Run for it! He smiled queerly. He had never run from anything in

all his life. Well, he would run for it now! That was the keystone of the plan, wasn't it?

The door opened. Miss Tanner came in.

"Miss Tanner," he smiled, "I wonder if you would be good enough to do a little telephoning for me?"

"Why yes, of course, Mr Melville," she answered brightly.

"I'd like you to get through to Superintendent MacNulty, headquarters crime branch of the municipal police, you know."

"Yes, I know," she nodded invitingly.

"Please tell him," requested Roy, "that I will act on his advice and will time the day of my departure from the hospital to coincide with whatever transportation date is first available once I am fit to travel. And also tell him that I accept the suggestion made by Mr Anderson, the same to be put into effect at Superintendent MacNulty's discretion and under his sole direction. Have I made myself quite clear, Miss Tanner?"

"Perfectly. Is that all, Mr Melville?"

"Thank you, Miss Tanner, yes," he answered. "That's all."

INTERLUDE

At Scotland Yard

ACROSS the desk in his office Inspector Thornton of Scotland Yard, a spare, wiry, little man of middle age with keen, though kindly, black eyes, faced bluff, gray-eyed, wide-shouldered Superintendent MacNulty of the Shanghai municipal police.

“The East and the West!” grinned Inspector Thornton cordially. “Well, well! We’ve had a bit of correspondence together during the last year so that makes it a double pleasure to meet you in the life. What brings you to London, Superintendent? Not the Melville case, I take it, as you did not cable or write that you were coming.” He offered cigarettes, a cigar.

By way of refusal Superintendent MacNulty apologetically displayed the inseparable briar he had pulled out of his pocket.

“No,” he answered, “nothing to do with that. As a matter of fact it wasn’t until almost the last moment that I knew I was getting away from Shanghai at all. I’ll spare you the details, which would take the rest of the afternoon, by saying that I’m on a rather ticklish case with a Chinese political background and potential international complications—high-ups and all that, you know. Its tentacles are so far-flung that new developments have made a personal conference with the New York and Paris police imperative. So, roughly, that’s my detail.

“I’m through in New York and I’m going on to Paris tonight. I came this way rather than direct from New York to a French port as the sailings fitted in better, and besides I wanted a sniff of England again anyway. And, being here, I had naturally hoped to see Mr Melville again, and of course meet you and have a yarn about his case. Not that there’s much to say, I fancy, that hasn’t been touched upon in our official letters to each other which date sometime back now and the letters that have passed between Mr Melville and me, though during the last six months Mr Melville’s letters have been few and far between, and, indeed, of late I haven’t heard from him at all. And this morning when I called up I found that he not only was not in London but was not expected home for some days yet. I was quite

disappointed. Tell me about him. Though we damned him heartily for the chances he took we all liked him a lot for the way he went through the sticky time he had of it out there in the Orient. I hope the year that has gone has put him to rights again, not only physically but in every other way."

Inspector Thornton shook his head dubiously.

"I wish I could tell you that were so," he said, "but unfortunately I can't. When he first returned from Shanghai he used to come here to the Yard a great deal, and I saw a lot of him. Then his visits began to dwindle, and I haven't seen him now for a number of months. But I've kept track of him in a hearsay way. He is in ill health. I do not think he ever fully recovered from his wounds, and besides I hear that he is in a badly run-down, nervous condition. He seems to have let go his grip on his business affairs, but luckily he has someone quite competent to carry on for him—a man named Justin Meredith, who is recognized in the City as a clever and brilliant financier, and who, you might say, was bred, trained and brought up in the business, since for twenty years or more he acted as a confidential executive for Mr Melville's father and is now serving the son in the same capacity. Socially, I am sorry to say, Roy Melville appears to have become almost a recluse, and when in London is rarely known to leave his house. He is, however—so I am told—away a great deal and, I understand, puts in this time at health resorts, baths and all that sort of thing on the continent."

Superintendent MacNulty sucked at his pipe somberly.

"I was afraid of something like this," he growled. "That he ever lived at all is a miracle. On top of that the loss of his father was enough, but—as I wrote you when he left Shanghai—though he never said so in so many words, all of us who were closely associated with him at the time could not help but see that he was deeply in love with Miss Myrna Lang, and I'd say now in view of his present condition that her murder was the proverbial last straw that had broken him. Damn it, it's too bad!" He clenched a hand suddenly. "Yes, and, damn it, I'm not proud of the fact that we're not much—if any—nearer to getting our hands on Lan Chao-tao than ever we were!"

"We've got a few cases ourselves," volunteered Inspector Thornton consolingly, with a wry smile, "that haven't been solved in a year."

"Oh, we're not discouraged," asserted MacNulty grimly. "Someday we'll get him, for we'll keep after him until we do! Has Mr Melville still got his Chinese cabin boy, Fu Yung, that he took off the ship with him?"

Inspector Thornton nodded.

“Yes, I believe so. I was suspicious at first, as I wrote you—thought it might possibly be a play on the part of Lan Chao-tao to plant the fellow for some sinister purpose or other, but after receiving your reply I lost interest completely, of course, in the worthy Fu Yung.”

Superintendent MacNulty laughed.

“Fu Yung wouldn’t have been pleased if he had known! As I explained to you he was a picked man. I hardly thought that Lan Chao-tao would attempt to repeat any such attack as he had engineered on the Shansi when Mr Lang was murdered, but I wasn’t taking any chances that I could help. It was my job to provide for Mr Melville’s protection on board ship to the best of my ability, and I went into the matter thoroughly with the steamship people. But even before he knew that I had made any such provisions he asked me to see that he was allotted a competent and trustworthy cabin boy who could speak English, and one that, since Mr Melville was still scarcely on his feet and would require a great deal of personal service and attention on the way home, he could take all the way back to England with him as a body servant, providing the boy suited him. So you see that, so far as Fu Yung was concerned, it was a sort of joint prearrangement on Mr Melville’s part and mine, and I even provisionally paved the way with the various authorities to permit Fu Yung to accompany Mr Melville to London—having in mind the restrictions to which Fu Yung, as an Oriental, would be subject. I am glad it all worked out so well, for, once back here in England, I was fairly sure that Mr Melville was safe, since Lan Chao-tao had got what he was after—that million dollars in diamonds—though there was always the chance that Lan Chao-tao would never forget or forgive that bashed face of his. So it would seem, then, that I was right, as I understand from your letters that since leaving China Mr Melville has never been threatened or has never heard anything further from Lan Chao-tao.”

“No, nothing, according to Mr Melville himself. I admit I was uneasy at first on that score, as witness my suspicion of the cabin boy which you promptly allayed, but Mr Melville has been back for a year now and not even a disturbing hint of any kind has reached me.”

“Just the same,” muttered Superintendent MacNulty half to himself, “I wouldn’t like to see him show his face at close quarters in China again, and I hope to God he never does!”

“He’s hardly likely to, in view of his present condition,” Inspector Thornton pointed out quietly.

“Yes, that’s so,” agreed MacNulty.

Inspector Thornton tamped out his cigarette meditatively.

“It’s a queer case,” he said, “and an extraordinarily beastly one. Take that response to Mr Melville’s offer of a reward, for instance, that you referred to in one of your earliest letters. No one else offered to furnish any information after that, I fancy, or you would probably have mentioned it in later correspondence.”

“That’s right!” MacNulty’s smile was hard. “No one did. The outcome on that one occasion wasn’t exactly encouraging to would-be squealers!”

“I only know the bare facts,” prompted Inspector Thornton invitingly. “I’d be interested in a few of the details.”

“Well, here they are then, but—” a rasp had crept into MacNulty’s voice —“they’re not exactly pleasant. We advertised the reward in the newspapers and started the offer on its way among the coolies, the ricksha pullers and the swarming illiterate by word of mouth, so that in those quarters it spread like wildfire, as we knew it would, not only from one end of Shanghai to the other but over so wide an area of the Orient as well that in an incredibly short time we learned that even the ragged night-smokers, squatting behind their tattered curtains of odds and ends rigged against the house walls in the alleys and lanes of Hong Kong, were talking about nothing else over their government, or at least what they would always claim was government, opium.

“Nothing happened for sometime. In fact, if I remember correctly, it was not until some three weeks after Mr Melville had left Shanghai that I received the letter one morning at headquarters that was the sole offer we had had to open negotiations for the reward. It was addressed to me personally, written in crude English and was signed Chi Fang. The letter stated that the writer was in a position to give us information that would lead to the capture of Lan Chao-tao, but as this would be at the risk of Chi Fang’s life, great care must be taken to protect him. I was told to join a party of tourists from a world cruise who would be sight-seeing in the Native City that afternoon. I did so. I had rather high hopes because I considered it was decidedly a cleverly arranged rendezvous on the part of Chi Fang, and therefore that Chi Fang at least was certainly no fool. I would attract no undue attention in such company and even if recognized there was nothing to arouse suspicion that I was there for any other purpose than that perhaps I had friends among the visitors whom I was accompanying.

“It was a fairly large party—about forty, I should say. You don’t know Shanghai, so of course you don’t know the Native City with its swelter of

humanity and its twisting, narrow streets—but no matter. As usual the tourists, always fair game, of course, were besieged by a multitude of hawkers offering for sale everything from relics of the Ming dynasty, probably fabricated the day before, to bamboo back-scratchers, admittedly of present-day manufacture.

“Anyway, about an hour after the sight-seeing tour started I was for the moment with a group of five or six American ladies and gentlemen—none of whom I knew, and none of whom knew me—when a middle-aged Chinese with a basketful of toys and curios began to pester us to buy his wares. Some of the toys were quite amusing, and he made a sale or two as he jabbered away in Chinese like a house afire. I left him with the group and walked away. He had not once looked at me, but I had taken a good look at him—and for a very good reason. His jabber, which the Americans took to be oft-rehearsed sales talk, and which was otherwise meaningless to them, was not meaningless to me. What he said was that his name was Chi Fang, and that he would meet me that night at a designated hour and a designated spot on the road between Shanghai and Hangchow.

“I kept the appointment, but Chi Fang did not—and you know why. His body, mutilated in most horrible fashion—all except the face which was obviously spared to insure identification by me and all others concerned—was found by the early passers-by in the morning gruesomely decorating my front doorstep, and pinned on the chap’s blouse was a strip of paper proclaiming in Chinese characters that the ignoble Chi Fang was a traitor to Lan Chao-tao. That is all. The body had been seen; the legend had been read. The news spread. Lan Chao-tao has an unpleasant but damnably effective way with him! He knows his Chinese. A checkup on Chi Fang’s friends and relatives got us nowhere. Since then, and that’s nearly a year ago now, no one else has applied for the reward.”

“And that, I fancy,” remarked Inspector Thornton gruffly, “disposes of the reward angle, once and for all, and the hope of any insider ever coming forward with information.”

“Well—yes and no.” MacNulty knotted his brows. “So far as the reward is concerned I would say ‘yes’ very definitely. I gave up counting on ever getting another nibble at that bait long ago. But inside information is another matter—something I’ve been trying to get to the bottom of for a long time now. Frankly, I confess I just don’t know what to make of it. I have told you in my letters that on several occasions since Mr Melville left Shanghai I have received anonymous typewritten communications supplying advance information about both piracy and opium-running operations that, the

communications stated, were to be staged under the direction of Lan Chao-tao. The information invariably proved to be accurate, and, acting on it, as you know, we were able to seize a number of shipments of opium and on one occasion to thwart a piratical attempt on a coastal steamer out of Hong Kong. But in no case was any quid pro quo even suggested in return for the information supplied.”

MacNulty rubbed the bowl of his pipe vigorously up and down on the side of his nose and paused to stare at the resultant polish, as though seeking inspiration therefrom.

“The only answer I can possibly figure out,” he went on, “is that revenge is the motive, and that Lan Chao-tao has an enemy at court. On the other hand, no definite information concerning Lan Chao-tao, his identity, or his whereabouts, has ever been forthcoming. Why? I don’t know. And yet obviously the informant knows a lot about many of Lan Chao-tao’s plans before they are actually put into execution. Go way back, if you like. This all tones in with that warning given to Mr Melville by the unknown beggar on the Nanking Road. That puzzled me from the start—still does. Presumably, I’d say now, it originated from the same source from which those later tips have come. There’s a missing link somewhere. Why hasn’t this enemy, as I call him, handed over Lan Chao-tao in person instead of just sitting back and throwing monkey wrenches into Lan Chao-tao’s machinery?”

“You don’t expect me to answer that, of course, because, naturally, I can’t,” stated Inspector Thornton with a serious smile. “The only two theories I have to offer are that: either the informant is playing a cat-and-mouse game, gloating in slow torture, if you know what I mean, before striking the finishing blow, or else that Lan Chao-tao is too far back in the shadows, too well covered and protected as yet to be identified—the which, perhaps, may be what is still balking the informant himself.”

MacNulty shrugged his shoulders savagely.

“One or the other—perhaps!” he grunted. “In which case I’d vote for the latter. I don’t know, and I don’t suppose that speculating about it will do much good. We made plenty of arrests in the piracy and opium cases but got nowhere in attempting to follow the trail back to Lan Chao-tao who, it is certain, was the supreme command. So that today all we really know is that Lan Chao-tao’s activities embrace the exploitation on a huge scale, to put it mildly, of about every crime in the decalogue. And speaking of activities, I suppose there’s nothing new in connection with that letter to Mr Melville

posted here in London informing him that his father would be kidnaped within the next few hours in Shanghai?"

"No." Inspector Thornton shook his head unhappily. "We're still at it, of course, but nothing's turned up. All we've done is to draw blanks from the beginning, and it's become a rather sore subject here at the Yard now, I'll confess."

"Well," returned MacNulty with bluff heartiness, "misery likes company, you know, and we're none too proud, as I said before, of our own record along the same line in Shanghai." He looked at his watch and stood up. "Four o'clock. Can't take up all your time, and I've a few things to do myself."

"That's all right," responded Inspector Thornton genially. "But I can't let a confrere from the other side of the globe push off in any such casual fashion. Have you a dinner engagement for this evening?"

"Why no, but——"

"Righto then! I'll pick you up at your hotel. Suppose we say seven o'clock? That will give us plenty of time before your train leaves. Where are you staying?"

"The Merwick."

"Seven it is, then?"

"Yes, and mighty kind of you," said MacNulty as he moved toward the door. "See you later, then, and thanks a lot!"

PART TWO: THE SHOWDOWN

CHAPTER I

Alias Jim Thompson

NEAR to sunset—were there any sun to set. The sky was blackish-yellow. There were no lights aboard the Huetan. The wireless had long since gasped out its last feeble spark of life. The engine room was awash, the fires out. The waves thundered their battering tons in ceaseless attack upon the wallowing freighter's flush foredeck as though in constantly mounting fury that this puny handiwork of man still dared to challenge their might and intrude itself upon their path.

Wreckage fore and aft. Hours gone, a wave, near funnel high, had left the bridge a broken, crumpled thing as it had swept the captain, the first officer and a quartermaster to destruction overside. The port boats and davits smashed. A loose derrick boom, weirdly shapeless in the half-light, danced grotesquely up and down and this way and that, as if executing a nightmare jig to the accompaniment of the howling wind. Disaster everywhere—the ship's ever-increasing list to starboard viciously premonitive.

The typhoon raged on.

Shadowy forms, ungainly and disproportionate in appearance by reason of the bulging life belts they all wore, showed in the lee of the house on the starboard side of the boat deck—not many of them—perhaps ten or twelve. All that were left of the crew. Some few were Chinese, erstwhile stokers; the others were whites.

Their movements seemed to be strangely restrained. A boat, the last boat left intact, swung in the davits, but the davits had been bent and twisted and in their present condition were unserviceable. There was no frenzy exhibited in the efforts being made to repair the damage, no hysterical race with the flying seconds against death. The work was being done methodically, but, as one might say, with the calm of desperation rather than with fevered spirit. The two boats that had previously been manned and lowered had capsized within a few hundred yards of the ship's side, their occupants swept away. There was little hope that a third boat would fare better, but it offered at least a chance—to the minds of these survivors on the boat deck the *only* chance.

Not all could work at once effectively—no more than three or four. The others could only wait and watch until called upon for some united effort. And as Roy Melville watched he was conscious that his emotions were violently contradictory and intuitively conscious, too, that those around him shared the same emotions, despite the fact that some prayed and muttered under their breaths, and some blasphemed aloud in utter abandon, and some with set faces and tight lips stared in silence at what was going forward.

He wanted to cry out desperately, to urge haste and yet more haste, and at the same time was as desperately reluctant to see the work at an end. To step into the boat! And then—what? More likely than not a quicker ending than to await the actual sinking of the ship, wasn't it? Those two upturned boats that had gone before had been a hellish sight. But a boat *might* live, whereas no one dared to hope that the next lift or roll of the ship would be other than her last.

And then Roy became suddenly oblivious of the refractory davits that still stubbornly refused to become operative. Garkmar the purser, half-Chinese, half-English, and behind his back commonly designated by the crew as the Mongrel, had certainly been here a few minutes ago. Roy's eyes, as he stood on the outskirts of the group, swept rapidly again over the face of each man clustered on the boat deck. Garkmar was definitely no longer among them.

Roy's hands in the pockets of his coarse dungarees clenched. If this was the end of it all, and the launching of the boat proved to be no more than the stepping-stone into the beyond—as well it might—then nothing mattered; but if he, Roy, lived, then the life of Garkmar mattered everything.

He had little doubt as to where Garkmar was at the present moment. The fool! Garkmar was running true to form; he had been drinking heavily for the last hour or so to keep his courage up. Within not more than the past ten minutes Roy had seen him, surreptitiously as Garkmar had thought, get rid of an empty bottle overside. It was a thousand to one that Garkmar had sneaked down to his cabin to replenish his supply.

Roy took note of the scene around him as critically as he could in the fast-settling darkness. There would be a scurry for the boat the instant it was ready, and there would be no counting of noses then in those last moments, for everyone had long since been checked up as being present here on deck. He could not tell just how much longer it would be before the boat could be launched, but under ordinary circumstances Garkmar would presumably have time to make the trip below and back again. As a matter of fact,

granting that he had now been gone three or four minutes, the man should already have been back. But he wasn't back! That was the trouble. The circumstances weren't ordinary. Garkmar, in his present condition, wasn't half-responsible for his actions, and in his fuddled state was likely enough to dawdle below *too long* over another fortifying drink or two preliminary to returning to the deck with the bottle probably hidden in his pocket. There was nothing for it but to go after Garkmar and hurry him up. Nothing humanitarian about it—Roy smiled grimly to himself—but on no account must Garkmar miss whatever chance the boat offered.

A thought came, weighted with ugly potentiality. Suppose the boat were ready for launching within the next minute or so while he was still below? He nodded his head sharply. He must safeguard both Garkmar and himself against that contingency. True, those here around the boat could not afford to wait long under any circumstances, but they'd wait the necessary few moments that would be involved if they knew that anyone was missing. His hand, thrust suddenly out, closed tensely on the shoulder of the man nearest him, one of the Chinese.

"I go catchee Mr Garkmar below," he said hurriedly. "Back quick. You sabe?"

"Me sabe," the man answered.

Garkmar's cabin was one of those that opened off on either side of the old-fashioned dining saloon, and Roy now made his way aft as rapidly as the canted boat deck and the violent motion of the ship would permit. The forward companion ladders, he knew, were now but debris along with the wreckage of the bridge, but the after starboard ladder to the main deck was still intact.

He descended this and entered the narrow alleyway leading forward to the ship's saloon. It was pitch black here. He lighted a match only to have it almost instantly extinguished as he was flung heavily from one side of the alleyway to the other. He shouted Garkmar's name—shouted it again. There was no answer. He went on, groping his way, attempting to run in an unsteady, stumbling fashion, still shouting Garkmar's name, still receiving no answer.

His progress was maddeningly slow, but he came finally to the entrance to the saloon. The door was open, hooked back, and here, his eyes narrowing in a sort of startled perplexity, he paused involuntarily, steadying himself by bracing his shoulder against the jamb. The saloon was forbidden ground to a common seaman, but he knew the location of Garkmar's cabin,

since on the rare occasions when he had been here before it was to fetch and carry at Garkmar's behests. And why he had paused, and what he stared at now was a strange, diverging streak of light that lay thinly upon the floor at the forward end of the saloon on the starboard side. Queer! That was where Garkmar's cabin was.

"Mr Garkmar!" he called out loudly. "Come along, sir! The boat'll be putting off any minute now."

No answer—the light the only evidence of possible human presence.

Roy started forward again, catching for support at the backs of the swivel chairs that flanked the dining saloon table. Some swerved under his hand but still held him against the list and roll. And then he stood in front of the open door of Garkmar's cabin.

The light came from a flashlight, pointed outward and protruding from beneath something that, though shapeless behind the light, bulked ominously on the cabin floor. Roy stooped, snatched up the flashlight and focused its rays. It was Garkmar lying there on the floor, right enough. Not a pretty sight!

The cabin reeked with gin fumes, and scarcely more than a single glance sufficed to supply the story. A broken bottle lay upon the floor, and Garkmar lay with his face, a welter of blood, in the splintered glass. With Garkmar almost certainly already none too steady on his feet when he had reached his cabin, the cause was as obvious as the effect. A plunge of the ship had hurled Garkmar and the bottle together to the floor.

Garkmar, lying motionless, was breathing stertorously. Roy shook the man.

"Mr Garkmar!" he cried sharply. "Rouse yourself, sir!"

Garkmar opened his eyes and blinked blood-splashed lids at the light that was now flooding his face.

"Who're you?" he mumbled. "What you want?"

"I'm Jim Thompson, sir," Roy answered urgently. "It's the boat. I want to get you up on deck. Do you think you can help yourself a bit, sir? There's no time to lose!"

Garkmar raised himself slightly on his elbow.

"The boat," he said vaguely and fell back again.

Roy studied the other for an instant, his mind working at top speed. Between semi-intoxication, the blow on his head when he had struck the floor and the loss of blood, Garkmar was in almost a comatose condition, and, it was quite apparent now, was utterly incapable of doing anything for himself. There was only one way to carry the man. Roy must have one hand and arm free, not only so that he might make some use of the flashlight but to help him keep his feet and act as a buffer against the ship's pitch and toss. He slung Garkmar over his shoulder much as he would a sack of meal and staggered with his load out of the cabin.

It was not easy going. Garkmar was not a small man, and the life belts that both men wore were cumbersome and unwieldy, adding not a little to Roy's difficulty in preserving the always precarious balance of the dead weight on his shoulder. But the flashlight helped.

He reached the saloon door, started along the alleyway and heard himself suddenly give vent to a panting burst of laughter. From the way he swayed and tottered he might well be as drunk as the man he carried! But what was risible about that? If there was any humor in it, it was perverted humor. He was getting a bit jittery, wasn't he?

Along the alleyway he went, bumped and pitched ruthlessly from one side to the other in spite of every effort to prevent it. The length of the damned thing was interminable. It mocked him. Couldn't he speed up this snail's pace? What was he doing? Inviting the ship to make her last plunge and entomb him at the same time? He felt Garkmar's head, hanging limply, knock and knock against his back. He couldn't afford to lose the race with the ship, for then Garkmar would be entombed too. Fancy Garkmar going out like that after getting this far along the China coast! What a hell of a note!

Roy stepped, laboring, over the high sea-sill that guarded the alleyway door and out onto the main deck. A wave striking high to port spent itself in a hiss of water that swept across the deck and swirled around Roy ankle deep. He sloshed his way to the foot of the companion ladder and began to mount it. But as his head came on a level with the boat deck he stood suddenly still.

The darkness had increased since he had gone below, and there was now scarcely any light—but there was enough. The boat deck was empty. Between the davits where the boat had hung was only murky space. He looked seaward. Indistinctly, like some phantom thing in the imperfect light,

the boat and blurred figures showed for an instant on the crest of a wave and vanished.

CHAPTER II

While the Typhoon Raged

THE boat was gone.

While a minute passed, or perhaps two—or even more for all Roy knew—he hung there on the companion ladder with Garkmar swaying perilously on his shoulder and stared in a dazed way at the racing, mountainous seas. Just that one single glimpse of the boat. It wasn't there any more. The boat was gone—the words began to drum at his ears in a silly, singsong fashion—the boat was gone. But it wasn't true. It was impossible. It was his imagination. It couldn't be true.

And then his mind snapped back alertly to face the naked reality. It was true enough. But they wouldn't knowingly have deserted him. That was irrefutable. What, then, had happened? Why had the boat gone without Garkmar and himself?

He resumed his ascent of the ladder, his mind probing swiftly. The explanation, after all, was rather glaringly apparent, wasn't it? Either the Chinese stoker to whom he had spoken had not understood, though the man had said he had—a not uncommon habit of his class; or else the ugly alternative that the man, cravenly fearful that every second's delay would lessen the chance of saving his own life, had deliberately chosen to say nothing. Not nice, that thought! Roy's jaws were clamped. He preferred to believe that the man had not understood. But did it matter? Cowardice or not, the boat was gone.

At the top of the ladder he hesitated for an instant. He couldn't put Garkmar down on the deck. The man, if left to himself, would roll all over the lot and probably, since there was nothing but a few boat chocks and davits left to prevent it, roll over the side as well. What about the wireless room, then?

Roy went staggering along the deck. Yes, that would do. Not, of course, to be imprisoned in it when the ship went down, though essentially that wouldn't make the slightest bit of difference—but even rats didn't die that way. It would afford shelter as long as shelter was of any avail. . . . Leave

the door open. . . . The high sill would act as a buttress and prevent Garkmar from tumbling out on the deck . . . and at the last—well, at the last, he could lift Garkmar——

Futile, illogical, insane, all of this! How many more minutes were there left to go? It mattered not a particle what he did or where he went. After all, as well sit down on the deck anywhere, keep a steadying grip on Garkmar and wait. It wouldn't be long!

And yet he went on. An inner voice mocked and gibed at his folly as he laid Garkmar down on the deck, wrenched the door of the wireless room open and hooked it back. But even folly had its compensations, hadn't it? Occupied him, gave him something to do. What a grisly joke if it were all over before he had got Garkmar *safely* in there!

He lifted Garkmar over the sill, deposited the man on the floor and sat down on the sill himself. Garkmar was still breathing heavily; he could hear that despite the shrieking of the wind, but it was so dark now that he could scarcely see Garkmar's face.

Roy switched on the flashlight. Garkmar, he discovered, was not only unconscious now but was bleeding more profusely than ever; the rough handling, the bumping and knocking about to which the other had perforce been subjected on the way up from below had not helped matters any in that respect. The man's face was lacerated in many places, but one particular gash, wide and long, near the temple was flowing a stream. Garkmar would certainly bleed to death if the flow were not stopped.

Bleed to death! That inner voice screamed at him now in unbridled exasperation and derision. Would a drowned man, bobbing around out there in a life belt within the next few minutes, be any the more comfortable in death because his head had been swathed in bandages?

The ray of Roy's flashlight began to circle the interior of the wireless room inquisitively. Yes, of course, that was perfectly true, and it was utterly ridiculous to attempt anything of the sort. Well? Well—what? Well what, then, was he looking for?

The wireless room was little more than a cubbyhole, a makeshift; wireless equipment had not been compulsory when the Huetan had been built. There was practically nothing in the room but the wireless set itself—no bunk, for instance, to supply a sheet that might be torn into strips. There was a uniform jacket, though, hanging from a peg, and as it swung back and

forth something white that looked like underwear of some sort showed beneath it.

Roy rose, stepped over Garkmar's form and lurched across the room. He returned with a singlet in his hand. It would serve the purpose. He tore it into lengths and, as best he could, bandaged Garkmar's head. The inner voice was silent now. Something seemed to have shamed it, put it to rout. What? Well, there were some things, inherent things, that one did at times—couldn't help doing—weren't there? One didn't ask why, just did them. This was one of them, that was all.

Roy sat down again but this time on the deck, his arm over the sill, using the latter for a brace. The matted hair that fell over his eyes crowned a face that had become suddenly drawn in hard, sharp lines.

Nothing more to be done now but wait—and die. He hoped not unmanfully. He could not say that he was resigned, for death somehow as he faced it at this moment seemed to be but the consummation, more than anything else, of a sorry jest fathered by Fate in mockery. His mind dwelt on that.

More than a year now devoted to the one end he had had in life. Months of precarious existence replete with almost incredible happenings. But little by little he had appeared to be winning through, and the promise of ultimate success had spurred him on, kept him going when at times it had seemed that he had done no more than fight his way into a cul-de-sac that denied him any further progress. That was the bitter part of it. Fate had led him on, fed him sugar-coated morsels in the shape of minor victories just at those moments when his spirits had faltered and finally now had even brought him almost within sight of his goal only in derision to snatch hope away and substitute oblivion.

And so Lan Chao-tao would live, and he, Roy Melville, would die.

It had seemed so nearly a certainty that it would be otherwise. The plan that had germinated while he lay in the hospital in Shanghai, vague then in detail but its essentials definitely based on his acquiring a working knowledge of Chinese and his return to China secretly and unrecognized by anyone, had worked out even beyond his most optimistic hopes. One by one the once nebulous details had taken form and shape, fitting themselves in logical sequence into the framework of his plan to make a compact whole.

There were only two men in whom he had had to confide, to one wholly, to the other in part: Justin Meredith and Fu Yung. Meredith, though not

without many vehement protests because of the dangers and difficulties that would be thus incurred, had become a party to the dual life that Roy had led. Fu Yung, his onetime cabin boy, had been an excellent and enthusiastic instructor in Chinese; that was why and the purpose for which, though both Superintendent MacNulty and Inspector Thornton imagined otherwise, he had insisted that a picked man be allotted to him as cabin boy when he had left Shanghai and had brought Fu Yung back to England with him. Fu Yung had proved his worth in all respects. He had implicit faith in Fu Yung's loyalty. Also, Roy unconsciously shrugged his shoulders in a grimly humorous way, the servant had been a hard taskmaster! But even so, one did not acquire a scholarly grasp of Chinese in a year no matter how assiduously one applied oneself; still at least, though none knew this except Fu Yung and Justin Meredith, he could now speak and understand the Cantonese and Shanghai dialects in a fairly practical way.

His mind once started on this tack seemed to cling to it tenaciously. He made no effort to divert it. Why should he? One had to think about something, and God knew there was enough and to spare to think about in that crowded year—a little more than a year—just past.

Somehow though, it didn't seem as though it could have been he, himself, who had actually played the composite and bizarre role of Roy Melville during all those months; it was more as if from some intimate and privileged vantage-point, detached yet present, he had been a spectator who now looking back upon it all was bemused, wondering even if what had passed for reality had been anything other than a convincingly staged illusion.

For some two months after his return to England he had almost haunted Scotland Yard, always with the hope that some clue would be found leading to the identity of the person who had posted the original ransom letter in London. But no clue had been turned up. Inspector Thornton had had nothing to report except what Roy already knew through his own letter- and cable-contact with MacNulty in Shanghai. The offer of a reward had resulted only in the murder of the would-be informer. But of more promise had been MacNulty's report that he was receiving anonymous inside information from time to time—from some hidden enemy of Lan Chao-tao, as MacNulty had put it—that had resulted in some of Lan Chao-tao's schemes being frustrated. This had been heartening in a sense, but—and what was alone vital so far as Roy was concerned—none of this information had in any way blazed the trail to Lan Chao-tao himself.

And then, by almost the same post, he had received those two letters, both typewritten. One, which he had discovered in due course was but the precursor of many others, was postmarked London and signed By Order of Lan Chao-tao. This letter demanded information as to the whereabouts of the diamonds and the immediate surrender of same. Failing compliance, plus an additional ten per cent a month for the two months already expired, his life was threatened. He was to answer "yes," sign his initials and insert his reply in the personal column of a specified newspaper, whereupon he would receive further instructions. He had not only not answered but had kept the receipt of the letter a secret from everyone except Meredith, a decision strengthened by that other letter which was then in hand. Perhaps Scotland Yard could have baited a toothsome trap—perhaps not. In any case, the course he had pursued had proved itself justified, even if the success thereby attained had carried with it, as was now evident, the ironic rider of utter futility—and worse. It did not help these last few moments any to bear with him to his death the knowledge thus acquired of *who* it was who had signed himself By Order of Lan Chao-tao.

The other letter had been postmarked Shanghai and bore no signature at all. It had informed him without any introductory preface or waste of words that, though the writer was unable to supply any tangible proof, the original ransom letter had nevertheless certainly been posted in London by one Mr Chu Sho-tung, head of the steamship and commission firm of Sho-tung, Grayson and Company, that Chu Sho-tung was undoubtedly Lan Chao-tao's agent in England, and that the firm's vessels were intimately connected with the activities of Lan Chao-tao in the Orient. He was to use this information as he saw fit, turn it over to the police if he desired, but primarily it was to forearm him so that he might use it to safeguard himself against any approach or attack that might be made upon him from the source indicated.

The letter had borne all the earmarks of those anonymous communications MacNulty had been receiving in Shanghai containing information relative to Lan Chao-tao that had invariably proved to be authentic, and, though the thought had occurred to him, he had never for a moment seriously entertained the possibility that the letter might be but a hoax. He had ranked it from the start as genuine, and he had been right.

He remembered what his almost instant reaction had been when he had read the letter. It was as though the key to a door that he had wanted so desperately to open, because Lan Chao-tao was in hiding behind that door, had been thrust suddenly into his hand, and an inspiration had come flashing through his mind. The next second he had told himself that what he had

taken to be inspiration was nothing but sheer madness, that it was visionary, chimerical. Then sober thought. It wasn't visionary; the obstacles were many, but they were not unsurmountable. If this letter told the truth it held out a golden promise. Not only did it point the secretive way back to China that he had been seeking, but it would be as though, unknown to and unsuspected by Lan Chao-tao, he had been enrolled in Lan Chao-tao's own forces! And even if the letter were not true it still had torn a blindfold, as it were, suddenly from his eyes, still pointed the way back to China, and he could see clearly then, where before he had been confused, troubled and uncertain. Whether on one of Chu Sho-tung's ships or not, would Lan Chao-tao look for Roy Melville as a member of a freighter's crew?

He had not turned this letter over to the police either. The police might unearth a lot about Mr Chu Sho-tung, enough and more, quite probably, to put the man behind the bars for many a year to come, but his interest in Mr Chu Sho-tung had lain in quite the opposite direction. The experiences of MacNulty in the Orient had stood out as premonitorily as a red light at a street intersection. The uncovering of tools and satraps, the frustration of plans had never drawn Lan Chao-tao into the net—had indeed but vitiated all the latent possibilities of reaching Lan Chao-tao through the medium of those very minions. He had meant to see to it that there would be no chance of that happening in this instance. Mr Chu Sho-tung was a homing pigeon not to be disturbed in flight! It was *where* the homing pigeon alighted that was vital—nothing else. He had pledged himself to find Lan Chao-tao, and he would watch that flight alone.

And so he had said nothing to Scotland Yard about either of the two letters. So far as the demand for the ransom and the threat were concerned, he had been quite satisfied to take care of himself, and his reasons for maintaining silence anent the dragon and the diamonds were as valid then as they had been when he had left Shanghai. And so far as the plan he had then decided to follow was concerned, he had not dared confide in the police or anyone else apart from Meredith. It was his own life that he was risking, and he was prepared to forfeit it if need be, but he had not proposed to throw it away uselessly, with nothing in return—with Lan Chao-tao still as far-distant as ever. Interference of any kind would have been ruinous, while a leak anywhere, no matter how inadvertent, would in a very literal sense have meant his almost instant extermination.

The first step of course, and a very simple one, since it was but a matter of business routine, had been to obtain a confidential commercial report on the firm of Sho-tung, Grayson and Company. From this report it had

appeared that the firm, besides doing a commission business, owned and operated three small freighters of about four thousand tons each, the Huetan being one of them, which plied between London and the Orient and traded on the China coast. Grayson, the onetime English member of the firm, had sold out his interest to his Chinese partner some years before, leaving the sole ownership vested in Mr Chu Sho-tung. The firm was well-rated and enjoyed an unblemished reputation, but this latter fact had rather substantiated than denied the statements in the letter—at least that had been his, Roy's, opinion. A reputation of any other sort would have been a constant source of menace and incident investigation; in other words, the firm's reputation would be a prime asset to Lan Chao-tao that would be jealously guarded, and the fact that the sole ownership was then vested in Mr Chu Sho-tung had not seemed to be without significance either!

The Huetan had been in port at that time, but, even if the opportunity had been his, he had not been anywhere near ready to sail on the Huetan, or any other vessel for that matter. He had scarcely begun to study Chinese; there were still months of intensive work, many of them, that must first be devoted to that purpose with Fu Yung. But this enforced delay, if it could have been called a delay, had not disturbed him—rather the contrary. If Mr Chu Sho-tung's ships were constantly engaged in nefarious practices as the letter indicated, the deduction was, one might fairly assume, rather obvious that the initiation preceding membership in anyone of his crews would be no casual ceremony, and the applicants, it was only reasonable to expect, would be closely checked and investigated. He had first, then, to establish his bona fides, and those months while he studied with Fu Yung would serve him well in which to do so.

Meredith had balked at the idea, had flatly refused at first to have anything to do with it and had only been won over when he had finally realized that, willy-nilly, and with or without his co-operation, the plan would be put into effect. It had not been a question of disguise in the sense of wigs and false mustaches and heavy-lensed spectacles; it had been a question of assuming at intervals a not-too-difficult character, but one so utterly at variance with that of Roy Melville in his proper person and station in life that, thus encountered, he would have confidently faced his everyday acquaintances without fear of recognition. Who, for instance, would have identified as Roy Melville the unkempt person of Jim Thompson in cheap, grease-spotted clothes, coarse boots, unshapen cloth cap with broken peak, whose face was none too closely shaved, whose hair straggled mussily, whose grime was not confined to his hands alone, who frequented the pubs in the neighborhoods of the dockyards and hobnobbed with the sailors

ashore? Not Superintendent MacNulty, not Inspector Thornton—not Lan Chao-tao!

The metamorphosis when required had not been difficult to achieve, but it had been a bit rough on Meredith, a man already in his middle fifties. Meredith's big limousine, driven by Meredith, had served very adequately as a dressing room. Roy with Fu Yung's collusion, and especially so after he was supposed to be practically confined to his home as an invalid, had only, after dark and unknown to the rest of the staff, to slip out of the grounds that surrounded his house and be picked up by Meredith some distance away. Then during the drive to the purlieu of the dockyards Jim Thompson would come into being and in some ill-lighted and for the moment deserted street surreptitiously leave the car. The rehabilitation of Roy Melville and the return home had been accomplished in the same manner. At a given hour before daylight and at a given rendezvous Meredith would pick him up again. It had all worked out without mishap. His excuse for breaking away from the companions he was cultivating when sometimes the sessions were becoming too prolonged had always been accepted at its face value: "a cove as worked as a machinist's helper a good stretch away across the city 'ad to get back in time for 'is blinking job in the morning, 'adn't he?"

Not every night had been like that, of course—far from it. There had been days and sometimes even weeks when Jim Thompson was nonexistent. It was only when one of Chu Sho-tung's ships was in port that the nocturnal Jim Thompson was rather constantly afield; otherwise he was to be found in the pubs only often enough to keep the character of Jim Thompson in countenance and preserve his standing as a frequenter of the various haunts to which sailors in general were partial. Oh yes, he had become known as he had wanted to be known in such resorts! He had been accepted and recognized by the fraternity of sailormen as a good fellow, a free spender within the limits of his meager purse, and as one who, though tempted sorely by the lure of distant lands and a life at sea as against the drab existence of a machinist's helper ashore, always hovered in indecision, seemingly unable definitely to make up his mind to chuck his shore job and cut home ties asunder once and for all. And so he had temporized, listening agape to the lurid sea tales that were told and pleading for more, while he waited for the seed he had planted to germinate and grow to flower, full-blown and ready for the picking.

On the first night that Jim Thompson had come into being he had stood unobserved near the dockyard gates as a group of the Huetan's crew had come out for an evening ashore; still unobserved, he had followed them and

watched them enter a pub, and a few minutes later he, too, had unostentatiously entered the same pub. It had not been hard to chum up with them. He had paid his whack as the drinks went round. They were out on a binge and ere long had insisted that he accompany them thereon. He had done so, from pub to pub. After that Jim Thompson was one of them.

Through the fellowship thus established he had met many of the other members of the crew during the time the Huetan was in port. He had heard them talk about Garkmar whom they called the Mongrel. Garkmar, he had discovered, was cordially disliked. "Gave 'iself a bloomin' lot of airs for a bloke wot was only 'arf a white man!" they had said. Also he had gathered that it was Garkmar, and not the captain, once the ship reached the China coast, who was in sole control of the ship's itinerary; but this state of affairs, he learned too, also obtained on Mr Chu Sho-tung's two other ships, the pursers of which were likewise endowed with the same authority that Garkmar possessed and differed from him only in that they were of pure Chinese descent.

Then the months had gone by, quite a number of them, in which he had met and fraternized, not only with the Huetan's crew but with the crews of those other two ships as well. But during all this time there had appeared no sign of secrecy or furtiveness among these men as might have been expected had they been banded criminals, nothing indeed to indicate they had even a suspicion that all was not open and aboveboard in the comings and goings of their respective ships. He had therefore come to the conclusion, and in this he had proved to be right, that whatever villainy was afoot was wholly apart from both the officers and the crew and lay between Mr Chu Sho-tung and his pursers alone. So it had become obvious, then, that there were no underlying difficulties in the way to hinder him from joining anyone of the Sho-tung ships; on the contrary, catering to his professed but hesitant longings for a life at sea, he had been urged on many an occasion by the men of the various ships, who had by then become his cronies, to sign on and make a voyage with them. But still he had not been ready; still a working knowledge of Chinese had not yet been acquired.

And that had been the most arduous and at times the most discouraging part of it all—the study of Chinese, despite the fact that as a tutor Fu Yung had left nothing to be desired. He had, however, made steady and satisfactory progress, but that was because he had realized he could not have devoted the necessary time to study which had demanded nearly all his waking hours, to say nothing of living so frequently his dual existence at night, and at the same time have carried on the normal routine business and

social obligations of Roy Melville which in themselves alone would have crowded both day and night to the exclusion of all else. There had been but one way out of this impasse, it had seemed to him, and he had taken it—a simulated nervous breakdown, the result of his wounds and melancholy experiences in the Orient. He had made short trips occasionally to health resorts and the like on the continent by way of camouflage, and it had all resulted admirably. It had enabled him, without arousing any suspicions of an ulterior motive, to lead practically the life of a recluse.

Also this pseudo life of a man in broken health had served another purpose. Following that first letter which had been signed By Order of Lan Chao-tao, he had received each month a further letter—mailed of course by Mr Chu Sho-tung—each letter informing him that the ransom had been raised another ten per cent, and each succeeding letter invariably couched in increasingly threatening terms. And then a time limit of six months had been set, at the expiration of which period, if he still refused to pay, he was promised an unpleasant death. He had ignored these letters, and his supposed disability had, he was sure, to express it tritely, pulled the wool over Mr Chu Sho-tung's eyes to a large extent at least. A sick man, on the face of it, did not require very close watching so far as any attempt at escape was concerned!

Then again the months had passed, and at last he had felt that his knowledge of Chinese, imperfect though it was, was sufficient for his needs, and that it was time to go.

And so, some six weeks ago, a year after he had first met any of the Huetan's tars, Jim Thompson had finally succumbed, as they thought, to their urgings, joined the Huetan as one of the crew and had sailed from London, leaving behind him the report, fathered by Justin Meredith and believed by all, that Roy Melville, still seeking restoration of health, had quietly departed for a prolonged stay at some unnamed sanitarium. A move on Roy Melville's part which, in Mr Chu Sho-tung's opinion no doubt, had been inspired by fear and was but a desperate attempt to hide himself away since the time limit had then almost expired while the ransom already stood at well beyond double the original amount, and Mr Chu Sho-tung was probably now biting to the quick his Occidentally shortened fingernails in vicious rage at being unable to locate his victim and, in lieu of ransom, deliver the threatened coup de grâce! Yes, quite so! Curiously enough, though, he had never seen Mr Chu Sho-tung but once, and that had been on sailing day and then only at some distance away—a fat little Chinese of middle age in English top hat and cutaway coat. But the other's personal

appearance at the moment had been inconsequential; what had really interested him had been the fact that, so far as he had been able to determine, Mr Chu Sho-tung, while he had paid only scant attention to the captain, had been closeted below with Garkmar for a good hour or more.

And then the voyage had begun. From the start his attention had naturally been centered upon Garkmar, for with Garkmar in the confidence of Chu Sho-tung the possibilities latent in the person of Garkmar were at least boundless in promise. So, since on a long voyage even a common seaman must have some personal contacts at times with an officer, he had put himself out to be attentive and obliging to Garkmar at every opportunity that presented itself, and Garkmar, receptive to this unaccustomed deference paid to him by one of the crew, had responded to the extent of being condescendingly amiable.

It was not, however, until the Huetan had left Hong Kong and had begun to trade along the coast between Hong Kong and Shanghai that he had been rewarded in any material way for his attentions to Garkmar, but his reward had come then in fullest measure. He remembered vividly the night when the Huetan, at her first port of call after leaving Hong Kong, had dropped anchor off a small Chinese town. He had been told that it was Garkmar's custom to go ashore at all such ports in a small boat which the ship carried for that purpose, it being Garkmar's duty, so the crew had informed him, to interview the local merchants, arrange for what cargo could be obtained and often bring one of the merchants back on board to extend to the latter the courtesies and hospitality of the ship.

Yes, he had been fully rewarded! He had been chosen by Garkmar to row the boat ashore.

And for that one time at least Fate had been on his side and had laughed with him at the sublime irony of the situation! Sitting in the stern of the boat beside Garkmar on the way back to the ship that night had been a Chinese, who appeared to be merely one of the town's substantial merchants whom Garkmar had invited aboard the hospitable Huetan, but Garkmar had unwittingly and almost instantly dispelled that illusion. "As you have heard me remark before," Garkmar had said in Chinese to his companion as the boat left the shore, "the cabins afloat and the houses ashore have ears when Chinese is spoken, but a small boat and an ignorant English sailor who cannot even speak his own language have none. It is safe here, and who would suspect why I always come and go in this way? So now we can talk freely."

And Roy, tugging there at the oars, had listened.

The inner workings of Lan Chao-tao's piratical activities in a general way had been laid bare before him. Translated and summarized and applying the obvious deductions, he had learned that so far as the Chu Sho-tung ships were concerned the cargo they picked up along the coast was to a large extent legitimate, but sandwiched in with the legitimate was the product of Lan Chao-tao's piratical forays—at least such portions of it as were suitable for direct shipment to and marketable on the European market.

This loot was purposely scattered and distributed over many of the small coastal towns, and from thence was dispatched as part of each merchant's shipment in the guise of merchandise legitimately owned by the merchant and acquired by him in the ordinary course of business. Not too much from any one merchant—not enough ever to arouse any suspicion!

A merry game! The stolen cases, bales, casks or whatever the containers might be, having of course first been re-marked and doctored to hide their origin, were all consigned to Sho-tung, Grayson and Company, who, being commission merchants as well as shipowners, were entrusted with the marketing of the goods in England and on the continent. It was an extremely lucrative and profitable business. The goods had cost nothing, and each commodity was sold at full market price by Mr Chu Sho-tung. It was all profit! And who was to question the integrity of the long-established-in-business Mr Chu Sho-tung?

But that night in the boat both Garkmar and his companion had been perturbed and uneasy. There was very little loot indeed made ready and waiting for the Huetan, Garkmar's companion had explained, because the gunboats of the foreign devils and the gunboats of the Chinese government had become as a swarm of hornets and many of the illustrious Lan Chao-tao's junks had been captured. Had Garkmar heard that there was a traitor somewhere among them, and that the illustrious Lan Chao-tao was consumed with unspeakable wrath? Yes, Garkmar had heard that. Had Garkmar heard that the illustrious Lan Chao-tao was soon to hold a council at a secret meeting place to which those of his underlords in whom he put high trust and confided power had been summoned that plans might be made to outwit the gunboats, and that the traitor might be found? Yes, Garkmar had heard that too and had even admitted that he had perhaps heard a little more—not much more—but a little more. He had received his instructions before leaving London, he had said; that was all he was permitted to say.

And there had been other occasions like that, similar experiences all the way along up the China coast. Conferences in the boat to and from the ship. Confidences exchanged with only an illiterate common seaman, a deaf-mute so far as Chinese was concerned, for audience. Garkmar had taken no chances! And then, with only a few of the small coastal ports left to visit before Shanghai was reached, the typhoon had struck the Huetan, and——

Roy stared around him in a sort of dull surprise, like one awakening from a dream to the reality of his immediate surroundings. It was black everywhere except that the blackness out there was shot with faint, whitish streaks that, of course, could be nothing other than the curling crests of the towering seas. He had been sitting here waiting momentarily for death, hadn't he? Trying to keep his mind from brooding over the details of that final plunge. Well, he seemed to have succeeded in that respect. A great many moments must have passed, but the curious part of it was that he was still here. Incredibly, the Huetan had not yet foundered.

CHAPTER III

The Yellow Package

GARKMAR, lying there within hand's touch, brought reality still more tangibly home to Roy. He thought he heard Garkmar speak.

"What is it?" Roy asked.

No reply.

He switched on his flashlight. Garkmar's lips were moving, but the man was obviously in bad shape—delirious, raving a bit.

Roy bent over the high sill to catch the words. Garkmar was mumbling in a thick, jumbled way that at first was hopelessly unintelligible but in his delirium kept on repeating the same thing over and over, and Roy finally made out what the other was saying.

"Cheng-ping-wo . . . Yellow package . . . Lan Chao-tao . . . Cheng-ping-wo . . . Yellow——"

What or who was Cheng-ping-wo? Roy pulled his hand across his eyes as though to clear his mental vision. It didn't make the least difference now, nor did the yellow package, or Lan Chao-tao either!

An hour went by, another, and yet still another, as Roy sat there on the deck. It was no more than an hallucination, of course, but it seemed as though the Huetan's motion was becoming less violent, the waves less mountainous. Nonsense! He couldn't even see the waves—just the streaky crests. What was he trying to do? Bolster himself up with false hope? It was true that the Huetan was still afloat when in all reason she should have sunk hours ago, but that was a miracle. The miracle could not endure. Better that she had had done with it in the beginning. It would have been all over now. This waiting for death was not an easy matter.

Came then the dawn and with it, though in a numbed way, for it was hard to believe the unbelievable, the realization that the Huetan was not only still afloat but might even remain so indefinitely. Why not? He had read of

floating hulks. And the sea *had* abated appreciably, and the sun as it rose was breaking more and more frequently through the clouds.

The day advanced, the sea flattening, the sodden Huetan rolling listlessly. If the ship had weathered the typhoon she was not likely to sink now. No tenuous thread of hope, this! In so far as life was ever certain, here once more was the certainty of life for the tomorrows. Perhaps it was only Fate up to her old tricks again, batting him like a shuttlecock from trough to crest. Perhaps in any case, the Huetan apart, there would not be many tomorrows. Well, so be it! He would make the most of those there were!

And then, once satisfied that he had no longer imminent need of it, he discarded his cumbersome life belt and laughed aloud a little shakily. No need of it any more—but need again for this coarse leather belt that supported his dungarees. He had rather prided himself on that belt; he prided himself on it now. He had had it made. Money would be hard for Jim Thompson to obtain in the Orient. It looked like an ordinary seaman's belt, though perhaps a trifle thicker. Who would divine that the two strips of leather of which it was composed, one sewed on top of the other, were lined and waterproofed with thin, rubber sheeting, and that nestling between them were English banknotes in varying denominations, tightly folded, to the tune of a thousand pounds?

And so he laughed once more because he was overwrought with the thought that he would ever again have need of money. And stopped laughing because he realized he had yet to get a grip upon himself. And then he went to Garkmar and removed Garkmar's life belt, too, so that the man might be more comfortable.

Fate, whether playing tricks or not, was growing kinder every moment! Beneath Garkmar's life belt was an unbuttoned tunic, and beneath the tunic was a shirt open at the neck, and tucked inside the shirt was a package about the size of a well-stuffed large envelope encased in yellow oil silk. The yellow package! He did not touch it. True, Garkmar was eying him in a vacant way and was no more than semiconscious, but it would be no better than a fool's act to risk even a hundred-to-one chance of arousing suspicion in the other's mind. And, besides, to ascertain Garkmar's ultimate disposal of that yellow package was infinitely more important than to obtain any immediate knowledge of what the package actually contained. Also, it would be a bit difficult to remove that elaborately sealed oil-silk wrapping without Garkmar knowing in his rational moments that it had been tampered with.

But he did not like the looks of the man at all—and all the more so because Garkmar had become again the pivot on which success or failure hinged. Garkmar, manifestly, was seriously ill—appeared to be running a high fever. If Garkmar died! Roy's new-found high spirits were suddenly dampened. He did not care to dwell on any such contingency.

He brought up a mattress from below and nursed and fed the other as best he could throughout the day. For long periods at a stretch Garkmar was wholly rational and in a gruff, supercilious way, as became the nature of the man, appreciative. At other times he mumbled and muttered in delirium, sometimes in English and sometimes in Chinese. And at these times, listening intently, Roy never left the other's side. But he learned little more than he already knew. Apart from repeated mention of the yellow package and Cheng-ping-wo, but to which no details were added, Garkmar in his mental aberrations harped only on one other thing: he babbled many times about "the third night of the eighth moon."

But here Roy was at a loss. When would it be the third night of the eighth moon? Tomorrow? Or a week from now? He did not know. Here was one thing that Fu Yung had not taught him, but neither Fu Yung nor he had ever given thought to the Chinese calendar. What significance did this date, whatever it was, possess? What was to happen on the third night of the eighth moon? He did not know that, either. But if Garkmar did *not* die——

And so the day passed. On excursions below for food and supplies he had searched Garkmar's cabin thoroughly. He had found nothing except the ship's manifest sheets which, though he knew them to be falsified, would, he also knew, pass muster with the authorities anywhere as being perfectly in order.

Night came. He procured another mattress and lay down beside Garkmar. He was wakeful, restless. His thoughts were vagrant. He was sorry he had missed MacNulty in London. Was he? He was not so sure. MacNulty might have proved a trifle difficult—over-inquisitive. He was quite sure that Jim Thompson could pass MacNulty on, say, the Nanking Road or anywhere else without being recognized. MacNulty wouldn't be looking for Jim Thompsons—Lan Chao-tao wouldn't either.

Morning came. Garkmar appeared to be no better and no worse.

Another day. When not occupied with Garkmar Roy roamed the ship aimlessly or sat busy with his thoughts. How long must he expect to remain here inactive on the Huetan? He grudged the passing of the fruitless days, worried about them on Garkmar's account. Garkmar must not be allowed to

pass out! But what could he do? There were no boats left. He thought of a raft. Folly! He could not have launched one that would carry Garkmar and himself even if he had been able to construct it. Why a raft? Why a boat? So that Garkmar would perish the sooner through exposure? And where would he go with a raft or a boat? What made him think of such things? Was he becoming slightly sun-touched himself that the thought of leaving the ship should even pass through his mind? There was food and water here to last for months on months, provided the Huetan remained afloat. And the chances were she would remain afloat. As he had told himself before, since she hadn't already sunk she was not likely to sink now. Marooned! Yes, he would be marooned here for no one could tell how long. He did not know the Huetan's position other than that she had been close in on the coast and not far south of Shanghai when the typhoon had descended upon her, driving her possibly far out of the regular shipping lanes, but even so, sooner or later, she must inevitably be sighted by some sort of craft. There was no other thing to do but wait until he was picked up, and meanwhile, if he could, keep life in Garkmar.

Long hours. Too much time for self-communion. He was glad of life where he had expected death. That was only human. But with life he knew again that ache of loneliness that had never left him during the year that was gone, whether in the pubs pretending to join wholeheartedly in a sailors' carousal or at home surrounded by every physical comfort or tossing here of nights in the Huetan's crowded and none too savoury forecastle. And in these present hours it seemed to be with him more poignantly than ever. Alone here, save for the presence of a sick man, lacking companionship, lacking the balm of urgent interests that would force his mind into other channels, how could it be otherwise? Myrna. The memory of her. He missed his father's smile. He had but one thing to live for now—to come face to face with Lan Chao-tao. And that was human too.

Another night. A bad one for Garkmar, and Roy had little or no sleep. But as dawn broke he stepped out on deck and stood suddenly stock still, staring seaward. A point off the starboard bow and not more than several miles away were three large junks. He watched them for a full five minutes. There was no doubt about it. They had sighted the ship and in the light breeze were bearing down on the Huetan.

Rescue? He pursed his lips. He was in no way elated by what he saw. Far from it, in fact. Why *three* junks? Junks did not usually sail in company unless they were fishing junks, in which case he would expect them to be much smaller craft, and besides he was somehow extremely skeptical about

these being fishing waters! But he was not at all skeptical about the Huetan being at the moment in pirate-infested waters; in fact, it was a practical certainty that such was the case, since anywhere south to north between the limits of Mirs and Bias Bays near Hong Kong to the mouths of the Yangtze near Shanghai, fell very hotbeddedly within that designation.

He swung, then, sharply on his heels and returned to Garkmar. Garkmar, he knew, was in one of his lucid moments—or had been when Roy had left him a few minutes ago.

“Mr Garkmar,” he reported bluntly, “there’s three junks out there making for the ship, and I can’t say I likes the looks of ’em.”

Garkmar’s small, black, fever-lighted eyes held a curious glint in their depths as they fixed on Roy’s face.

“Junks, eh?” he ejaculated; and then, with irritable facetiousness: “And so you don’t like the looks of them? You’ve been listening to the crew’s pawky yarns about these parts all the way out from London—that’s the trouble, isn’t it? Pirates is what I suppose you mean. They couldn’t be anything else. But most likely they’re decent, peaceable fishermen, and luck’s turned our way at last.”

“Yes sir,” Roy answered meekly. “Maybe that’s what they are, but——”

“But they’re pirates,” Garkmar cut in querulously. “And they’ll hold you for a ransom of God knows how many thousand pounds although even the poor sailor’s wages haven’t yet been paid, and they’ll put you in a wooden cage and hang you on a pole to broil in the sun until the money is forthcoming. Hell! What do you expect me to do about it?”

“That’s what I came for to ask you, sir,” Roy answered soothingly.

“H’m!” Garkmar half closed his eyes. “Well, pirates or fishermen, or whatever they are, I can’t keep them from coming aboard, can I?”

“No sir.”

“But you’d like to get away from this filthy tub—get ashore, wouldn’t you?”

“Gawd, yes!” exclaimed Roy fervently. “Perwiding,” he added anxiously, “that it’s to be somewheres where we could lay ’ands on a doctor for you, sir.”

Garkmar was silent for a moment. When he spoke again he seemed to have acquired a heretofore unknown graciousness.

“Thanks, Thompson,” he said. “You’re not half a bad sort. Send them to me, whoever they are, when they come aboard, and I’ll talk to them. Even pirates, my man, may listen to reason, and, if that’s what they are, I’ll see if I can’t come to some arrangement with them. Speaking the language will go a long way.”

“Yes sir,” agreed Roy, “that was what I was thinking, and I hopes you’re right, sir, but just the same I can’t say I fancy knuckling down to ’em, us being a British ship.”

“Well, whatever you fancy,” admonished Garkmar sharply, “keep a civil tongue in your head, for even if they couldn’t understand what you said they might not like the way you said it, and that would make it all the harder to bargain with them. So even if they are pirates, as you seem to have made up your mind they are, don’t be a hero. Don’t try any of that Britons-never-will-be-slaves stuff by welcoming the first man aboard with a punch in the nose. I hope you get my meaning, Thompson.”

“Yes sir,” said Roy in a chastened voice. “I understand, sir. Peaceful and quiet does it, while you ’ands out a bit of soft soap in the lingo. And now I’ll go out and take another squint at the blighters.”

Garkmar nodded.

Roy stepped out on deck again, a tight smile compressing the corners of his lips. He had got Garkmar’s meaning all right!

Once more Roy studied the approaching junks. It was as he had thought. They were close enough in now for him to see that there was an overabundance of men on their decks. They were very definitely not fishermen; they were very definitely marauders.

He had no intention of being a hero, but neither had he any intention, if the worst came to the worst, of submissively extending his neck for decapitation. He had more than a well-founded suspicion that Garkmar’s piratical alliances would see Garkmar through all right, but he was none too sure that Garkmar would be personally overconcerned about what happened to Jim Thompson. Jim Thompson might be an awkward witness to whatever proceedings might ensue or, on the other hand, a valuable one in Admiralty Court when the case of the Huetan was under adjudication. It all depended on the way Garkmar looked at it. A slippery customer, Garkmar, and a callous one!

Yesterday when wandering over the ship, Roy remembered, he had seen a very serviceable revolver and a box of cartridges in the captain’s cabin.

They had not interested him then, but they very emphatically interested him now. He went and got them, and, mindful now of a former eventful occasion when he had not taken the same precaution, made sure that the weapon was loaded before thrusting it, along with the cartridges, into one of the pockets of his dungarees. Then he returned to the deck for the third time.

The leading junk was drawing alongside, its crew, excited, chattering shrilly. And Roy, standing on the boat deck, waved his arms amicably, and, for Garkmar's benefit, shouted lusty British cheerios in return.

The Chinese swarmed aboard. Roy met a cluster of them as they clambered up the after companion ladder. They surrounded him menacingly, all talking at once, but a moment later they were incontinently thrust aside, and Roy found himself confronted by a thin, wiry, pockmarked Chinese who was obviously their leader.

A belligerent bombardment of questions followed: who, why, what, when? Jim Thompson could neither speak nor understand Chinese! He could only smile ingratiatingly and point invitingly along the deck to the door of the wireless room. His pantomime was answered by an impatient snarl and a violent push in the direction indicated.

Roy led the way. The other followed.

Reaching the wireless room, Roy halted and put his head inside the door.

"They've come aboard from one of the junks, Mr Garkmar," he announced tersely, "and the other two of 'em are making fast alongside now. And this 'ere's the skipper of the crowd what's boarded us, leastways he acts that way, and——"

Again a violent push as the Chinese leader, shoving Roy aside, stepped through the doorway into the wireless room. There was a rapid-fire exchange of words in Chinese between Garkmar and the other, while Roy, standing respectfully outside the door, listened. They knew each other, at least by reputation. Lan Chao-tao was the magic link between them. They both sailed under the same banner! Roy was not surprised; indeed, he would have been vastly surprised had it been otherwise, for he had already foreseen something of the sort.

And then the Chinese leader made a sudden and pertinent inquiry. Did the English sailor out there understand any Chinese? If so, he had already heard too much and should be killed and thrown overboard at once.

Instinctively Roy's hand sought the pocket of his dungarees and his fingers the butt of his revolver as he hung on Garkmar's reply.

"No," Garkmar answered, "this is the first time the fellow has ever been away from his home in London, and he doesn't understand a word of Chinese. Let him alone; don't even drive him away from the door. I don't want to make him suspicious that there's anything between us. I want him to think that I'm only bargaining with you to be put ashore. I can make use of him later. There'll be the question of either salvage or insurance. Also I need him now to look after me. I'm too sick, and he's too good a nurse to lose."

Roy relaxed. The conversation became prolonged, and though toward the end Garkmar's voice, through weakness, began to sound dragged out and at moments was almost feeble, Roy, apparently engrossed in the movements of the Chinese crews from all three junks who were then barging everywhere over the ship, lost no word of what was said.

Wan Ming was the Chinese pirate's name. . . . The Huetan was under Lan Chao-tao's protection, virtually one of Lan Chao-tao's own ships, and as such was inviolate. . . . There would be no looting. . . . Cheng-ping-wo proved to be the name of a coastal village, and Garkmar must be in Cheng-ping-wo before the third night of the eighth moon. . . . The third night of the eighth moon was still five nights off. . . . How long would it take Wan Ming to sail his junk to Cheng-ping-wo? . . . Perhaps three days, perhaps four . . . It would depend on the wind, but Cheng-ping-wo would unfailingly be reached before the third night of the eighth moon——

Wan Ming came brusquely out on deck and, paying no attention to Roy, began to shout orders to his men.

"Come in here, Thompson!" Garkmar called.

Roy obeyed. Garkmar, from a propped-up position on his elbow, let his bandaged head fall back unsteadily on his pillow. His face was drained of color, as though he had overtaxed his strength and was near to the point of exhaustion.

"Well, Thompson," Garkmar announced with an attempt at an indulgent smile, though he spoke with an effort, "you've nothing to worry about. These men are just what I thought they were—honest fishermen. And the proof of that is that nothing on board here will be touched or stolen, and they're going to get assistance and make an attempt to tow the ship to port. Meanwhile Captain Wan Ming is going to take us ashore in his junk."

"Lor' lumme!" exulted Jim Thompson in fervent thankfulness. "That's good news, sir. I don't mind saying as how I 'ad the wind up a bit, and——"

“Never mind that,” Garkmar broke in impatiently and waved his hand weakly doorwards. “Get together whatever supplies will be needed for four or five days and put them aboard the junk at once.”

“Yes sir,” Jim Thompson blurted out joyously. “I’ll see to it at once, sir.” And then, as though apostrophizing the universe as he moved toward the door: “And to think I thought as how we was in a rare bad mess! Lor’ lumme!”

CHAPTER IV

Fog

“WAN MING says I’m dying.” Garkmar’s voice was painfully labored, a thin wheeze in it. “Is that the truth, Thompson?”

It was not since early afternoon that Garkmar had spoken before, and now it was nearing evening. Roy did not answer at once. Indubitably true. The man *was* dying. In fact, several times during the afternoon he had thought that Garkmar was already gone. Not a pleasant question to answer truthfully. Strange that he should have any sympathy for Garkmar! What was strange about it? Was one ever callous in the presence of death? He was hesitant, uncomfortable, searching for evasive words to put into the mouth of Jim Thompson.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, sir,” he said cheerfully. “You know as how while there’s life there’s ’ope, and——”

“That’s enough of that, Thompson!” As nearly as he could come to mustering a snarl, Garkmar snarled. “So I’m dying, eh? Well, I knew it myself. Don’t talk like a bloody parrot!”

Roy was silent.

“Where are we?” Garkmar demanded. “We ought to be close in on Cheng-ping-wo by now.”

“Yes sir,” said Roy. “When I was up on deck a little while ago we was running along about a mile off shore, and from what I could gather from the way the Chinks was chattering and pointing and from seeing a lot of junks as was messing around what looked like the mouth of a river, I’d say Cheng-ping-wo was showing ahead. But what with the wind dropping and then the fog shutting down on us we ain’t there yet, though I’d say we ain’t far off for the Chinks are sculling her along in handy fashion.”

“Fog?” repeated Garkmar as though he had not caught the word aright.

“Yes sir, and a rare good ’un,” amplified Roy. “Thick as pea soup, as the saying ’as it.”

Garkmar was mumbling something.

Roy, squatting on his mattress beside the other, leaned forward.

“Made good time,” Garkmar muttered. “Tomorrow night—third night of eighth moon.”

“I beg pardon, sir?” said Roy solicitously.

“I—” Garkmar choked for breath—“I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Yes sir—I mean, no sir,” said Roy.

Garkmar relapsed into silence.

In the dim light Roy’s eyes searched the other’s face. Garkmar’s eyes were wide open, but the stare was vacant, and the man appeared to be sinking into a coma again. Roy’s lips firmed grimly. Garkmar had been failing steadily since the morning they had left the Huetan. Certainly the end was not far off. And then? He had already striven to answer that selfsame question a hundred times. The yellow package, of course. Naturally! But after that—what? Well, it depended on what the yellow package contained, didn’t it? He hadn’t got any farther than that.

He flirled a bead of sweat from his forehead. It was hot down here in this filthy hole that, if it could be called by so grandiloquent a name, served as Wan Ming’s cabin. And the air was fetid in spite of the vagrant wisps of fog that came drifting in through the open porthole. Porthole! Applied to a junk that somehow sounded absurd. But what other name could be given to a hole cut in the hull that was closed in inclement weather by a hinged, though ill-fitting, solid wooden shutter? And what did it matter if it were ill-fitting? Nothing to the Chinese! The apertures could be stuffed with bits of rags or anything else that was available if they leaked too badly.

Roy smiled queerly to himself. He had learned a lot about junks—at least about big, hundred-ton junks like this one—since he had come aboard. Where he had never before connected portholes with a junk, he knew now that the ones opening off the main hold here were even big enough to permit the crew to get out on the footboards or runways, from which, some four feet above the water line, they worked their *yulas*^[1] when the wind failed them.

He could hear them working their *yulas* now. And from directly overhead came the monotonous creak of the long sweep which, when the junk was not under sail and the rudder not in use, served both to steer and help propel the craft. He swept away another bead of sweat. No wind—just

fog and the stench below here. He half-rose to his feet to make his way to the deck to fill his lungs and nostrils with clean air, but a glance at Garkmar held him back. Garkmar was in too critical a condition to be left alone now even for a moment.

He looked around rebelliously at the miserable quarters that, together with Garkmar and Wan Ming, he had inhabited for the last few days and nights since leaving the Huetan. No furnishings. Nothing but his own and Garkmar's mattresses on the floor and a bunk of sorts used by Wan Ming, the covers of which were nondescript and indescribably dirty. Nothing but a smelly, confined space partitioned off at the stern of the junk, the only egress therefrom or entry thereto being through the door connecting with another, but smaller compartment, which was in turn partitioned off from the main hold of the junk and from which a perpendicular bamboo ladder led upward to the deck. A sort of glorified antechamber and guardroom, this latter, in which Wan Ming's Number One and two other dependable henchmen lived. Wan Ming had an eye out for the preservation of his own precious skin. A pirate junk was a pirate junk, and a pirate crew was a pirate crew, and the Chinese were the Chinese! Wan Ming did not trust everybody; he had his bodyguard. Perhaps it was as well! The junk was manned by the scum and sweepings of Asia, but, at that, the most untrustworthy and treacherous scoundrel of the entire lot was Wan Ming himself!

Roy's face was suddenly hard. So Wan Ming had told Garkmar that he was going to die, had he? Well, the reason for that bit of vicious information was not obscure. Wan Ming knew that, acting under instructions that had presumably emanated in a roundabout way from their mutual chieftain, Lan Chao-tao, it was imperative that Garkmar should be in Cheng-ping-wo on the third night of the eighth moon; also, though Garkmar still hugged that yellow package to his bosom, still kept it tucked away inside his shirt, it had in the very nature of things been often exposed to view and Wan Ming had seen it many times. Only a mental defective, and Wan Ming was far from falling within that classification, could have failed to put two and two together. Again and again in the last twenty-four hours when it had become obvious that Garkmar was approaching the end and, contemptuous of the presence of the English sailor to whose ears Chinese words were but meaningless sounds, Wan Ming had plied Garkmar with subtle and persuasive questions. But all to no avail. Garkmar had kept his own counsel.

Wan Ming's mind had not been hard to read. Wan Ming knew a little—but not enough. There would be high reward and much aggrandizement at the hands of the mighty Lan Chao-tao if Wan Ming could step into

Garkmar's shoes and carry out the latter's instructions. Granted! So why must Cheng-ping-wo be reached before the third night of the eighth moon, and what was to be done with that sealed package that was so carefully wrapped in yellow oil silk? And so at the end Wan Ming was trying to force Garkmar's hand by impressing on Garkmar's mind the fact that he was dying. But Wan Ming had not succeeded, even by resorting to such tactics, for the last time, say an hour ago, that Wan Ming had talked with Garkmar, Roy had been present, and Wan Ming's probing had still been ineffectual.

Roy frowned. Why had Garkmar persistently refused to confide in Wan Ming? He did not know, but it seemed strange. Both men, as it were, belonged to the same unholy lodge. Both were under the domination of Lan Chao-tao, and it would seem that the logical and natural thing for Garkmar to have done would have been to pass on the torch to one of his own tainted brotherhood—but he hadn't!

Roy's frown deepened into a knotted furrow between his eyes. He was pretty much in the same boat as Wan Ming. He knew as much, but, from the standpoint of practical value, no more than Wan Ming did. He had counted desperately on Garkmar pulling through, counted on keeping a watch by hook or crook on Garkmar's movements, counted on discovering where and to whom the package was to be delivered, counted on bridging one if not more of the gaps that lay between himself and Lan Chao-tao, counted on reaching at least the outer fringe of Lan Chao-tao's inner circle. And now there would be nothing left but the yellow package itself.

Well, there was only one answer to that. He must depend on the contents to supply the open-sesame to his goal, and where he had, until now, refrained from touching the package or showing any interest in it whatever, deeming the chance to watch Garkmar's disposal of it the more important, the actual possession of it had now alone become vital. But how was that to be accomplished? The possession of it was equally vital to Wan Ming. Wan Ming would never let him get away with the package if it were in his power to prevent it—and Wan Ming had plenty of power and to spare!

Not so easy! Wan Ming would be watching like a hawk. Yet in some way it must be done, and——

There was a sudden, violent crash and shock that, though Roy snatched instinctively at the edge of his mattress for support, rolled him over sideways. Came then a chorus of yells and shouts from overhead and from without, but the junk was steady again.

Roy got to his feet and looked out through the porthole. Nothing very serious. They had collided with another junk in the fog, that was all. But he could hear Wan Ming's voice screaming in fluent vituperation at all and sundry on the other junk—mostly references to their ancestors couched in the choicest of uncomplimentary terms!

A voice answered Wan Ming in pacifying tones from the other junk. Roy, even at that short distance, could see only mistily through the fog, but he could make out the speaker to be a middle-aged Chinese, rather richly dressed in a short, black, brocaded jacket, who kept constantly pointing to an old and bent Chinese woman on the deck beside him. The speaker was desolated that through the unspeakable clumsiness of his misbegotten crew the accident had occurred. He had come from Canton, where he was a merchant, and was going on up the river from Cheng-ping-wo with his mother—identified by gestures as the woman beside him—to visit his natal village and the paternal tomb. Would the mishap be forgiven? He was, as it were, on a pilgrimage. All had not gone well with him of late. He had consulted a celebrated *Foong Sut*^[2] who said that his father's spirit was restless and displeased because the body's head and feet lay through the unpardonable stupidity on the part of some one in the wrong position. The position should be reversed—or something to that effect. Roy could not catch it all, but anyway the calamitous blunder was to be rectified and the father's spirit appeased.

Wan Ming became more moderate in his diatribes.

More palaver—over nothing, Roy thought. What had a tomb or a pilgrimage got to do with a collision which was most likely entirely Wan Ming's fault anyhow!

The junks drifted apart.

Garkmar spoke suddenly, unexpectedly.

“What's the matter?” he demanded in a weak tone.

Roy turned away from the porthole.

“Bumped into another junk in the fog, sir,” he explained. “No harm done, and we're clear again, but these blighters are worse 'n a pack of cats on a backyard fence.”

“Come here and sit down beside me—close.”

“Yes sir,” said Roy as he obeyed. “What is it, sir?”

"Listen." Garkmar's voice was no more than a whisper. "Tomorrow night. Can't go myself." Garkmar was forcing his words. "Got orders not to trust any Chinese because it's—it's written in Chinese. Understand? Very important. You—you'll have to go."

Roy felt his pulse quicken, but his face was impassive.

"Right you are, sir," he answered. "Anything you say. Where am I to go, sir?"

"Up the river. Same side as Cheng-ping-wo, same side as—as though we'd come from Shanghai. Understand? Cheng-ping-wo at mouth of river on—on left bank going up. Go up river. About six miles. Old abandoned temple there on riverbank." Garkmar struggled for his breath. "Go—go after dark. Don't let any one see you. Buddhist priest all alone at temple. People think priest is—is off his head—cracked. But—but he isn't. He—he'll understand." Garkmar tried to open his shirt but was not equal to the effort. "Package in there," he gasped.

The man was going fast, his words so thick and low that Roy could barely make sense out of them.

"Yes sir," he said. "I'm to give the package to the priest—is that it?"

"Yes, and—and say it's for—Lan Chao-tao from—from——" Garkmar's words ended with a convulsive movement of his lips.

For a little time Roy did not move. Here was more than he had ever hoped for, but death for the moment sobered anything in the nature of an exultant thrill. Garkmar was dead.

Then presently Roy leaned forward and, opening the dead man's shirt, stood up with the yellow package in his hand, but as he did so someone coughed in a mock apologetic way behind him. He whirled round.

Wan Ming was standing in the doorway smiling blandly. Also Wan Ming was extending his hand for the package.

The smile was not disarming. Every muscle in Roy's body was tense. Whether any of Wan Ming's favored followers were in that outer cabin or not, he did not know. All he knew was that he had one chance and only one, but if that succeeded he would have an ally out there in the fog.

The brain functions with incredible speed, and Roy's at that instant was geared in high. Perhaps a second had passed—no more. To take Wan Ming by surprise. Six feet between them. Roy covered the distance in a sudden

leap and, with every ounce of his weight behind the blow, his fist crashed full on Wan Ming's jaw.

There was a squeaky cry. Wan Ming pitched sideways, tottered, and, out of the corner of his eye as he dashed through into the outer cabin, Roy saw the man go sprawling to the floor.

The outer cabin was empty. Roy thrust the yellow package inside his shirt, sprang for the bamboo ladder and began to climb, but before he could reach the top the frantic screams and shouts of Wan Ming, who was evidently scrambling to his feet, began to echo up from the inner cabin below. He heard racing steps overhead. Faces, forms, appeared before him as he gained the level of the deck. Again the element of surprise. They did not know what it was all about, and Roy did not intend that they should—until it was too late. He burst his way through the three or four chattering Chinese who confronted him and the next instant dived from the side of the junk into the fog-mantled sea.

[1] Sweeps.

[2] Burial Professor.

CHAPTER V

On Secret Service

THE gathering darkness had joined forces with the fog. When Roy came to the surface, after swimming to the limit of his endurance under water, he could barely discern the outline of the junk behind him, but shouts, shrill cries—a din that seemed to come from all quarters—sounded in his ears while bullets spattered the water in ugly fashion around him.

He got his breath and went under again. If he could scarcely see an object as large as a junk, it was most unlikely that they could actually have seen his head above the water, but they were firing in his general direction, and that was bad enough.

He had always counted himself a fairly strong swimmer in the ordinary sense of the term, but he could neither stay long under water nor cover much distance in that way. He came to the surface once more. The bullets were falling much wider of the mark than before. No good attempting to swim further under water anyhow. He could not see the junk at all now—just the flashes from the shots—so it was definitely certain that they could not see him.

As well to put a bit more distance between himself and the junk, though! He swam on steadily for a few minutes then turned on his back to lie still and listen and, if possible, to get his bearings in the fog.

The firing from Wan Ming's junk had become intermittent, but the shouts and cries from all around him, some distant, some near at hand—like some discordant ghostly chorus out of the fog—were unabated. There could be only one explanation. There must be quite a number of junks in the neighborhood, their crews alarmed, excited and bewildered by the firing and uproar originated by Wan Ming. Yes, of course, he remembered now. He had told Garkmar about them—off the mouth of the river at Cheng-ping-wo. That's where they undoubtedly were, and he was—at the present moment.

But in which direction was the shore? He had plunged, he knew, from what had been the landward side of the junk when, before the fog had set in, they had been following the coast line, but that was by no means any

assurance that the junk had been parallel with the shore when he had dived from it. All he was certain of was that the shore could not be more than a mile away and was probably much less. But it would be rather bad business to swim blindly in the wrong direction!

An idea formulated itself suddenly in Roy's mind. The fog had obliterated everything, but now it had grown really dark and lights should be showing soon from at least some of these junks around him and, if the fog lifted, from the shore as well. Yes, there was a light now over there a little to his right. He swam silently toward it and touched the hull of a junk.

Voices reached him from overhead. No sound of *yulas*. The junk was anchored. That was inspiring. The shore might not even be nearly so far away as he had thought, though the fact that the junk was anchored was not necessarily any proof of that. He drifted along the hull of the junk and reached his objective—the stern post and rudder.

Here was support enough to last indefinitely. If the fog lifted during the night there were bound to be lights of sorts, as he had told himself, showing from Cheng-ping-wo which would indicate the shore line, and, in lieu of the fog, there would be the darkness to cover his movements. If it didn't lift——Well, he could only hope for a break of some kind. Nothing to worry about for the moment anyhow, but sooner or later he would have to swim for it again, and the first thing to do was to take off his boots. This he did and, tying the laces together, strung the boots around his neck.

How long was it since he had leaped from Wan Ming's junk? Possibly ten minutes at the very outside, he estimated. But in any case, though the firing had ceased, the hubbub from everywhere about him was still as great as ever: one junk's crew shouting to another, two or three all joining in at the same time, questions asked and answered. But with the incessant chatter from the deck above him Roy could make little or no sense out of the verbal exchanges that were going on between the junks.

And then another sound caught and riveted his attention. A small craft of some kind was approaching—a sampan probably, for he could hear the creak and swish of its single oar and the slap of water under its prow. Not nice if he were spotted! It was close upon him now. Instinctively Roy held his breath as he hung there rigid and motionless. The craft, a vague, shadowy shape passed by him and bumped to rest against the side of the junk.

Roy relaxed. He had not been seen. But he could hear the occupant of the craft explaining now that this junk was the first one his unworthy eyes

had discovered in the fog, that the people of Cheng-ping-wo were in great excitement because of the firing of many guns and the shouting of many voices, and that he had been sent out in his sampan to ask the cause of the not-understandable uproar.

A voice from the deck answered importantly that a foreign devil, who was a thief, had attempted to murder the great Wan Ming and had escaped by jumping into the sea. It was possible that the depraved one had been killed by Wan Ming's bullets, but, if so far he had preserved his miserable life, Wan Ming, whose generosity was known far and wide, would pay richly for the capture of the foreign devil. Also, if this were not known to the people of Cheng-ping-wo, it was well that they be told, since the reward would be great, and where else could the foreign devil swim but to the shore?

The occupant of the sampan was instantly responsive. The logic was irrefutable; likewise cupidity was to the fore. It might perhaps be that the munificent Wan Ming had by now sent word to the village, but in any case the occupant of the sampan would return at once and in all haste to Cheng-ping-wo.

Roy's mental laugh was mirthless. A reception committee ashore! Well, perhaps—and perhaps not! Anyway, he must get to shore no matter what the risk.

He heard the sampan begin to move away from the junk. If the man could find his way out here in the fog he could find his way back again. Roy slipped into the water, allowed himself to float well clear of the junk and then, swimming noiselessly, followed the sampan.

But he had no intention of following it too far. Once he was sure of his bearings and had definitely located the shore line he would need no further guidance. The sampan was outdistancing him, of course, but that was of no consequence; he could hear it, and that was all that was necessary.

He swam steadily, strongly and to his intense gratification found that the tide was with him. The minutes passed. He was at least keeping the sampan easily within earshot. And then suddenly he stopped swimming and raised his head to listen. It had been but a comparatively short swim after all. He could hear the man in the sampan calling to the shore, and voices quite close at hand answering him; also, though very dimly, he could make out now a number of tiny pin points of light—Cheng-ping-wo, of course.

And now he could orientate himself without difficulty in view of the directions that Garkmar had given him. Garkmar had said that Cheng-ping-wo was at the mouth of the river on the left bank going up. All he had to do therefore was to keep Cheng-ping-wo on his left, and he would always be on the nearer side of the river to Shanghai, which was the side that the old temple was on.

He swam still closer in. The voices became a babel, as though an excited crowd was congregating; the lights grew more numerous, but scarcely any clearer—one could hardly expect much brilliance from oil lamps and lanterns in any case! Pitch-black, and still the fog. Even if no more than, say, thirty yards out from the shore he would be wholly safe from observation, but at that distance he would surely be able to distinguish the shore line well enough to keep in touch with it, for he had noted before the fog set in that the whole stretch of coast along here was high-banked and quite heavily fringed with scrub and trees.

Yes, there was the shore line. He could make it out hazily now. He veered at once to the right to parallel it; this would bring him into the river itself, once he had circled or had passed Cheng-ping-wo. The villagers would of course spread out along the shore in their search for him, but his first concern now was to put at least a fair distance between himself and the immediate vicinity of Cheng-ping-wo and, if possible, get a little way up the river where he would have only the stragglers to avoid before he made any attempt to leave the water. Why not? He was still fresh, could take his time, and the tide would help a lot; it was running strongly, and he could practically drift along on it without effort.

He swam quietly, hugging the shore line always, floating at times on his back to rest. Once or twice he heard sampans swishing through the water near him. The voices on the shore and the commotion from the anchored junks began to fade away, and after a time there were no lights to be seen anywhere. And then at last he headed in directly for the shore. How far he had come or how long he had been in the water he could not even guess, but he was tiring now, and it should be as safe here as anywhere to land.

His feet touched bottom. He floated in silently to the water's edge and lay there motionless for a little while. If any of the searchers had come this far there was certainly nothing to indicate that they were now anywhere in the neighborhood, for he could hear no sound around him. He got to his feet, crossed a few yards of muddy shore to where, he could see murkily, the riverbank rose before him and climbing the bank found himself on level ground among trees and underbrush.

He wrung out his clothes and flung himself down on the ground. He was very tired—far more so than he had imagined. Too tired to think except in a snatchy way. Six miles to go overland . . . But he couldn't go barging through the woods in the dark. . . . God only knew where he'd end up that way. . . . The only thing to do was to wait for daylight. . . . No hurry anyhow . . . Tomorrow night, not tonight, was the third night of the eighth moon, and

Roy drowsed off to sleep. He slept restlessly, wakened, slept and wakened again at recurrent intervals. But at the first showing of dawn, though there was still scarcely light enough to see, he was on his way.

His sleep, broken though it had been, had at least put him mentally on his feet. On the face of it, since he had no wish to reach the old temple until after nightfall, he apparently had all day and at least part of the coming evening in which to cover six miles, but as a matter of practical fact he had nothing of the sort. Garkmar's injunction to him not to allow himself to be seen had become ironically unnecessary. The whole countryside would be on the lookout for Wan Ming's foreign devil. Therefore he couldn't travel by daylight for fear of being seen, and he dared not put off the journey until nighttime, not only because he was far too uncomfortably close to Cheng-ping-wo at the moment, but also because, even with the river to guide him, he might have great difficulty in finding the old temple in the darkness.

The only feasible plan to pursue therefore, it had seemed to him, was the one he was now putting into effect. He would go as far as he could up the river before it was actually daylight, and any one was astir; that ought to give him an hour and a half yet, perhaps more. At the end of that time he would of course have to take cover somewhere and lie doggo during the day, but if the going had been at all good he should by then be quite close to the old temple and, with luck, have even been able to locate it so that when it was dark enough again to hide his further movements he would have neither far to go nor any difficulty in finding his way.

And the going he found was not at all bad. At times the bank of the river was high and well-wooded; at others, the shore was low, flat and devoid of any sort of cover, except that furnished by the semidarkness, for there was no longer any fog. He walked briskly when he could, more slowly when the trees and underbrush impeded his progress and ran whenever the open stretches afforded him the opportunity to do so. It was hard to judge the elapsed time or the distance he had traveled, but his average speed he knew had been good, and there came finally the moment when he was confident that the old temple could not be much farther away.

But it was growing light now—too light already to risk any further exposure of himself in the open spaces. A few minutes ago, for instance, he had been able to see almost across the river. There were several junks near by, and one of them was quite close—much closer than he liked, inshore. And now from somewhere off to the left he could hear a driver's petulant voice accompanied by the slow thump and creak of wheels. The world around him was coming to life. He was quite all right where he then was, of course, for here the bank of the river was high, steep and thickly wooded, and as long as the trees provided him with protection he could keep on going, but after that, prudence warned him that it would be very definitely time to halt.

He went on for what he judged was perhaps another quarter of a mile, and then the trees began to thin rapidly, giving him an almost unhampered view of the terrain ahead. He stood still, his eyes searching the landscape. Luck! He could have asked for nothing better. For what he estimated to be a distance of considerably less than half a mile the ground was comparatively barren, then it rose to form a high, wooded bluff on the riverbank, and there, showing through the trees, he could see portions of what appeared to be a decayed wall and behind it the roofs of buildings likewise in decay. The old temple, beyond any question whatever! Also, a hundred yards to his left, he could see the deep-rutted road over which the creaking cart he had heard a little while ago had doubtless been traveling. The road, though, did not lead directly to the temple; it seemed to diverge around the bluff, presumably to continue beyond on its way up the river. Logical enough! What traffic could there be to a deserted temple that harbored only a lone and supposedly half-demented Buddhist priest? Perhaps in the old days the road had forked there, perhaps it still did even if the by-road had long since been in disuse. In any case that was immaterial, for he could not possibly lose his way now when the time came no matter how dark it then might be.

A little way back Roy had crossed a small stream, little more than a rivulet, that trickled its way down to the river. He retraced his steps now and ensconced himself in a thicket beside the stream. Here was abundant shelter for the day.

The day! The entire day to put in! Not a wholly entrancing prospect! But there was no alternative. He did not propose to reach the old temple until after dark, for it would be folly to take any chance of being seen or discovered by the mad priest—who wasn't mad. He wasn't going there to deliver the yellow package; he was going there to be, he hoped, an unseen

witness of whatever it was that was scheduled to take place on this the third night of the eighth moon.

He took out the yellow package from inside his shirt and examined it critically. The oil-silk wrapping had preserved it perfectly. He applauded the foresight of Mr Chu Sho-tung in preparing it in this way against the hazards of a sea voyage! What was in it? If it contained some vital communication written in Chinese, for which reason Garkmar had refused to turn it over to Wan Ming in particular or any Chinese in general for fear that it might be read—and he believed Garkmar's dying words—there was nothing to be gained by opening it. Speaking the language and reading it were two vastly different matters! He could not read Chinese. Better open it, though, just the same, even if he *did* believe Garkmar. He opened it. It contained nothing but a sheaf of papers covered with Chinese characters. Utterly undecipherable to him. All right. At least he was satisfied. He wrapped it up again as securely as he could. There was nothing to be done with it except—well, say, hand it over to MacNulty. If he *ever* could. He wasn't minimizing the risks ahead tonight. But no matter what else occurred one thing was certain: the priest who faked insanity up there at the old temple would never get it!

Tonight! What did he expect to do or see or hear tonight? Tonight was the third night of the eighth moon. Well, what about it? Suppose it was! What did it mean anyhow? He could not answer that until tonight was over. But he remembered very vividly that conversation in the Huetan's boat when he had rowed Garkmar and that Chinese merchant out to the ship. Lan Chao-tao was soon to hold a council at a secret meeting place.

That inner voice that sometimes plagued Roy prodded at him now cynically.

And if the old temple is the secret meeting place, and the time appointed is the third night of the eighth moon, and Lan Chao-tao and his underlords that the Chinese merchant talked about are to be there—what then? Do you expect to capture them all singlehanded? No, of course not! But you'd like very much, very much indeed, to find out who Lan Chao-tao is. Of course! And then somehow, though God alone knows how, you'd make your way back to Shanghai and with the aid of the police trap your man. Excellent! But there is always a most excellent chance that, instead, Lan Chao-tao might find out who *you* are!

Quite true. All of it. It was exactly what had been passing through his mind. A queer way, though, of expressing his thoughts! Yes, quite true, but,

whatever eventuated, the cards this time would not be stacked by Lan Chao-tao when the showdown came. And that was all he asked.

He tucked the package away inside his shirt again and took out his revolver from the pocket of his dungarees. The grease-smeared cartridges were of course immune, and the revolver's immersion in the water wouldn't have done it any harm, providing it was not allowed to rust. He broke the revolver, extracted the cartridges and removed the cylinder, tore a piece from the bottom of his shirt which was now dry and, with a stout twig to serve as a plunger, began to clean the weapon carefully.

His thoughts reverted to the old temple and the lone priest. What he hoped might happen tonight was one thing, but what might actually happen was another. He might be wholly wrong in his supposition that Lan Chao-tao would come here to hold his furtive council. He might as well make up his mind to that, and that he was going it blind except in one particular: the yellow package, according to Garkmar's own words, was definitely intended for Lan Chao-tao. It was supposed to be handed to the mad priest tonight, who, if he did not deliver it in person, would naturally then in some way pass it on to Lan Chao-tao. Therefore at least the obvious remained. Watch the priest. He would watch the priest.

Another thought came uninvited and suddenly to mind—the source and authorship of the inside information that had from time to time mysteriously reached MacNulty, and to which same source he attributed the letter exposing Mr Chu Sho-tung that he had himself received. But why think of that? No reason at all, but now, *having* thought of it, the natural corollary presented itself in the form of another question. Did this informer, who on occasions appeared to know so much about Lan Chao-tao's intimate movements and at other times so little, know anything about the old temple, the priest and the third night of the eighth moon? What was he driving at? Quite frankly, he had no idea. The question merely possessed interesting possibilities—that was all. Nothing to be gained by pondering over it.

Roy reloaded the revolver, restored it to his pocket and stretched himself out in the thicket. He had not realized it before, but he was conscious now that he was beginning to feel hungry. Too bad! There was nothing to eat. Perhaps he could sleep.

He could not only sleep, but he slept heavily. When he awoke the sun told him that it was long past midday. He went to the stream. One could manage without food for a goodly period if one did not have to combat thirst as well. He drank his fill and went back to the thicket.

But there was no more sleep. He lay there while several hours went by—his mind, as it so often did now when for long periods he was physically inactive, dwelling on the past. Not brooding. There was always the ache and loneliness that would not be appeased, but he liked to think about his father and about Myrna. It seemed to bring them nearer to him. And if at times he turned and lay with his face in his hands, and if at times the leaves beneath his body stirred and rustled faintly because his shoulders shook, they did so not scornfully—for what was there of shame in a strong man's tears?

And so, lost to his immediate surroundings, Roy lay there until, in the waning afternoon, suddenly aroused, he sat bolt upright. Rather faintly but none the less unmistakably the sound of firing reached his ears. It seemed to come from somewhere down the river in the direction of Cheng-ping-wo. It persisted—grew heavier.

CHAPTER VI

The Old Temple

ROY jumped to his feet, pushed his way through the thicket and looked out over the edge of the riverbank which, being high here, gave him a clear view. Down the river and perhaps three-quarters of a mile away a junk that was close in by the shore, though he could not tell whether it was aground or not, was afire. Smoke, shot with flames, great swirling volumes of it, shrouded the burning vessel to a large extent, but he could see that it was being attacked both by another junk that was near at hand and by some riflemen on the shore. For a time the firing was incessant from all quarters, for the attacked craft replied in kind, then figures began to leap from the burning junk into the water and gradually the firing died completely away. But the smoke was thicker now, settling down on the water like a curtain between himself and the scene.

There was nothing more to be seen, but he had little doubt as to the meaning of it all. Dog eat dog probably, he told himself. The Chinese of the pirate and bandit type that infested not only the sea coasts but the inland waters as well had no distaste for preying upon their own kind when the opportunity offered. An ugly little episode. There were not likely to be any survivors!

What time was it? Again the sun was his informant. It must be well after five o'clock. He returned to the thicket. Another two hours at least to wait before it would be dark enough to make a move.

But those remaining hours were not to pass unmarked by incident either, for some half an hour later another series of sounds caught and held his attention. Far different sounds this time, becoming more and more distinct, obviously from the road out there that he had seen and approaching from the direction of Cheng-ping-wo—menacing shouts and jeers and vile-tongued commands chorused by Chinese voices.

Once more Roy jumped to his feet but this time made his way through the thinning trees to where, though quite secure himself from observation, he could plainly see the road, since it was, as he had previously noted, only a

hundred yards away. And then, as he instinctively clenched his teeth at the sight that confronted him, he suddenly realized that he perhaps knew more of the meaning of the attack on the burning junk than he had before, since after all there *were* survivors—God help them! A middle-aged Chinese man in a short, black, brocaded jacket and a tottering old Chinese woman, both with their hands tied behind their backs, were being pushed and prodded and hustled along the road by six vicious-faced, jeering Chinese in dirty and disreputable attire, all of whom carried guns slung across their shoulders, and at every few steps the lash of a whip descended in gratuitous cruelty on the back of the male captive and sometimes struck the old woman as well.

He had seen the faces of these two unfortunates no more than once before, and then only indistinctly, but there was no mistaking their identity. They were the Chinese merchant and his old mother whom he had glimpsed through the fog on the deck of the junk with which Wan Ming's had been in collision. And he had no doubt in his own mind now but that he could supply in one word the reason why they *were* survivors—ransom. A Chinese merchant from Canton on a pilgrimage to his father's distant grave must be possessed of money.

Was this some of Wan Ming's work? He was inclined to think so though he was not at all prepared to say that he recognized any one of the six ruffians as being a member of Wan Ming's crew. Did it matter? It was a miserable spectacle, and anger seized upon him, but there was nothing he could do to better the situation by so much as one iota. Even if intervention would avail anything—which it wouldn't with the odds of six to one against him—he dared not let himself be seen; he might better never have left England than do that now!

And so he stood and watched the sorry procession as it went on up the road. There was no secrecy, no attempt at concealment on the part of the bandits. Well, that too fitted in perfectly with the attack upon the burning junk, than which nothing in the way of outrage could have been more blatantly and openly perpetrated. Who was to say anything? Who was to raise a hand against these vermin? No one, forsooth, in this sparsely settled countryside—not primarily through fear, though that factor could not be wholly ignored, but because, more likely than not, the great majority of the dwellers hereabouts were in cahoots, silent partners as it were, with the outlaw element.

Captors and captives were near the bend of the road now where it diverged around the old temple on the bluff and in another minute or so would be out of sight, and——

Roy rubbed his eyes in startled amazement. They were very certainly disappearing from sight—but not around the bend of the road! Instead, they were heading in among the trees where he had conceived there might once have been a fork leading to the old temple.

They were going to the old temple! What did that mean? He was on the qui vive now. He did not return to the thicket. This was a vantage-point from which, so long as the light lasted, he could keep watch, and which he did not propose to leave.

He was rewarded. At the expiration of what he knew could not have been more than half an hour, though it seemed much longer, the six bandits emerged from the trees, came down the road toward him, passed by and continued on in the direction of Cheng-ping-wo. Some of the questions that had been thudding at his brain were now therefore partially answered, but the essential one of all was not. It was apparent now that the lone priest had not been reinforced by the eyes and ears, to say nothing of the physical strength, of six confederates, and that the two prisoners had been left at the old temple, with the priest undoubtedly acting as their warder. But what did all this portend?

Did it bode well or ill for the night ahead? It was added proof, of course, that the old temple and the lone priest were not all that they seemed, but would the two prisoners have been taken there if that was to be the locale of Lan Chao-tao's secret council meeting? Also he wasn't at all sure now, since he had seen the two prisoners taken to the old temple, that Wan Ming had had anything to do with that attack upon the junk down the river there and much less sure that Wan Ming had sent those two captives hither. If Wan Ming had known the actual truth about the temple he might easily have jumped, and jumped correctly, at conclusions instead of prodding Garkmar so constantly and fruitlessly with pertinent questions, and, bearing out this supposition, Roy had gathered from remarks that had passed between Wan Ming and Garkmar at various times that Wan Ming came but rarely to Cheng-ping-wo—had not, in fact, been there for several years—and so it was a fair presumption that he had no intimate knowledge of the vicinity.

Roy's brain muddled on. Would this or would that happen? There were too many ifs. They did not clarify anything; arraigned against each other they only induced a greater confusion. Nothing was concrete. He would have to take tonight as it came. There was nothing else for it. Speculation would get him nowhere.

Twilight came. Then darkness.

Roy moved swiftly then, but cautiously. Keeping well away from the road to avoid any chance traveler, though he had seen no one upon it since the six bandits had passed by on their return, he crossed the open space in front of him and presently reached the edge of the wooded tract on the bluff that surrounded the old temple. There would be a moon later on, he knew, but meanwhile here, as he began to make his way forward through the trees, it was utterly dark. He proceeded even more cautiously now, making no sound, practically feeling his way. The crumbled wall, or at least such portions of it as he had seen, had appeared to be quite close to the outer fringe of trees and so now could not be far away.

Nor was it. He came suddenly upon a heap of debris where the wall had fallen completely away, crept across it silently and stood still on the other side. He found himself even yet among trees, but it was not quite so dark here. The lower branches were well above the level of the ground, the trees themselves were wider apart and seemed to be in more orderly array—a grove, he imagined, possibly of dragon cedars, that had been planted by the priests in the thriving years long gone.

He was standing beyond doubt in some part of the temple court. He could hear nothing. There was no light anywhere to indicate the whereabouts, let alone the presence, of the lone priest. He wondered with grim facetiousness what he would have done under these circumstances if he had been blindly and literally carrying out Garkmar's instructions? Shouted probably and kept at it until he was answered. He wasn't shouting now—but where was the priest?

He began to skirmish about among the trees. He could see open spaces here and there and could make out the shadowy outlines of several buildings. He had never visited a temple, but from what he had read he took these to be the onetime pavilions and quarters for the accommodation of guests and pilgrims and the housing of the priests themselves. The temple itself he could not mistake, for it bulked high above any of the rest of the buildings.

No light. And, tritely put, a tomblike silence. Just age-old shadows, that was all. A bit eerie somehow. But there *was* someone here despite the pervading air of desertion—and someone besides the lone priest. Those two Chinese captives. Where were they? Queer that there was no sign or indication of life anywhere!

Roy chose a spot beneath the trees directly in front of the temple proper and separated from it only by a narrow strip of bare ground. This seemed to

provide the best possible observation post, for from here he could see what little was to be seen at all: the shapeless forms of the other buildings scattered about in the vicinity of the temple and therefore, obviously, the coming or going of anyone to or from these buildings—in so far, of course, as the darkness would permit.

He sat down on the ground. All he could do was to await developments—if there were to be any developments! He was already dubious and uneasy, and he became more and more so as the time passed, hours of it he could have sworn, with still no sign of life from anywhere around him. Certainly, if Lan Chao-tao was coming here tonight no elaborate preparations were being made for his reception!

The moon came up. Still nothing to recompense him for this endless vigil. Where did he expect Lan Chao-tao to come *from*, anyway? Shanghai? Well, why not? From the talk he had heard aboard the junk Shanghai was considerably less than forty miles away overland. It would be quite feasible. Not more than a matter of a few hours if there was a road that was at all passable. And the others who would form the council? Where were they coming from? Who were they? A bit out of the way, this place, but then, of course, that was probably why it was chosen. MacNulty, for instance, would never think of looking for Lan Chao-tao *here*!

The moonlight began to penetrate the shadows in places and by contrast deepen them in others. It disclosed the fact that if there ever had been a door to the temple the door was no more, also that in one place, at least, the roof had fallen in, for a shaft of moonlight was striking weirdly down through the opening into an otherwise cavernously black interior. He was half-tempted to explore it—but what good would that do? He hadn't even a match.

Unless this whole thing turned out to be nothing but a ghastly fiasco, someone must appear from somewhere sometime. But it couldn't be a fiasco. Garkmar had been lucid and desperately in earnest. A dying man didn't deal in fiascoes. The yellow package was a tangible thing. Those two Chinese prisoners who were most certainly here were——

What was that? It sounded like the opening and closing of a door somewhere over to his left. Yes! A figure, carrying a lantern, was emerging from one of the buildings there and was coming toward him—or coming, rather, in the direction of the temple. And now, the moonlight aiding, he could see that the figure was dressed in a loose, yellow robe; at least it looked like yellow and probably was, though that might be the effect of the moonlight. The lone priest!

Roy was instantly and silently on his feet.

The man entered the temple. The light from the bobbing lantern grew dimmer as it receded, and as it did so Roy stole across the intervening space and crouched at the entrance. And now the light was as bright as before, for it had become stationary, and he was again as near to it as he had been when the priest had entered the temple—not far away, perhaps fifty feet. Here in the shadows Roy could see without being seen.

The priest was standing at the far end of the temple entrance and was holding the lantern slightly aloft. His back was turned to Roy, and he seemed to be working with, or searching for, something on the wall. Then the light suddenly disappeared, but he could hear the other's footsteps in a muffled way. The man seemed to be descending a stairway. Then the sounds died wholly away.

It was rather obvious. The priest had gone through a door and had closed the door behind him, shutting out the light from the lantern. Roy tiptoed his way into the temple and across to the wall to, as nearly as he could judge, the spot where the priest had been standing. The moonray through the broken roof helped not at all. It was so dark here that he could see nothing. His hands felt along the wall. The wall seemed to be composed of carved wood panels, but he could discover no door.

But there *must* be a door. He was too far to the right or too far to the left. Try again. The priest couldn't vanish through a solid——

Roy repressed a startled ejaculation. Directly in front of him and apparently through the wall there began to show a thin thread of light that grew steadily more and more luminous. A crack in the wall evidently. But where did the light come from? Definitely not from the lantern, for there was no sound of the priest approaching from the other side. Roy felt out with his fingers. Not a crack. A panel that had not been quite closed and that gave easily and silently under pressure.

He slid the panel back a few inches and found himself looking down a flight of stone steps into a circular chamber whose roof was everywhere supported by an almost forestlike number of large, carved, wooden pillars except in the center where there was a richly-lacquered table with seven high-backed chairs, three on either side and one at the end that was more stately than its fellows. And the source of the light that had showed through the panel now became apparent. Pendant from the pillars and ranged around the side of the chamber were numerous candles and lamps which the priest was now busily engaged in lighting.

The council chamber! The preparations for the reception were under way! Roy's lips were tight as he watched the priest. What was the man up to now? The priest, his task of lighting the lamps and candles completed, had opened a door on the right-hand side of the chamber and, still carrying his lantern, had disappeared through the doorway, leaving the door open behind him.

Roy listened. Again the sound of receding footsteps. He opened the panel to its full extent, which was doorway in size, and examined it. In the light flooding up from the stairs he could see that there was a quite modern spring lock on the chamberside, though how it operated on his side, which was of course still in darkness, he had no means of telling—even if the mechanism had not been craftily hidden as he presumed it was, since the sense of touch when he had felt over it only a moment or so ago had disclosed nothing. In any case, if he could open the panel from the stairside he would at least not have shut the door of a trap irrevocably upon himself.

The priest's footsteps were still retreating, so faint now in the distance that he could scarcely hear them. He couldn't afford to be seen—that was axiomatic—but *he was here to see*. At the worst, any one of those pillars below there would hide him.

From the top step of the stairway Roy turned and slid the panel back as exactly as he could into the position in which the priest had left it. His tread was noiseless as he descended to the floor of the chamber, still noiseless as, moving from pillar to pillar, he gained a position close to and opposite the doorway through which the priest had disappeared.

He could see quite plainly. The priest was still lighting lamps and candles, but this time on a long, double row of roughhewn posts that held in place the roof beams of what looked more like a short though unusually wide tunnel than anything else. Roy thought for a moment. It extended in the direction of the river, didn't it? Yes, unquestionably. But was that of any significance? Anyway, it didn't extend nearly as far as the river, for the priest was standing beside the rear wall now, which was at most not more than two hundred feet away.

And then, as Roy watched, the priest disappeared once more, this time, most curiously, as though he had sunk down through the earth.

The tunnel room, as Roy now styled it for lack of a better name, appeared to be stored on either side, though by no means to full capacity, with all sorts of merchandise; bales, boxes, casks and loose articles were everywhere to be seen. He moved forward for a closer inspection, only to

come to a sudden halt in the doorway. And there for a minute he stood as rigidly as though he were incapable of further movement.

Some twenty yards inside the doorway, hidden from him before by an intervening pile of merchandise but now full in the light that played upon it from the lamp on one of the posts, he saw again, on its jade pedestal, the bronze dragon of Chapei.

CHAPTER VII

The Zero Hour

ROY's brain was chaotic. He couldn't be mistaken, could he? He reminded himself that there were thousands upon thousands of bronze dragons in China. Yes, but there weren't thousands upon thousands of magnificent jade pedestals such as this one, in China or anywhere else, that mounted a bronze dragon.

He stepped forward through the doorway and stood beside the dragon, but his eyes were almost instantly attracted by still another object. Lying on the floor beside the pedestal was a ceiling fixture still with its rose-colored bulbs that brought memory flashing swiftly to his mind. And near by were pieces of furniture that he recognized too. Also there was a huge rug, obviously Oriental though it was rolled up, and there were numerous straw-encased bundles that from their shape, it was not hard to guess, contained those vases whose outstanding beauty had not failed to impress him even under the unpropitious circumstances in which he had once seen them.

Here, then, were the entire furnishings of the reception hall of that house in Chapei from which he had so narrowly escaped, and these in themselves alone identified the bronze dragon beyond peradventure or doubt. He remembered word for word what MacNulty had said: "When Lan Chao-tao moved out that night he took with him everything the house contained except one occupant and one piece of furniture."

A bitter smile flickered for an instant across Roy's lips and was gone. His dead father tied in a chair. That was all that had been left. And so everything else—at least everything that had been in the reception hall, the only apartment in the house that he had actually seen, for that inner room had been in comparative darkness—was here, was it? He thought he knew why. It was in accordance with every move that Lan Chao-tao had ever made. Lan Chao-tao hadn't denuded the house merely for the sake of the intrinsic value of what it had contained; he had almost certainly transported and hidden these things here so that no single object that Roy or anyone else could afterward identify might crop up somewhere and afford a traceable clue to Lan Chao-tao.

Roy stared critically down the length of the weird tunnellike room in which he stood. Many of the bales and cases that flanked the rather narrow alleyway, formed by the double line of posts upon which the lighted lamps were placed, had been opened, and the contents laid upon the ground. Bolts of silk, he noticed particularly, were in abundance, also there were a number of new cases, their covers propped up beside them, ready, obviously, for repacking. Loot. This, then, was one, at least, of the hidden caches where Lan Chao-tao revamped for market the proceeds of his piratical forays, though the occasional empty spaces along the wall were indicative perhaps of the truth of the statement the Chinese merchant had made to Garkmar in the Huetan's boat that pickings of late had been rather thin!

But nowhere, as his eyes searched about him, was there a sign of any other piece of furniture save that which was here in the vicinity of the bronze dragon. He nodded his head as though endorsing his own opinion. The probability was somehow strong in his mind, and this lent color to it, that, except for the reception hall which, if his theory were correct, had been lavishly and luxuriously fitted up purely for the occasion and the impression it would make upon him, but little of the rest of that shabby, low-quarter house in Chapei had been furnished at all. A quite logical assumption. Otherwise, the balance of the house furnishings would be here, too, wouldn't they?

He lifted the bronze dragon from the pedestal and examined it minutely. It was intact in every particular. There was not so much as a scratch upon it. It had kept its secret well! He smiled grimly as he set it back on the jade pedestal. He would know where to find it again! The third night of the eighth moon, whatever else it held in store, had at least opened auspiciously.

Roy started suddenly. He was in a rather exposed position here, wasn't he? Through the open door he could hear voices now and footsteps descending the stone stairs into the circular chamber. Well, there was plenty of cover. He dodged instantly behind a large packing case that was near at hand and crouched there on the floor. And now, too, he could hear other voices, this time from the lower end of the tunnel room where the priest had disappeared. The priest was returning—and not alone. There was an entrance, then, to the tunnel room other than by way of the panel between the temple and the circular chamber.

He could move now in neither direction. Not so good—for the moment at any rate. From where he was he could only see obliquely a few yards along the passageway between the posts in the center of the tunnel room and nothing at all of the doorway leading into the circular chamber. He would be

able to rectify that though, he promised himself, as soon as the priest and his companions had passed by. Meanwhile he could do nothing but content himself as best he could with what he could *hear*.

Not very satisfactory so far as the circular chamber was concerned: a confusion of voices, the shuffling of feet, the scraping of chairs as seats were evidently being taken at the council table. Better, however, here in the tunnel room. Here the voices were more distinct. The priest—Roy took it for granted that it *was* the priest—and those with him seemed to have paused back there along the passageway and to be engaged in some vexatious consultation. Chinese expletives. The repeated mention of machine guns and traitors.

They were coming along in his direction again.

“Even in Peiping,” said a voice angrily, “we are now so closely watched that——”

“The same is true everywhere,” another voice interrupted in a tone that was both venomous and apprehensive. “The auguries have been unfavorable from the time the well-chosen Mr Travers was appointed by Chu Sho-tung to carry out the commands of the illustrious Lan Chao-tao and execute justice on the person of the execrable Morton Lang, for did not the esteemed Mr Travers himself die on the return journey by a disease of the heart that suddenly overtook him? Yes. And after that was there not the deplorable matter of the diamonds that were never found? Yes. And then the ruin of many plans because birth has been given to a perfidious offspring, a traitor who is hidden among us. Some of us have made long journeys hither, but it is well that we have been summoned here tonight to take counsel.”

“It is well,” agreed the first speaker, “for there are many other ill-omens still unrecounted by your truthful lips. But see! The august Lan Chao-tao is already in his seat and awaits us.”

They were passing by in Roy’s line of vision now. The priest in his loose yellow robe—it *was* yellow—a tall, cadaverous man, with crafty and forbidding features, followed by two Chinese who appeared to be of the upper class but were at any rate in rich attire—the two speakers presumably.

Travers! Roy’s mind was running riot. So it was Travers who had murdered Morton Lang! He had sometimes thought that it might have been Chinese Charlie, though he had also thought that it was much more likely to have been one of the many Chinese stewards. Travers was the last man he would have picked as the assassin. Exactly! That was why Travers had been

chosen. "Well-chosen" that underlord of Lan Chao-tao had just said. Quite so! Travers had been only a casual shipboard acquaintance, but he knew the man to have been genial and well-liked by all on board and to outward appearances always the gentleman. Mr Chu Sho-tung must have selected the fellow from among his trusted criminal associates either in England or on the continent, though, if a foreigner, Travers' English accent had not betrayed him in any way. Execution! Judgment! Roy's hands clenched fiercely. But what was the use! Travers as an entity meant nothing. If it hadn't been Travers it would have been someone else. Travers was dead.

That singsong, whining voice, which was certainly not that of either of the previous speakers, and which seemed to come now from just this side of the doorway, was the priest's, wasn't it? The words were quite distinct.

"I will make known at once to the Illustrious One what I have explained to your excellencies, and that which your excellencies have seen, for it may be that the Illustrious One will see fit to deal with the matter before I and all others who sit not at the council are commanded to depart, and the doors are shut upon us. If your excellencies——"

Roy's forehead gathered in puzzled furrows. Yes, it was the priest, right enough. But what the devil was the fellow talking about?

They had gone on through the doorway, their footsteps and the priest's voice lost now in the confused sounds that issued from the circular chamber. Roy edged forward and stole a glance around the corner of the packing case. He could see the doorway, but beyond it, with the exception of catching sight of a moving figure or two, the many pillars, which seemed to superimpose themselves with deliberate malice upon one another, obstructed his view miserably. He could not obtain even a glimpse of the council table.

The angle wasn't right, that was all. But how change it? He could not expose himself to view; the matter of angles worked both ways! What was he to do? He couldn't stand in the doorway! And yet he was just far enough away from it to prevent him from hearing clearly what was going on in there. Moreover, and what was of paramount importance, he wanted to see the face of *one man* in particular!

He wasn't going to be stumped, was he, just when success was all but within his grasp? It was damnably maddening! But there must be some way out of the impasse. Where were his wits? Well, what about the door? Wasn't that the solution? He considered its possibilities swiftly. The door swung inward on the same side of the passageway where he was crouched, was about three-quarters open, and was prevented from swinging back to its full

extent by some carelessly scattered odds and ends of merchandise. It was a massive door, and therefore the hinges must be massive too, and depending on the size and type of the hinges would be the width of the opening between the door jamb and the rear edge of the door itself. If he could drop down behind it! It would at least provide him with a totally different angle of vision, and, whether that was productive or not, he would at any rate be able to hear almost as well as though he were actually standing in the open doorway itself. The door was about twenty yards away. Could he reach it, without being seen, by climbing over the almost roof-high bales and casks and cases that intervened? His lips compressed. It wasn't a question of could; it was a question of must.

But, though short, it was not an easy journey. He dared make no sound, least of all dislodge a cask or bale or box to send it tumbling thunderously to the ground, and there were times when there was scarcely room to squeeze through beneath the roof. But the confused sounds from the circular chamber still reached him—his ears were alert to that. Five minutes? Perhaps more. He was in a welter of perspiration as he finally gained his objective and dropped down behind the door.

There was a comfortable space here. The door was indeed massive, constructed of thick, solid timber, fire-proofed with a heavy metal casing and when closed, he noted, could be securely fastened by means of a stout iron bar that, working on a pivot, would swing home into a socket which, though he could not see the latter, must, obviously, be affixed to the wall. And the same, of course, might be true on the other side, so that the door might be fastened either way at pleasure. He did not know. He had taken but little notice of the door on the way through; he had had eyes then only for the bronze dragon. And even now these material aspects seemed only as something inconsequential and extraneous that had intruded itself in an almost subconscious way upon his mind.

But that space between the door jamb and the rear edge of the door! He glued his eyes to it. It was wider even than he had expected. There was at least a two-inch spread. And, more again than he had dared to expect, he could see the upper end of the council table. But here was both an abysmal disappointment and a sudden sense of grim satisfaction. He could see Lan Chao-tao. One of the two councilors who had been ushered into the circular chamber by the priest had said that Lan Chao-tao was already seated, hadn't he? Well, he, too, could see that now. It could be no other than Lan Chao-tao who sat in the stately chair at the head of the table. But Lan Chao-tao's face was masked. He could see only the back of the man's head sitting at Lan

Chao-tao's left. But the face of the man at Lan Chao-tao's right was in full view. It was a very familiar face. Mr Hung Tchen, the Chinese director of the British-Asiatic Bank! So that was where the leaks had come from! Mentally Roy apologized abjectly to Henry Anderson for his ofttime suspicions of the other.

"Yes," he added heartily under his breath, "and damned glad to do it, too!"

The three men in view were all in Chinese garb. He could see no others, but he could hear now, as he had anticipated, almost as plainly as though he were in the room itself. The whining, singsong voice of the priest rose and fell, and the cryptic remark that the fellow had made to the two councilors was now no longer cryptic. The priest was talking, and apparently had been doing so for some time, about the two captives who had been brought to the temple that afternoon. And now he ended his narration abruptly.

The masked figure at the head of the table spoke with smooth incisiveness.

"Bring the man in first!"

That unforgettable voice! Roy felt the blood surging upward to his temples, and yet somehow he seemed to be strangely calm and unmoved.

The priest appeared in sight, coming swiftly toward the tunnel-room doorway, passed through and continued on down the passageway between the lamp-lighted posts. Roy turned his head, but he could not see over the miscellany of merchandise that was piled high above him. But presently, at about the spot where the two councilors and the priest had halted in discussion on their way through, he heard the priest scuffling around and snarling out orders. So it was in here that the two prisoners had been confined and had therefore, obviously, been thrust into one of the spaces he had noticed that were untenanted for the moment by reason of the scarcity of loot.

Dragging footsteps. Harsh, waspish commands. The priest was returning with the merchant from Canton. They came into sight a moment later as they entered the circular chamber. The prisoner, whom Roy now saw for the third time, was limping badly; his hands were still tied behind his back, and the priest, while he urged the other savagely along, was at the same time roughly removing a thick strip of cloth that, presumably to hold a gag in place, had been bound around the lower part of the captive's face. Then the pillars hid them.

Roy could not see what was done with the prisoner, but a moment later Lan Chao-tao, at his ease in his stately chair, began to speak—like the purring of a tiger cat. Roy stirred disquietedly in spite of himself. He knew too well the portent of those casual, conversational tones:

“Would the highborn presence, who, it was understood, was a merchant from Canton, be graciously pleased to make known his name to his wholly unworthy listeners and inform them also why the unmerited honor of a visit had been paid to Cheng-ping-wo by so exalted a person?”

Probably, almost certainly, it was due to gag-swollen lips and tongue that the answer, which came from somewhere near the lower end of the table where it was now evident the prisoner had been placed, was so thick and low as to be almost unintelligible. All Roy could catch, and that only because he had already heard the story, was that the man was on a pilgrimage to his father’s grave.

“It is regrettable,” observed Lan Chao-tao commiseratingly, “that the music of the great one’s voice does not ring clearly in our disappointed ears. Can it be that he is afflicted by some untreated malady that is even within our unskilled power to cure?” He waved his hand nonchalantly.

A piercing scream rang out and echoed through the circular chamber.

“Ah, that was better!” Lan Chao-tao was affable. “The voice was so quickly being restored to its much-to-be-desired natural vigor! So would the highborn now explain why there were so many machine guns found on the junk of a peaceful merchant from Canton?”

The answer came steadily, though weakly:

“It was known to all men that there were many robbers and pirates upon the sea and upon the coasts and in the rivers. The machine guns were for the protection of those aboard the junk.”

Again the same question. And again the same answer, but this time terminated—as Lan Chao-tao gestured idly with his hand once more—in another scream of agony.

Again and again the same question, the same answer, the same movement of Lan Chao-tao’s hand and the resultant scream.

It was not a trial; it was the inquisition of a man foredoomed yet put to torture. It was abominable and horrible. Roy’s hands clenched. Thank God, he could not see the victim’s agony! How long must this continue? Not once

had the man deviated in the slightest degree from his original answer, but the screams were becoming weaker, more like moans now.

The end came suddenly.

“The repetitions are tiresome,” said Lan Chao-tao smoothly. “Perhaps the woman will be more versatile *when she has seen her son!* Bring her _____”

But Lan Chao-tao got no farther. Roy stiffened. From somewhere, dull and muffled, there came what sounded like heavy rifle fire. Then the crash of an explosion, and the council table temporarily vanished from sight in a cloud of dust, smoke and flying debris.

“A bomb flung down the stairway from the panel entrance!” said Roy between his teeth. “But God knows who flung it!”

Another bomb! Yells and terror-stricken shrieks rising even over the roar of the detonations. The one avenue of escape was through the tunnel-room door here. Figures were groping, stumbling, pawing their way toward it. Roy smiled queerly. Lan Chao-tao, easily distinguishable now by reason of his masked face, was well in the lead of everyone else. Yes, he would let Lan Chao-tao through—but not the rest. The bomb throwers, evidently bent on extermination, could deal with the others; he would deal with Lan Chao-tao, and Lan Chao-tao would not escape!

Lan Chao-tao was near the doorway now, but he was lurching badly and appeared to be wounded. A moment more, and Roy heard the other stagger through the doorway and slump down upon the floor inside, and in that moment Roy slammed the great door shut and shot the iron bar home into its socket.

CHAPTER VIII

The Tunnel Room

POUNDINGS upon the door. Frantic appeals for admittance. Enemies all! Roy's face was set like chiseled marble as he wrenched his revolver from his pocket and swung around toward the sprawled figure on the floor. Lan Chao-tao! The man was raising himself painfully on his elbows and, striving to stand erect, succeeded only in attaining a sitting posture.

Roy stooped and tore the mask from the other's face. It was a Chinese face, of course, but the face of no one he could name by any other name than—Lan Chao-tao! Perhaps MacNulty could do better! But now nothing else mattered save that it was Lan Chao-tao, and, had he had any doubts about that before, the scar that disfigured the other's face from the corner of the lips to the bridge of the nose would instantly have set that doubt at rest.

The eyes of the two men met and held.

"You do not seem to recognize me, *Lan Chao-tao*," Roy said evenly.

"Ah," murmured Lan Chao-tao blandly. "Forgive me if I was puzzled for a moment by your uncouth appearance. So we meet again!" He smiled whimsically. "What did you do with the diamonds, Mr Melville?"

Lan Chao-tao was bleeding profusely from wounds on his face and neck and was obviously in pain. Roy paid a mental tribute to the man's insouciance and essayed to answer in kind—but none too successfully, for he was conscious of the bitter, caustic note that crept into his voice.

"I left them in your keeping." He pointed down the passageway to the bronze dragon on the jade pedestal. "I fed them to your dragon, and as they were indigestible they still ought to be in the brute's belly."

Lan Chao-tao's eyes followed the direction indicated, fixed for an instant on the dragon and returned to meet Roy's again.

"I believe you," he said imperturbably. "Well-played indeed, sir—as I think you say in England. I congratulate you, Mr Melville."

The poundings on the door were becoming feebler, and the screams and shrieks more intermittent, as though those trapped within in the circular chamber were rapidly succumbing to the shots that, though their sounds were deadened, were definitely being fired now in the circular chamber itself. But elsewhere the fight was still in progress. From directly overhead there was firing too, and suddenly a roof beam yielded, and earth and shattered timber fell upon the floor near by. The attackers, whoever they were, were evidently well-equipped with bombs—or more properly, probably, hand grenades. Roy's mind was working swiftly. This was no safe place. Above, if he was not mistaken in the location, was one of those shadowy pavilions that he had seen, and in which now, evidently, the defenders, Lan Chao-tao's guards—that at least was obvious—were making a stand.

Lan Chao-tao was smiling quietly.

“I suppose that I am to congratulate you, too, on this surprise attack, but—pardon me if I revert again to your English phrases—I might remind you that one is sometimes hoist on his own petard. Another explosion above our heads may do more damage than the last, and we are both in equal danger. With your assistance I am sure I could accompany you for at least a few yards away from here to where we would be less exposed. But—” he gestured toward the revolver in Roy's hand—“perhaps you would prefer to shoot and, so far as I am concerned, have done with it at once, Mr Melville.”

“I am not a murderer,” Roy answered coldly. “Nor, so long as there is no chance of your escape, an executioner either. Yes, we'll get a bit farther down the passageway. I'll even carry you if necessary, but——”

There was a deafening, roaring sound in Roy's ears. It seemed as though the earth itself were torn away from beneath his feet. One of the posts that supported the roof, as though uprooted and wielded by a giant hand, its lighted lamp gyrating in mad arcs, came hurtling toward him. He was conscious of a blow that seemed to lift him from his feet and hurl him yards away to the floor.

Half-dazed he lay there for a little time. Then he struggled to his knees, only to fall prone on the floor again. He was fighting now to retain his grasp on reason. There was flame and smoke. Fire—perhaps from the exploding bomb itself, perhaps from the spreading oil of the lighted lamp on the post that must have been smashed when it struck the ground. Where was his revolver? Where was Lan Chao-tao? He could see neither. The fire was

gaining rapidly. Evidently much of the stored merchandise was highly inflammable.

Again he tried to gain his feet, and this time succeeded. But movement was agony. He felt at his side. His hand came away sticky, wet. He was bleeding, bleeding badly. But he had to get on, hadn't he? There was a way out of here—down at the far end of the tunnel room—there must be—where the priest had disappeared—the way the priest and the two Chinese councilors had come back.

He stumbled forward in that direction. The smoke thinned a little. And then suddenly he laughed in a distraught way. There was Lan Chao-tao. He could see Lan Chao-tao. Already badly wounded, even if he had escaped further injury from that last explosion, the man was not making rapid progress, but he was nevertheless well down the passageway and close to the end of the tunnel room. Who else than Lan Chao-tao would know better that there was an exit there? Lan Chao-tao was crawling along the floor and dragging the bronze dragon beside him.

Roy gnawed at his lips against the pain and weakness that assailed him. A hell-born race—and hell must be holding its sides while it shrieked with unholy laughter. A man who crawled and a man who tottered upon his feet! He could go a little faster than Lan Chao-tao, though probably not fast enough to overtake the man before the exit, whatever that might prove to be, was reached by the other. But the race would not end at the exit. If there was still an underground passage to the river bank, as he was sure there was, there must be at least several hundred yards yet to go. He could overtake Lan Chao-tao in that distance. If it were humanly possible to carry on, Lan Chao-tao could not get away. Perhaps Lan Chao-tao would not be able to go much farther anyhow. Lan Chao-tao was badly wounded too, and——

Roy clawed at his smarting eyes. The smoke was eddying in ever-increasing volume around him, and he could hear the flames back there near the door of the circular chamber begin to crackle as the fire gathered headway. It wouldn't be long before the whole place was an inferno.

Ahead of him the lamps on the last two posts at this end of the tunnel room were murky spots of light—just enough to enable him to see that the exit, not five yards away now, was an opening in the floor, the head of a stairway, probably, that led down to the shore level of the river, and that the crawling figure ahead of him had just reached it.

Five yards! But the distance wasn't measured by five yards; it was measured by the unconscionable time it would take to cover them. He tried

to quicken his pace, tried to *run*—a pitiful failure except for a step or two. But Lan Chao-tao, too, still clutching the bronze dragon, had evidently measured the gap that was closing in between them, for he was now twisting and squirming frantically, though feebly, in an effort to lower himself through the opening before Roy could reach him.

Four yards. Three yards. God, that took so long! Lan Chao-tao's head and shoulders and his outstretched hands that grasped the bronze dragon as he sought to carry it with him, alone showed above the level of the floor. Two yards.

And then Roy came to an abrupt halt. The dragon, an unwieldy object at best with its three-foot spread from jaws to tail, seemed momentarily to have caught its claws on the edge of the flooring, obviously causing Lan Chao-tao, tugging at it, to lose his balance, for with a wild, despairing cry, that was no longer that of a nonchalant Lan Chao-tao, both man and dragon suddenly disappeared from sight. And an instant later there came the sound of a dull thud and, faintly, the tinkle of splintering metal.

Roy stumbled forward then and looked down through the opening. There was a steep flight of stone stairs, and below—was it twenty, or thirty feet below?—there was a dim light. Of course! He understood. That was the underground passageway to the riverbank that he had already assured himself must exist. The priest had lighted lamps down there too. That was the way the two councilors had come in. But what held Roy's gaze was the crumpled, motionless figure of Lan Chao-tao at the foot of the stairs—dead. It couldn't be otherwise. No man so sorely wounded could have sustained that fall and lived. Yet that was not all that he could make out in the feeble light, for, a little beyond the lifeless figure, lay the bronze dragon, broken and dismembered now, and strewn around it a number of little, white, paper packets. The diamonds! Lan Chao-tao dead! Strange that the diamonds should be lying there at the last almost at Lan Chao-tao's finger tips and yet, as they had always been, and now were forever, beyond his reach!

Roy clawed at his eyes again. The smoke was becoming thicker and thicker. Yes, but there was a current of fresh air coming up from below. The sooner he got down there the better.

His head was swimming dizzily, and his mind seemed suddenly now to be functioning only in a jumbled, fragmentary way: There weren't many minutes left to spare. . . . How could there be? . . . The flames were rapidly eating their way along the tunnel room toward him, weren't they? . . . He could at least rest down there. . . . Try to stop the flow of blood from his

side. . . . If he didn't, his—his number was up, wasn't it? . . . Perhaps it was anyway. . . . It wasn't only his strength, but his life that was being drained away. . . . Internal injury and—and all that sort of thing. . . . The pain nauseated him. . . . Made him damnably giddy. . . .

He limped down a step—another—and stood there swaying unsteadily. *That old Chinese woman!* The mother of the Canton merchant that Lan Chao-tao had tortured! He had not thought of her before; he had thought only of Lan Chao-tao. She was back there somewhere in the tunnel room and just as surely bound and gagged as her son had been. She would be burned to death, of course, unless—unless he could manage somehow to save her. He—he couldn't leave her there, could he?

He climbed back up the two stair treads that he had descended, and as he did so that inner voice of his was to the fore once more, battering at his brain more ferociously and virulently than it had ever done before, it seemed.

"You damned fool!" it raged. "Take your one chance for life while you have it! What is an old Chinese woman to you? She's practically spent her life anyway. You've yours to live. It's a question whether you've even got strength enough left to save yourself, let alone her. How are you going to find her? You don't know where she is. And even if you find her what are you going to do? Die with her quixotically? Go back! Get out of here! You're so weak yourself that you couldn't help her anyway!"

Roy gritted his teeth. There was a miserable side to him, wasn't there? God help him if it ever got the upper hand!

He got down on his knees and began to crawl. The air was clearer here near the floor. She couldn't be far away. It was somewhere down here at this end of the tunnel room that the two councilors had halted, and it was from down here too that not so long ago the priest had taken her son away.

He must look wherever there were empty spaces between the stacks of merchandise. She couldn't be anywhere else. Some of the lamps were burning, and the flames farther up the room were bursting through the smoke, and these two, combining, produced a spectral, unearthly glow. But he could see only with great difficulty. It wasn't the light so much; it was his eyes, smoke-seared and burning, that were failing him.

He zigzagged from side to side of the passageway, hunting, groping. To breathe was to cough and retch. The smoke and fumes were suffocating. And it was growing hotter—heat waves that seemed to scorch as though they were flames themselves. That inner voice was striving for utterance

again. Damn that inner voice! He could still carry on, couldn't he? She must be here somewhere.

And then he found her. It was all smoke and blackness in here against the wall between the rows of high-piled casks. He couldn't see, but he could feel. It was the woman all right. He could feel the face, cloth-bound and gagged like her son's, feel the tied ankles and arms and feel her move responsively as he touched her.

God, for a breath of air! His mind seemed to be faltering, sinking into almost a state of semicoma. He fought desperately for sanity. She was still not only alive, but conscious. He couldn't cut her lashings. He had nothing with which to cut them. And there was no time to make a fumbling attempt to untie them here. The seconds were counting now. Air! His lungs seemed on the point of bursting. An old woman—cramped limbs—she probably wouldn't be able to do anything for herself even if she were released.

Dragging her, for he had no strength to lift her in his arms, he crawled out into the passageway, and, dragging her, he crawled along toward the opening to the tunnel below, oblivious to the fact that his wound was taping every inch with blood. His cracked lips emitted a sound that he did not recognize. He thought he had laughed defiantly. This was a sort of ghastly plagiarism, wasn't it? Lan Chao-tao had crawled along here dragging the bronze dragon not long ago. Would the cohorts of hell applaud this second spectacle, too?

He came to the opening. Had the light gone out below? No—it was his eyes. They were streaming water, ached excruciatingly—worse than his side. It was his eyes that had gone out, leaving him near to total blindness. The light was still there, but it seemed no more than pin-point in size now.

The old woman lay like a blurred bundle on the floor beside him. He could not carry her down those stairs. He—he was too weak. He felt his senses leaving him. It seemed as though he were floating off into space. But—but he must go on somehow. He could not let this be the end. It would be death here for them both. He thrust his head down into the opening and inhaled deeply, greedily. The fresher air revived him somewhat.

But he couldn't *carry* her down those stairs. There was only one way, brutal though it could not help but be on those stone steps—if even he had strength enough for that! There was nothing for it other than to drag her after him again.

He began to descend the stairs, swaying as he went. He could support her head and shoulders—that was all he could do. Her bound feet thumped and bumped from tread to tread. Even that guiding pin-point of light hurt his eyes cruelly. He couldn't see. He had to feel out with his feet. He couldn't go on much farther. Pray God, there was not much farther to go.

At the bottom he stumbled over something soft and bulky. Yes, he knew what that was. It was the body of Lan Chao-tao. He won clear of it with his burden and sank down on the ground.

He had gone his limit. He knew that. But—but there was one thing left to do. Sooner or later the smoke certainly, and the fire probably, would be penetrating down here! The—the old woman must have her chance. *She* wasn't wounded, and——

He groped out and began to struggle with her bonds. It took a long time to untie the knots. He wondered in a queer, vague way if she hadn't already died from suffocation. Suppose that with his last remaining strength and in his last few moments of remaining consciousness he was but freeing the arms of a dead woman!

But finally it was done, even to that cloth and gag.

"There—there must be a way out of here to—to the river," he gasped out feebly in Chinese. "If—if you can't walk, creep and——"

He was going out—floating off into space again, but this time he seemed to be falling through great depths, and though supporting arms seemed suddenly to be flung around him he was still falling—falling—falling. And there was the sound of voices in his ears. No, not voices—just one voice. It seemed to articulate with great difficulty, as if perhaps, through some injury, lips and tongue would not co-ordinate, or perhaps it was because the voice was yet so far away, but in his soul it still found recognition. It was the voice of one dead—the voice of one he had loved so well. It was as though he heard Myrna's voice from across death's threshold cry out to him in tender greeting: "Roy! Roy! Oh, Roy, beloved——"

And then he heard the voice no more. . . .

CHAPTER IX

White Walls Again

MACNULTY was uneasy and embarrassed. He always was when sentiment—so ill-becoming to the superintendent of the Shanghai municipal police!—had a bit the better of him. He hid his sentiment now in jocularly.

“Well,” he bantered, as he shook hands and sat down beside the bed, “I must say, Mr Melville, you look a lot better this afternoon than you did when they brought you in here three days ago. You looked like hell then, if you don’t mind my saying so. Maybe it’s the haircut and the shave. But even that is a promising sign. They don’t barber the dying—until they’re dead.” He glanced portentously at his wrist watch. “My permit as your first visitor is for half an hour. And Doctor Colter says that when he says half an hour he doesn’t mean thirty-one minutes. There are a lot of questions I want to ask you, and maybe there are a few questions you’d like to ask yourself, so, since you’ve probably been getting fifteen-minute bulletins about Miss Lang ever since you knew you were back in the land of the living, give me a free hand for—er—well, official business, won’t you?”

Roy grinned. Back in Shanghai. The same old MacNulty, the same hospital, the same white walls, the same Doctor Colter, the same nurse—God bless her! It was true about those bulletins. Miss Tanner had supplied them. An understanding soul! Witness that charming blush this morning when she had confided over the alcohol rub that she hoped to be married herself in another few months. The same everything—except himself. Physically he was pretty nearly as much of a crock as he had been when, a year ago and more now, he had lain here in bed in the hospital through those endless days. Internal injuries and some broken ribs this time, and it would be a week at least before he could hope even to sit up in a chair Doctor Colter had said. But that didn’t count for anything. There was a song in his heart now, as against the black despair that he had known on that former occasion. Myrna wasn’t dead. Myrna was alive. That voice, those arms around him when he had drifted off into unconsciousness in that tunnel below the old temple, hadn’t been the delirious imaginings of a sick mind. It *had* been Myrna’s voice, and those arms had been Myrna’s arms. The old

Chinese woman! Myrna! True, Myrna was also here in the hospital now, but her condition was in no way serious. She had been near to suffocation, and that, coupled with the violent treatment she had received at the hands of the bandits, had temporarily undermined her strength. Doctor Colter had insisted on three or four days in bed. Myrna was alive. And not only alive, but right here in this corridor only two doors away, and tomorrow—or the next day at the latest—both Doctor Colter and Miss Tanner had promised that Myrna would be allowed to get up and come in to see him. Why shouldn't there be a song in his heart? Myrna was——

“Well,” grunted MacNulty patiently, “what about it?”

“Dear old chap, I'm listening,” returned Roy innocently. “I thought you were going to ask me questions.”

“Er—yes. So I am.” MacNulty fished the same old briar out of his pocket and polished the bowl on the side of his nose. “So I am. I've just been in talking to Miss Lang, and——”

“How is she?” demanded Roy avidly.

MacNulty grimaced.

“Dammit, she's all right! I've got her side of the story. Now I want to get yours——” he glanced at his wrist watch again——“and there are about five minutes gone already. Hiding those diamonds in that dragon's belly was a cheery bit of all right, *I'll* say! But you can leave out that part of your story for the time being as I've already heard it, since what little you've been able to tell Doctor Colter up to now—for he says you haven't been allowed to talk very much—he has of course passed along to me. What I want to know now particularly is how you got back here into China without anybody knowing it, and how you found out about that old temple? Miss Lang says you two weren't working in conjunction with one another, and that you didn't even know at the time that it was she, masquerading as an old Chinese woman, whom you pulled out of the fire.”

“That's quite true,” confirmed Roy. “But as for the rest, with the time limit you've set, I don't see how I'm——”

“Give me the high spots,” suggested MacNulty. “That's all that's necessary now; the details can wait for another day.”

“All right then,” agreed Roy and sketched in rapidly a concise summary of what he had done and his reasons therefore since he had last seen the other here in Shanghai.

“Holy cripes!” ejaculated MacNulty as Roy concluded his abbreviated story. “So that’s how you got the yellow package we found inside your shirt, is it?”

“Yes,” said Roy. “I knew you’d found it, for I asked Doctor Colter about it. Also, because I opened it, I know what was in it, though the contents meant nothing to me since I could not read Chinese. So here’s one of *my* questions. What was it all about? Was it important enough to warrant all the fuss that was made over it?”

“You’d receive a decoration from Scotland Yard for getting your hands on it and holding on tight, if Scotland Yard awarded decorations,” MacNulty smiled grimly. “I cabled a translation of it to Inspector Thornton at once. It was a report submitted by Mr Chu Sho-tung of his activities covering the period of the preceding six months. A very enlightening document! Many of his agents, not only in England but on the continent, were named. I’ve had a cable back from Thornton. Chu Sho-tung managed to commit suicide shortly after his arrest, but, between Scotland Yard and the continental police, at least a dozen of his principal confederates have been rounded up. And, I might tell you, we’re doing the same thing over here in the Orient now with what’s left of Lan Chao-tao’s crowd.”

“My best wishes to you!” exclaimed Roy fervently; and then, abruptly: “Look here! You’ve heard Miss Lang’s story, and you’ve heard mine. There are some things I know through what both Miss Tanner and Doctor Colter have told me, but there are a lot of things I don’t understand which I am sure would be clear enough if I had heard Miss Lang’s story as you have. I know, for instance, that the man who called himself Lan Chao-tao was found dead down there in that tunnel, and that the bronze dragon and diamonds were also found. I know that neither Hung Tchen nor any of the other leaders escaped alive from the council room, and I know that Miss Lang managed to creep out of the tunnel and brought some of her men—they seem mysteriously to have been *her* men who had successfully attacked the place—and I was carried out, placed in the car that, I understand, had brought Lan Chao-tao across country to the temple and, along with Miss Lang, was taken to the hospital here in Shanghai, and that, on Miss Lang’s instructions, you were then notified of what had occurred. But—and there are so many buts—the things I don’t know: I don’t know how Miss Lang got on the track of Lan Chao-tao in the first place, how she gathered those men of hers about her and organized that attack, and how, even more bewildering still, she came to be upon that junk, and—— Oh well, open up, won’t you,

Superintendent? You can't expect a man to get well with all that on his mind, can you?"

Superintendent MacNulty sucked ponderously at the stem of his briar.

"Oh, light it!" gibed Roy. "I can even stand the scrapings you smoke if you'll only talk!"

"Thanks," said MacNulty and, tamping down the dottle, produced a match. The effect was almost instantaneous. Officially the superintendent of the Shanghai municipal police had vanished. MacNulty was purring. "Well," he said, "you having told me all I wanted to know, that's reasonable enough. I don't want to steal any of Miss Lang's thunder, for there's a great deal, I imagine, that she'll want to tell you herself, so I won't go into details any more than you did. But—" there was a sudden quizzical twinkle in the steel-gray eyes—"for the sake of your peace of mind during the next day or so before she is up and around again, I fancy she wouldn't mind if I told you enough of her side of the story to make the pieces fit."

"Excellent!" applauded Roy. "But first, tell me this: Who was Lan Chao-tao? Have you discovered anything startling about him? Or was he just a heretofore uncaught super-criminal? In other words—just Lan Chao-tao?"

"Did you ever hear of a Chinese merchant prince by the name of Tu Shen Siang?"

Roy shook his head.

"Well, that's the answer. So far as you are concerned then, Lan Chao-tao was—Lan Chao-tao. But Lan Chao-tao was Tu Shen Siang. And out here in the Orient natives and foreigners alike are still catching their breath, and the disclosure is still being headlined in every newspaper from North to South China. Take the name of whatever Englishman you consider stands highest and is most honored in financial circles, say, in London, and read in your morning paper over the breakfast table that he is, instead, the head of a stupendous, international syndicate whose dividends accrue from crime and murder, and you have as near an analogy as I can give you to Tu Shen Siang of Shanghai, alias Lan Chao-tao. We haven't had a chance yet to trace his career from its beginning, but we know of course that it extends over a long period of years during which Lan Chao-tao as an actual personality dropped out of existence, as it were, though he was careful to keep the *name* alive, not only as a cloak for many of his crimes but to capitalize as well on the fear and dread that it inspired. At the end, as you have seen, he held in the hollow of his hand men like Hung Tchen." MacNulty shrugged his

shoulders. "We have already identified the others that were found with Hung Tchen. They were from the south and from the north, and every one of them held a key position, either in the civil, military, political or business life of the country. And," he appended wryly, "I might add that it was reported Tu Shen Siang had met with a grievous motor accident somewhat over a year ago, and though I saw him on numerous occasions in Shanghai, and though I was looking for something of the sort, I must confess I did not connect his facial disfigurement with *you*. So you see that even to a hard-boiled policeman Tu Shen Siang was above reproach!"

"I have an idea," contributed Roy with a thin smile, "that I'm lucky to be no more than a hospital case! Go on, please. Miss Lang's story now, Superintendent."

Superintendent MacNulty knotted his brows thoughtfully for a moment.

"Well, condensed, it's like this," he began. "It seems that from the night her father was murdered she made up her mind to devote herself to an attempt to unearth Lan Chao-tao, and by the time she received that last message—you were with her that afternoon, you will remember—her preliminary plans were pretty well perfected. She did not wait for Lan Chao-tao to strike. She had previously drawn a considerable sum of money from the bank, so she was well supplied with funds, and she left her house in disguise that night through her bedroom window, and all of her servants loyally pretended that they thought she had gone to bed—though there was not one of them then but knew the truth! You know what followed. With her number one boy found murdered where he had been sleeping as usual outside her door, we all thought she had been kidnaped.

"I wouldn't have endorsed her plan, mind you; it was too much of a ghastly risk, but I have to admit that she was the one white woman in China qualified to see it through. She had been born here, had lived here all her life and spoke Chinese as fluently as though it were her mother tongue—thanks to the amahs and other servants who had surrounded her from birth—and physically both her stature and features lent themselves admirably to the role she proposed to play. She had faithful retainers to rally around her, not only in her own household but among those who, though for one reason or another had left the family service, had still, whenever the need arose, been provided for, over the years, by both her father and herself. She had taken her amah, who looked upon Miss Lang as a mother would look upon her child, her houseboys and some of the old retainers into her confidence and that night became the old Chinese woman that, as you have told me, you first saw on that junk off Cheng-ping-wo.

“She took up her life then among these lower class Chinese. She did not confide in the police for, as in your own case, she said she dared not risk the possibility of a leak anywhere or the possibility that there might be spies of Lan Chao-tao even among the Chinese police themselves.

“I’m afraid I’m not very original in this, but I think you’ll get my meaning when I say that from then on it was the old story over again of the ever-widening ripples from the pebble dropped into the pond. These trusted ones of hers had fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and so on, and these latter had their intimate friends. It was in that way that she began to work, and it was in that way that she obtained her first result—much sooner, indeed, than she had dared to hope. She received a hint that in keeping a certain rendezvous on the Nanking Road you would only meet with treachery. It was Su Nan, her number two boy, that she sent to warn you. You thought his face was vaguely familiar, but you did not recognize him under the grime and in his beggar’s garb. Su Nan knew that Lan Chao-tao’s men would be near you. His life depended on his disguise.”

MacNulty crackled another match.

“That incident stumped me then, and always has until today,” he said soberly; “but it’s clear enough now, and in a sense it’s the key to everything that followed. From then on, though she said Lan Chao-tao himself seemed always as far out of reach as ever, her sources of information widened steadily and to such an extent that she was able to obtain from time to time accurate foreknowledge of some of Lan Chao-tao’s plans. And it was Miss Lang, of course—I know now—who passed that information on to me.

“But it was not until within the last month that she obtained the *one* piece of information for which she was risking her life—where to find Lan Chao-tao himself. And this time she did not pass on the information to me. She did not, she told me today, propose to take any chance of even a whisper reaching Lan Chao-tao to put him on his guard. I don’t know—” MacNulty chuckled suddenly—“but that we ought to inflict dire penalties upon her for taking the law into her own hands—except that bandits in this country are always fair game!

“Anyway, she found out about the meeting at the temple long before it was scheduled to take place and laid her plans accordingly. A visit was paid to the temple by a wandering beggar—Su Nan again. Su Nan didn’t do so badly in spite of the priest’s watchful eyes. He came back with the information that there were underground rooms at the rear of the temple and

that, though he had been unable to find it, he was sure that there was a tunnel leading out to the riverbank.

“Miss Lang qualifies as a staff officer. She armed thirty men, carefully chosen by her retainers and their relatives, not only with rifles but with hand grenades to enable them to break through into the underground rooms and started them out in twos and threes from Shanghai several days in advance, as they had to make the journey on foot. Their instructions were to travel only by night, avoid all villages and when within easy striking distance of the temple to remain under cover until a specified hour of the night designated, when they were to rendezvous in the woods at the temple gate and launch their attack.

“That exit through the tunnel to the riverbank that Su Nan had been unable to locate, Miss Lang made her own concern. She did not propose that anyone, and Lan Chao-tao in particular, should escape that way. She manned that junk you asked about with a picked crew and equipped it with machine guns. Her plan was to station the junk after dark near the shore opposite the bluff on which the temple was built and, with the aid of flares after the shore attack had begun, pick out and command the exit from the tunnel if anyone attempted to use it.

“But here, through no fault of hers, this part of the plan went awry. In preparing the flares on the way up the river from Cheng-ping-wo an accident happened. A charcoal brazier was overturned, one of the oil-soaked flares caught fire, and in short order the whole junk was ablaze. This attracted the attention of a near-by junk. A helpless craft and predatory rescuers! That about sums up the situation. The fight began, Miss Lang’s machine guns came into play, but the smoke and flames soon drove the defenders overboard, and——But you saw the fight yourself from a distance. The attacking junk proved to be one belonging to Lan Chao-tao that, no doubt in view of what was to transpire that night, was doing something in the nature of patrol duty near the temple. The machine guns excited suspicion, the crew met with short shrift, and Miss Lang and that devoted Chinese chap who posed as her son, and who, I am glad to say, finally came through alive, though he had a narrow squeeze for it, were taken to the temple and——But you know what ensued.

“I think that puts the finishing touch to the whole picture—with perhaps one exception, though even that now is really obvious. I refer to the original ransom letter. Certainly your father’s intention of going to the Orient was known long before he actually set out on the trip from England. We know that Chu Sho-tung posted that letter in London. Either, therefore, the

kidnaping had been set for a certain prearranged day, or else a cable was sent to Chu Sho-tung that the kidnaping had just been effected. True, Scotland Yard couldn't trace any such cable, but an apparently innocent missive, its code hidden, for instance, in freight-rate quotations and cargo consignment advices such as frequently passed in a routine way between Chu Sho-tung and his agents in Shanghai—in other words Lan Chao-tao—would naturally get by without question at Scotland Yard. In either way, therefore, the practical synchronization of the kidnaping in Shanghai and your receipt of that letter in London is readily accounted for, and the idea of the synchronization, of course, was to impress you with the magician's touch that validated the letter and to leave no doubt in your mind as to the fulfilment of the threatened consequences if you did not comply with its instructions. And so that's that. I did not intend to talk my head off, but you've definitely got it all now."

During the latter part of MacNulty's recital Roy had lain with his eyes half closed as he had listened intently and without interrupting. He opened his eyes wide now as he shook his head.

"No," he dissented quietly. "Thanks no end for what you've told me, Superintendent, but it's *not* all. You've slipped a point that, to me at least, is about the most important of the lot."

"And what might that be?" demanded MacNulty blankly.

"The reason," Roy pointed out, "why Miss Lang wanted everybody to believe that she was dead—and succeeded so convincingly when she sent those two houseboys of hers to you with that story of her death."

"H'm. Yes, I did forget to mention that," admitted MacNulty, "though I asked her about it this afternoon. She said she wanted to stop the police from searching for her, that it only made it all the harder for her to keep undercover and play her part, and also, though he would, of course, know the story was not true, she thought Lan Chao-tao would almost certainly interpret it to mean that she had used it as a blind to effect her escape from China, and so *he* wouldn't search for her any more either."

"And do you believe that?" inquired Roy after a moment's silence.

"Why not?" returned MacNulty. "It sounds plausible enough, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes—quite!" said Roy casually. "Only I've an idea that Miss Lang fibbed to you outrageously."

"Eh—what?" ejaculated MacNulty. "What do you mean?"

“Nothing,” said Roy with a cheery smile. “That is, for the moment. If I find out I’m right, I’ll tell you. All I wanted to know was what she *did* say to you.”

“Well, you’ve found out all right,” retorted MacNulty with a good-natured grumble. “Though what you’re driving at I’m hanged if I know.” He was suddenly staring, awe-stricken, at his wrist watch. He thrust his briar hurriedly into his pocket, jumped to his feet, wrung Roy’s hand and made for the door. “Been here *an hour!*” he whispered dramatically. “See you tomorrow—if I’m not caught going out!”

The door closed behind him.

And then a little later the door opened again, but so quietly and stealthily that at first Roy was not aware of it. Then he tried desperately to struggle into an upright position only to fall back on his pillows again—but his arms were outstretched. As stealthily as the door was opened so it was now shut, and coming toward him was a little figure in a dressing gown, her finger pressed to her lips cautioning silence.

The next instant Myrna was kneeling at the bedside, and with his arms around her Roy drew her lips to his.

Her face was all color. She hid it on his shoulder.

“Oh, Roy,” she said breathlessly, “is it very, very terrible of me to do this? I stole out of my room without anybody seeing me. But I wanted to come to you so much. I would have been quite well enough to have come before, in spite of what they said, only they told me you were not well enough yet to see anyone. But they let Superintendent MacNulty see you a little while ago, and so I—I couldn’t see why I shouldn’t too. And so I—I’m here. The—the old Chinese woman whom you did not recognize, and who owes you her life, wants to—to try to tell you that what you did for her that night——”

“The old Chinese woman will try to do nothing of the kind!” Roy interrupted with mock severity. “And how dares she talk about recognition? She did not recognize me either that night.”

“Oh yes, she did,” Myrna contradicted softly. “The very moment you dragged her out into the passageway where there was light enough to see. *You* weren’t disguised, you know. But she couldn’t speak to you because _____”

“And yet at the end,” Roy broke in tenderly, “I recognized her voice. She said—‘beloved.’ ”

“Roy! Oh, Roy!” she whispered.

Her face was still hidden on his shoulder. He lifted it gently now to look into eyes that were wet with happy tears.

“Once, dear,” he said a little brokenly, “you made me a promise. Do you remember? You promised that wherever you were, you would let me hear from you. Why didn’t you keep that promise?”

“I—I couldn’t, Roy.” The color was flooding her face again.

“Perhaps I know why. Was it for the same reason that you tried to make us all believe that you were dead?”

There was no answer.

“Why did you want us to believe that?” he prodded.

“I—I explained that to Superintendent MacNulty. Didn’t he tell you?”

“Yes, I know what you told him, but tell *me* the truth. You wouldn’t have brought what you knew would be hopeless grief and sorrow to those who loved you unless you had a stronger reason than you gave MacNulty. Tell me what that reason was, Myrna. It’s one, isn’t it—I’m daring to hope so anyway—that means everything and all to me?”

She nodded her head; her lips were quivering, and then her face was hidden again on his shoulder, and his arms were tight around her as she knelt there at the bedside.

“Yes, Roy, you know,” she said tremulously. “There—there wasn’t anything else that I could do. I was afraid—so terribly afraid for you. You had not only outwitted Lan Chao-tao but had marred him for life. Your only chance was to leave China. You—you had never told me that you loved me, but—but somehow I—I was sure you did. And—and—so I was sure that you would never—never leave China if there were even a chance that I was still alive, and—and that you could——”

There was a knock upon the door, but neither heard it. The door opened, and Miss Tanner put in her head.

“Oh, I—I beg your pardon!” she gasped and hastily closed the door again.

Miss Tanner was an understanding soul.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Dragon's Jaws* by Frank L. Packard]