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The **BRASS**
KEY by ▲ ▲
HAL·K·WELLS



"Then came darkness and the spider horde."

IN THE home of Foo Chong, merchant prince of Los Angeles' Chinatown, there were two strange rooms. The keys to their two locked doors were carried only by Foo Chong himself.

Foo Chong had first planned the rooms six months ago when they brought to him the broken body of his son, with an expression stamped upon the sensitive, old-ivory features of the motherless youth which threatened a fate rather worse than death. When days and then weeks slipped by, sealing the verdict of the Pacific Coast's foremost brain specialists, Foo Chong smiled sadly and ordered that the two rooms be prepared.

The first of the rooms of mystery

was equipped as a playroom. Its gaily figured walls, its pictures and furnishings, the toys scattered carelessly on the floor—all were of the kind that would appeal to a very young child. Yet the youth for whom the room was prepared was nearly twenty, in years on the very threshold of manhood.

But Foo Chong's only son would be as a very young child for the rest of his life, the eminent brain surgeons had said. The jagged scar beneath the crisp black hair had healed months before, but the deeper injury that the crashing impact of that cruel blow had wrought could never be healed. The youth would always be content with his toys on the floor of the nursery room.

The second of the two rooms, though it required days of work to construct, and weeks to equip completely, was intended for less than a single night's occupancy. The guest upon whom such a signal honor was to be bestowed was "Bull" Partlow.

It was late in the evening and Foo Chong was spending his usual hour in the nursery with his son when a servant came with word that Bull Partlow had at last been brought to the place. Rising from his place on the floor beside the slight silken-clad figure who was absorbed in constructing queer little houses from a set of American building-blocks, Foo Chong carefully closed the door of the room behind him and joined his servant in the hall.

"We found him who is called 'the Bull' at the drinking-place of Black Manuel in San Pedro," the man told his master. "'The Bull' had but just returned this morning with his ship from a long cruise to Tahiti and other islands of the Southern Seas."

"Is he badly hurt?"

"He bears no injury save from the drug which we slipped into his drink. He knew nothing of the long automobile ride which brought him here, and he only now begins to recover his senses from the drug."

"You have done well," Foo Chong commended, and handed the servant a key. "Take him to the little room with the steel door. Bind him tightly to the chair within, but with his back to the glass case in the floor. Remove every particle of his clothing, even his shoes. Then rub his body well with the ointment which is in a stone jar by the chair. Place his watch beside the dagger on the little table.

"Then stay with him until I come. And, if you value your reason," he warned, "or your life itself, touch nothing in the room save as I have directed!"

With a nod of understanding, the servant was gone.

Foo Chong returned to the nursery. "Come, my son," he said gently. "It is time to go to bed."

The youth obediently left his blocks where they had fallen and allowed Foo Chong with tender, practised hands to undress him as though he were a babe in arms. Then, after he was tucked into bed, the boy smiled contentedly and dropped off into sleep with the swift ease of a tired child.

Foo Chong stepped softly over to a corner of the room. For a moment he touched with caressing fingers the carefully arranged instruments laid out there on a drawing-board, placed there in a vain hope that their once-loved shapes might bring a ray of light to the boy's darkened brain. As he idly fingered the T-square and the compasses, Foo Chong thought sadly of those days when his son's keen young mind and sensitive fingers were being trained for the modern magic of a structural engineer.

Foo Chong sighed as he closed and locked behind him the door of the nursery room. Then he went to his reckoning with "Bull" Partlow.

IT WAS a strange little room which had been built behind the second locked door. From the center of its ceiling there was suspended a single electric light bulb. The walls were without windows or visible openings of any kind, except for a thin line of latticework grating near the top. Otherwise, their flat gray surfaces were as bare as those of a prison cell. Scattered about the little room at apparent random were half a dozen small pieces of intricately carved Chinese furniture.

In the exact center of the floor, directly under the solitary light, a vivid white circle a yard and a half in diameter had been painted. Within this circle a peculiar glass case, with a heavy glass lid, was set into the floor. In size and shape it was

not unlike a cheese-box. Its interior fairly swarmed with horrid life.

Foo Chong's entrance was greeted with a flood of foul-mouthed protest and profane abuse from the hulking, apelike figure who was bound to a chair between the glass case and the door. Foo Chong nodded a brief dismissal to the servant. Then, with folded arms, he studied his captive in silence for a moment.

The mark of the beast was stamped indelibly upon the heavy features of the man before him. The full lips, squat nose, and heavy lower jaw hinted at the mixture of races which had produced an ideal specimen of harbor bruiser and deep-water bully. The bulging muscles on mighty shoulders and powerful torso bespoke the origin of the name, "Bull." His naked body smelled pungently of the strangely scented ointment with which it had been rubbed.

"And so you are Bull Partlow." Foo Chong's voice was very quiet. "The Bull Partlow upon whose ship my son stowed away six months ago, for the adventure of a trip up the coast from San Pedro to Portland?"

"I didn't know the whelp was yours," growled the bound giant in surly defiance.

"That matters not. You do know that my son never got to Portland. He was found on the waterfront at San Francisco, with his skull fractured, and at the point of death. For you had found him in his hiding-place, Partlow, and dragged him out to work his passage. That was not amiss. But when my son's strength failed him at the unaccustomed labor, you beat him. Then, when he fell to the deck unconscious from your blows, you kicked him in the head. He did not regain consciousness, and, becoming frightened, you left him at San Francisco to die."

"I didn't kick him in th' head!" Partlow protested thickly. "He hit

his head again' somethin' when he fell."

Foo Chong leaned forward and gazed deep into the other's eyes. For a long moment their wills met and battled. Then Partlow suddenly looked away with a muttered oath.

"Aw, what's the difference?" he snarled. "Yeh, I did it—I kicked him." Then, squaring his shoulders with a return of bravado, "What're yuh gonna do about it? Th' kid didn't die, did he?"

"No, my son did not die," agreed Foo Chong softly. "It would have been better if he had."

There was another long moment of silence, until Partlow began to fidget uneasily. Then Foo Chong's even tones continued.

"I am going to exact the price of your evil act from you, Partlow. I have prepared a little game of wits which you and I shall play."

Keeping carefully away from his bound captive's hands, Foo Chong spun the other's chair about until Partlow faced the glass case. Then he watched the man's face blanch in sudden terror as he saw the fearful contents of the case for the first time.

There was ample reason for Partlow's fear. A frail glass case filled with living specimens of the great tree spider of Papua is not a pleasant sight to see suddenly at one's very feet. With sprawling, hairy legs spanning seven inches, and bloated puffy body two inches in length, the creature is a monstrous abnormality which only the nightmare depths of a tropical jungle could spawn.

The glass case literally swarmed with the great spiders. Its floor and its glass walls were carpeted everywhere with the surging silken-brown creatures. In the stillness of the cell-like room the slithering sound of the myriad groping legs was faintly audible as the horde surged in ceaseless activity over the smooth walls of the cage.

"Somewhere within the four walls of this little room," Foo Chong explained quietly, "is hidden a small key of brass. It is possibly two inches in length, and has a handle in the design of a scroll. It is the key to the door. If you succeed in finding it you are free to go when you will, unmolested.

"You have two hours in which to search for the key. At the end of that period the timing mechanism of the case will cause the lid to rise, and the spiders will be liberated into the room. As the lid of the case rises, the light will be extinguished. Your body has been anointed with an oil which is a natural lure for the spiders. It should be only a moment or so in the darkness before the horde is swarming over your bare skin. The least tampering with the case, if you even touch a finger inside the white circle on the floor, will bring the end at once.

"But there is one alternative." Foo Chong gestured to where a heavy dagger of Oriental workmanship rested on the polished top of a small table. "If your search for the key is in vain, and your courage fails you as the light darkens and the spiders come forth, the blade of the dagger may bring you a quicker and more merciful release—if you care to take it.

"You have two hours. Then, if your search fails, you face either the spiders or the knife. It should be an interesting game, Partlow."

As Foo Chong finished, Partlow with an effort forced his gaze from the spider cage at his feet and twisted in his chair to look his captor in the face. The deep-set eyes of "the Bull" were clouded as his slow brain seemed to struggle to realize the situation. Then realization apparently came, and stark murder flamed suddenly in the smoldering eyes.

With a sudden convulsive straining of every muscle in his powerful body, Partlow wrenched himself to

his feet as though the heavy chair to which he was bound were a toy, and hurled himself at Foo Chong in one desperate, mighty effort to crush and destroy the slight figure before him. The attempt failed by inches. Warned by the flash in the other's eyes, Foo Chong stepped swiftly aside. Even as the bound figure crashed to the floor, Foo Chong clanged shut the steel door of the cell behind him.

As Foo Chong entered his own room next door he glanced at the clock on the table before throwing the switch that set in motion the timing mechanism of the spider cage. Eleven o'clock. At 1, the mechanism would function, if it were not disturbed before.

FOO CHONG turned out the light. Then crossed the room and ascended a short flight of steps leading to a small platform high up along the wall which separated the room from the cell next door. A cunningly concealed opening in the grating near the ceiling of the cellroom enabled Foo Chong, though impossible of discovery himself, to see and hear every detail in Partlow's prison as though he were actually with him. Leaning forward in his chair on the platform, Foo Chong settled himself patiently to his long watch.

Brief though the interval had been, Partlow had nearly freed himself from the bonds that lashed him to the wrecked chair. The last of the weakened strands snapped in one mighty effort, and "the Bull" shambled to his feet.

For a brief time he stood there, half crouched, with long arms tensed at his sides, his great chest rising and falling from his recent exertions, and his little bloodshot eyes darting swift glances to either side like those of an animal at bay. Then, as the minutes passed without event, his tension gradually relaxed.

Then, as though finally deciding

that he was really left to his own devices, he went into action. Stepping over to the door he gave a tentative wrench at the handle, then beat testingly upon it with his hands. Not satisfied, he swept up the heavy chair to which he had been bound and, swinging it lightly aloft, rained crashing blows upon the door.

The heavy piece of furniture splintered into kindling wood on the steel panel. Apparently realizing then the futility of escape in that direction, Partlow began ranging the four walls with the quick, restless tread of a caged jungle beast. He began a careful series of blows upon the walls as high as he could reach, striking with the heel of his hand and listening for the hollow sound which might denote a weak spot. He found none.

Then, for the first time since Foo Chong had left the room, Partlow's gaze returned to the cage of the spiders. The sight of the writhing brown horde within its glass walls had the electrical effect of a dash of ice-cold water. Snatching up his watch from its resting-place beside the dagger on the little table, he scanned the face of the instrument with feverish interest.

Fifteen minutes had gone.

Partlow licked lips that seemed to have gone suddenly dry, and began to search for the key in earnest.

He studiously kept his gaze averted from the cage of the spiders as he set to work upon the bizarre furniture of the cell. There were six pieces in all. They included the little table where the dagger and the watch rested, the chair to which he had been bound, and four pieces whose myriad drawers and compartments might have adapted them for almost any purpose. Except for the chair, all the pieces were of Oriental design and workmanship, with their intricately carved surfaces and recesses offering hiding-places for a hundred keys.

Selecting a piece at random, Partlow searched swiftly through its visible drawers and compartments. At the end of his fruitless search, with a dozen or more empty receptacles strewn about him on the floor, he paused for a moment, baffled.

Then his groping fingers blundered upon a hidden spring. He grunted in satisfaction as a tiny secret drawer slid open. The grunt changed to a muttered curse when he found the drawer empty, but the incident spurred him on to renewed efforts.

The piece proved to be literally honeycombed with secret drawers and nooks which came to light as the concealed springs were pressed by Partlow's clumsy fingers. But, one by one, the hidden spaces proved empty, and without trace of the brass key.

The possibilities of the first piece apparently exhausted, Partlow passed on to the next. The second piece of furniture was nearly as well equipped with hidden niches as the first, but the search for the key continued fruitless. Save for an occasional disappointed oath, the searcher worked in grim and tense silence. At constantly shortening intervals he glanced at the watch, setting to work again each time with a new and more feverish energy as he noted the passing of the precious minutes.

Twelve o'clock. Only one hour more.

Every piece of the six had been ransacked without result. In grim desperation Partlow now began work on the skeleton framework of the furniture, tearing the joints apart with his bare hands.

A quarter past 12.

Partlow's face showed that the strain was beginning to tell. Streams of sweat bathed his swarthy features. His heavy lips began to creep back from his teeth in a set snarl of terror. Heedless of sharp

edges and jagged splinters, he continued to tear at the wooden fragments with raw, bleeding fingers in feverish and ever growing desperation.

Twelve-thirty. Only half an hour more.

Partlow's nerve seemed breaking with ghastly swiftness, until he threatened momentarily to give way blindly to sheer panic. The watcher in the room next door sighed softly. Foo Chong might almost have felt compassion for that pitiable figure in the cell had it not been for another image which loomed before him—that of the other room with a locked door, where a slender youth with listless eyes spent his days putting together endless little houses of building-blocks.

Only thirty minutes left in which to find the precious key of brass, and it seemed that every possible hiding-place in the cell had been searched. But, after all—was there not at least one place left untouched? Apparently struck by a sudden thought, Partlow glanced tentatively at the cage of the spiders.

Visibly shaken at the sight, he shuddered. But he steeled himself to look again, his eyes staring and intent as they searched for a telltale glint of brass beneath that surging horde of pousy brown bodies and writhing legs. Slowly and unwillingly he forced himself to approach the case more closely.

Finally he was kneeling on the floor beside it, his hands resting just outside the warning white circle. His face was not a yard from the glass of the case itself. The proximity nearly proved fatal.

As he gazed at the horrid inhabitants of the cage sprawling in hideous array so near his eyes, Partlow's swarthy features slowly went ashen. His lips opened in horror while, with fascinated eyes staring with hypnotic intentness, he began slowly swaying back and forth,

threatening momentarily to topple over on the case in utter collapse.

Foo Chong watched breathlessly as the seconds passed and a premature climax loomed imminent. Then, at the last moment, Partlow wrenched his gaze away as though breaking a physical bond, and threw himself backward from the case.

FOR the next quarter of an hour it was little more than a madman who raged up and down within the confines of the cell—a madman who beat wildly upon door and walls with clenched fists, and who chattered mingled curses and prayers as he pawed frenziedly with bleeding fingers among the scattered scraps of wood in a last sobbing effort to find the key. Then the reaction came swiftly, and he sank to the floor, crouched on his haunches in a listless stupor.

It was five minutes of 1 when he roused himself from his lethargy of despair.

He lifted the watch with a shaking hand. As he read the dial's fateful message, the timepiece slipped from his limp fingers and clattered unheeded to the floor. No need now for a measure of the few precious moments remaining.

Foo Chong leaned forward with new intentness at his vigil.

With movements as deliberate and mechanical as those of a sleep-walker, Partlow picked up the heavy dagger, and turned to face the glass case.

Four minutes of 1.

Was it imagination, or was the light in the cell now tinged with a faint reddish hue—and was the heavy lid of the spider cage trembling ever so slightly upon its supports?

Three minutes—and doubt became awful certainty!

The light from the solitary bulb was now dimming swiftly, its filaments fading to loops of vivid red.

And the lid of the case was slowly rising! Partlow's grasp upon the dagger tightened.

Two minutes.

With eyes that sought to pierce the crimson gloom, Partlow saw the lid of the case yawn until the crevice was fringed with twitching legs as the great spiders swarmed at the opening. The man's face writhed in a ghastly grimace, as though he already felt the touch of those hateful bodies swarming over his bare skin, with poison fangs bared to strike. He raised the dagger until its point rested just over his heart.

One minute.

The light was now but a dim red glow. The lid of the case seemed rising more swiftly. Suddenly from beneath its edge the first of the spiders dropped, pushed through the crevice by the surging bodies behind.

The creature's palsy body struck the floor with a slight but audible thud. For a second it sprawled there with forelegs twitching, then scuttled straight for Partlow.

It was the end.

Partlow whimpered aloud as he convulsively drove the dagger's blade home.

As he lurched to his knees, a small object tinkled to the floor in front

of him. Groping for a moment on all fours, he sought with fast-glazing eyes to identify the object. Then, almost with his last breath, he cursed aloud as he realized the truth.

It was the key to the door that lay before him there on the floor—a small key of brass with a handle of scrollwork. The twisting blow as he had driven the blade of the dagger home had released the key from its hiding-place in the hollow handle of the weapon.

Partlow made a last convulsive effort to grasp the key, but his ebbing strength was not equal to the task. His clutching fingers fell short by inches as he sprawled limply forward on his face.

Then came darkness and the spider horde.

AS FOO CHONG rose from his post of vigil and stretched cramped limbs, he smiled gently to himself, but there was no hint of gladness in that faint smile.

For Foo Chong was again thinking of that other strange room, the nursery where toys and child's building-blocks were scattered carelessly on the floor like shattered fragments of some tenderly cherished dream.

