

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1941

Cover by Margaret Brundage

## NOVELETTES

- THE MAN WHO LOVED PLANKS** . . . . . Malcolm Jameson 4  
*—And Gathered the Scattered Wood Nymphs of All the Ages*
- WAKE AND REMEMBER** . . . . . Seabury Quinn 31  
*Romance Walks Out of the Past*
- THE GRAVEYARD HORROR** . . . . . Thorp McClusky 103  
*Only Crucifix and Stake Could Cure the Dead's Ghastly Malady*

## SHORT STORIES

- THE DOWNFALL OF LANCELOT BIGGS** . . Nelson S. Bond 19  
*Traveling With Us? We're Outward Bound for Mars!*
- AN ADVENTURE OF A PROFESSIONAL CORPSE**  
(4) *The Affair of the Shuteye Medium.* . . H. Bedford-Jones 46  
*This Dead Man Does Tell Tales!*
- THE CRYSTAL BULLET** . . . . . Donald Wandrei 60  
*Freezing Horror Falls from the Wildernesses of the Universe*
- THE CREAM-COLORED CAT** . . . . . Ann Sloan 66  
*... Was Death's Pet*
- EDGE OF THE CLIFF** . . . . . Dorothy Quick 80  
*"One Second—and It's Over"*
- DEATH WORE AN ASTRAKHAN HAT** . . . . . Walter C. Brown 83  
*Black Magic, a Thousand Years Out of Its Time*
- "COME TO ME!"** . . . . . August W. Derleth 94  
*A Full Dress Rehearsal for Judgment Day*

## VERSE

- DREAMER** . . . . . C. S. Youd 65
- FLIGHT OF TIME** . . . . . John M. Barnard 82
- BAD COMPANY** . . . . . Leah Bodine Drake 119
- SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS** . . . . . Irwin J. Weill 58
- IT HAPPENED TO ME** True Experience . . . . . Ralph Rayburn Phillips 120
- THE EYRIE and WEIRD TALES CLUB** . . . . . 121

*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 15 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, 90c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand, London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

Copyright, 1940, by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain.  
Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.

173  
Vol. 35, No. 8

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

H. AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

"Listen, Sergeant. Act your age.  
You can't kill people by  
making screechy noises  
on a piece of stone."



HARRY FERMAN

# Death

## Wore An Astrakhan Hat

By WALTER C. BROWN

*Just a shabby old man in a woolly hat—who hitched  
his murders to a star*

**W**E WERE sitting in the Little Shanghai over a stone bottle of *samsbu*. It was past midnight, and we had the back room all to ourselves except for a couple of Chinese playing *ching gong*, which is the Oriental idea of checkers.

It was quiet as a joss-house in the Little Shanghai. The players pondered their board like a pair of dreaming Buddhas.

The sifting of snow against the window might have been a warning hiss from the gold-thread *kylin* writhing across the black silk curtain.

"Rocky," I said, "what was the strangest thing you ever ran across down here?"

Every one calls him "Rocky," but you'll find him listed on the rolls of the 14th Precinct as Detective-Sergeant Russell Stone, Chinatown Squad. And unless I

miss my guess it won't be long before he turns in his stripes for a captain's gold shield.

He took a few moments to think it over. "I'd say it was the Man with the Astrakhan Hat."

"What was that—a murder case?"

"We don't know. Three men died, you see, but we were never sure."

"Why? Couldn't you get a confession?"

"Oh, yes. That's the trouble. The confession specified murder. But if it was murder, then it's the strangest case on record. Yes, and the queerest weapon ever used to kill."

"What was the weapon?"

"Stars!"

Rocky tossed out the word in the casual way he might have said "Knife" or "Gun" or "Poison."

I suppose I just sat there and looked at him. He lifted his narrow glass and absorbed a few drops of the "triple fire" from Hong Kong. *Samsbu* is almost as thick as molasses, and has the sullen glow of Chartreuse.

"How do you like this stuff?" he asked.

"Two shots of this'd make the rabbit chase the bulldog," I told him. "But let's not get off the subject. You were going to spill a yarn about a Chink with an Astrakhan hat who hitched his murders to a star."

"He wasn't a Chink," Rocky retorted, "and I didn't say a word about telling the story. You asked a question, and I answered it."

"That's known as quibbling," I tossed back at him. "Do you want to be coaxed?"

"It isn't that. I'd be wasting my breath. You wouldn't believe the story. Nobody does. Fact is, half the time I don't believe it myself."

"That's one swell prologue, Rocky. Go right on from there."

"No, I mean it. The thing doesn't make sense. It's a piece of black magic—

a thousand years out of its time. You just can't let yourself believe it."

"You try me," I told him. "After the things I've seen tonight, I'm ripe to swallow anything."

For Rocky had been showing me Chinatown—*his* Chinatown. It wasn't anything like the Chinatown I'd seen a hundred times before. We went exploring in weird nooks and corners, places like Sword Alley, Half Moon Street, and Paradise Court.

We met moon-faced Mark Sin, high priest of fantan; watched Yow Gat, the blind man, carve a perfect Chinese *junk* from a peach stone; heard Kow Lun play "Love comes to the least of men" on a bamboo flute, and had a drink of white whiskey with Wang Tsi, proud wearer of the last pigtail in Chinatown.

We'd seen the wooden war drums of the Ting Tsien Tong, and the five sacred candles burning in the jade-crueted Lamp of Peace. We'd been smuggled past the bolted doors of the Plum Blossom Joss in coolie smocks to glimpse the fragrant shrine of Kwan-te and the eight-foot gong of hammered bronze. We had peeped through beaded curtains at the gilded bamboo cages in the notorious "Blue House" of Peking Court.

All of which gives you a rough idea of what Rocky meant when he said "Chinatown." And having had previous samples of Rocky's yarns, I meant to add the story of the Astrakhan Hat if I needed a subpoena to get it.

I told him so in good, round Anglo-Saxon.

"ALL right," Rocky agreed, "but remember, you asked for it. And no arguments. Just listen and keep your mouth shut. I'm tired of arguing about it."

"Okay," I promised, "but start at the beginning. You call him the Man with the Astrakhan Hat and say he wasn't a

Chink. Well, what was he? And what was his name? Or didn't he have a name?"

"Two names, in fact. His professional name was Astro. He was an astrologer, and his star-parlor was in Pagoda Street, over the Green Buddha tea-house. His real name was Melchior Azrael something-or-other. I don't remember exactly, except that it was a mouthful. You can look it up later if you're interested. It's all in the Precinct records. He came from Syria, or Armenia, or one of those places."

"Astrakhan hats are Persian," I put in.

"That doesn't matter." Rocky waved it aside. "I'll never forget the night that shabby old man walked into the 14th with his fantastic tale about murder from the stars. We thought he was crazy and chased him out. That was a mistake that cost us about two weeks' sleep before we found him again.

"THIS all happened some years ago.

Philip Connelly was Precinct Captain then. The House Sergeant was a hard-fisted Irishman named—well, let's call him McDonald. You'll understand why, presently. Looking back on it afterward, it seemed as if everything that was said and done that night fitted into a pre-arranged scheme.

"I was on the midnight shift that week, and I had just reported. Now, coming or going, Captain Connelly was always on the dot. St. Mary's was still striking twelve when he came out of his office, putting on his overcoat to go home. Outside it was snowing and blowing and bitter cold, something like tonight, only more so.

Sergeant McDonald had taken over for the night. He was sitting at the desk behind the railing, reading a newspaper—a late edition he had brought in with him. If he hadn't brought in a paper that night the whole thing might have taken a different turning.

"Any hot news there, Sergeant?" Con-

nelly asked, winding a silk muffler around his neck.

McDonald rattled the paper. "Nothing startling, Captain," he replied. "Oh, I see where old Simon Brent dropped over dead."

"Heart?" asked Connelly.

McDonald nodded. "He dropped over dead at the dinner table."

Now this Simon Brent was a regular Chinatown character. We all knew him. He wore an old frock coat and gates-ajar collar, and carried one of those cloth bags with a drawstring lawyers used before briefcases were invented.

Brent owned a batch of Chinatown properties—part of a family estate from way back, before there even was a Chinatown. He was supposed to have barrels of money, but he was a close-fisted old Shylock.

Connelly stood there nodding his head over the news. "That's the way I'd like to go when my time comes. No fuss, no bother—just a Zip!—and it's over." He pulled on his gloves and laughed. "But after dinner—not before. Well, good-night, boys."

"Good-night, Captain," we said, and he went out. Nothing more was said about Simon Brent. Old men dropped over dead every day—nothing in that to talk about. Fact is, Brent had been a first-class nuisance, always wanting the Squad to crack down on tenants who didn't come across with the rent.

It was very quiet after Connelly left. McDonald and I stayed out front, the rest of the boys started a pinochle game back in the roll-room. There'd be a flurry for a few minutes every hour when the pull-boxes rang in, but that was all.

One o'clock struck, two o'clock, three. By that time we had a couple of howling drunks down in the coop, and they started to out-yodel each other, banging on the cell-bars for music. McDonald threw down his paper. "I'll fix that," he said, and

went out. In a couple of minutes he came back, a little red in the face and rubbing his knuckles. There was no more singing.

Everything was quiet again. McDonald kept turning pages and I was over at the bulletin board looking through the day's fliers from Headquarters. Suddenly there were footsteps out in the hall. They were light, like a woman's, and hesitated so long outside the door that both of us had our eyes glued on the knob, waiting for it to turn.

When it did, there was the Man with the Astrakhan Hat, and a blast of cold air that gave us goose pimples followed him in.

"Shut that door!" McDonald barked, and he turned meekly and went back and closed it. Then he came slowly toward the railing, pulling off his funny round hat and bowing and scraping. He was covered all over with snow, as if he'd been walking in it a good while.

McDonald smoothed down his paper. "Well, what do *you* want?"

"**E**XCUSE, Mister, please. I think I make a murder!"

Out it came, just like that. Nothing sinister about him, no. A touch of the grotesque, perhaps, but just a shabby old man. He had a small face, dark and foreign, with a thin beaked nose and a silky beard all dotted with snow. You could tell by his eyes he was all wound up about something.

McDonald looked him up and down. "You *think* you have," he said, "but you're not sure. Is that it?"

The old man bobbed his head. "I am not sure. I try to kill him, and now he is dead." He kept screwing up his face and making those cringing bows at the desk, holding that woolly hat in his hand.

"Is that so?" said McDonald, very pleasantly. When somebody walks in, hat in hand, and starts to tell you they've mur-

dered someone, you learn to take it with a bushel of salt. Bona fide killers don't act that way. You hear some wonderful yarns in a police station, especially late at night. Hopheads, drunks, reefer boys, half-wits or less—they'll wander in and run off a long spiel about some imaginary crime. We'd given this fellow the once-over, and he looked like one of the tribe.

McDonald looked past him and gave me the nod. I came up behind the man and gave him a quick fanning—we called it a frisking in those days. That was merely routine stuff. He had nothing on him more dangerous than a safety pin.

There were a couple of packages in his overcoat pockets, wrapped in old newspaper. I didn't open them. One felt like a book. The other was flat and narrow and made a rattling sound, almost like dice.

The old man stood quiet enough while this was going on, but he was holding himself in tight as a bowstring, and I saw that the facial contortion was nerves, and not a smirk. There was a sickly sweet smell about him I noticed, too. Thinking he might be a hophead, I pulled up his sleeve, but there were no needle marks in his arm.

"Okay, Sergeant," I reported.

"Now, then," McDonald went on, "we can get down to business. Step up a little closer, Pop. What was the name of the man you killed?"

"His name is Simon Brent."

I pricked up my ears when I heard that name. These owl yarns generally tie up with something big, if they tie up at all, but Brent wasn't important and his death wasn't headline stuff. Page four, I think they gave it.

But McDonald was an old hand at games like this. You couldn't tell from his face he'd ever heard the name before. He reached for a pencil and pad. "Simon Brent. Where does he live?"

To our surprise, the old duffer gave the correct address—street and number.

"What'd yuh kill him with—a knife?" asked McDonald.

"No, Mister."

"Gun?"

"No."

"Well, what? You must have had a weapon."

The old man made a wide gesture. "I kill him with the stars. I make the Curse of Draco for him, and he is dead. Your law make me go in prison now, yes?"

That business about the stars was the tip-off to McDonald. He looked over at me and winked, as much as to say, "Watch me have some fun with this nut." McDonald would listen to these goofy yarns and kid them along. There was a method in it. If they started to act violent, he'd lock them up for observation, otherwise he's shoo them along after awhile.

"Well, I'll tell you how it is, Pop," he said with a perfectly straight face. "Our jails are full up just now. I don't know that we'd have room for you. Maybe I could put you on the waiting-list, though. What's your name?"

McDonald pretended to write it down. "Melchior—Azrael—how do you spell that last?" He made the old fellow spell it over several times.

"Where do you live?"

He gave a number on Pagoda Street, right in the heart of Chinatown.

Now I knew Pagoda Street from end to end, and I had never seen him around there anywhere. I thought he was lying, and tried to trip him up. "Is that over Wan Lee's shop?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "Wan Lee is other side. Where I live is teahouse called Green Buddha." He was right about that.

"What's your line of business?" McDonald broke in.

Out came a business card. McDonald

looked at it and handed it to me. The card was soiled with thumbmarks. In large type was the name "ASTRO," and under it, "Let the Stars Guide You in Love, Marriage, Money Matters. Full Reading, 50c. De Luxe Reading, \$1.00."

"So you're a fortune teller, eh?" McDonald snapped.

"I am astrologer," said Astro. "I read the stars."

"Yeah? You read the papers, too, don't you? Trying to pull off some kind of a publicity gag, I guess."

Astro shook his head. He looked puzzled.

McDonald banged his hand on the newspaper. "You're not kidding me, Pop. I read the papers, too, and it says right here in this paper that Simon Brent died of heart failure at the dinner table. What's the stars got to do with that?"

Astro waved the hat around excitedly. "I have tell you. The stars make his heart to stop. The Curse of Draco make him dead. Always before I am afraid to make this curse, but *him* I hate so strong I try it. I am glad I make him dead."

"So you hated Brent? Why?"

"Mister, he put me from my house. Because I have not enough money on day he mark down, he send men with yellow paper. They are strong men who push me outside. They laugh at me. They sell my bed and chairs. They sell my books and my maps. They leave me nothing. *He* send them to do this, and so I have wish him dead."

"Oh, I see," said McDonald, "you've *wished* him dead. Well, Pop, I take off my hat to you for a good, two-fisted wisher. I've had a whack at that game myself now and again, but nothing came of it. There's no law against wishing a man dead, just so you don't go 'round to his house and put a knife in his back."

"I do not need knife, Mister. I make the Curse of Draco on him. The stars kill."

"Well, well," said McDonald. "That's a new wrinkle. This Curse you mention, what would it be like?"

By this time the boys in the back room had heard our voices and come out to see what was going on. I saw that McDonald was all set to give the old fellow a ride on the merry-go-round. Naturally I didn't take any stock in the old man's jargon about the stars, but the rest of his story made sense, and I had a sort of uneasy feeling about the whole thing.

Anyway, I slipped into Connelly's office and closed the door and used his phone to call Brent's house. When I heard the bell ringing at the other end I felt like a darn fool to be routing them up at 3 A.M. to answer silly questions.

**H**OWEVER, I got an answer right away. Brent's houseman was still up, attending to things. I told him who was calling and a little about Astro, then I asked a few questions.

The houseman assured me that no such person had ever called there, that no foreign-looking man had been seen hanging about the place, and that if any threats had been made against Mr. Brent's life, he had never mentioned it.

"Were there any dinner guests tonight?" I asked.

"No, sir. Just the family, as usual."

"Was Mr. Brent stricken during dinner, or after?"

"Before dinner, sir. They had just sat down."

"And there's no doubt whatever that it was his heart?"

"I don't quite understand, sir," he replied.

"Well, all I've had so far is the newspaper account, and sometimes they say 'heart'—"

"Oh, no, sir. No doubt whatever. The doctor was quite positive. He could give you the details, sir. It was Dr. Robinson."

"Thank you," I said, and decided to go the whole hog while I was about it. Doc Robinson didn't take very kindly to the idea of being dragged out of bed at that hour and I didn't get very far with my questions. "Look at the death certificate," he snapped. "I've been in practice thirty-five years, and I believe I'm competent to certify to *angina pectoris*."

Bang went the receiver, and that was that.

When I came out of Connelly's office the boys were all crowding around the old man, laughing and joking, and his voice was away up, like a screech. "You do not believe. You think I lie. I show you. Give me name of bad man, man you hate very strong, and I show you what Draco do. He die—like that—quick!" The old man snapped his fingers by way of illustration.

"Have I missed anything?" I asked McDonald.

"Oh, he's been telling us how to work this Curse of Draco. It seems Draco is a bunch of stars somewhere—you know, like the Dipper—and we're all hooked up to them by little threads or wires you can't see or touch. He's got a piece of smooth stone there, and a pencil. You put marks on the stone, then draw over it with the pencil, and that breaks all these wires and you fall down dead. Can you tie that one? Crazy as a loon, but harmless."

"Where'd he get this stone?"

"Spain, he says. Spain! I'll bet he picked it up along the docks somewhere."

I pushed up front to see for myself. Astro had unwrapped his paper packages. In one of them was an Arabian manuscript, supposed to be the work of Haji somebody-or-other. It was made up of a bunch of thin slats strung together through the ends, so you could spread it out like a little Venetian blind. The writing looked like half-melted music.

The other package held the magic stone.

It was a very curious stone. It was black as soot, hard, and yet it felt greasy to the touch—something like jade. But it wasn't jade. And it had a smell, a sickly sweet smell like rotting bananas. I rubbed my finger over it and it felt magnetized—very unpleasant. Did you ever handle a live snake?

"Well, it felt like that, hard and scaly, yet sort of quivery underneath. This black stone had a number of cuts like little stars, arranged in a design—a sort of S in reverse. I found out later this S shape followed the outline of Draco—the Dragon—one of the Northern Constellations. The little stars had a sort of glitter to them.

Astro was hopping mad by this time. The boys' razzing had worked him into a fury. I saw that the pupil of one eye had spread to a wide circle, while the other was just a pinpoint. And if you don't know it, that's a bad sign.

"You, Mister," he challenged McDonald. "You give me name, please. I kill him for you."

"Sure," said McDonald. "Why not? It's the chance of a lifetime. Try your gadget on the captain. That's his name on the door over there—Philip Connelly. I guess we could get along without the captain," and he winked at the boys. That raised a laugh. Connelly was a good copper, but not exactly what you'd call popular with his men.

THE old man got busy right away. He copied the name off the glass panel and spread out his string of slats and began to jot down stuff that looked like Arabic writing. After that he copied them onto the black stone, one under each star.

"It is ready," he announced. "You want I should make the Curse of Draco for him?"

"Sure," said McDonald, "go right ahead. We can hardly wait."

Astro picked up the black pencil. It

looked like a carbon stick from one of the old-style arc lights. Well, he moved that black pencil from one star to another on the black stone, and you never heard such a shrill, scratching sound in your life. It was worse than a roomful of slatepencils going at one time. It put an edge to your teeth and made your blood crawl. We were all glad when the sound stopped.

"It is done," said Astro.

"All right, Pop," said McDonald, giving us the wink again. "I hope you made a good job of it. If you didn't, the captain'll come down here and kick the pants off you for disturbing his sleep."

Just about this time the telephone buzzed, and Miller popped up from behind the switchboard. "Hey, Sergeant—a three-alarmer at Reimiger's factory. The F. D. wants all the men you can spare to set up a fire-line."

McDonald raised his voice. "Break it up, boys, break it up. Back to the job. All right, Pop, wrap up your stars and run along now. We'll see you again some time."

The old man gathered up his things and shuffled toward the door, mumbling and chuckling as he went out. Reimiger's factory burned till dawn, and we forgot all about Astro and his magic stone. At eight o'clock my trick was over and I went home and went to bed. I had just about touched bottom when the phone rang. It was Sergeant McDonald, and his voice was so shaken I could hardly recognize it.

"Rocky," he said, "I just had a call from the Precinct. Mrs. Connelly phoned them. *The captain died last night!*"

I was still half asleep. "Died?" I said. "Where? How?"

"At home. In his bed. He was asleep. Mrs. Connelly said he sat up, groaned, and toppled over. When the doctor got there he was dead."

Something went Click! in my mind and the question popped out. "What time?"



"Half-past three—this morning!"

I didn't say anything. It was all to sudden for me. McDonald's voice was shakier than ever. "Rocky, do you think it could be—?"

"Don't be a sap," I cut in on him, sharp. "What'd the doctor say?"

"Heart attack."

"Well, what's queer about that? That could happen to anybody, anywhere."

"Yes, but the time, Rocky! It was just half-past three when—"

"Listen, Sergeant, act your age. You're carrying on like an old woman. You can't kill people by making screechy noises on a piece of stone. That sort of thing belongs in the middle of Africa."

"But I'm the one who gave him the captain's name. I'm the one who egged him on. I told him to go ahead. Rocky—I've got to find out for sure about that stone!"

"Okay," I told him, "wait for me. I'll get dressed and come right over and we'll get hold of the old man, just so you'll get it out of your head. You're crazier than he is."

I did that. I went around to McDonald's house, and he looked like a haunted man. That telephone call had put about ten years on him. "Buck up, Sergeant," I said, "you're making a damn fool of yourself over nothing. It's a coincidence, that's all."

"Maybe," he said, "but I've got to *know*. I feel like I murdered Phil Connelly."

"All right, we'll start by going down to that place on Pagoda Street. Maybe he's still hanging around there. When you see him in broad daylight you'll realize he's nothing but a ragged old crackpot."

It was a two-story house. The Green Buddha was on the ground floor. The upstairs part had a separate entrance, and there was a "For Rent" sign tacked on the door. There was also a cheap tin sign with the name "ASTRO" and a splatter of stars like a comet's tail.

"We're too late. He's been here and gone," McDonald said, pointing to two sets of footprints in the snow drifted over the steps.

We found the door unlocked and went up a dark staircase. The rooms were cold, bare, stripped of everything, and the window panes frosted over solidly.

The back room was black as midnight. I struck a match and looked around, then called McDonald. "Look at this," I said, and struck another match.

From baseboard to ceiling the smooth plaster walls had been painted with all sorts of signs, symbols, and hieroglyphics. On the ceiling itself was a circular chart of the zodiac as wide as the room. It was neat work, and the shiny black paint stood out against the white plaster like wrought-iron tracery.

"Are there no windows in here?" McDonald asked.

"They've been smeared with black paint," I told him. "The old man wanted a spooky corner for his hocus-pocus."

"I don't like it," said McDonald. "Smell that sweet stuff in here?"

I had, and the more you smelled it, the less you liked it.

"He's gone," said McDonald, "and he won't come back. There's not even a place to sleep."

"Of course he's gone. Didn't he tell us how old Brent sold up his furniture because he couldn't pay his rent?"

"I've got to find him. And when I do, I'll get the truth out of him if I have to wring his neck!"

"Well, there's no use wasting any more time here. Come on, Sergeant."

"Where to?"

"Over to Brent's office. Maybe they can tell us something."

BRENT'S office looked like nothing had been changed since Grover Cleveland's time. There was a bald-headed bookkeeper

at a high desk and an old maid typist. They couldn't do any work because everything but the ink was locked up in a big iron safe and only Brent had the combination. Anyway, the bookkeeper told us about Astro.

He told us Astro had fallen back with his rent until Mr. Brent had ordered a levy. Then the "funny little man" had come to the office, very much excited, and had made threats about some sort of curse he would bring down on them.

"When was this?"

"About a week ago."

"Was this just a general threat, or did he give any particulars?"

"No, just general."

"Did he make these threats to Mr. Brent personally?"

"No. Mr. Brent was out at the time. I was alone here in the office. I had to threaten to call the police before he would leave."

"Did he come in again?"

"No, he never came back."

"So you put the old man on the street?"

The bookkeeper looked apologetic. "What else could we do? We have nothing but trouble with those Chinatown rents. You can't get good tenants down there, so we have to protect ourselves."

"Do you know what became of Astro?" I asked him.

"No," he said, "I haven't seen him since."

Outside, McDonald kicked at the snow. "We've got to find him. First thing you know he'll get out of the city."

"We'll find him, Sergeant, don't worry about that. He's got no money. He won't be far away. All we have to do is watch for the Astrakhan hat. That'll be a cinch to trace. We can start right now — divide Chinatown between us. You take all this side of Mulberry Lane — I'll take the other."

But it wasn't as easy as that. At the

end of the day neither of us had turned up a single trace of the old man. And when the midnight shift lined up in the roll-room of the 14th there was a lot of buzzing and whispering among the boys about Connelly's sudden death and that hocus-pocus with the black stone.

When McDonald walked in to call the roll you could have heard a pin drop. When that was over he looked along the line, and his face was white. "Men," he said, "you've all heard by this time about what happened last night. Of course there is nothing in it, but I won't rest easy till I have that old man back here for questioning. God knows I had nothing against the captain. What I said was all in fun. I want you to bring in Astro. Turn the district upside down, if you have to, but bring him in! Dismiss!"

But the old man refused to be found. We couldn't understand it, for we covered Chinatown like a blanket. Day and night we had a man watching Pagoda Street, but he never came back there. We combed through the Homeless Shelter and the flophouses.

Day after day went by, a week, another week, and still no luck. McDonald had become a different man, haggard, brooding, red-eyed from lack of sleep. "I've got to find him!" he'd say, over and over. "I've got to *know!*"

"Rocky," he told me one day, "I've been on the force 28 years. Always I wanted to wind up with my own precinct. Yesterday they offered to make me acting captain of the 14th, and I refused. I couldn't go in there and sit at Phil Connelly's desk. I just couldn't do it."

There were tears in his eyes when he told me that—hard-fisted Sergeant McDonald who'd handle a messed-up homicide stiff like you'd pick up a bag of laundry.

Then, late one night, I found Astro. I spotted the Astrakhan hat. He was look-

ing in the window of Johnny Moy's grocery store. As soon as he heard my footsteps he was off, but I managed to hang onto his trail.

I followed him to a tumble-down shack on Quince Street, where the gypsies have their winter quarters. I waited there half an hour and he didn't come out. So I hunted up a phone and called McDonald at the Precinct.

"Sergeant," I said, "I've found him."

"Wait for me!" he shouted, and he was with me in less than two minutes. I pointed out the house. "Let's go!" said McDonald.

"Hold on, Sergeant. We go in and grab him. That's easy. But then what? What's the charge? Murder? Do you think any jury'd give an indictment? If you took that black stone into court they'd think you were the nut that ought to be locked up."

"Never mind the argument. We'll grab him first—then we'll see."

The front door was locked, so we waited until someone came out of the house, a young gypsy. I flashed my badge and we took him by the arm as far as the corner. "You have a key to that house?" I asked. "I'll take it. Now, there's an old man in there, an old man with a woolly hat. Which room is his?"

THE gypsy told us, and we sent him for a walk. Then we got inside the house and found the room. There was no lock on the door and we came up on tiptoe. It was a small room, and dirty. Nothing but a cot, a chair, and a table with a kerosene lamp.

Astro had the Arabic manuscript spread open on the table, and he was putting marks on the black stone. As soon as he saw us he jumped up, screaming. "Go away! You tell me there is no law. You tell me to make the Curse of Draco!"

"Grab the stone!" I yelled to McDonald. Astro was clutching it, ready to run.

McDonald got one hand on him and the old man hit at him with the stone. It caught McDonald on the neck and he went down as if he'd been shot.

Small as the room was, the old fellow nearly got away from me. He hopped up on the cot and made a flying leap from the springs like a diving-board. I had to stop him with a left and a right, and in the excitement I clipped him harder than I intended. He folded up like a rag doll.

McDonald was out cold. The edge of the stone must have caught him across the vagus nerve, for he was plenty sick when I got him back on his feet. Meanwhile the stone and the manuscript went into my pocket, and as soon as McDonald could navigate we took Astro by the elbows and practically carried him back to the 14th.

The old man was still too groggy to talk. "We'll have to put him in the cooler till the bells stop ringing," McDonald said. "You hit him too hard."

"How are you booking him?" I asked.

"Suspicious character."

We went into Connelly's old office and I emptied my pockets. "Here it is, Sergeant. Now that you've got it, what are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know, but *he'll* never see it again."

"It's his property. This is confiscation. He'll raise a howl."

"Let him howl."

The black stone seemed to hypnotize McDonald. He kept touching it, and rubbing his finger over it, and gripping the pencil.

"Now that you have it right in front of you," I said, "does it look like a thing you could kill a man with?"

"No, it can't be," he agreed, shaking his head. "Yet—"

"Look here, Sergeant, I told you from the start it was a silly idea. Coincidence, that's all."

McDonald nodded. "I guess so. Still,

it scares you when you think about it. But you can't kill a man just by drawing one piece of stone across another. Nobody could do that. Remember the funny noise it made—"

The pencil screeched as he moved it, and it set my teeth on edge. "I wouldn't fool with that thing," I said, sharply.

But the screeching didn't stop. The black pencil was moving from star to star. "Stop that!" I yelled, and tried to take it away from him.

McDonald pulled it free as if he were drawing a nail from a post. He looked frightened. "That's queer," he mumbled, "I didn't mean to do that. It pulled itself along, like it was in a groove. I couldn't stop it."

Then we heard somebody shout, and footsteps running back and forth. One of the boys stuck his head inside the door. "It's Astro, Sergeant—he just keeled over in his cell. Looks like he's gone!"

McDonald and I looked at each other, then he turned as white as a sheet and flung the black stub away as if he'd just come out of a trance and found a snake in his hand.

"I killed him, Rocky! There's a curse in the thing! There is! For God's sake, take it away from here!"

He toppled into Connelly's chair and sprang up again as if it had burned him.

"I'll see about this," I said. "You stay right here in this office and keep that crazy talk to yourself."

It so happened that Doc Cameron, of the Coroner's Office, was in the station at the time, and when he'd looked over the old man's body I had a long pow-wow with him downstairs.

"He tried a break, Doc, and I had to clip him. Would that have anything to do with it?"

"Well," said Cameron, "it wouldn't help him any."

"I wish you'd go upstairs and tell all

that to the sergeant. Tell him it was my sock on the jaw that did it. He's letting this thing run him ragged."

But all our words were wasted on McDonald. "It's the stone," he said. "I know! Once could be a coincidence—twice, perhaps—but three times, never! There's some kind of power in it we don't know anything about. I wish to God I'd never laid eyes on the thing. It's put blood on my hands!"

We tried everything—reason, ridicule, argument. He never got over it.

Perhaps the purple mark had something to do with that. It looked like a birthmark, and it came out on his neck where the black stone had struck him. He went from one doctor to another, but he couldn't get rid of it. Finally he gave up, turned in his stripe, and left the city. The last I heard of him he was working in a tire factory in Akron. The mark was still on his neck.

"But what became of the black stone?" I asked. "And what did you do with the Arabic manuscript?"

"I burned the manuscript," Rocky replied, "and I smashed the stone with an axe. It was quite a job. Then one day I took a boat ride down the bay, and every mile or so I dropped a piece of it overboard. It cost me a new overcoat, too."

"How was that?" I said.

"Well, the stone left that sweetish smell in the pocket. I couldn't get it out. I tried everything—sponging, steaming, drycleaning. Finally I got rid of the coat."

"Look here, Rocky," I said, "you yourself don't take any stock in that yarn about the black stone—"

"No," he replied quickly. "No, of course not. Just a coincidence, those three deaths. What else could it have been?"

He held his *samsbu* glass against the lemon-colored lantern which hung over our booth like a midget moon. "Coincidence—it's a funny thing, isn't it?"