

FIRST DEGREE

By ROBERT COSMO HARDING

COLAMONG!" Thus Soo Bong extended matutinal greeting to Yuen Gow, his employer, as the latter entered his shop shortly after the hour of ten on a morning that was fogless, windless, warm and conducive to the development of love's young dream.

Yuen Gow returned the salutation curtly, indifferently. And thereafter did not heed the youth who went about his work so conscientiously, so willingly, so ardently. Yuen Gow's mood never harmonized with a day of Spring.

On his part Soo Bong was not in the least perturbed by his employer's manner. His was accustomed to it, expected it. Had it been different he would have been surprised and worried. Hai! What different attitude could he, a penniless hand-to-mouth toiler, expect from one of Grant Avenue's most prosperous merchants? The youth's wage was a mere pittance. Yet even so, in the way of youth, he was hopeful—extravagantly hopeful. The promises for the years to come were roseate.

A natural optimism to the young, no matter what the nationality. Hai! Eyeglasses were not the outcome of a day's experimentation. Knowledge was not garnered in reading but one page of Confucius. So philosophized Soo Bong. But more to the point there was Sin Ping, coveted prize, daughter of Yuen Gow, on the horizon!

In the eyes and mind of Soo Bong this daughter of his "bossee" was the exquisite quintessence of all girlhood. In her was embodied all his dream of idyllic happiness in the life to be lived. Not for one sad instant did he speculate upon the possibility that Sin Ping did not and never would love him. That thought had no part in his fantasy. His were daydreams never touched by realities.

Soo Bong knew that she liked him. Whenever she came into her father's shop she had the loveliest smile and the pleasantest word for him. It was these, in the first place, that had won his heart. What did it matter that he was the son of a lowly coolie! In China, yes, Sin Ping would have been unattainable. But here in America—

Affairs glided along peacefully enough

until the advent of the Chinese New Year. This year the observance savored of Occidentalism. Every year the celebration was becoming less Oriental. Fewer firecrackers banged to scare away mythical devils. There was feasting—and, of course, the settlement of the year's accumulated debts. But nearly all the other rites, older than the white man's civilization, were forgotten.

This year Yuen Gow celebrated by inviting all of his friends and employees to a feast at his very pretentious bungalow just beyond the edge of St. Francis Wood. In this way he appealed to his gods for special favors for himself, his family and his revered ancestors.

Soo Bong, clad in his best native Chinese garments, entered the Yuen Gow bungalow and immediately Yuen Gow himself greeted him.

"Thrice welcome, Soo Bong! Make thyself comfortable and one of the merriest." The tone of his voice was the quintessence of hospitality. For, on the New Year caste is forgotten—no, not forgotten, but religiously ignored.

The youth fidgeted. Then answered properly: "I am honored to be here." He didn't feel elated. Nor much at ease. For, despite the gracious greeting, he couldn't forget that all callers that day were received with the same words.

Yuen Moy, the only son of the house, took Soo Bong in tow and piloted him to the music room where the younger set was gathered. Most of them wore American clothes. A piano-player rioted through the latest jazz, accompanied by many young Chinese voices singing in perfect English the inane words of the song. As Yuen Moy, with his newest guest, crossed the room the cacophony ceased. But almost immediately from a phonograph came the swift, intoxicating strains of a fox-trot. Couples moved, in close embrace, across the floor.

SOO BONG'S discomfiture increased tenfold. He didn't dance. He didn't sing American songs. But he didn't have much time to feel ill at ease, for Sin Ping, a lotus flower who spoke American slang, saw his embarrassment and cried: "Welcome to our city, Soo

Bong!" Then, in the melodious Chinese tongue, she wished him a very happy New Year.

"Thank you," he replied, and returned the wish, his heart thumping with hope. "I am mortifyingly sorry I do not know these new dances," he said. "I shall have to learn them, I perceive. Perhaps you can recommend me to a capable teacher who can direct my footsteps along the path of music."

"Just like that," Sin Ping promised, smiling captivatingly.

"And the intellectual one's name is—"

"Sin Ping—if you'll be so kind as to cut out the intellectual. Now, then, come on! Let's dance!" And immediately she placed her arm in position about his neck.

He drew back a little. But, glancing at the other couples and noting that all the girls had their arms in similar positions, he placed his own arm about her waist.

"Watch my feet. Do as I say and we'll get along famously," Sin Ping said. "Why, these dances are as easy to learn as it is for my father to make money! Now watch your step!"

The youth's feet, for the first five minutes or so, acted rather strangely. But after that, responding to the grace of his teacher, he caught the rhythm of the dance and was soon gracefully, if cautiously, executing its movements.

All too soon the dance ended, and Sin Ping slipped from his arms. But in a moment he was again on the floor with her. Hai! A new and exceedingly pleasant sensation. Thrilling! Now that the young ones had started there was no stopping them. A third record, livelier and madder than the others, was selected. Soo Bong was just on the verge of again taking his host's daughter in his arms when another youth stepped up to claim her.

"How about this one with me, Sin Ping?" he asked, ignoring the other.

The girl shook her head negatively. "Sorry, Bunny, but Soo Bong has engaged me as his teacher—for three more dances, at least: I'll tell you what, though—I'll give you the fourth."

Bun Kai, Bunny to his friends, raised

his narrow eyebrows above slits of eyes and frowned at Soo Bong, as if he were now aware of him for the first time. Bunny was not accustomed to taking a back seat; not he, son of Bun Poy, who was the richest restaurateur in Chinatown and half-owner in Grant Avenue's largest curio shop. Also, Bun Kai was very fond of the girl and considered himself a suitor for her hand. Hai! And why not? Her father looked upon him with much favor and Sin Ping treated him with far more consideration than any of the other of her eligible suitors who ever hovered so attentively about her. Bun Kai would have asked Sin Ping to become his bride long ere this day had he not been anxiously and impatiently awaiting his twenty-third birthday, at which time he would come into sole possession of a snug inheritance from his deceased mother.

Sin Ping stood smiling at Bunny bewitchingly, reading his thoughts. Then with a laugh, she took her position at Soo Bong's side. But Bunny wasn't so gracious, however. With a sneer on his lips, and an unmistakable emphasis upon his words, he said:

"That's the proper spirit, of course. New Year's makes all equal and—"

"Oh, that's not the reason at all, Bunny, old top," she called back to him over her shoulder as she and Soo Bong stepped away. "You flatter yourself too much."

Bunny watched the couple with a deepening scowl. Turning to a girl who stood near he said something which caused them to laugh rather contemptuously while their eyes never ceased to follow Sin Ping and Soo Bong. The latter flushed vividly under his yellow.

"Don't you mind," Sin Ping murmured. "It's one thing to be born with a gold spoon and another and greater achievement to acquire wealth by your own efforts. Remember, always, Soo Bong, that the purchasing power is in the actual gold—and that no amount of money can buy perpetual happiness." And in these words and in her own way, unconsciously, she had translated Confucius.

He pondered over this, and was more than pleased to be able to decipher the meaning between the lines. It revealed to him the breath-taking intelligence that he had as much chance to win this bewitching maiden as Bun Kai—that is, if he were not too long a time in acquiring his chest of treasures.

There was no fourth dance; just at the end of the third the announcement was made that the feast was served. Soo Bong, searching for his name written in

Chinese characters, was at the far, lower end of the table when he heard a feminine voice call:

"You won't find it there, Soo Bong—it's right here, beside me. Aren't you glad?"

Without looking up the youth knew that the words were Sin Ping's. And when he did look, his heart leaping, he saw that Bunny was seated on the other side of her. Sin Ping was delightfully impartial; for once Bunny and Soo Bong were equal.

AFTERWARD, the men, Bunny included, sought the smoking den for the purpose of gambling. The game most popular was the ancient favorite, mah jongg. Soo Bong, not having any money for the purpose of wooing the goddess of luck, was compelled to remain away from the tables. Yet presently Sin Ping was again beside him.

"All the others have found something to do but us," she said. "I'd enjoy going to the movies or out to the beach with you this afternoon. What do you say?"

"Whichever you prefer will be my highest pleasure," he replied.

"Then it's settled—it's such a fine day I think I'll decide in favor of the beach. We'll walk to Beach Terraces, then follow the car tracks past Land's End to Sutro Heights, and then down on to the sand. You wait here and I'll be ready in a jiffy."

Soo Bong looked at his clothes with ill-concealed embarrassment; then at the girl's dress with admiration. She was dressed in the latest American mode; his clothes were the usual garments of an humble Oriental.

"Don't let that bother you any," she told him, divining his thoughts. "If I don't mind why should you?" And with these words she vanished, only to reappear in five minutes. Hai! Transformation! She was now clad in the flowered silk of rich Chinese maidens.

His eyes formed a query.

"Oh, yes," she laughed, "I love to dress this way—sometimes. Why, there's no better fun than walking down Market Street in these. We girls do it at least once a week. Gee, it's as much kick as a movie thriller or watching fire engines responding to an alarm! The way the tourists stare!"

Parked at the curb as they left the bungalow were several expensive automobiles. One Soo Bong recognized as the property of Yuen Gow. Another was Bunny's.

"I'd much rather walk than be stuffed

like a mummy in a limousine. And especially on such a fine day. Isn't it glorious?" she said.

"The happiest I've ever had in my life," he agreed with a warm ring in his voice. And in his eyes there was the light of unquenchable love.

At the beach they found a secluded nook, sheltered from the wind.

Digging with her hand in the sand, and looking far out to sea, she asked in a dreamy voice: "Do you ever vision being rich?"

"It is so. Yet not so much for the wealth itself as for the happiness it can bring me. In reality, my dreams are the best part of me, the only part that seems to count."

"And what is that best part?" she queried, permitting her hand to stray very close to his.

Soberly he answered: "I cannot tell you—yet. But some day—"

"And why not now? Am I not worthy of your confidence?"

"Oh, indeed you are—and it is partly for that reason that I cannot now enlighten you."

Her hand almost touched his as she asked: "Has any girl anything to do with it?"

"That's the answer. She has. But in this land of freedom real happiness is only for him who is blessed with riches."

"You'll tell me who she is, won't you? Because, if you do, perhaps I can help you." And, it seemed unconsciously, her hand hit his. Nor was it withdrawn when his fingers closed over it.

"Why ask when you already know?" he whispered, allowing the pressure of his fingers to become a caress.

"You mean that I am the girl?" she breathed.

He nodded. And the next moment, without thinking of the consequences, forgetting his penury, he had taken her in his arms and kissed her. And as she did not struggle, but remained nestling there contentedly, he put all his pent-up dreams of love in the ardent kisses that followed.

Dusk was descending when they reached Yuen Gow's. Soo Bong left her at the gateway. In the hallway her brother, Yuen Moy, was waiting.

"Where have you been, little sister? The guests have departed without your good wishes. A breach of etiquette."

"Oh, I was out to the beach. Talk about a fine day and I'll say this New Year's was the greatest ever."

"You were with Soo Bong?" It was more statement than que-

"Why ask when you know?" she countered independently.

Yuen Moy's expression was not pleasant to behold. His tone became domineering as he questioned further: "And perhaps you'll answer why you preferred dancing with Soo Bong to Bunny. You'd your choice of the prince and the pauper—and you favored the pauper. Where are your senses?"

"Perhaps I won't answer. I do that which pleases me most."

Sternly the brother asserted: "Soo Bong is not a fit youth to be your associate. The word has reached our father's ears of the occurrence and he is very angry. Better let this be the last time."

Hotly she retorted: "He is as good as Bunny any time!"

"You know nothing about it when you say that. Within a moon Bunny will be three and twenty years of age and—"

"I don't care if he'll be three and forty. It's nothing in my young life."

"We'll see. But in the meantime you ignore Soo Bong—that is my advice—and good advice at that."

THE MONTH drew to a close. And with the day came the birthday of Bun Kai and he was a guest for dinner at the bungalow of Yuen Gow. Directly after the elaborate meal Yuen Gow and his wife retired, while Yuen Moy, by prearrangement, hid himself to town, thus leaving Bun Kai a clear field. Nor was he long in coming to the point.

"Sin Ping, I do not doubt but that for quite a while you've known that I love you," he began his plea. His manner was the personification of assurance.

"How should I have guessed when you didn't tell me?" smiled Sin Ping. "I have many boy friends and they all show the utmost respect and friendship—perhaps all love me."

"That may be—and probably is so—but I want you to become my wife." He stepped close to her and endeavored to take her in his arms.

Deftly she evaded him.

"Not so fast and strenuous, Bunny, dear," she admonished him. "Aren't you taking too much for granted?"

"But you do love me," he insisted, however, this time making no move toward her. His voice, though, still retained its tone of assurance.

She nodded: "Like I love all my other boy friends—no more, no less."

"But you must care for one more than for all the rest," he argued.

"Maybe so," she admitted.

"Then it's Soo Bong!" he accused, his voice rising in anger. "Hai! What chances has he to marry you and make you happy, a penniless coolie's son, penniless himself!"

"More than you'll ever have, Bunny, dear. Wealth is a great asset in wooing a girl, but love is a greater one."

Bun Kai was not one to be rejected easily.

"But your father and Yuen Moy will never permit such an alliance. And so, without their sanction, how are you going to live?"

"Bunny, if the situation weren't so serious you'd be funny. But you forget that this isn't China—and that both Soo Bong and I are still young and that there are many other places besides my father's where he can earn money."

Bun Kai laughed with scornful, unrestrained amusement.

"Yes, I have a picture of you living upon Soo Bong's wages. No hurry, though, for you to decide. I shall wait."

"Wait, if you like! But don't—"

"Oh, there's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip—and the cup may be at my lips before many more moons shine in the heavens," he said hopefully.

The next evening there was a conference between Yuen Gow and his son. With the result that Sin Ping received an ultimatum from her father never again to acknowledge acquaintanceship with Soo Bong.

And at the very moment that the girl heard her father, down in a certain inner room in Waverly Place, Chinatown, the youth marked for ostracism was himself making three Chinese lottery tickets, one five, one ten and one twelve, for a prize of fifteen hundred dollars and proportions. The hour was nine in the evening. The drawing was scheduled for ten. At ten-fifteen, Soo Bong was the possessor of fifteen hundred dollars!

One thousand, five hundred dollars! Compared to Bun Kai's inheritance not cause for elation. But to Soo Bong more. What wouldn't it buy! American clothes. Emancipation from ridicule. And Sin Ping so much nearer. Hai! It was the first step toward the acquisition of his treasure chest.

It so happened that some errand took Sin Ping to her father's shop the next afternoon. Soo Bong chanced to be near the entrance. And, instead of waiting to be recognized, as had always been his custom, he stepped forward eagerly and a smile illuminated his clean, boyish features. He could scarcely wait to impart the glad tidings. But he hadn't advanced

many paces toward her when he halted abruptly. All the animation left him and a swift transition saddened his heart. For, instead of welcoming eyes and a happy smile, he met a frown of no uncertain meaning. She barely nodded her head, then turned her back. But she did not move away, this giving him the chance to inquire under his breath.

"If you are sorry because of the beach I shall call upon the devil-gods to drive the memory from my mind. It can be made but of the fabric of unreality."

Without turning toward him she answered: "Silly. Of course I'm not sorry. But there's trouble in the air. Meet me tonight at seven o'clock, at the Haight Street entrance to the Park."

His heart sang again as he drifted away from her. She loved him. Hai! What more could mortal desire of life?

They walked through the Stanyan Avenue lanes of Golden Gate Park. Through the arch they went, hand in hand, over to the playgrounds where belated children were still romping. Here they stopped for a few moments, then continued on across the grass past the tennis courts until they came to the shadows of the museum. By this time twilight was giving way to night. They sat, hand in hand, upon a bench.

"My father has forbidden me to converse with you hereafter," Sin Ping said, her voice trembling.

"Perhaps until last night, for I was poor then," he said hopefully. "But do not grieve because that is all changed now. In the late lottery last night my prize was many yen—fifteen hundred dollars." His arms stole around her, and his lips sought and found hers.

"Have you told my father of your luck?"

"No. I intended to tell him today, but when you uttered that warning I thought I had better wait."

"You are wise, my lover. Always wait if in doubt. But now, because our love is so strong and true, you may speak to my father of it."

"And if he receives me with favor will you marry me—very soon?"

"Your wish will be mine," she confessed. "Soo Bong, to me you are the handsomest man in all the world—you are my ideal."

The next morning Soo Bong sought and gained audience with Yuen Gow.

Yuen Gow congratulated him upon his winnings. And then, on impulse, the old merchant informed the youth that shortly he intended to open a branch store in

Fresno and that if he desired to invest his winnings in the metropolis of the San Joaquin Valley he could be manager of the place.

Soo Bong overflowed with expressions of gratitude. Yet perhaps had this offer not taken him so completely off his feet and he had scrutinized the older man's face keenly he would have detected a gleam that would have lessened his enthusiasm.

"When am I to leave?" he asked.

"Next week. Be prepared to make the journey Monday."

"And about Sin Ping? We love each other devotedly. Therefore, if in a year—"

Again that strange gleam in Yuen Gow's eyes as he said: "When the year is ended we shall see."

THAT night Sin Ping was an unwilling eavesdropper to a conversation between her father and her brother. She didn't remember all she heard, but that which made a lasting impression were the words of her father:

"I promised him that in a year he could claim your sister."

And her brother's answer:

"That was a safe promise, knowing as only you and I do, that the chances of his return are scarcely worth considering."

Strangely enough, and for some reason or other, when she met Soo Bong clandestinely that evening, she failed to speak of her kins' talk. And it is not at all likely that it would have influenced him.

Monday of the following week Soo Bong and Yuen Moy started for Fresno by automobile. The next day Yuen Moy returned alone. He seemed unusually pale. Also, he betrayed symptoms of decided nervousness. Aimlessly he wandered about the streets and alleys of Chinatown, never seeming able to remain for long in one place. Toward dusk he went to the family home.

And it was just at this hour that down in America's raisin patch, an American rancher, while walking across a part of his acreage, found a revolver, glittering new, with three cylinders empty. He picked it up wonderingly, proceeded a few paces—and came upon the body of a dead Chinese youth. He hurried to his ranch bungalow, and got the sheriff on the telephone. An hour later both the sheriff and the coroner arrived upon the scene.

Addressing the coroner the sheriff consulted: "What is it, Doc—murder or suicide?"

"It's not suicide, Ed. The bullets couldn't have entered this part of the body had the Chink himself pulled the trigger. Looks like cold-blooded murder to me. How're the tongs hereabouts? Anything like fireworks among 'em?"

Ed, the sheriff, shook his head. "They're as quiet as the Bridal Veil over in the Yosemite in the dead o' winter. Last week all of 'em signed up another peace pact—a regular league o' nations now. And here I was aimin' to have a little rest and now it's up to me and the rest o' my outfit to get busy. Doc, why is a Chink murder as bad as a Chink puzzle? The answer is: Because you don't know where to begin and there's no end. Well, if you've got all the dope you want I'll be stepping on the gas and get the San Francisco 'boys' in this game."

Hours later one of the San Francisco "boys," formerly one of the Chinatown squad, Terry Morane in the directory, went down to view the features of the dead youth.

"Know him, Terry?" the sheriff inquired.

Morane scratched his head. "Maybe I do and maybe I don't. To you most Chinks look alike, but if you mix with 'em the way I do you get to tell the difference. This stiff looks familiar to me but I'll have to do a little scouting around before I can name him."

Next day, back in Chinatown, Morane wandered into the shop of Yuen Gow.

"Where's the young feller used to be here?" he asked the proprietor.

Almost indifferently the Chinaman asked: "Who you mean?"

"I don't sabe his name—never did. But where is he?"

Again came the query: "Who you mean?" But this time was added a name—Soo Bong.

"Well, where is he? How many times do I have to ask the same question?"

"Fresno—open branch store there," came the information desired.

Morane wired the Fresno sheriff: "Any new Chink store opened in your town lately?"

The answer read: "No."

Back to Yuen Gow's marched Morane. "You lied to me," he told the father of Sin Ping. "Why?"

"No sabe," was the masked answer.

The officer now perceived the futility of quizzing the old man. So he inquired: "You've got a son, Mo-ey, haven't you?"

For answer Yuen Gow called aloud: "Yuen Moy!" And added some Chinese words.

"What did you and Soo Bong quarrel about on the way to Fresno the other day? I know more about your movements than you think." Morane shot query and assertion at him in one breath.

Yuen Moy was not as clever as his father. Falteringly he said: "About a girl."

Morane did the logical thing. He took the young Chinese to the station and there lodged against him the charge: "Held for Fresno sheriff."

Naturally the evening papers carried the news. And Sin Ping read the article with a dull and aching heart. Tears streaming down her cheeks? Not yet. The shock was far too great. Her mind was far too stupefied by poignant grief. All evening she remained in the seclusion of her room. She was like one in a trance. Then, suddenly, like a hideous ogre, there came to her the memory of her father's words to Yuen Moy and Soo Bong. And her brother's assertion of exultant triumph.

She sat immobile for more than an hour. Yet her mind was alive and active, her thoughts bitter. The tears that would have relieved her grief would not flow. Such is the signal of deepest grief—dry eyes, apparent passivity. Her loss was irreparable—and had been caused by those who loved her and whom she had loved and trusted, by those to whom she had looked for happiness and protection.

AT last there arrived the demand for action. It completely overcame the lethargy that was her first reaction to great grief. She crossed slowly to a little writing desk that stood at a window overlooking the sea. Before this she sat down. Slowly she took up a pen; inked it; drew paper and envelope to her. Then, in English, she wrote a note to the Chief of Police, revealing therein the conversation she had overheard. Re-reading what she had written she inserted the note in the envelope; addressed it; sealed and stamped it. Then she put on a light cape and carried the note to the corner mail box. Here she hesitated only a fraction of a second, then resolutely posted it.

She returned immediately to her room. No one else was in the bungalow. Carefully she dressed herself in her prettiest frock, and then went again to the writing desk. This time, instead of pen and ink, she used ink and brush with which to write her second note. And, with tears now streaming from her eyes, she wrote in Chinese:

"You and my brother have killed my

lover, Soo Bong. And as you slew him so you murdered the heart that was in me, the heart that can no longer function."

She put this upright against the ink bottle; quickly rose and went to the bathroom. When she returned to her room she held in her hand a small bottle upon which was the skull and crossbones indicating poison.

Sin Ping raised it to her lips, and was just about to take a draught when excited voices on the walk halted her.

She ran to the window, looked out—and saw Soo Bong being led toward the steps by Yuen Gow and Yuen Moy!

They were gesticulating rapidly. The poison fell from her hand. A sob, hysterical and joyous, choked her. She fairly flew to the door and

flung it open just as they reached it.

"Soo Bong! Soo Bong!" she cried as she ran to his outstretched arms. "Soo Bong, my love! Oh, my dearest!"

Father and brother stood a little to one side, smiling approval upon the scene. Near-tragedy had changed their views—

And Terry Morane is still trying to establish the identity of the Chinese youth who was killed near Fresno.

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