

VOLUME  
I



NUMBER  
4

Published quarterly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Application made for entry at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., as second class matter. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$1.00 a year in the United States, \$1.20 a year in Canada, \$1.40 in other countries. English office: Charles Lavelle, 12, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet St., E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publisher's Chicago office at 849 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

Copyright, 1931, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

## Contents for April-May-June, 1931

Cover Design .....	von Gelb	
Hawks of Outremer .....	Robert E. Howard	436
<i>A stirring tale of Saladin and the Crusades</i>		
Tado, Samurai .....	Lieutenant Edgar Gardiner	455
<i>A Japanese youngster proves worthy of his ancestors</i>		
Hsun Hsu (Verse) .....	Hung Long Tom	463
Bibi Love .....	Solon K. Stewart	464
<i>A British soldier's love for an Arab girl—a tale of Mesopotamia</i>		
The Dragoon's Secret .....	Otis Adelbert Kline	474
<i>Khallaf the Strong drags Hamed the Astar through tortures</i>		
Tsang, Sea Captain .....	James W. Bennett	491
<i>A complete novel of a Chinese detective and the Red revolution above Shanghai</i>		
This Example .....	S. B. H. Hurst	535
<i>A story of Burma and the Andaman Islands—and a woman's love for her man</i>		
The River That Stood Still .....	Captain Ed Smith	548
<i>An outlaw datu in the Sultanate of Pahang—a thrilling man-hunt</i>		
The Fanatic .....	Kobold Knight	558
<i>A story of the Moplah rebellion, which swept down in bloody fury on Pallampaki</i>		
The Pearl Robber .....	Frank Belknap Long, Jr.	565
<i>Kanaka Johnny fails to solve the white man's psychology</i>		
Let There Be Light (Verse) .....	Adolphe de Castro	569
The Souk .....		570
<i>A chat with the readers</i>		
The Mirror (Verse) .....	Hung Long Tom	576



"Fletcher snatched for it and managed to deflect the muzzle."

# Tsang, Sea Captain

By JAMES W. BENNETT

*The gun-runner for the Chinese Communists finds himself pitted against the shrewd Oriental cleverness of Tsang Ah-bou—a vivid novelette of present-day China*

**T**SANG AH-BOU, a detective, was employed by that unique governing body, the Shanghai Municipal Council—which organization apportions taxes and in turn offers police and other protection to some forty thousand Westerners in China's great port. Such a bald

statement, however, does not tell of the strange and highly colored life led by that Oriental, who had attained as near infallibility in his profession as is often given to mortal man.

In appearance Tsang was a rotund Oriental of medium height, not dissimilar

to thousands of his brethren shuffling daily up and down Nanking Road. His face was nearly a full moon, with slit eyes half hidden behind thick, myopic-lensed spectacles. But, where the eyes of his fellows might be lack-luster, trachomatous, or opium-befogged, Tsang's were bright and shrewd. And where the roundness of others was all too generous fat, Tsang's was a beautiful crisscross of powerful midriff muscles, the heritage of a man who had practised long and arduously at the art of wrestling. Similarly, his leg muscles were unusually well developed and he was capable of exerting cruel and unexpected pressure in a variety of "scissor" holds.

What Tsang Ah-bou thought of the antics of the foolish Occidentals with whom he passed his working-days might be the subject of an interesting dissertation, were one able to penetrate his smiling reserve. Several of his foreign friends were privately of the opinion that Tsang considered them as children, wayward, deplorably lacking in politeness. Nevertheless, once he had given them his friendship, they knew they could depend upon him. They were aware that he would cheerfully risk his life for them—as he had done, times innumerable. And on one occasion, when the difficulty had been financial, he had calmly mortgaged his two "small wives" to raise the wherewithal to tide over a foreign friend. For Tsang, as was right and proper in an Oriental gentleman, boasted of three spouses.

More than once, John A. Fletcher, the young and successful manager of the Sino-American Banking Corporation, had tested the quality of Tsang's courage and staunchness—and found it sterling.

On a certain April morning—the last day of the month, to be precise—with a foretaste of summer in the heat that came billowing into Fletcher's office, he was thinking with some envy of Tsang. The

two had met casually in the Municipal Building the day before, and Tsang had said that he planned to visit his ancestral home on the cool lake at Hangchow, there piously to brush the dust off the spirit tablets of his progenitors.

Fletcher's thoughts shifted from Tsang to the problem that lay before him: whether or not to close down his one losing branch bank at the port of Chinkiang on the Yangtze River. To close would mean a heavy loss, but to remain open might cause a heavier one, for Chinkiang was in the hands of an army of revolutionists. The rebels politically were a vivid pink tint, verging on Bolshevik red. If they attained too much power, they might even threaten Shanghai. . . .

His gloomy thoughts were interrupted by his diminutive Chinese office-boy, who flitted in to announce that a "Conte di Mazzino" wished to see him.

On the heels of the boy, without waiting for permission, a desiccated little European came briskly into the room. The man was garbed in morning coat and gray, pin-striped trousers, a costume too hot for the day which was seeing half of Shanghai in tropic whites. His mustache and imperial were of such a glossy black that Fletcher at once suspected dye. His dark, shiny hair was of an equally suspect hue. He spoke in English, but with a heavy accent and with startling rapidity.

"I am truly sorree to troubl' you, sir, but I 'ave ship, yes, w'ich is eatin' off de head in harbor an' is makin' me pay tonnage dues. De ship, she is register' at Lloyds an' at our Italian consulate. Her worth is more dan one half million of dese Shanghai dollar'. Dis mornin' I 'ave decide' to borrow fifty t'ousand on her, an' go up river to Hankow wit' my large cargo. You will loan me de pittance of de fifty t'ousand, *hein?*"

The little man stopped and smiled ingratiatingly at Fletcher.

"I will—what?" the manager asked, slightly startled.

"Loan me fifty t'ousand! Fifty t'ousand! Fifty t'ousand!" The stranger's voice had grown suddenly irritated.

"I beg your pardon," said Fletcher, feeling a desire to laugh but controlling it. "Why, may I ask, haven't you applied at the Banca d'Italia?"

"But, of course," answered the little man with an increased note of irritability. "Of course, of course. Naturally I would go to my own countrymen's inst'tution. But de Banca d'Italia, she is shut for two days. De manager's wife died. Promptly he close' de doors. I found 'im playing golf at Race Club Links. But he say' he can not open de safe at de bank wit'out his Chinese compradore—who is away takin' fine advantage of de holiday. . . . Now, Mr. Fletch'r, if you are t'rough makin' de quibble, you will write me check for fifty t'ousand. I shall deposit in escrow wit' you de ownership paper' of my ship. You will find dem in perrrfect order. Ship unmortgaged. Value estimate' at Lloyds at sixty t'ousand pounds sterling, w'ere it is insure'. De name is *La Città di Pisa*."

Fletcher answered promptly: "Leave your papers with me. I'll examine them. Come again after lunch and, if I'm satisfied with the loan, the money will be ready for you."

"But I want de money now! I do not wish to wait until dis afternoon! 'Ere, I offer you de finest of loan' an' I pay your reg'lar interest rate—but I will not 'ave delay! No!"

Fletcher bundled up the various documents that the European had dumped on his desk, rose, and thrust them toward the visitor.

"Sorry. But banking is not done that way. Not at this bank. Although I doubt

it, possibly the Hongkong-Shanghai or the Bank of Asia may be able to accommodate you over the counter."

The small man refused to accept the proffered papers. "I am too hasty, I. Always am I goin' off, half-cock'. Dis afternoon? Not before?"

"And not then, unless I am completely satisfied," Fletcher replied with a touch of sharpness.

The dapper little man shrugged three times, bowed gracefully and backed from the office.

HE HAD NO SOONER left than Fletcher was at the telephone, asking to speak with Baron di Ravenna, the Italian consul. Briefly the bank manager sketched the man's visit, then asked for information.

It was a vaguely worried voice that answered: "Yes, Fletcher, he was in to see me, the moment we opened the shipping-office today. His vessel anchored last night, and he took out entrance papers. The *Città di Pisa* is registered at our Department of Marine, as well as Lloyds. It's a motor ship of two hundred ninety tons. Our records show that it was formerly owned by the Duc d'Alghierri and now by the Conte di Mazzino——"

"So there is such a person as this Count?" Fletcher interposed.

Fletcher could hear Ravenna give a dry chuckle. "Well, he *is* rather an apparition, isn't he! But, wait a moment, Fletcher . . . Here it is, in my Almanach de Gotha:

"*'Mazzino, Conte di. Cavaliere of the Golden Fleece. Order of Victor Emmanuel. Distinguished War Cross. Commissioned Lieutenant-Commander, Italian Navy, 1914. Married 1915 to the Honorable Lucy Thurston, second daughter Lord Northdown. Born Pisa, 1876. Lives in Livorno at Via Solferino. Sole owner of freight steamship line running between*

*Livorno and Cagliari, Sardinia. Clubs: Navy, Royal Yacht.'*"

"Good heavens, he's quite a distinguished man," Fletcher commented.

"Evidently," agreed the consul. "I suppose he came to you about that loan? Our own bank, you know, is closed today. I mentioned your name to the Count, since you've always been most kind in handling American financial paper for us. But Fletcher, after I did it I began to worry. I'm absolutely sure that the man is all right; I only wish I knew him personally. The trouble is, I'm from Rome and we Romans have a bad habit of thinking that the members of the nobility from other cities are a bit—how would you say it?—upstarts. The Count spoke wretched Italian, but he said that was because he had been spending nearly all his time, the past ten years, at his Sardinian branch. And in Sardinia they talk a patois. Any more information?"

"Thanks, no, Baron. I'll loan the man the money, since you've given him a clean bill. In these days of depression, with the Revolutionists raising Cain up-country, I can't afford to turn down a loan as good as this."

But, even as he came to his decision, Fletcher wondered why he was troubled with an obscure premonition that caused him to pick up the documents before him almost with the hope that they would not prove in order.

## 2

THAT afternoon, promptly at two, the dapper little Latin appeared at the bank. Fletcher's check was waiting for him. Contrary to the manager's forebodings, the papers proved in perfect order. Lloyds' Shanghai representative had further given ship and master a clear recommendation. The *Città di Pisa* was generously insured and the insurance was unincumbered.

What then had he to fret about, Fletcher asked himself in some annoyance. Nothing, except the Count's eagerness in the morning to rush negotiations and an undercurrent of doubt in the consul's voice, because the ship-owner was not a member of the Roman aristocracy.

Yet, his mind continued to trouble him. At last, he gave up trying to work, left the office and motored out to the Columbia Club for tennis. There, under the stimulus of three fast sets, he regained his normal optimism.

But that hard-won state was not to remain for long. At dinner in the bank's bachelor's mess, a wire was brought him. It read:

PIRATES ATTACK CITTA DI PISA IN YANGTZE BASIN THREE MILES ABOVE WOOSUNG. CREW AND COUNT DI MAZZINO, OWNER, KILLED. SHIP COMPLETELY GUTTED AND SET AFIRE, BURNING TO WATERLINE.

The wire was unsigned. With an oath, Fletcher bounded from the table. Rushing to the telephone, he got in communication with Lloyd's agent. After reading the wire to him he concluded:

"I am putting in a claim tomorrow through our consul for the amount due the bank on insurance."

"Um," answered the Lloyd's man.

"Well, what do you mean by that?"

"I mean," answered the insurance man slowly, "that this affair looks fishy to me. And I think that as soon as you stop to examine it, it will to you, also. True, pirates occasionally get as far up the coast as Shanghai, but I've never heard of them daring to operate in the Yangtze right at Woosung. A dozen foreign warships are anchored within five miles of where this is supposed to have occurred."

"Do you mean that you're going to refuse payment?" Fletcher demanded hotly. "You'll find yourself in a court action, if you don't stand back of that insurance."

The agent was imperturbable. "I

should regret a lawsuit." He paused, then added in a lighter tone, "Possibly my suspicions are unfounded. The first thing I'm going to do is cable our agent in Livorno. I realize now that I should have done it when you first asked me for a report on the ship. But then everything seemed to be in order. As soon as he replies, I'll get in touch with you."

As Fletcher left the 'phone, he found the Number One boy waiting to hand him a letter.

"Who sent this?" Fletcher asked, for there was no chit-book with it to sign.

The servant shrugged. "Chinese coolie bring. He say, 'No answer.' An' quick, he go 'way.'"

"That's queer," Fletcher muttered. The chit-book system was an integral part of life in the casual East. It offered a handy and practical method of gaining a receipt for the delivery of anything—from a lover's billet-doux to a hundred-ton silk-filature machine.

He dismissed the servant and opened the envelope—which was dirty—upon which his name had been printed:

JOHN A FLECHR

The letter read:

Will the honorable Flechr deposit hundred thousand (\$100,000) Mex. dollars in broken tile of north face of Lung Hwa Pagoda one foot from ground. Tile will be marked with black circle of ink. You will go tomorrow night, arriving at Pagoda three 'clock. Go ALONES. Any effort on your part to put boggis money in tile will result in death. Also failure to head this demands will see you most unhappily leaded over with many bullets.

(Signed)

THE BLACKE HAND

Back to the 'phone Fletcher ran. He would report this to Tsang Ah-bou. Here was a task for the small detective, if there ever was one, he muttered. Then, he would call Baron di Ravenna and demand what the Fascist government meant by allowing the Black Hand—notoriously an Italian organization—to gain a foot-

hold in China. A bit rough on the Baron, who was one of the best-liked foreigners in Shanghai! Well, Ravenna would have to suffer a little for the sins of his nationals!

FLETCHER lifted off the hook to telephone Police Headquarters; then he remembered that this was Tsang's holiday, that by this time the small detective must be in Hangchow. The thought suddenly disconcerted Fletcher. A drop of fear began to mingle with the brew of hot anger that was boiling within him. . . . He was aroused from his thoughts by an angry voice coming from the instrument:

"*Wah! Wah!*—Hello! Hello! *Sieuh nieh gob*—what man? [Who is it?]"

"Oh! . . . Give me Police Headquarters."

As the connection was being made, Fletcher writhed inwardly. He hated to tell the story of the day's events, to spread his own stupidity before the bovine Irish desk sergeant. With Tsang, it would have been a different matter. On a chance, he would first ask for Tsang. The detective might be back in the morning; in that case, Fletcher decided, he would wait.

In answer to his query, a heavily brogued voice said:

"Tsang's away for at least three days——" The voice broke off, then continued, "Wait wan minute, sir."

Fletcher waited. Then came the words:

"I've just learned that Tsang's promised to call in from Hangchow, tonight, over long distance. I don't know when, but if you do be wantin' to come down, sir, we'll let you talk with him when he does ring up."

"Right! Hold him on the wire if he calls before I get there. I'll pay the extra toll for the delay."

Tossing the receiver approximately toward the hook, Fletcher bounded out the door and down the driveway to his roadster. Fifteen minutes later, he was sprinting up the steps of Police Headquarters. In the hallway, an excited Chinese waved him into a small, deserted anteroom.

"Honorable sir, Detective Tsang is waiting for you to speak with him! The waiting is very costly! It is long distance! I will close the door. You may speak in quiet."

Fletcher lifted the combination mouth-and-ear piece from its hooks and shouted breathlessly: "Tsang? Is that you?"

"Yes, honorable Fletcher." The Chinese voice at the other end of the wire was calm, yet shaded with alertness. "You may begin."

And Fletcher did, omitting nothing. When he had finished, there was a silence at the other end. In something like panic, he shouted:

"Tsang! Tsang, are you there? Have you heard what I said? Did that damn 'phone go off?"

Softly the answering voice came: "I hear. But, Prior-born, I think one moment what to tell you to do. Even a water buffalo travels more easily along a path than across a rice paddy. I was trying to find a path."

"But, Tsang," Fletcher said nervously, "I'll do anything you say. What do you think of all this? Of course, I'm not particularly afraid of that threatening letter. I'm more worried about the money I loaned on the ship."

"I do not agree, as to danger, Thrice Honorable. When man has already most easily obtain' money from you by guileful method, is it not his desire to put distance between him and you? To leave you alone? But if he is trying to get *more* money out of you, then, I think, there is danger for you——"

"So you believe the blackmailing letter is written by the same man that got the check out of me?" Fletcher interrupted.

Tsang's answering voice was still calm but slightly long-suffering: "Pre-born, how can I—fresh from sweet labor of burning incense before my ancestors' spirit tablets—tell who has done what? I am possess' of but feeble intellect and that has been greatly strain' of late by too much work. I am very tired——"

"Great Lord, Tsang!" Fletcher interrupted again. "You don't mean you're considering leaving me in the lurch? That you'll go on burning punk for those dead chaps and let me get poured full of lead as a sieve?"

The other end of the wire chuckled. "So you think now there is possibility that blackmailing letter is important? No, Favored of Heaven"—there was a gusty sigh—"my holiday is over. I leave for Shanghai tonight."

"Then I'll see you in my office the first thing tomorrow morning?"

"Unfortunately, no, Prior-born. If I am to be of any values to you, I must work all day tomorrow. I may have to go to fifty places and put the ear to fifty windows."

"In the meantime, Tsang, should I get in touch with Ravenna, the Italian consul? This is running it a bit thick, to import a Camorra over here in the Orient. After all, Ravenna represents Italy, and the Black Hand is certainly a Latin invention."

Tsang had listened to Fletcher with that innate politeness of the Oriental, but when the bank manager had finished, the voice at the other end said quietly:

"But he is good man, Baron Ravenna. Like yourself, Pre-born, he is one of my fine friends. Why should we cause him to lose face, by telling him of this letter? He will groan and be unhappy——"

"Oh Lord, Tsang, stop beating about

the bush! You mean, that for some reason of your own, I am to say nothing to him? Is that right?"

"Precisely, Heaven-smiting. At moments your penetrating eye is like the piercing gaze of a fish cormorant. You can stare far under water and see the fish."

Fletcher laughed. "Oh, no, I can't, Tsang! And right now, the water is as dark as though a squid had been pumping out ink. But, go ahead, give me your orders. I'll follow 'em if I break a leg doing it."

"Good," came the voice from distant Hangchow. "You will get together a packet of paper, the size of bank-notes. On the outside you will wrap a thousand-dollar bill, of some old currency that is greatly debased, p'haps one of those bankrupt *Crédit d'Indo-Chine* bills. And——"

"But, Tsang, isn't that the bogus money they warned against using? Yet, God knows, I can't pay over any hundred thousand!"

"I will try to take care of that," Tsang went on, with a hint of firmness. "Then, tomorrow night, as the letter directs, you will go out to Lung Hwa Pagoda. Go by rickshaw. That will be slower and may give you the opportunities to watch and to see if you are being followed. That, I think, is all."

"No it isn't, Tsang! Should I arm myself? Slip a pistol in my pocket?"

The detective's answering voice was unenthusiastic: "If you wish, although I believe it is of small values to you, Preborn. But if you do chance to make shootings, do not begin until you are very sure you know whom you are shootings at. I should not be very happy if you—how you say it, just moment ago?—'pour lead' into *me*. I shall try to be near you at all time.' Let' see. . . . We should have some password, to avoid that pain-

ful accident. 'Black Hand,' they felicitously call themselves. For us, then, 'White Hand.' That is it! If you hear man whisper, 'White Hand,' even though he seem stranger to you, you will know either that it is I, or one of my somewhat blockheadish assistants."

There was a long pause at the other end of the wire, as Tsang thus politely indicated his wish to end the talk. Fletcher was loth to break the tenuous connection, but reluctantly he said:

"All right, Tsang. I'll follow your directions. And, speaking of hands, I'm in yours!"

## 3

FLETCHER awoke early the next morning. Long before sleep actually left his eyes, he was dimly conscious of the stir of events. And it was not in too happy a frame of mind that he took his setting-up exercises and needle shower that was his usual rather pleasant routine.

He had no more than seated himself at breakfast, when the telephone rang. It was the agent at Lloyds.

"Fletcher, this ruddy *Città di Pisa* affair gets more and more puzzling. I've gotten my reply from Livorno. Our representative there says that Count Mazzino left port for a cruise of the South Seas some three months past. He was last reported at Tahiti, en route for New Zealand; that was five weeks ago. No report has been turned in since. However, if he had changed his plans and decided to come up here, it would take a month. That isn't the point that is mystifying me. The cable indicates that the *Città di Pisa* is a pleasure yacht and that this is a pleasure cruise. And——"

"I know," Fletcher broke in excitedly, "but the ship had a cargo! The hold was filled with copra!"



"Exactly!" agreed the Lloyds agent. "The only thing I can think of is that Mazzino may be eccentric and want to play at shipping again. Or the cruise may have cost him more than he could afford and he is trying to make a little money. I've cabled again for more information. But today is May First. What with labor disturbances on May Day in Europe, our Leghorn office will probably be closed. I'll get in touch with you again, the moment I hear anything."

It was on the tip of Fletcher's tongue to say: "I hope I'll be here for you to get in touch with me." But he refrained. Instead, he closed the conversation and went back to a breakfast which, while tastefully cooked, failed to tempt his appetite. The very air seemed charged with ominous implications.

Fletcher had always considered himself a man with a normal amount of courage; yet it was a distinct drain upon his nerves to leave his quarters that night, to set forth in the face of promised danger. He was not complying with the terms of the letter in the matter of money. What if he were stopped, seized, overpowered and the packet of paper with its misleading outer banknote were examined?

At least he would make a fight for it! Sagging his coat-pocket was a heavy automatic pistol. He felt gingerly of it and gained a trace of courage from the touch—although he knew himself to be a wretched marksman. If worst came to worst, he would probably forget the pistol and take to his fists.

But the Camorristi used daggers, didn't they? Not much good, one's fists, against a knife. However, Tsang had been precise in his directions. Confidence would have to be placed in the small Chinese, and Tsang had never yet let him down. On the other hand, the small detective was only human and this

was something outside Tsang's ken. Could the Oriental pit his wits against a cold-blooded organization such as this must be? Probably a villainous gang that knew in advance all the subterfuges employed by a squirming victim endeavoring to circumvent its demands. Fletcher shivered.

Tsang had asked him to go by rickshaw. It was a long ride to the Lung Hwa, the Flowery Dragon Pagoda. The note had stipulated that he place the money in the tile before three o'clock; therefore he started on the stroke of midnight.

The intervening hours of the evening, he had played bridge with three of the bank juniors. When his wrist-watch pointed to the moment of departure, he had somewhat quizzically bade the trio good-night, wondering—as he had done with the Lloyds agent—if he was fated to see them again in this world. Yet he had made no reference to his journey. Tsang, in cautioning him against divulging the Black Hand threat to Baron Ravenna, had plainly indicated that he was expected to play his hand in secret.

THE night was balmy; the air seemed drugged with the scent of frangipani and *yu-lan*, Chinese magnolia. Somewhere at the rear of the servants' quarters, a coolie played on a two-stringed, python-skinned fiddle—a persistent minor aria, a sequence of sound that had come down intact without a written note from a Chinese dynasty that antedated the birth of Christ.

A peculiar nostalgia for life attacked Fletcher. China was bizarre, colorful; he loved it; he wanted to live in this land of his adoption for a natural span. It seemed grotesque that he should be menaced here in the very middle of Shanghai's peaceful, well-ordered foreign settlement with its low criminal rate that

would put to shame many an American city. Yet he was a banker, a man who handled money; perhaps it was inevitable that he should be picked out as the best possible prospect for a blackmailing band.

The only person to whom Fletcher gave an indication of the hazards confronting him was the rickshaw boy. He concluded:

"If you don't wish to make this trip, I won't blame you; I can call in a public rickshaw from the street. On the other hand, if you do decide to come, I'll double your wages."

"My wage' b'long plenty!" the coolie answered promptly, scowling. "You my mastah. Should I no come 'long wit' you? Am I not fastes' puller in Shanghai? No man can catch—'less he have motocah."

Fletcher climbed into the cart. His servant's loyalty touched but did not surprise him. A faithful people, the Chinese!

The coolie's words acted as a tonic. A quick beat of adventure began to drum in Fletcher's pulse. He was like a soldier, advancing into the unknown; somewhere ahead was the enemy. And somewhere near at hand—he hoped—was Tsang Ah-bou, putting up a barrage to make the advance safe.

Fletcher sank low in his cart as though drowsing, but with eyes alert for signs of following rickshaws. Bubbling Well Road, however, seemed practically deserted. Occasionally his cart overtook and passed a jogging rickshaw with an owner lolling on the back of his neck, napping after too strenuous a session of bridge and whisky sodas at the Shanghai Club. Even less occasionally motor cars roared along the road with a criminal disregard for speed and safety. These, Fletcher tried to scrutinize.

Two of them did not roar. They were of the limousine type, with tonneau

curtains drawn. True, that might mean nothing. The Chinese, with their stubbornly held cult of the hareem, might be conveying the women of a family home from some private banquet. Or the shades might simply be the means of shielding the "Thousand Ounces of Silver," that is, a marriageable daughter, from the contamination of public gaze.

On the other hand, those blinds might hide armed, crouching men. Each of the cars had slowed down perceptibly as it had passed Fletcher's rickshaw. Had he imagined it, or had those rear curtains been raised ever so slightly just as the car came up to him? . . . And they appeared to be going in the same direction that he was headed: toward the Lung Hwa, the Flowery Dragon Pagoda.

## 4

WITHOUT molestation Fletcher reached the outskirts of the city. He thought to discover Tsang's plan underlying this exceedingly risky move. Granted that the note from the Black Hand was ominous, they would probably not act until after he had placed the bogus money in the pagoda tile—probably not even then, for fear that Fletcher might have stationed spies about the pagoda. They might allow the bundle to remain in its cache a week before trying to retrieve it. But not until the bundle was examined should there be any actual danger. By that time Tsang would have woven a fine web of protection about Fletcher, guarding him much as a President is guarded by secret service men, following the receipt of threatening letters at the White House.

The way was now growing more lonely. Suburban Chinese villages had dwindled to small clusters of houses, then fields dotted with mounds of rotted bricks, above-ground graves. The Chi-

nese, he thought, were born, lived, died and were buried on their ancestral acres. An indissoluble part of their native soil. He shivered slightly at these evidences of mortality. The roadside became shaded by a double avenue of trees. It was as though he had entered a long, eery tunnel. The small lantern of the rickshaw cast such a feeble light that it seemed on the verge of being swallowed by the grotesquely looming tree shadows.

Fletcher began softly and tunelessly to whistle. The rickshaw boy slowed down and turned to interrogate the unusual sound from his master.

Fletcher smiled sheepishly. Yes, he had been whistling to keep up his courage. "It's all right, boy——"

He broke off abruptly, for over the face of the coolie had crept an expression of horror. Fletcher jerked around to meet the menace behind him; then the world grew impenetrably black.

A sack had been neatly dropped over his head.

For a moment, instinctively, he fought. He could feel his fist land on a man's face and in answer he heard an interjection in some foreign tongue, not Chinese. His forearms were caught and twisted so cruelly that he wondered despairingly if the bones had been broken. He choked back a groan. He could feel the twine of rough hemp biting into his wrist-bones and ankles. Then he knew the utter helplessness of not only blindness but of inhibited locomotion.

An exploring hand went into his pocket. He could feel his pistol being drawn forth and the packet of imitation money . . . and he knew then an active fear of death.

How would it come? By a bullet? That had been the manner stated in the blackmailing letter. But bullets meant noise. He rejected the possibility. It would much more likely be by a knife-

thrust to his heart. He vaguely wondered if that would be painful.

He could hear a whispered voice: "Jus' as we t'ought. No money. Make fool of us."

What was the voice? Not Chinese. Foreign? Not English, certainly. . . . Why didn't they strike? He grew dimly angry at the delay. . . . Had he trusted Tsang Ah-bou once too often? Yet this was not the detective's fault. Tsang had evidently thought that he, Fletcher, would at least be allowed to reach the pagoda in safety. The little detective had not foreseen such a sortie and ambush, a good two miles this side of the old, crumbling monument. Again came the queerly accented voice that held a reminder of another voice he had recently heard; apparently a command, for Fletcher felt himself being lifted and borne by feet and shoulders at a rapid trot.

One thing was clear; for the moment at least they had decided to spare him. He took heart at the reprieve. Desperate though his situation might be, helpless, and menaced in the future, nevertheless there was the hope that as long as he continued to live, just that long would Tsang Ah-bou be given an opportunity to try to effect a rescue.

What had happened to his rickshaw boy? There had been no sound of combat. The boy would have fought, Fletcher knew, had the chance been afforded him. He hoped profoundly that no harm had come to the boy. If the coolie had been hurt, Fletcher told himself, he would do what he could for the boy's family. But possibly the puller had only been stunned and thrown aside on the edge of the road.

**T**HERE was an interminable time during which Fletcher found himself sweating at every pore from the close confinement of the sacking. At last the

jogging movement of his bearers ended. He caught a distant hail. It was answered by the voice of the man whose accents had puzzled him. Again Fletcher was carried forward. There was a sense of being lifted high, then dropped. He was conscious of the worn hardness of boards and of the peculiar blending of smells inseparable from a Chinese sampan: of fish, of leeks, the sour odor of rice wine. There followed now a quick conversation some little way from him, too distant or too guarded for him to distinguish the words. He could only hazard the guess—from the absence of sliding tones—that it was not in Chinese.

The conversation ended. The boat shook as though men were leaping ashore. A moment later he heard the creak of a *yuloh*, that long single oar which propels a sampan through inland waterways.

Where was he being taken? About Shanghai was a network of canals, China's substitute for roads. He was lying on his back. It would not be long before dawn would break. The moments dragged past to the slow creak-creak of the *yuloh*. In spite of his acute discomfort and fear, Fletcher found himself beginning to doze, and from a doze he fell into a troubled sleep. When he awoke, after fighting through a nightmare of being buried beneath a heavy kapok mattress upon which, sitting and amicably discussing his fate, were Tsang Ah-bou and Conte di Mazzino, he found that the sun was beating through the folds of his head covering.

Again Fletcher heard a hail in the distance. He could feel a freshening of the air. Bare footsteps pattered along the deck of the sampan. He was lifted and carried up and up. A gangplank, he postulated, aboard another junk, and by the elevation, a very large one.

He tried to shout and succeeded in uttering a muffled sound. A cruel buffet

against the side of his forehead caused him to desist. Again he was set down upon hard boards. Faintly he caught a new smell, the sweet cloying aroma of the Black Seed—opium. What did it mean? Was this a great, two-decker flower boat, dedicated to Oriental lust? Or was it a sea-going junk whose skipper dallied with the dream-giving smoke? He listened for the high titter of singsong girls, that might prove it a Chinese pleasure craft. But about him was that same silence indicative of a secret purpose. Who knows, he thought bitterly, he might have been transferred from the sampan under the very nose of the *Villa Lobos*, or some other American gunboat in the lower harbor.

He was aroused from his pondering by the painful impact of a toe against his ribs.

"Fletch'r," came that same voice he had grown to recognize, "we now take you to a place w'ere you can not make fool of us any more, with your boggis moneys. You had you' chance. Now, before you can get away, you will pay ten times w'at we ask first time. Five hund' r'ousand dollar' for you' life." The voice broke into a laugh that was almost genial. The figure moved away, the feet bare or rubber-heeled, falling softly on the deck.

He left Fletcher a prey to forebodings a hundredfold more sinister than if the alternative offered had been of some specified death. Death alone, Fletcher realized, might not be an evil; it might even be a release.

As he felt himself being drawn deeper and deeper into the depths of imagined torture—knowing that he could not begin to pay the ransom of half a million dollars—another voice came. It spoke in Chinese, uttering two simple, but marvelously pregnant words:

"White hand."

Then, without adding a word of explanation, the speaker shuffled away. His feet gave that telltale slip-slipping sound made by the Oriental.

Once more Fletcher was left in silence, but now his heart was pounding—drumming so painfully that he nearly choked. Hope suddenly flamed. The prearranged password. The voice was Tsang Ah-bou's.

## 5

THE next five minutes had in store one more jolt for Fletcher, but of a less pleasant variety. The opium-reeking junk that he had imagined himself aboard, suddenly began to throb with the unmistakable beat of engines. The beat increased, and soon he was conscious of a slight rolling motion of the deck on which he had been dumped.

His mind jumped to one conclusion: he was being Shanghai'd. The irony of this struck him. In the past, crimps had impressed sailors aboard their ships for the run to Shanghai; now he was being carried willy-nilly *away* from this city.

He began to worry over the bank. That Chinkiang situation was serious. With the rebels in power there, it might change overnight for the worse. He should be back at his desk—abruptly he halted this unproductive line of thought. He must take what consolation he could in the fact that he had been permitted to live this long.

Where was the boat taking him? He tried to judge its size by the roll of the deck and the throb of the engines. But he was too much of a landsman. The patter of bare feet approached him. Instinctively he drew himself together, tensing muscles all too uselessly. He could feel hands at his wrists and feet; his bonds were being untied. Then he felt himself lifted upright. A hand grasping his shoulder propelled him for-

ward. He staggered, for the withes about his ankles had been drawn so harshly as to impede the circulation. The propelling hand tightened and he lurched along the deck. He was stopped. He could hear a door being opened.

The next moment his bit of black sacking was removed. He found himself in a large cabin expensively panelled—after the fashion of a dozen years ago—in Circassian walnut. Seated at a flat-topped desk, a beautiful example of the cabinet-maker's art, was the little European who had borrowed the fifty thousand dollars of him. The man was clad now in immaculate yachting whites, brass-buttoned, with a peaked cap lying at his elbow. A bulge in his right-hand coat pocket was the only marring factor in an otherwise perfect sartorial creation.

"What in the name of the devil is the meaning of this?" asked Fletcher brusquely.

The man gave him a preoccupied stare, then waved aside the question. His lemon-yellow hands drummed a tattoo on the desk.

Fletcher gathered his wits together and glanced swiftly out the narrow window just above the desk. The ship-owner caught the glance. Quickly he jerked down a wooden blind—but not before Fletcher had seen the early morning sun reflected redly upon the windows of a familiar group of buildings: the Chinese-American silk filature mills. The ship was moving down the Huangpu River, not three miles from the center of Shanghai.

"Now," said the dapper man at the desk, "let me make apologize, Mr. Fletch'r, for de exceeding' bad t'reatment you have been give'. But it might 'ave been worse, *bein'*? I could 'ave done several t'ings: put a dagger in your back or dropped you, wit' your hands and feet still bound, into de canal. But I did none of dese t'ings. An' w'y? Because

I t'ink you may be ver' useful to me——"

"Oh, no, I won't!" interrupted Fletcher savagely. "I'm not worth five hundred thousand dollars. So you needn't think you'll get that much out of me for ransom! Or even a tenth of it!"

"Ah, so Beppo 'as been talking to you? He threathen you, eh? Well, Beppo is good man, even if he is half-caste. He is fine navigator—but *Dominiddio*, I am master of dis ship! You may set you' mind at rest about ransom. Of course I 'ad 'ope' dat perhaps you might 'ave been frrrighten' into brringing along dat hundred t'ousand I ask for in my letter. But you didn't. In any case, it wouldn't 'ave purchase' your freedom——"

"So you confess that you wrote that blackmailing letter?"

"But of course. W'y not? It serve' its purpose. Are you not here, w'ere I can use you? And believe me I shall——"

"Just what do you mean?" again interposed Fletcher. Then he halted. After all, would it not be well to learn just what this man had in view? "Go on!" he concluded curtly.

"Precisely w'at I shall do. You have de fine reputation. None bett'r. I 'ave rreports on you from—but no matt'r 'bout dat. Dese rreports say dat you are ver' successful banker wit' de Chinese, because de natives trrust your word. I am goin' to make use of dat trrust. You will do exactly w'at I say. You will say exactly w'at I tell you to say——"

At this point anger overcame Fletcher's caution. "I'm damned if I will! Just disabuse your mind, right now, of any hope that I'll join forces with you! Is thar clear?"

The little man shook his head mournfully. "So bull-in-the-China-shop-ish, you Americans! You do not know 'ow to bend to de wind." He leaned forward until his face was close to Fletch-

er's. The bank manager suddenly saw that the eyes of the ship-owner were contracted to pin-points—sign positive of the opium addict. The thin lips widened to a smile, cold, completely lacking in all elements of humor. "I shall teach you de art of bending—to my will. Do you know w'at it mean' to be buried—to your neck—under de sun? Only your head expose' to dar pitiless glare, to de flies? Do you——"

A figure appeared at the door. The sinister orator at the desk turned with an exclamation of annoyance. "W'at you mean, interruptin' me, *heim?* 'Ave I not orrder dat I be left alone wit' dis man? You shall be giv'n fifty stroke' wit' a bamboo on your heel!"

The man at the door, a Chinese, bowed meekly before the storm. "Velly sorry, Mastah! But wheelmans, he say *mus'* talkee you! Wantchee know what to do now. Whedder to take uppah or lowah channel."

As the colloquy was going on, Fletcher eyed the speaker. He was a decrepit-looking old fellow, heavily pock-marked, eyes rheumy and lack-luster, about his whole face a look of such vacuity that Fletcher suspected an advanced case of senile dementia.

At that instant a hoarse blast of the ship's whistle blared almost above Fletcher's head. It was answered in higher key, apparently near at hand.

A mad impulse came to Fletcher: to try to escape. To bolt for the rail, jump overboard and trust to being picked up by that other, passing ship whose nearness had been indicated by its whistle. . . . A man accustomed to quick decisions, he drew himself together, wheeled and plunged for the decrepit Chinese at the entrance. The Oriental instinctively drew back. The way seemed clear. Fletcher glimpsed the railing, the muddy brown water of the Huangpu, and the red-rusty

stem of a tramp steamer, the boat that had given the answering whistle.

With a leap, Fletcher cleared the high sill of the stateroom door, only to feel across his ankles the bar of a dexterous foot. He fell crashing. Darkness, mingled with gaudy stars, settled about him. . . . Later, still stunned, he groped his way to a sitting posture on the deck.

Around him were clustered several Chinese sailors. At the door of his stateroom stood the dapper ship-owner. He reached out and patted the shoulder of the senile Chinese. Using the generic term of the East for the Oriental servant irrespective of age, he said:

"Good working, Boy. For dis, I forget de bamboo on your heel. An' I give you five Mex. dollar more a week wage." He turned to the other Chinese. "An' to you, if you serve me, jus' as faithful', *perbacco*, I reward you same way. But, to dose who *don't*—"

He swiftly yet graphically pantomimed the motions of a sword in the act of *hari-kari*.

The sailors muttered a moment, staring fearfully at the dapper yachtsman; then hurriedly they backed away from him. Fletcher also stared. He knew now that in this man resided a desperate force, capable of acts as horrible as they were grotesque. Queerly enough his mind turned to Baron di Ravenna, a man of the finest probity, and he wondered dimly at the difference between the two Italians, each a nobleman, each a member of an old race.

The small Latin spoke to the old coolie, pointing to Fletcher: "I am t'rough wit' dis man for de moment. Take him to Number Three Hold. Give him littl' food an' water." Then his pin-point eyes dropped directly upon Fletcher. "As for you, if you make any other attempt to escape, you'll wish you

'adn't! You'll see how you like it wit'—both your legs brok'n!"

Fletcher felt himself shaken with a sudden fury. A red flame danced before his eyes. He had an insane impulse to catch that immaculately collared throat and throttle it. . . .

"Why, blast you! We'll see——"

Then, close to his ear, the gentlest of whispers, too low for the man at the door to catch:

"No, Master! *Don't!* . . . Remember White Hand."

Startled, without thinking, Fletcher wheeled around. Behind him was a ring of Chinese faces. These were blank with that peculiar, expressionless quality that betokens uneasiness. Like the average of Shanghainese, all were men of medium height or just under. Any one of them might be Tsang Ah-bou. Fletcher knew the uncanny ability in disguise that Tsang possessed. Therein lay one of the secrets of the detective's success. Yet it was more than mere make-up: he seemed able to merge himself into the character that he played. Genius, Lluellan, the Chief of the Shanghai Police, had called this ability of Tsang's, and Fletcher had never desired to challenge the Welshman's statement. . . .

Yet it seemed impossible that any of these simple, almost vapid-faced Orientals could be Tsang. The ancient, rheumy-eyed Chinese now stepped importantly forward. Catching Fletcher's arm, he said in a shrill, senile voice:

"You come on! An' don' make monkey-foolo with me, or I hit you topside you' head, savvy?"

The crowd of Chinese roared with sudden, childish laughter at this threat, emanating as it did from an old man who was a full head shorter than the burly, hard-muscled Fletcher. They opened a way for the pair to pass.

**M**BEKLY Fletcher moved forward along the deck. His desire to put all to a desperate touch had vanished. For one thing, he was still sick and shaken from his fall; for a second, somewhere in the group behind him was Tsang Ah-bou.

A spasm of nausea shook him. For a moment he reeled. The ancient man shook him by the arm. There was an unusual force in the pressure. Obeying the direction indicated, Fletcher began to descend a stairs. Below was blackness and the nearly overpowering stench of drying copra. . . . It seemed a long time ago now, his talk with the Lloyds agent about the conversion of this pleasure yacht to a copra-bearing steamer. Like a race horse made to carry a manure cart, converting a yacht to this rancid, oily trade.

The darkness grew, insidiously stealing about him, and with it waves of billowing heat. He halted, his body suddenly refusing to take him farther into that fetid cavern. Again the Oriental hand was clamped just above his elbow. His biceps tensed. He tried to jerk away and was surprized to find that he was powerless in that clasp. Yet the old Chinese had seemed feeble, tottering on the brink of the grave. Desperately Fletcher began to struggle, to break that grasp on his arm.

A chuckle sounded in his ear and again that familiar, cautious whisper:

"It is all right, Prior-born. Do not try to fight with me."

Fletcher stopped as though stung. "Tsang!" he muttered. "Tsang——" A hand went roughly about his mouth.

"Thrice Honorable, would you tell the whole ship who I am?"

The bank manager tried to mumble an apology, but the hand remained firmly about his mouth. Tsang's voice exasperatedly continued:

"Sometimes I think you b'long like a little child. First you risk being shot by Mazzino, trying to jump overboard. He has pistol in his pocket, which I think any man could see! And now, you try to tell all the ship who I am."

The hand was grudgingly released. Fletcher gave a shaky smile. His fingers went out and caught the firm shoulder which even Tsang's mastery of disguise could not make flabby with age. He gave the shoulder a quick, thankful squeeze and then stepped confidently down the stairs into the intense blackness of the vessel's hold.

Both men groped their way forward. Tsang muttered: "I have no lantern. I have no match." At last he stopped. "I think this is Number Three Hold."

Fletcher stopped. He could hear Tsang moving about near at hand.

"That funny," the detective muttered.

"What's funny?"

"This cargo here not copra. This boxes." He paused. "I guess I turned around. This is Number. One Hold. But no matter. The Count will not know the difference. Boxes. Funny!"

But Fletcher was not interested at that moment in the ship's cargo. He whispered cautiously, hardly above his breath:

"May I ask a question now?"

Tsang gave an impatient exclamation; then an innate, racial politeness caused him to say: "If you desire, Pre-born."

"What ship are we on?"

But racial politeness was not proof against this stupidity. Tsang clucked through his teeth. "Have you not guessed that yet, my friend? This be-long *Città di Pisa*."

"But I thought that she had been pirated and burned!"

The small detective gave a deep groan. "Yes, my good friend, I suppose you do think that. You are very fine banker, yes! But of crooked men you know not



at all." Tsang's voice grew philosophical. "However, as the old poet says, 'The lordly mandarin duck knows not of the battles of the steel-spurred fighting quail.'"

## 6

TSANG disappeared, leaving Fletcher alone in the pitch darkness of the hold. The only air there was came from a single ventilation pipe leading to the deck. Copra bugs flew about him, settled and bit viciously. The heat was terrific. His clothes became soaked with perspiration. Thirst then attacked him.

In an endeavor to forget the increasing pangs of thirst, he began to explore the confines of his prison. Tsang had commented in some surprize concerning the presence of boxes in this hold. Fletcher now ran his hands along the surfaces of these. They seemed to be of equal size, each approximately seven feet long, and a yard wide and deep. He soon noted that there were many of them; back and back they were piled.

Suddenly he stopped. A shiver ran a swift course up and down his spine. And in spite of the heat, his teeth began to chatter.

## Coffins!

What hellish sort of ship was this? The dapper Latin in command, Fletcher was convinced, was a degenerate. Did the man's moral slackening lead toward awful and ghoulish rites with helpless human cadavers?

Panic surged in Fletcher. The terrific heat, the blackness, the nearness of possible coffins. He turned and ran, stumbling, falling prone, picking himself up to run again, back through the ship to the stairs leading upward. Vaguely he realized that he was unreasoning, but he failed to take into consideration the fact that he had been under a terrific tension the past forty-eight hours.

Up the stairs he climbed. The hatch was down. He pounded upon it, shouting, cursing.

After a moment, he could hear voices outside the hatch. It was cautiously opened. The face of a Chinese sailor peered down. Then the man was shouldered aside and Fletcher could see the tiny, opium-contracted eyes of the ship-owner.

"I t'ought you would not like dat hold. But you come up littl' quicker dan I t'ink. So you 'ave decide to make partners wit' me, *hein?*"

For a moment Fletcher did not answer. The sight of that leering face was like a cold douche upon his sweat-drenched body. His first impulse was to damn the man and stumble back down the stairs. Better the companionship of the dead, better the hear and the stench of copra than to fraternize with this perverted being whose febrile mind might invent torture after torture, for the sheer sadistic pleasure of seeing a victim writhe. Then a second, saner impulse came to him and prevailed. He said quietly:

"If you don't ask me to do anything criminal, why shouldn't I help you?"

"'Crrriminal?'" The ship-owner laughed as though the idea were humorously absurd. "Not in de leas' crriminal! Unpleasant, perrhaps, for you; but crriminal, no. Come up on deck. Now dat you are a rrrational 'uman being an' not a rrranting fool, I give you bett' r quart'rs. A nice cab'n. Trrue, you will still be lock' up, but it will not be bad, dere. I shall send you bottl' wine from my own cellaret. I am gen'rous man, I. To dose pipples who serve me well, I give an' give an' give. I am like a damn' fool, so gen'rous. I shall send you in—le's see—a bottl' of Château Yquem —" The Latin halted abruptly and apparently repented of this lavish gesture, for he shook his head. "No. You are

American. You have de debase' palare. You would not appreciate Château Yquem. It woul' be putting diamonds before swine. I will send in bottl' of good port, instead. A fine Spanish wine but littl' heavy for my taste."

As he delivered himself of this monologue the dapper little man had been leaning down, peering at Fletcher. The bank manager had been standing on the ladder with his head not quite on a level with the deck. He tried to edge himself higher, to see over the side, but the shipowner thrust out an immaculately white buckskinned shoe.

"Stay w'ere you are—until I have sack brought. I'm not sure I wan' you to know yet w'at place we go. After you prove frien'ship for me, den I let you see ever'thing, *bein'?*"

Fletcher accepted the verdict not impatiently. After all, Tsang would keep him informed as to their whereabouts. And he would know by the motion of the ship if they were putting out to sea preparatory to going to some other coast port of China. He realized that he was not to be shanghai'd, as he had first feared, for reference had been made by the owner to his, Fletcher's, reputation with Chinese merchants. He was to be used in some variety of negotiations. If the small Latin spoke no Chinese, perhaps an opportunity might arise to warn them that they were dealing with a rogue and a monster.

Philosophically, Fletcher submitted to the same bit of black sacking. Before it was slipped over his head, he was given but one fleeting glimpse of the deck. Tsang Ah-bou was not in sight. The bank manager was again propelled along the deck to a cabin, a compartment not far, as well as he could judge, from the captain's stateroom.

This cabin was beautifully furnished but, queerly enough, in a feminine fash-

ion. A heliotrope satin spread lay over the bed, its edges flounced and ruffled. One side of the cabin was taken up by a full-length mirror. To the opposite wall was clamped a woman's dressing-table. Curiously Fletcher examined this table. Along the surface were still traces of spilled face powder. Yet the room gave no impression of recent feminine occupancy. As he examined more closely, he could see that the dabs of powder were touched with a damp mold.

The dressing-table offering no more enlightenment, he turned to a narrow door by the mirror. It opened easily, giving upon a tiny closet. In this reposed a dozen woman's dresses, all apparently of a similar size. On the bottom were neatly ranged pairs of slippers, gold brocaded, cloth of silver, suède, even a pair of tan riding-boots. Fletcher picked up one of the boots. It was heavily bearded with mold, that pervasive substance which attaches itself in the Orient to shoes when not constantly worn or brushed.

He tried to draw some sort of deduction from this, but failed. Tsang would know about it; he would probably sniff like a bloodhound and move to some unerring conclusion. That is, if Tsang were given the chance to enter the cabin.

**T**HE chance was given a few moments later. The key was turned in the outer lock and Tsang slipped in. The shuffling figure so perfectly simulated age that Fletcher could hardly believe it was the brisk, youthful-appearing Oriental he had known so intimately for the past three years. Tsang was bearing a tray with food and wine.

Promptly the detective put a finger to his lips to inform Fletcher that there was to be no conversation. The bank manager nodded; the cabin walls, he realized, were probably thin.

However, he could not refrain from pointing mutely to the various signs in the cabin of a former feminine occupancy. That done, he raised his eyebrows interrogatively. But to Fletcher's disappointment, Tsang only shrugged.

Curiosity proved too much for Fletcher. He risked a whisper: "Do you think the woman is somewhere aboard the ship?"

Tsang gave a terrific frown which seemed to add a score of wrinkles to his speciously lined face. Without a word, he stalked to the door, opened it, then closed it again with a bang of righteous anger.

"Evidently," Fletcher said to himself, "I am not to learn the mystery of this. At least, not for the moment."

He turned to the food which Tsang had brought and ate ravenously. He sipped the ship-owner's port, although he would have preferred coffee.

The motion of the ship continued steady, without pitch or roll, although the engines appeared to be going at full speed. That probably meant the *Città di Pisa* was forging up the Yangtze. . . .

Up the Yangtze? Did the little foreigner in command know of the rebels? Did he know that the revolutionists were filled with an unusually virulent hatred for the Westerners in China? "Down with the Imperialistic Nations, France, Italy, England and the United States," was their motto. "Kill the Foreign Barbarians," was their unpleasant and often obeyed slogan.

After eating, sleep dragged mightily at Fletcher's eyelids. He threw himself down upon the ruffled bed and slept. When he awoke, the sun was trying to pierce the wooden shutters of the cabin window, and he realized that it was late afternoon.

For a moment he lay drowsily, listening for the beat of the engines. They

were silent. He sprang from the bed and ran to the shuttered window. Outside, apparently at some little distance from the ship, came confused noises. He began to separate and distinguish these: the creak of *yulohs*, indicative of moving sampans; the resonant, echoing twang from a barber boat, advertising its trade by the stridulation of a giant jew's-harp. Farther away came the wail of a long-handled Chinese lute accompanying the excruciating yelps of a singsong girl engaged in rendering a Chinese operatic aria. . . .

Tsang and Fletcher had argued amiably more than once about this variety of Chinese music. Fletcher had contended that it sounded precisely like the wail of an amorous cat. Tsang Ah-bou, however, had argued that it was the finest florescence of music; and that a thousand years hence, when the Western Barbarians had progressed in their musical education to the point China had already attained, they would be applauding similar arias sung in a like fashion.

The music Fletcher now heard indicated a restaurant boat. And restaurant junks in turn predicated a city of some size. Not Shanghai, for even as he slept, he had been vaguely aware all day long of the steady motion of the engines. Not Nanking, the new capital, for the ship had been traveling too short a time. It must be Chinkiang.

A sudden oppression of worry bore down upon him. Chinkiang was the center of the Revolution. This gloomy foreboding thought was suddenly overshadowed by a hail from the river which was answered from the ship's deck. Call and reply were in Chinese. He felt a faint jar as a boat bumped sharply against the side of the *Città di Pisa*, followed by a sputter of exclamations. The impact had evidently thrown some one off his balance.

There was a scurry of feet along the deck, and Fletcher guessed that a ladder was being lowered overside. More sputters followed in agitated Chinese. He caught such phrases as:

"Very good, venerable and eminent sir, be pleased to come up. Here, Cha, help him with great care over the rail! . . . Ey-yah! Oh, son of a turtle, *do* you wish to deposit the honorable gentleman in the river?"

At last the party seemed to have assembled itself on deck. There was much hissing intake of breath in that Oriental sibilation of politeness. Fletcher heard the ship-owner's voice, in the distance. He was saying in English, and somewhat peevishly:

"Well, 'ave dey come? Only two hour' late! For China, dat is good, I s'pose. My time is of no value. *I*, of course, can spen' hours an' hours, twee-dling my thumb, waitin' for dem! . . . Ch'ung, bring Fletch'r to my stateroom. Dis will be good chance to experiment; I shall find out w'ether dat stiff-neck' banker has been worth bringing along!"

The door was unlatched. Tsang entered and ran swiftly toward Fletcher. Putting his lips to the bank manager's ear, he breathed with the utmost caution:

"Come with me. Pretend to fall in with any proposing that this Mazzino man may make. No matter what he talk, *you* say to him, 'Yes, Count, can do!'"

Fletcher twisted about irritably, promptly forgetting his earlier plan to pretend compliance with the schemes of the Count. "I'm damned if I will! Do you think that——"

"Yes," interrupted Tsang with a peculiar stern dignity that he could assume upon occasions, "yes, Honorable, I do think that you are going to do so. And why? Because I ask it. It is more than your little personal honor. If I have guess' right, it is the life of many, many

people that we may be able to save. Is that clear, my good friend?"

"Y-es."

"Then come. We have talk' too much now. If I am discover'—you will lack even my poor protection from now on."

Fletcher was not blindfolded. His eyes went quickly over the rail. The ship was anchored apparently in the river but near the shore. About her swarmed a city of junks. Over their masts, ashore, he could glimpse the crenelations of a low city wall. The glimpse was brief, but it was sufficient. There was Chinkiang. Chinkiang that was lying gasping and supine under the hands of Red rebels, men who had become so far renegade as to hold as their aim the turning over of China to Russia, presenting that northern nation with yet another Soviet State.

## 7

**I**N ADDITION to the ship-owner, there were two men in the Latin's stateroom, as Fletcher entered. The pair were Chinese and were clad in the heavy brocaded silks that indicated Oriental affluence. The buttons which fastened the loops of their jackets were of finest jade. Their long finger nails were encased in white jade protectors.

The elder of the two, and the more richly garbed, was a peevish-faced Oriental of some sixty years. He seemed to be nervous, for he jiggled a silken knee up and down with maddening regularity. His companion was apparently in awe of him and hurriedly concurred with each shrill platitude that he gave forth.

The first few moments of the interview were taken up with the usual polite circumlocutions prior to engaging upon the business of the day. Each stencil that the man proffered, Fletcher mechanically answered in-kind, since the ship-owner demanded that he act as interpreter. As

he did so, he tried to guess the elder Oriental's profession.

Too brisk for a merchant; he lacked that touch of blandness, that air of pouring oil on water whether or not troubled, which is characteristic of the commercial Chinese, from wealthy bank comprador to petty shopkeeper. On the other hand, he lacked that cynical detachment invariably found in native diplomats. There was an air of strain, of feverish excitement about him which betokened nerves strung almost to the breaking-point. . . . He informed Fletcher that his name was Leong.

The bank manager could see Tsang Ah-bou, lingering humbly at the door, examining this visitor with a veiled but intense scrutiny. Yet Tsang's mouth drooped with an expression of vapid gawking curiosity so typical of the Chinese coolie that Fletcher had to stiffen his lips to avoid smiling.

When the two visitors had concluded their remarks, the ship-owner demanded impatiently of Fletcher:

"Well, what dey say, *bein?* Dey make lot of talk!"

"Nothing yet. He's just about to tell us," Fletcher answered as the peevish-faced Chinese leaned forward.

"This person has come to discuss the purchase of the arms aboard this ship."

Fletcher tried to school his face not to show surprize. But it was difficult. The answer to so much that was puzzling him was now given. Those boxes—coffins, he had thought them—were rifle cases. He was on a gun-running boat. And, since he was a white man, this Oriental apparently thought him a partner with the ship-owner in the enterprise. He would have to go warily. Learn more, if he could. . . . "Leong," the Chinese visitor had called himself. The name was unfamiliar, not the title of the leader of the revolutionists. Possibly some

agent of the rebel generalissimo. On the other hand, each Chinese had a dozen names which he used as fancy dictated, changing without warning or without any reason. Even Tsang Ah-bou; although the detective, familiar with Western prejudices in the matter of taking a name and keeping it, had never made one of those startling overnight changes.

The ship-owner spoke: "As soon as dis chap get t'rough talkin' *la politesse*, you tell 'm I have his rifles."

"I know," Fletcher answered shortly. "I saw the cases, when you put me down in the hold." He turned to the Chinese and conveyed this information.

Leong jerked up his chin with an annoyed motion. "Naturally the rifles are here. They had better be—if your ship is to escape a bombardment by my batteries of red-mouthed cannon there." His hand swept vaguely in the direction of the shore. "Do you think I would allow you to anchor here, otherwise?"

Fletcher held up his own hand and turned to the ship-owner. "He says that the arms had better be here, or he'll throw a few shells into us from shore."

The small Latin gave a slow smile. "For dat littl' bit of bravado, I charge 'im five t'ousand dollar' extra, *bein?* Tell 'im to give me the money he promise' and stop his cat-talk, den we start unloading. I want to do other business here, more important dan dis, den get down river."

At this juncture an idea struck Fletcher—like a sudden flood of light in a darkened room. The owner of the ship spoke no Chinese; the visitor, no English. Possibly the man's satellite understood it, although his face gave no inkling of comprehension. . . . What he so suddenly planned to do, Fletcher realized, was a mad, probably suicidal thing, but it would revenge him against the sinister Latin and, more important, if it succeeded

it would save this revolution-torn land just that much more unnecessary bloodshed. He turned to the ship-owner.

"Just how much money was it our envoy here promised to bring?"

"Fifty t'ousand dollar in Shanghai paper currency, bills on your bank, my good Fletch'r. And forget w'at I say jus' now about chargin' 'im five t'ousand extra. Get de money."

Fletcher turned blandly to the visitor. "The captain of this ship says that he is ready to unload his cargo just as soon as you turn over to him the agreed sum of two hundred thousand dollars——"

"*Liang?* *Liang?* *Two?* *Two?*" interrupted the Chinese with a sputter. "Ey-yah! What do you say: *two hundred thousand?* Thieves! Grave-robbers! *Two hundred thousand!* Aieeee!"

The bank manager turned back to the ship-owner, trying to simulate a worried look. "This native says he won't go through with the bargain. He says that fifty thousand is too much. He will only give you ten thousand."

But the little Latin, instead of breaking into angry curses, sat quite still. His eyes bored into Fletcher, like tiny but inordinately sharp gimlet points.

The bank manager met the look—squarely. Not for nothing did Fletcher have the reputation in Shanghai of being one of the city's best poker-players, even though, due to his bank position, he limited himself to small stakes.

FOR a moment, the ship-owner seemed satisfied by his scrutiny. Then his eye lighted upon Tsang Ah-bou, still gapping with half-witted fervor into the stateroom. A cigarette-stained finger was flung out.

"You, old Ch'ung! Come in here!"

Into the room Tsang shuffled.

"Did dis man"—indicating the peevish-faced arms agent—"say to Fletch'r

jus' now dat he would only pay ten t'ousand dollar' for our whole cargo of arms?"

"Oh-a, yes, Mastah! Yes, Mastah!" Tsang agreed, wagging his artfully grizzled head up and down with enthusiasm. "He talkee only ten sousand, and he say ten sousand b'long too much!"

"Good work, Tsang!" Fletcher mentally applauded. For an instant the bank manager had been disconcerted by the Latin's request for corroboration from Tsang. But the detective, whether he liked Fletcher's idea or not, was standing by, like a good sportsman.

The owner gave a thoughtful nod. Then apparently he thought of a further line of proof. "Ch'ung, you speak to dis Chinaman. You tell him dat dis ship-ment cost me more dan fifty t'ousand. Make 'im see dat I am giving him fine, fine bargain w'en I sell at dat fig'r'."

"Yes, Mastah! Yes, Mastah!" Tsang answered with that same air of pathetic eagerness to obey. Turning to the visitor, he said in the vernacular with an air of deep humility: "O Venerable Leong *Lao-yeh*, my master, the foreign barbarian, wishes me to tell you that the cargo of arms he carries has cost him more than two hundred thousand Shanghai dollars. That he is making a great concession to you in parting with it for that figure."

The arms agent groaned deeply and batted his hands together. He seemed to hesitate. Fletcher had a moment of sharp fear. Would the Chinese accede to this demand? Was he so badly in need of the rifles that he would pay any price? If so, the ship-owner would see through not only his ruse, but Tsang's seconding of it. Why, in the name of heaven, hadn't he made the sum half a million, one that it would be impossible for the visitor to meet?

Leong rose. Curtly he beckoned to his henchman. "Tell your masters," he

said arrogantly to Tsang Ah-bou, "that I refuse their offer."

Then his arrogance seemed to leave him. He walked hurriedly as though afraid, to the side of the ship. Lifting his silken gown, he straddled the rail and began to descend the ladder to the sampan bobbing below.

"But w'at he decide to do?" muttered the small Latin, as he and Fletcher followed to the rail.

Fletcher, remembering the arms agent's threat, earlier in the interview, answered honestly for the first time: "I don't know." There was a sharp shriek below them. In his hurry to get aboard the sampan, Leong had slipped on the last four rungs of the ladder. Falling he landed squarely athwart the gunwale of the boat, and lay there face down. His breath was apparently knocked out of his body, for he was silent. Not so his assistant. That worthy gave forth loud ejaculations of commiseration and horror.

As soon as he could regain his wind, the arms agent stood up in the sampan. He vigorously passed his fist before his own nose in a gesture as though he wished to strike that inoffensive member. Then he emitted an appalling screech of rage, followed by the flooding words:

"I will sink your ship! Not a man aboard your louse-infested steamer shall be alive tomorrow morning. I will show you whether or not you can make playful sport with me, with *me* the Leader of the Sublime Peoples' Revolution! You tallow-hided barbarians! And you renegade Chinese who hire yourselves to the Western Bloodsucking Imperialists! Before tomorrow you die!"

Fletcher stole a glance at Tsang. For the moment, the detective had forgotten to play his part of elderly, half-witted coolie. The gaping lips were closed and over the face had crept an expression of deep perturbation. If Fletcher had not

known Tsang to be a man almost inhumanly devoid of fear, he would have said that the Chinese detective was afraid.

Had he, Fletcher, by his bit of chicanery, endangered both their lives? For his own safety he felt small concern at that moment; exultation at the success of his ruse was still too strong within him. He had deflected this shipment of arms; it would not be used to harry a peaceful countryside, to threaten village elders into giving up their pathetic all. For little more than bandits were these revolutionists. . . . On the other hand, if his act had jeopardized Tsang's life, then he was making sorry repayment for the cool heroism Tsang was displaying in worming a way aboard this ship.

The next hours, tonight, would tell.

## 8

AS THE multi-clad leader of the rebels disappeared shoreward in his sampan, a fast-sinking sun caught the small boat and tinted it a blood-red hue. Standing by the rail, Fletcher thought how appropriate was this gory color. . . . At least, he mused, the owner of this ship was not aware of the threat just made to blow them all skyward by some concealed shore battery. Before the bombardment began, Tsang and he must contrive somehow to escape the *Città di Pisa*—for Fletcher knew the procrastinating Chinese well enough to feel reasonably sure that it would not be started soon.

Then, even as this necessity was first presenting itself, the way was offered. The ship-owner, who had been standing at Fletcher's side also watching the disappearing boat, turned and said:

"Dat man, I t'ink, mean' ttroubl' for us. Dat mean' we go ashore, you an' I. I mus' see a man dere. But now dat I have quarrel' wit' military leader, dat other man won't come out to ship, I t'ink.

So I mus' go! I'll have to wait till it get' dark. I don' like goin' 'shore in dark, either. I don' like China! Dis firrs' time I come China an', *per Dio!*—it de las' time!"

He was silent for several moments. Fletcher waited. At last the ship-owner sighed and went on:

"Oh, well, now we *mus'* work out my other plan." His voice grew more cheerful. "De plan I have kidnap *you* for, my good Fletcher, at Lung Hwa Pagoda. I have take' much t'rroubl' and run much risk to bring you along, jus' for this scheme. Bur I t'ink you goin' to be worth it. If I succeed, I can laugh at littl' general who is here jus' now. I can make him damn mad, t'rowing de rifle cases in river, rright under his nose, *hein?* *Perbacco*, dat would be fine! T'row dem overboard, rright under his nose! W'at you say to dat, Fletch'r?"

"I'd say, serves him right," Fletcher answered mechanically. He was listening with strained eagerness to the ship-owner's words. Here, before him, loomed some real test. Not merely to gain an interpreter had the Latin taken such elaborate pains to bring him aboard the *Città di Pisa*. And, whatever were the stakes for which the ship-owner played, they were high enough evidently for him to view with equanimity the loss of a fifty-thousand-dollar arms cargo.

The sun now dropped with a great splash of maroon behind the city wall. The Latin twisted about and bawled out an order to lower a lifeboat. Fletcher noted that the deck crew of the ship seemed to be Oriental. With apparent casualness, he looked up toward the bridge. There, he was somewhat startled to see, stood an Eurasian. That was strange!

With considerable furor and more bungling, the Chinese sailors managed to get the lifeboat launched and brought

around to the ladder down which the Generalissimo had stumbled and fallen. At the boat's tiller, Fletcher noted with satisfaction, sat Tsang Ah-bou. The small detective's face looked unusually grim. And, while he employed that senile, querulous voice to which Fletcher was becoming accustomed, there seemed a note of genuine underlying annoyance at the thrashing efforts of the boat crew.

The Count was first down the ladder. He moved with a cat-like surety and grace astonishing in a man of his age. A person who had led an active life, Fletcher postulated. The bank manager followed, and they seated themselves.

The sun gave one final gleam and dropped behind the wall of the city. There was a short twilight, and then, except for the illumination of boats, the river was in darkness.

Lanterns at the bows of river craft cast ribbons of lemon yellow, or ruddy gold, across the sluggishly moving current. The cook-fires in the small braziers on junk decks glowed maroon, shifting to dancing, green-blue flames, as hand-bellows were applied. Several large, brightly lighted restaurant boats, two-and-three-deckers, were like strings of gaudy paste jewels, their hulks pricked out with paper lanterns of vermilion, heliotrope, the formerly forbidden hue of deep Imperial yellow. . . .

Before them, drowsing behind the low city wall, lay the Treaty Port of Chinkiang.

The progress of the boat continued to be slow, since not a single oarsman was able to develop the slightest aptitude with his sweep. The ship-owner muttered in his disgust:

"Dis is w'ar is known as che-eap Chinese labor, *hein?*"

The small Latin—after Fletcher's seeming obedience this afternoon—had apparently decided that the bank manager



had thrown in his fortunes with the *Città di Pisa*. It would be just as well, Fletcher thought, to keep the ship-owner in that frame of mind as long as possible. He smiled an agreement and began to question the Count, with the vague idea of learning as much as he could of Mazzino's past. But the Italian was a shrewd verbal fencer, too wary to divulge the least item that seemed significant.

At last the thrashing-oared, maladroitly handled boat reached the shore, bumping its way among an increasing press of sampans, barges and fishing-craft of all descriptions. So awkwardly did the life-boat nose its way in, that it called down upon itself a wealth of Oriental vituperation.

The river gate piercing the wall was still open—although in some Chinese cities this is closed at sunset. A lone soldier in the gray coolie-cloth uniform of his calling patrolled back and forth before the aperture. He stared curiously at them, but made no effort to halt their progress.

The Count commented with some satisfaction on this: "I t'ink I am right, to go ashore. Rebel generrral, he watch' ship all evening, but he don't expect us to go to city. . . . But now, w'at we goin' to do? Now we're here?"

"Where do you want to go?" asked Fletcher. "I know a little bit about Chinking—"

He stopped abruptly, for an elbow had jogged his arm. Tsang—who had followed like an unobtrusive shadow behind them—was shaking his head. Taking this cue, Fletcher added:

"But it's difficult to find one's way about in any Chinese city at night. What is the address?"

From an inner pocket, the ship-owner drew a gold-edged, alligator-hide billfold. He extracted a paper from a flap and peered at it, a frown deepened on his forehead.

"I can' see now to read. Here, my good Fletch'r, you look!"

The bank manager read: "Cha Wing-sun, 14 Kingchenling Road."

"Cha Wing-sun——" That was the native banker of Chinkingang, the wealthiest Oriental in the Yangtze Valley, the man who was reported to be financing the Revolution. Fletcher had met Cha, once. He had even been in the Chinese financier's home, had been taken through Cha's gardens, famous in the Flowery Republic for their beauty. But remembering still the detective's admonitory elbow, Fletcher returned the paper, saying:

"Sorry, but I don't know where Number Fourteen Kingchenling Road is."

"Ey-yah, Mastah, my know! My savvy!" Tsang now broke in. "Can do!"

The Count turned with surprize. "Ol' Ch'ung, you still 'ere? W'at you mean?" He paused, laughed shortly. "Oh, well, someone got to guide us. You go firs'. An' Fletch'r, you nex'. I follow las'." The ship-owner's eyes were heavy with suspicion. Then he patted the bulging, lower pocket of his coat. "Per'aps I bett'r tell you. In 'ere is a pist'l. On de pist'l is a nice silencer. No noise. Ol' Ch'ung, I t'ink you aw rright. But, Fletch'r, if *you* try to make funny businesses, to run up side street, to stop man an' ask 'm to help you, den *Dominiddio*, I finish wit' you! I can shoot de wings off a *mosca*—how you say?—a fly! An' quick! You nev'r know w'at hit you!" He paused. "You un'erstan'?"

"Yes, I understand," Fletcher answered quietly. He had not thought of escape. Had the ship-owner but known, Fletcher was anxious to go to the home of the man who was the financial power behind the Revolution. The bank manager had spiked one gun for this sinister little Latin; possibly, before the night was over, he might be able to spike another.

They moved along for several moments

in silence. Then from mild curiosity, Fletcher asked:

"Mazzino, how does it happen that you smoke opium? When you say that you've never been in China before?"

"How you know I smoke it?"

"Smelled the stuff aboard your ship. Also, I've seen your eyes. They're contracted so that you couldn't read that address on the paper."

"Well, you' rright, Fletcher, I do smoke littl'. Not much. It give' me ideas. I can t'ink of more bell, w'en I have half a pipe in me, dan t'ree or four ordin'ry men." He gave a laugh so grating that Fletcher shuddered. "But dis firs' time I have been in China, jus' same. I learn to smoke at Port Said, one time, w'en"—his voice slurred—"w'en my ship was bein' repair'."

Fletcher nodded. The story in essential was probably true. Port Said had the reputation of being the clearing-house for all of the vices of the East, from hasheesh to opium. Then he dared a second question:

"But, if you can't see to read, how can you shoot as accurately as you boast?"

Again that laugh. "I t'ink I can shoot wit' my eyes shut! Wait few minute' until I see somethin' to shoot at, den I show you."

They had been marching in single file with the metamorphosed figure of Tsang Ah-bou shuffling along in the lead. The narrow lane twisted ahead of them, a cavern of darkness. They encountered no other travelers, a state of affairs not unusual in a city overrun by marauding soldiers of the Revolution. Then, ahead, a *wonk* dog barked eerily. Fletcher frowned at this, for the hunger-crazed scavenger animals were known at night to attack humans, particularly foreigners. Normally engaged upon such a walk, he would have carried a stout stick.

Suddenly a growl came from the dark tunnel before them.

"A dog, *hein?* Now my good Fletch'r, I show you how I shoot," promised the ship-owner.

The bank manager was hardly able to distinguish the gaunt, blunt-muzzled brute before a ping-ing-ing at his ear, like the sound of a Flobert cap, caused him to jump. The animal ahead gave a yelp, leaped high in the air, then fell crumpled and lay still.

"You see?" came the voice of the Count. "I am one of great pist'l shots of world. . . . Only I like bett'r anot'er, more large target." And yet again he laughed gratingly.

Fletcher's fists clenched. He felt a sharp urge to turn upon this man, pistol or no pistol, to strangle him as he would have strangled that *wonk* dog. And, he felt, he could do it without a qualm of conscience. . . .

The spasm of anger passed. No, he was committed to another course of action, more devious, less to his liking; but carry on with it he must, for he had tacitly promised Tsang.

The small detective was moving steadily up the lane, confidently twisting and turning. Fletcher had more than once marveled at Tsang's uncanny knack of orienting himself in the darkness of strange Chinese cities. It was an ability not unique with the detective but shared with his countrymen, who for so many generations have passed their lives in the rabbit warrens that make up a Chinese metropolis. Fletcher wondered if Tsang—instead of going to the home of the banker—would attempt to lead them to some house where a rescue might be effected and a refuge offered. He half feared that Tsang would try this. And, having seen the marvelous marksmanship of the Latin ship-owner, he grew less and

less sure they could escape the menace of that pistol.

Bur Tsang Ah-bou had apparently contemplated no such scheme. Abruptly he drew to halt, turned with a wide-mouthed smile and said to the Count:

"Look, Mastah, my bring you all propah place! Dis b'long house Cha Wing-sun. You look—see." His brown finger was pointed to a gilded sign at the side of a tall gate piercing the street wall. The placard was half in English, half in Chinese. The lower portion read:

CHA—MONEY FOREIGN  
BOUGHT AND SELL  
BEST RATE

Fletcher dimly remembered the great gate with its colored tiles. Five years before, when he had opened the Chinkiang branch of his bank, he had been tendered a banquet by Cha Wing-sun. He had entered this very gate by sedan chair, and as he had done so, a band had burst into an approximation of foreign music mingled with the snapping of welcoming fire-crackers. What a strangely different entry now, with a pistol—practically speaking—at his back!

In answer to Tsang's clatter upon a small brass knocker, a porter came from within and, grunting, swung back the ponderous gates. He lifted high a lantern of melted-buffalo-horn and eyed the trio suspiciously.

"Tell you' master," said the small Latin crisply, "dat we mus' see him at once!"

"You come ship-side in rivah?" asked the servant.

"Yes."

This seemed to satisfy the porter, for he waved them inside.

Fletcher felt a sudden stab of instinctive uneasiness. He had won free of the ship. Now he must immure himself behind high walls. A little of his earlier bravado, his desire to spike yet another

of the Count's guns, evaporated. He glanced about him. To escape now he would have to run back, past the ship-owner. That would expose him to the deadly aim of the Count. He stared at Tsang Ah-bou. The detective seemed placid. Obediently, almost eagerly, Tsang was trotting after the servant with the lantern.

"Aw rright, my good Fletch'r, go on!" admonished the Count, a satisfied lift to his voice.

And Fletcher found himself entering a courtyard, fronted by a spirit screen of lacquered dragons, gleaming in the lantern glow with suave glints of color. . . .

9

THE court was banked with beds of peonies. In the center lay a small pond upon which floated great cream-white lotus buds. Feeding the pool was a trickling stream that made a cool babbling as it emerged from a miniature mountain, cunningly builded.

Standing by the pool, gazing down into its clouded, carp-filled depths, was a tall, excessively slender man. He was garbed in a gown of shabby serge with scuffed felt shoes. Turning weary eyes upon the approaching trio, he mutely interrogated them.

Then, as the light of the lantern fell across Fletcher's face, a smile of genuine welcome parted the lips of the slender man. He said:

"Ah, Flei-chah, *Lao-yeh*, this is an honor you do my humble house! When I heard, this afternoon, that the foreign ship had anchored in the river, I expected the Count of Mazzino would come, for his agents had written me. But that you should come, too, Flei-chah, that was a pleasure I did not know I had in store."

Fletcher stared for a moment in surprise. Upon first glimpsing the man, he

had thought him a servant. Now he realized that it was Cha Wing-sun, the banker, himself. Fletcher had seen Cha the day of the banquet, five years before, but on that occasion the Chinese financier had been gorgeous in the finery that such a celebration demanded. In the wearing of shabby serge this evening, Cha was subtly showing that he expected to deal not with an equal, but with an inferior, in the meeting with Mazzino. Cha had already gained an impression of the Count's essential gurgery, Fletcher thought.

The American made an appropriate reply and introduced the ship-owner. Tsang Ah-bou, Fletcher was careful to ignore. The small detective at once dropped to the background and squatted on his heels, coolie-fashion. The financier paid no heed to Tsang, for he was accustomed to the presence of servants, surrounding the persons of his friends, a part and parcel of life in that casual land.

Cha clapped his thin hands together. A servant, clad in immaculate white grass-cloth, appeared. Tea was ordered. As it appeared, the Count drank thirstily. Fletcher and the host refrained, since to touch it would have signalized the end instead of the beginning of an interview. The act of drinking was done so spontaneously that Fletcher's last remaining doubt of the Latin's lack of familiarity with China vanished.

Cha then directed his two visitors to an octagonal kiosk of lacquered wood which was built out over the pool. The three seated themselves on high Chinese red-wood chairs, fluted and carved in the pattern Chippendale copied so extensively in England. Cha turned an inquiring face to Fletcher. Fletcher looked quizzically at the Count.

The ship-owner said softly: "Eh, we begin? Ver' well. Fletch'r, you will tell dis man, fir's, dat we are leaving for Shanghai tonight, jus' as soon as dis talk

is ov'r. Tell him dat I'm littl' uneasy about dat funny fellow who came dis afternoon about arms, dat I wan' get away. So you no make too much talk. An' *you*, Fletch'r, you tell 'im exactly w'at I say, or——" Casually, he parted the pocket of the white drill coat. "You un'erstan'?"

"So far, yes," Fletcher answered, angered by the threat.

His voice, in turn, angered the small Latin, for the Count raised his voice, to say:

"*Perbacco!* You had bett'r un'erstan'! I kill a man for bein' stupid jus' as quick as for bein' trraitor to me! I have come to get de money w'ich is to be use' in Shanghai to buy over garrison of Chinese city to Revolutionists. Dis Cha knows how much; we sent him telegram yesterday. Tell him to bring out money quick——"

"Oh, see here," Fletcher interrupted sharply, beginning to comprehend the Count's scheme, "I'll tell Cha all that, but you're wasting your time. Why should this banker entrust money to us? He knows that you're a gun-runner——"

Abruptly Fletcher halted, for a smile of sheer malignity had overspread the ship-owner's face.

"Ah, but dat, mos' worthy Fletch'r, *dat* is w'ere you ent'r de picture. Dat is w'y I have spare your life so far an' bring you along up here. *You* are goin' to guarantee dis money! As manager of your large an' mos' wealthy chains of banks all over China! Dis Chinese will advance money mos' willingly, for if it should be los' an' nev'r reach Shanghai, you will repay him from your g'reat bank vaults! Is not dat nice littl' plan?"

Fletcher could feel fires of anger beginning to burn within him, but he tried to hold it under control. "And if I do guarantee repayment, how much are you to take away, tonight?"

"Oh, it is not great sum. It will not cause your chain of banks to go crash. I am not sorry of dar, Fletch'r, for you have been such fine partner wit' me, so far, so helpful, dat I rreally wouldn't like to t'ink dat I had cause' all your banks to go burrst——"

"Will you tell me the amount this Chinese has agreed to turn over to you?"

"Not so much, I say. Jus' half-million dollar' in cash."

"Only half a million! Only——" Fletcher choked. The sum, it was true, would not bankrupt the Sino-American, but it would end his career. Ten years of hard work, building up the institution from one small bank in Shanghai to a great organization with fifty branches in China. Those ten years swept away. How could he go before his board of directors and say, "Yes, I tossed half a million squarely out the window"?

"No!" he began. "What you ask is too much——" when a warning cough came to him from the figure squatting in the shadows, almost forgotten. Tsang Ah-bou. Tsang had told him to pretend acquiescence to all the schemes proposed by the Count. But did Tsang realize what he was asking now? Demanding that he, Fletcher, ruin his own career and cripple the bank, just to satisfy the insatiable money-lust of this Mazzino who had but one threat to offer after all, death. Would it not be better to risk that, to explain the true situation to the quiet man in gray serge who had been sitting so patiently while this colloquy in a foreign tongue was going on?

The ship-owner apparently read the conflicting emotions in Fletcher's mind, the thought of treachery, for he said with that same oily inflection which held so much venom:

"The proof of the—how you say?—Nesslerode?—is in de eating. I will know ver' easily, my good Fletch'r, w'ether

or not you persuade dis Cha to do my bidding. Eith'r I get dis money in my hands, in cash, in good pap'r, or I leave you 'ere, stretch' on de floor of dis sum-m'r house, mos' unpleasantly dead. Take your choice, *hein?*"

Again Tsang Ah-bou coughed, a dry, rasping sound, accompanied by an asthmatic wheeze.

Fletcher hesitated no longer. The cough he translated as a signal to acquiesce. Tsang Ah-bou had never yet failed him. Nor had Tsang ever asked him to consent to a dishonorable act. He must blindly trust the small detective. He twisted toward the Count, saying dourly:

"All right!"

"Good!" said the ship-owner. "It is much bett'r for you dat you keep de breath of life! And it is bett'r for me dat I get de money!"

Fletcher turned to the Chinkiang banker. This time, he translated the Count's words without evasion or untruth.

"But, of course," quickly answered the gray-serge figure. "When I was first approached to loan the money, I demanded some sort of guaranty that it would go to the right persons. Now that you promise to underwrite the loan, I can ask for no finer security. The Count seems anxious to get away. I will not detain him."

Again he clapped his thin hands. Once more a servant appeared. Cha gave an order in Chinese, but he spoke so rapidly that Fletcher had difficulty in following it. The latter caught the key words, however: "Half a million."

As they waited for the servant's return, Fletcher turned to Cha.

"May I ask an impertinent question? How does it happen that you, a member of the great compradore class of Chinese, are allying yourself with these revolutionists? They are opposed to capital and to capitalists."

"I might ask you the same," commented Cha.

"But I am doing this out of—of—well, friendship for Count Mazzino," Fletcher answered a little haltingly.

"And I also for the sake of friendship," Cha took up the point quickly. "I was a friend of Doctor Sun Yat-sen, the Father of the Chinese Republic. I was with him in Peking, when he died. He told me that Madam Sun Yat-sen would try to carry on his 'Three Peoples Policy.' Madam Sun is pledged to Russia. And when the Nationalist government turned away from communism and all that Russia stands for, Madam Sun ordered a revolution—to oust the conservatives. Yet at heart I am a conservative. I have eaten much bitterness over this revolution. Its chances of succeeding are not great. If it fails, I shall lose my entire fortune, probably my life. But a death-bed promise in China is sacred. Would I risk the return of the spirit of Doctor Sun to haunt me? There are worse things than the loss of one's fortune. . . ."

The Chinese financier fell silent, and Fletcher questioned him no further. The American knew the tremendous power exerted by the dead over the living in China. Nowhere in the world is the *morte main* so inexorable.

At last a servant appeared, bearing a lantern, a tabouret, and pen and ink—foreign style.

"I have made out a written guarantee for you to sign, thrice honorable Fletcher," Cha said, his voice becoming keen and business-like.

Fletcher's eyes strayed toward the crouching figure, just outside the kiosk. This was Tsang's last chance to create a diversion. But in reply it coughed again.

"All right," Fletcher said to himself. "I suppose I'll have to sign. But how Tsang is going to get me out of this mess is more than I can fathom! Cha is giving

over his money in good faith; I won't repudiate."

He signed and handed the paper to the Chinking financier. The Chinese banker accepted it with a quick, jerky bow.

"Prior-born, the money will await you at the gate." Cha's hand went tentatively toward his untouched cup of tea.

Fletcher reached for his own cup, drank it and stood up. "I now make my departure," he said in the formal phraseology of Chinese leave-taking.

"May prosperity attend your ten thousand ultimate descendants," answered Cha, a phrase that caused Fletcher to smile somewhat grimly, accustomed though he was to the words, for he was a bachelor.

At the gate a coolie stood, with a leathern sack in his hand.

"Here," Cha said, "is the money you are to take to Shanghai. May it win us a few concessions—even though I do not see how we are ever going to be able to take Shanghai." The financier's voice grew wistful. "Ey-yah! If we only could add Shanghai, I think we would have a chance of winning. But I am keeping you. Will you count the money?"

Fletcher turned to the ship-owner. "Here is your money. Will you count it?"

The Latin shook his head. "If he say dat, he is not afraid of my finding de sum short. No. Our time is precious. I will carry dis. You, Fletch'r, shall go jus' ahead of me. An' old Ch'ung, you lead de way back to de ship! . . ." He broke into a chuckle. "*Bene*, my fine Fletch'r! You are de mos' val'able partner I have ever had! *Dominiddio*, yes!"

## 10

THE trio had gone but a hundred yards along the winding lane, when Fletcher became dimly aware of a new purpose infusing Tsang Ah-bou. Before, the Chinese had seemed to join with

Fletcher in supinely bowing to the will of the sinister Latin. The detective had acquiesced so consistently that Fletcher had begun to fear the ship-owner was too powerful for Tsang. It was one thing for Tsang to pit his wits against Chinese garroters, thieves and opium-smugglers. Evidently it was another and more difficult task to cope with this resourceful but renegade member of the Italian nobility, a man with a brain as keen as a stiletto, and as deadly. A strange case, Fletcher pondered, that Mazzino, owner of a line of ships, possessing medals for valor, knowing the favor of a sovereign, should now turn his energies to the amassing of ill-gotten money. His motive was not for the money alone, Fletcher suspected; for the Count appeared too debonair in his cold, ophidian way; probably Mazzino was actuated by the love of the hazard, coupled with a perverted joy in inflicting harm.

Tsang abruptly turned from the main lane which led toward the waterfront into a side alley, darker, if that was possible, than the street they had just quitted. Fletcher knew that Tsang was contemplating something, but what? He tried to move warily and he kept his eyes glued upon the detective, ready to obey the least sign that Tsang might give.

While he was thus preoccupied, the voice of the ship-owner broke in upon his thoughts:

"Fletch'r, I t'ink when we get to mouth of river we not stop. Of course, dat banker Chinese, he t'ink I'm big-hearted frien' of his revolution, an' dat I take dis money to revolutionists in Shanghai. No, we keep right on goin'—back to South Seas. I make it nice ttrip for you. Nice, if you not make ttrouble. After w'ile, we come to Paumotus. Den I drop you on littl' atoll, *hein?* You live on fish, cocosnut, rain wa'r. Some day, littl' copra schooner, he come 'long, pick you up.

You ride 'round wit' him for few weeks an' finally he take you to Raratonga or Tahiti. Den you telegram your bank for passage money, and in one, two years, you're back in Shanghai, all safe, all sound." The Count chuckled and added, "How you like dat, *hein?*"

"I don't like it," Fletcher answered cautiously, "but I don't see what I can do about it."

"Dar's de right spir't! Nev'r cross me and I make you no harm. But, *perbacco*, if I am cross—I kill and kill and kill! Maybe you don' know w'at fun it is to kill a man, *hein?* We'en you kill, you are like a god, so powerful! Shoot tigers? Bah! Not in the same—how you say?—boats!"

The alley had grown so narrow by now that Fletcher could have touched the blank walls of compounds on either side. The ship-owner, his voice rambling along, expounding his extraordinary philosophy, half sadism, had failed to note the straitening of the way. But suddenly he stopped.

"Ol' Ch'ung, w'at's de matt'r? We no go dis way before. You get los'?"

Tsang turned a worried, wrinkled face. "My think we come out aw light, Mas-tah. But this place b'long velly dahk; plenty hahd to see, you savvy. We get back to rivah aw light." The words were a perfect blend of uncertainty and assurance.

The Latin swore viciously under his breath. Then he muttered: "Jus' like a Chinese! Bungle! Bungle! Bungle! Well, ol' Ch'ung, you bett'r find a way out! In about one minute, you un'erstan'? Or else I fin' my own way—and leave you here wit' a hole in de back of your head!"

For an instant the eyes of Tsang gleamed, then were veiled. Fletcher caught the gleam and he guessed that Tsang contemplated some action. He had

hardly postulated the thought when the action came. . . .

THE small detective gave a sudden leap to one side, grotesquely agile in one as aged as he posed as being. Almost simultaneously, the sharp ping-ing-ing of the pistol echoed thinly against the damp, moss-and-lichen-covered walls on either side. Fletcher caught the acrid odor of gunpowder and the scorched smell of cloth, for the ship-owner had shot through the pocket of his coat.

But this time, taken unawares and possibly bewildered by the darkness, the Latin missed. The next instant, Tsang was upon him. To Fletcher, the air seemed filled with flying arms and legs. The Count uttered a screaming cry that was pure insanity and, twisting about, he caught Tsang by the throat. The detective gave a whistling gasp.

Fletcher leaned over, his fist drawn back. It was difficult to see, but he knew that Tsang was in deadly peril. Deliberately he loosed a powerful, downward blow. Tsang, at that second, broke the Latin's hold and rolled on top. Fletcher's blow caught the small detective flush on the temple. His hold on the Count relaxed, and he crumpled motionless. Fletcher stared at his handiwork, eyes dilating with horror.

Not so the ship-owner. He jumped to his feet with a cat-like bound and wiped his hands fastidiously. He seemed hardly to be breathing fast. He said calmly:

"T'anks, Fletch'r! You help me. I don' know w'y, but you do. I not forget. I not put you on atoll, now. I jus' take you for trip to Tahiti. . . . And now, you watch me kill dis old fool, *hein?*"

So dazed was Fletcher by his blundering that he did not hear the ship-owner's words. He roused, to see the Latin flick a long knife from a holster under his arm. The Count muttered:

"De pist'l make too much noise, even wit' silencer; walls too close. Dis is better. Silent. Now, my good Fletch'r I show you how we kill men in Sardinia!"

Deliberately the knife was lifted. . . .

With a sobbing curse, Fletcher leaped for the descending arm. Again the attack was unexpected, otherwise Fletcher would never have been able to deflect the blow and knock the blade from the ship-owner's grasp. But after that first instant of surprize, the Latin became a deadly fighting-machine, expending his strength with an appalling fury. Fletcher outweighed the Count by forty pounds, he was in prime physical condition and was fully twenty years the Latin's junior . . . yet it was as though he wrestled with a great python or with a mass of inexorably expanding steel coils. He could feel his body being borne down. His head was caught and the neck twisted. . . .

In his ears grew a dull roaring. He could feel his strength ebbing away. He fought, however, fought with all the bitter determination of a man who knows that his life hangs in the balance.

The twisting pressure on his neck grew. Swirls of red mist now wove themselves before his eyes. A great nausea radiated from the pit of his stomach. He retched, and in doing so, relaxed in spite of his will.

As he felt consciousness dimming, he thought—but could not be sure—that he saw Tsang rise groggily to his knees. . . . Yes, Tsang must be up! For Fletcher could note a sudden lessening in the awful pressure upon his neck, a slackening of that human hangman's noose. An instant later, he was sitting, free; no longer were those insane arms twisting, twisting his neck.

But he found that he was unable to move, even to lift a hand. His body tingled, as the arm will when the "crazy bone" is struck.



As he sat there, a helpless spectator, he was vaguely made aware—in spite of his preoccupation with this peculiar and tingling paralysis—of a struggle, titanic in its violence, going on almost under his feet.

Tsang Ah-bou had apparently gained a partial recovery from Fletcher's sledgehammer blow. The American saw the detective try hold after hold, wrestler's grips, ju-jitsu locks, only to have them broken. Lluellan, Chief of the Shanghai Police, had once told Fletcher that no man in the Far East could master Tsang, were the detective given even half a chance. But now, Tsang was still plainly handicapped by that powerful, misdirected buffet Fletcher had given him. And in the ship-owner he had an adversary all too apparently proficient in this sort of fray and in addition dangerous as a cobra, fighting with a reptilian venom horrible to watch.

With dim, almost impersonal satisfaction—so drugged was Fletcher by the terrible, punishing grip Mazzino had given him—he watched the ship-owner's pistol slide from the charred and smoldering coat pocket to the ground. Once the Latin's hand went out like a dart of light to recover it, but with equal quickness Tsang kicked it into the shadows.

The detective was fighting coolly, yet he seemed no match for the Latin. With contemptuous ease, the Count broke the holds that Tsang tried. . . . But, when the ship-owner attacked in turn, Tsang was able, just able, to avoid being rendered helpless. Once he was nearly caught by that neck grip which had so effectually disposed of Fletcher. Another time, he groaned, as Mazzino caught and tore at his hand, trying—and almost with success—to break the fingers.

Then Tsang appeared to tire. His parries grew less and less sure. The Count took quick cognizance of this, for he

laughed. For Fletcher, it was a heart-breaking sound; it indicated triumph.

A moment later, with a sigh, the small Chinese relaxed. . . .

Fletcher made a mighty, herculean effort to rise, to go to Tsang's rescue. But, beyond lurching forward to his knees, his body refused to obey him. A sobbing moan bubbled through his froth-covered lips. He closed his eyes—to shut out the sight of his friend's death. Tsang Ah-bou—"heart friend"—as the Chinese called it. As gallant a man as ever died, trying to save the life of another. . . .

## 11

WHEN Fletcher opened his eyes he blinked. Then blinked again. Tsang Ah-bou had not succumbed. Instead he had suddenly gathered his strength to him. A ruse, the American realized. A ruse that seemed to be succeeding, for, although Mazzino had not been taken off his guard entirely, he had apparently lost some vital advantage. Tsang's arms, so chubby-appearing yet in reality powerfully muscled, darted upward. There was a flurry which Fletcher could not follow. The next thing he saw were Tsang's brown hands fastened about the Latin's lemon-yellow throat.

Suddenly the Count's mouth flew open, the tongue protruded. His body grew limp. Tsang gave a final squeeze, released his grasp, and, before the other could recover, he had whipped from his girdle two strips of blue coolie cloth. Quickly he tied the hands and feet of the Latin.

That final effort took its toll even upon Tsang's rugged strength. His breath was coming in gasps and he staggered slightly as he turned to Fletcher.

"Prior-born—are you—greatly hurt?"

The bank manager shook his head. Again he tried to rise but failed. He pointed to his neck.

Tsang leaned over, agate eyes suddenly flawed with pity and fear. His hand went to Fletcher's shoulders and felt gently along the neck vertebrae.

Even at this slight pressure, a stab of pain shot to the base of the bank manager's brain. "Don't!" he whispered dully.

Tsang's voice came softly then, relievedly: "You are all right, my friend. The muscles are strained, they feel cramped, and a ligament is badly torn. You will be better soon. Just rest."

"Tsang——?" Fletcher tried to ask a question. But the words would not come. His eyes went interrogatively toward the ship-owner.

"He is finished," Tsang answered, his breath coming easier now. "But what a man! Although the most peaceable of persons, I have had to make fighting with many men in my time. But of them all, he is the most tough bird, as your American slang say it. Once in Harbin, I fight for many moment' with great large-bearded Russian. And once in Urga with very dangerous Mongol. But this little man, who is not young, who smokes opium, he is a true killer. Like wolf. Or like cornered tiger. Instead of fighting to capture him, part of time I fought to save my own life. And you, Pre-born, did not greatly aid me, hitting my head with your large and so-hard fist!"

"Sorry," Fletcher mumbled. "Tried—tried——" Words failed to come and he stared mutely at Tsang.

"No, my friend, do not talk now. Rest. For there is much before us tonight. I well know that your blow was direct' at Mazzino. But as the old sage says, 'The friendly aid of a brother is more hard to escape than the lightning of Shang-ti. . . .'"

Tsang fell silent, while he breathed great drafts of air in his lungs. After a

space, he asked: "You feel little better now, Favored of Heaven?"

Fletcher nodded, for the tingling in his limbs was lessening. "Give—few minutes more—be all right."

"Yes. We wait. Although we should be aboard ship now."

Fletcher looked at Tsang in surprize. "What—we going—back—to—prison?"

"Unfortunately we must, Pre-born. Else how we going to reach Shanghai? This city is in hands of revolutioners. No Yangtze steamers stop here now. Railroad' torn—how you say?—to splinterings. And, too, I have guarantee to myself that ship is brought back to Shanghai. Queer is my life. I have hunt' stolen pearls and stolen bonds, even stolen sing-song girls. But this is firs' time I have ever bring back stolen ship."

"Stolen?" Fletcher queried. "What do you mean, Tsang? It's Mazzino's ship."

Tsang shrugged. His face grew blank. Then he said elaborately, "I mean, Favored of Heaven, that you are now part owner of ship, since you have loaned Mazzino fifty thousand dollars on it."

Fletcher caught the evasion in Tsang's reply and he respected the detective's reticence. However, he did ask:

"But, Tsang, how can we—alone—ever manage to get the ship back?"

The small detective jumped to his feet. "Now I know that you are feeling better, my friend. You begin to ask ten thousand questions. Will you let me help you to try to make a rising?"

Fletcher gritted his teeth and willed his pain-drugged body to move. It answered his demand, with Tsang's aid. He stood swaying, fighting back groans at the inordinate pain.

"Good," said Tsang softly. "That is brave, Thrice-Honorable. Now, make one more efforting—to walk. For we must go. I fear the threat of that peevish general of the revolution. Perhaps he grow'

tired of waiting for us to sail ship down-stream, and began firing at steamer."

"But wait, Tsang! Aren't we going to return the money we received tonight? Take it back to Cha Wing-sun?"

Tsang appeared to examine the suggestion, but after a moment he shook his head. "I do not have sympathies with the revolution, but if we return the money you will lose great face with the honorable Cha, who is a good man." The little detective was silent a space, then he said simply: "You are my good friend. I do not wish you to lose face. Cha wishes that money to be gotten down river to the revolutionists who plot in Shanghai. To do so is difficult, almost impossibles. That, I know, is why he accepted the offer of Mazzino's agents to carry it down for him in safetys. Pre-born, you have given him both a promise and a guarantee. Possibly we take too great a risk, but Cha would want us to take it, never less."

Fletcher at once comprehended Tsang's reasoning. He knew, all too well, the tremendous force exerted in China by "face," in many respects the ruling passion in the Orient. To have combatted it, he would have hurt Tsang; it was almost tantamount to demanding that the small Chinese deny his household gods.

Tsang interpreted Fletcher's silence as consent, for he turned to the quiet, recumbent form of the ship-owner and lifted the man in his arms.

"You will take the bag of money, Pre-born. I will make attending to this fighting fellow."

With the gestures of a man in a slow motion camera, Fletcher reached down and caught the handle of the leathern bag. The procession started, the bank manager staggering like a drunken man, Tsang swaying under the human burden he carried. In the distance a *wonk* dog barked. Somewhere, behind one of the high com-

pound walls, came the falsetto of a sing-song girl entertaining a party of Oriental revelers. Still farther distant, the clash of cymbals and a droning chant attested to the presence of death in a household, and to the efforts of Buddhist priests by their mantras to translate a soul into paradise, but first, to ward off predatory spirits that swarm about the path leading to that far bourn.

Fletcher shuddered. The night was very black, and he was filled with a mortal weariness. . . .

## 12

**T**TSANG now turned his steps directly toward the waterfront. As Fletcher followed, his forebodings increased. But he was too nerve-shocked by that fiendish wrestler's lock which had so nearly broken his neck, to give voice to them. After what seemed an interminable time, they neared the river edge.

Tsang stopped. "Prior-born," he asked softly, "will you walk ahead a moment?"

"Why? What's the matter, Tsang?"

"No matter, Favored of Heaven." Then, since Fletcher had paused, the detective said resignedly: "My countrymen are a curious race. Can I take this man to rowboat, through a crowd of prying sampan coolies—with his arms and legs tied?"

"But won't it be dangerous to loosen them?" Fletcher peered down at the blood-congested face of the ship-owner. "In time, he'll regain consciousness."

"That's just it, Pre-born. I must make sure that he won't rouse for a while."

Fletcher drew in his breath sharply. Did Tsang mean that he intended to kill their captured adversary? Something Anglo-Saxon rose in Fletcher in sharp rebellion at the thought. To have killed the man in combat, yes, that would have been fair; but to take the Latin's life now,

as he lay choked to insensibility by Tsang's steel fingers—no, he would refuse to countenance it. He put the decision into words.

Tsang Ah-bou gave an exclamation of impatience. "Do you realize, my friend, that any moment the angry general of the revolutioners may begin showing his displeasing at us, by shooting his cannon into our ship——"

"Yes, I realize, Tsang. But——"

"But, Pre-born, if he sink' the *Città di Pisa* where will we be? This man will soon wake. He will make great outcries. Soldiers will hear the sound. They will take us to the general's *yamen*. After that—how you say?—for us the fire-squad at sunrise. . . . But I respect your funny morals, Thrice Honorable; that is why I ask you to take steppings ahead so as not to see, while I do small bit of very necessary operating upon him. Just a quick blow with heel of my palm on back of his head. It will not hurt him one-tenth the amount he has hurt you, and it will make him sleep for three, four hours."

Without explaining further, Tsang bent over, lifting the ship-owner easily in one arm. Fletcher saw the brown hand flash up and then down. A sigh escaped from the lips of the Latin and he seemed to sag even more heavily in Tsang's arms. The detective callously dropped him to the ground and unknotted the bonds at the hands and feet.

"Now," Tsang said quietly, "to those who ask curious questions, I can say with blitheness that I take sick man back to his ship."

The detective looked a little wistfully at Fletcher, but the bank manager, realizing that he was being foolishly squeamish, stubbornly refused to commend Tsang's act. With a shrug, the Chinese trotted around a turn of the road, and the river lay before them.

TSANG made his way unhesitatingly through a veritable maze of sampans, using them as a bridge, jumping from boat to boat. Occasionally half-hearted growls of protest arose, but they were not couched in real anger, since the sampan men were accustomed to this method of locomotion among their fellows.

The jar and the pain of such a method of travel was excruciating to Fletcher. He bit back groan after groan. The nausea and the giddiness returned. But doggedly he went on, by sheer force of will making his sick body obey him.

At last, Fletcher espied ahead a stretch of comparatively open water and at its edge the lifeboat of the *Città di Pisa*. Drowsing in the bow were the Chinese sailors who had rowed them ashore.

Fletcher expected Tsang to make some explanation to these men, to fabricate some account that would show why the ship-owner was returning in this supine manner. But the small detective said nothing. Nor did the group show the slightest surprize. After they had seated themselves, Tsang once more taking the tiller, the detective explained the seeming mystery to Fletcher:

"These are my assistants. Patrolmen, now in 'plain clothing'."

Fletcher started. "By Jove, do you mean to say that you were able to get them aboard the ship as sailors?"

"Yes, Pre-born." Tsang's eye roved coldly over the group and his mouth drew down with dour lines. "And what sailors! Such great bungle-ers! I thought many time' that they would give everything away. Fortunately, the Count thought it was only Chinese stupidity. Ey-yah! He was jollée right!"

As though a sharp physical stimulus had been applied, Fletcher felt his lethargy lifting. He said with a trace of eagerness:

"I see now why you're so anxious to

take the ship back, Tsang. You've gotten control of it! Why, it will be no trick at all."

Tsang shook his head. "Oh, no. The ship is not yet under my thumbs. True it is that I have a plan. But it may not work. These men are all I have, and they could not run a ship if their necks were within one inch of the executioner's sword. Fortunately, the *Città di Pisa* is not large boat. The Count has two men of his own race in engine room, who take turns watching engine. Up forward, there is Italian cargo man, who can use wheel. But the main—how you say?—steersman is a big-muscle' half-caste, part Chinese, part Italian. He was man, I think, who persuade the Count to come to China. And I think, too, he was man who get Count in touch with Revolutioners in Shanghai and make negotiations for arms shipments and for the money that you have in satchel."

"But, if he's part Chinese," Fletcher objected, "how did it happen that the Count had me to interpret this afternoon with that Leong fellow?"

"That is because Chinese part of him is from Canton. As you know, Pre-born, a Cantonese can no more speak our dialect than if he were Englishman."

"I know. I had a Cantonese clerk in the bank once. He had to talk English to the other clerks to make himself understood. But this half-caste must have been the fellow who was in charge of kidnapping me. I remember wondering about his voice. Also, he was the brute that gave me such a fearful boot in the ribs. They're still bruised and sore——"

Fletcher halted, for the lifeboat was nearing the *Città di Pisa*. A hail in an unfamiliar tongue—vaguely reminiscent of, yet not, Italian—floated across the water ribboned with gold from a score of deck lights.

In reply, Tsang Ah-bou immediately

broke into pidgin-English: "Is dat Num-bah Two Captain? My bling back Num-bah One, all sick. Ey-yah, he plenty sick! My no savvy what b-long martahtah."

The voice, coming from the bridge of the ship, changed at once to broken English, heavy with anger: "Sick? Not much! I know w'at matt'r wit' him! Hé smoke too many pipe of dat opium again! Sometime he smoke so much he not wake up—den I laugh like hell! I s'pose he lose Fletch'r and dat money and everything! *Perbacco*, w'y do I stay wit' him?" The voice rose to an irascible roar.

Tsang again spoke placatingly, almost with a whine: "No, Mastah. My bling Flei-chah back. He here. And my bling money, too. Whole bag full. Plenty full."

"W'at?" A flashlight fumbled through the space between ship and lifeboat and illuminated the latter. "*Per Santo Tomaso!* Old Ch'ung, you're good China boy! I give you much money for w'at you do, tonight! Much! All rright! Bring de Captain aboard. Can you get him up ladder?"

"No," whined Tsang. "My too old man. No stlong."

"Den wait moment. I help you."

There was the sound of rubber-soled shoes whispering down the ladder from the bridge and across the deck. The partially slanted eyes of the speaker peered over the rail. His powerful hands reached down.

As he stood up in the bow of the lifeboat, Fletcher examined the face of the half-caste. It was stamped with brutality, from heavy lips to a receding, ape-like forehead. "Like master, like man," Fletcher commented to himself.

Tsang lifted the body of the ship-owner, until it was caught in the grasp of the half-caste, who callously dragged it aboard. The detective, followed by Fletcher, next scrambled up the ladder. As the bank manager was painfully pul-

ling himself over the rail, he felt a jerk. The navigator had plucked the leathern bag from his arms with the swooping motion of a cormorant that has sighted its prey. With mingled emotions, the bank manager watched the navigator tuck the bag under his arm. A dull anger mounted to Fletcher's brain at the cool theft, and fear that Tsang was making an error, overrating his own power to recover the bag. It would have been better, Fletcher muttered rebelliously to himself, to have returned the money to Cha, the financier, while there was the opportunity, ashore. Tsang was carrying "face-pidgin" too far! . . .

The half-caste gave Fletcher a look that was in part indifference, in part scorn, as though to say: "Not much of a man, are you, coming back to the ship—with only old Ch'ung to keep you from escaping. . . ." Then he stared at Fletcher more closely. The latter was holding to the rail, eyes closed, face contracted with pain. A smile touched the lips of the navigator and he said softly: "*Per Dio!* If dis Fletch'r hasn't also been hitting de pipe! Dar's good joke! Ch'ung, you bett'r lock him up. We're finish' wit' him, but we don't want him running 'round, shouting 'bout us." The navigator confidently turned his back and mounted the stairs to the bridge.

Tsang Ah-bou lifted the recumbent ship-owner and carried him along the deck to the Captain's stateroom. Depositing the Count within, Tsang turned the key in the lock and dropped the key in his girdle. Then he returned to Fletcher, thrusting an arm about the bank manager's shoulders.

"You feel pretty bad, Pre-born," the detective whispered. "But you'll be better as soon as you can be honorably quiet. We will go now to the cabin where you were lock' up yesterday. There

you will lie down and forget everything."

"No!" Fletcher muttered. "I must help you!"

"I'm afraid with feelings as you do, Thrice Honorable, you will be a hindering, not a help. Come!"

Obeying the quiet dominance of Tsang's voice, Fletcher lurched along the deck and into the cabin. He sank on the bed with a groan.

Tsang paused at the door for an instant, looking out, his eyes keen and darting. Then his arm lifted in a signal. The next moment, the tattered demalion Chinese deck crew which had just come up the ladder from the lifeboat, flitted with stealthy feet, one by one, into the cabin.

In Chinese, he whispered cautiously: "We are now ready. Fong, you will creep up to the bridge, put your pistol to the back of the half-caste and make him steer down river. You know a little about the channel. See that he does not try to run the ship into a sand bar. Do not take your eyes away from him, not for a single instant. . . . And you, Zia, to the engine room. One of the engineers should be asleep on deck. I will settle him, but your job is to take care of the man who is on duty with the engines. Tell him that the Captain wishes to see him on deck. Then as he starts to go up the steel ladder, cover him with your gun. Do not lose your head and shoot, for he must be kept alive, to run the engines. . . . And you, Li. . . ."

Tsang's voice blurred for Fletcher. A great wave of pain caused him to gasp. It was as though a branding-iron had been laid across his neck and pressed there.

When the paroxysm passed, Tsang and the men were gone. Fletcher strained his ears but could hear no sound. Had Tsang Ah-bou failed? Had the half-

caste and the engine crew proved too powerful for the patrolmen? The silence deepened. The suspense became nearly unbearable. Fletcher staggered to his feet. He had to know!

Then suddenly, he saw Tsang standing in the doorway of the cabin. The detective was seemingly as placid as though he had just come from a Chinese banquet, replete with sharks' fins, antique jellied eggs and edible sea slugs. Only Tsang's eyes glittered, too youthful for the crisscross of painted wrinkles that made his visage look so old. In his hand rested a blue-steel automatic pistol. Glancing down at it, he said quietly:

"I do not like to make using of this. Force has never been Chinese method. But tonight our task is difficult. The bridge and the deck we have. There is only the engine. If we get that, a whistle will blow during the next minute or so. If we lose there, we are as badly off as we were when we started. For the engineers can make barricading of themselves in hot engine room, behind steel doors and laugh at us——"

The further words he would have uttered were blanked by a hoarse bellow almost above their heads.

"Ey-yah! The spirits of my ancestors have been good! I knew it would pay to take that trip to Hangchow; my luck has been poor lately; I thought that they were getting restless for the sweet smell of a bit of sandalwood! . . . For the moment at least, Thrice Honorable, the ship is in our hands!"

And again Tsang Ah-bou was gone.

**F**LETCHER staggered to the door. Although giddy with pain, he forced himself to stand there.

Above, on the bridge, he heard Tsang's voice, speaking into the communication pipe, apparently to the engine room. He

was talking in his own tongue, voice firm yet a trifle elated:

"Full speed ahead!"

The *Città di Pisa* pulsed into life. The rhythmic throb of the engines deepened. A stir of air touched Fletcher's hot cheeks. The dim lights of the town seemed to be turning, moving away from him.

"Prior-born?"

Fletcher looked up. Tsang was standing at the head of the ladder leading down from the bridge; he was smiling.

"Set your mind at rest, Favored of Heaven. Our troubles are about over——"

A dull boom had sounded on shore, interrupting Tsang's words. The same instant, it seemed, a shell screamed over the mast of the ship. It disappeared just beyond in the water with a great hiss and a rising cloud of steam.

"Aieeee!" Tsang gave the Chinese exclamation of despair. "The revolutionary general! He see' our ship move—and he fire! He fire' to hold us here." The detective cast worried eyes toward Fletcher. "Plenty troublement now! Prior-born, what do you think? Shall we stay? Or shall we keep on—and take risk?"

"What do you say, Tsang?"

The lips of the Chinese drew firmly together. "If we stay, I think we lose ship, lose money, I lose my prisoner. Sure defeat if we stop this side—and I do not like defeat."

With an effort, Fletcher forced his voice to carry with a note of firmness to the bridge: "Then I'm with you, Tsang! We've got to chance it!"

The detective disappeared from Fletcher's view. An instant later, he heard Tsang's command shouted down the communication tube:

"We are being fired upon. From shore. Hold the engines up to top speed. And

keep them — no matter what happens. Remember—top speed!"

13

WHAT followed then had elements of a strange and awful beauty for Fletcher. The pain across his shoulders produced a queer anesthesia, dulling his fear. . . . A great roaring and whining filled the air. Sharp javelins of light. A crash that shook the ship. Another that caused it to give a sickening lurch. The motion hurled Fletcher to his knees. He crouched there, unable to rise.

Staring down the deck, he saw smoke and a small tongue of flame. He tried to call to Tsang, but in the air clamorous with great reverberations he could not make the sound carry. Had the shell set the ship afire? He beat his hands together in despair at his own physical helplessness. Then he saw a Chinese figure, one of Tsang's men, swiftly running along the deck. The man carried two buckets slung on ropes. A hiss arose, as he decanted the water over that tongue of flame. The little serpent flare disappeared, but the man came again and again, dashing buckets of water on the mass of twisted planking and metal.

A third and a fourth shell ripped through the rigging. Down came a wireless receiving aerial. Fletcher's forehead was gashed by a flying splinter of wood, but he hardly felt it. He tried to listen for the throb of the ship's engines but the roar of that shore battery drowned out all sound. Then he became aware of a steady fan of air on his cheek. The *Città di Pisa* was still moving.

Mentally he tried to hurry the ship, as a man will twist his body and strain to speed a racing horse that he wants inordinately to win. "Go on! Go on! Go on!" he muttered.

A shell struck the water just behind the  
O. S.—7

vessel. A great geyser rose and, for an instant, held like a mist. "That was a near one!" he whispered. A little lower and nearer, and it would have caught the steamer amidships, squarely into the engines.

There was a slight lull. Fletcher wondered if the battery was slackening. He could hear the half-caste on the bridge break out in wild curses—all too plainly inspired by an agony of fear. Then came the cool, almost placid voice of Tsang Ah-bou, inexorably holding the helmsman to his task. The thought crossed Fletcher's mind that Tsang might have been a naval officer, so imperturbable did his commands sound.

The lull was only momentary. Again the shore battery began its demoniac work. But now, Fletcher saw, the shells were definitely falling behind the vessel. The Chinese gunners were not allowing for the speed of the vessel. And its motor engines were unusually fast. On the other hand, they might reset their range at any moment. He asked himself fretfully: "Would they never stop?"

Then, as though in pat answer to his self-query, a silence almost ominous after the appalling uproar fell upon the river. The revolutionists had given up. The *Città di Pisa* had won through.

Tsang approached. The detective was smiling; he appeared as debonair as though that half-hour of concentrated hell was completely to his liking.

"They are very bad shots, Heaven-favored. They were too filled with the eagerness to shoot quickly. They did not aim enough. Although three or four of their shells did hit us! One of them I thought had us——" Tsang pointed down the deck where a thin wisp of smoke still rose from the twisted pile of metal that the sailor had repeatedly doused with water. "Yes, one of their



shots just five feet lower, and our engines——"

He broke off to stare quickly at Fletcher. The bank manager was leaning back against the sill of the cabin, his eyes closed. Tsang's words seemed to be coming from farther and farther away.

"Prior-born, you are ill! Wait——"

Fletcher could feel the mists enveloping him. Time stopped. Then he could feel a glass being pressed to his lips.

"Drink, my friend! Drink, please!"

Fletcher obeyed. He choked at first, then managed to swallow. Neat brandy. Slowly the mists cleared away, Tsang, somewhat grotesquely, emerging from amid their swathing.

"Better now. Thanks."

"I am very glad," said Tsang. He seated himself on his heels near Fletcher in that Chinese posture so difficult for a foreigner to hold longer than a few moments. After a long silence, Tsang spoke:

"Now there is little left to do but to push the ship on—back to Shanghai."

Fletcher could feel the fire of the brandy in his veins, giving him a spurious strength. If only that spot between his shoulders didn't ache so damnably! He turned his eyes toward the detective.

"Tsang, how on earth were you able to get aboard this ship in the first place?"

"It is not a long story, Thrice Honorable, but you are too weary and ill to listen."

"No. I wish you'd tell me. Perhaps it may help me to forget that feeling as though some one were shooting a knife into my neck at half-minute intervals."

**T**SANG shrugged doubtfully. "Very well, if that is your wish. First, when you talked to me over expensive long-distance telephone, you told of two things: the letter threatening you, and the telegram saying that pirates had burn' the *Città di Pisa*. I knew that no pirates dare

come into channel of either Huangpu or Yangtze Rivers. Through a spy system, we keep closer watch on Bias Bay and Si-kiang pirates than p'haps you realize. So I say to myself, I say: "The captain of the ship has sent that wire. And why? To throw Fletcher and Lloyds and the police off his track for a while. To give him time to do something."

"I rush back from Hangchow and I ask my Chief to give me detail of four plain-clothing men. He does not have any, so he takes uniforms of four patrolmen. They are stupid men, but after tonight I know that they are very brave. While that battery fired on the ship, not one of my men leave his post. . . .

"I put on coolie-cloth and I make myself to look like old man. It is not bad make-up, for no one makes suspectings of a feeble-minded old man. Then, my plain-clothingmen and I take fast police launch. We go down Huangpu. Just as we are going past Chinese-American silk filature mills, I see this ship. More than that, I see dark, foreign-looking man work hard painting out name *Città di Pisa* and painting over it another name. I need no more proof.

"The launch I at once steer ashore to fishing settlement. There I hire a sampan and a fishing-net. My men *yuloh* the boat out to the middle of the river, near the ship, and drop net in water, as though fishing.

"Pretty soon, the skipper of the ship come and lean over rail, watching my men fish. I smile up at him and I say in pidgin-English:

"Mastah, you wantchee Chinese boy fo' yo' ship? One time I b'long steward Pacific Mail. Go San Francisco. Talkee little English. An' my men all b'long plenty stlong. Wo'k mahd. We velly poo'. You let us wo'k fo' you, we no ask muchee money'.

"Then, I hold my breath. For if he

say, 'No,' I do not see how I can get aboard that ship. Possibly I can sneak aboard at night, but that is difficult and dangerous. Besides, I have promise' you that I will be near, when you go to Lung Hwa Pagoda.

"But he think' a moment, look' hard at me and at my men. Then he says, slow-like: 'Yes, we do need a deck crew. We short-handed. And you talk English. I've a man aboard that speak' Chinese, but he only talk' Canton-talk, and he can't make Shanghai man understand——'" Tsang Ah-bou paused in his narrative, to remark, "You remember, my friend, we speak of that point tonight, when we come out to ship on lifeboat. Fortunate for me that the Chinese part of the navigators is Cantonese. It is men from Canton who go abroad, who marry foreign women. We Shanghainese are too proud—but I lose the track of what I tell you.

"Having made a bargain with the ship-owner, I send the sampan ashore and my men and I come aboard the *Città di Pisa*. Ey-yah! What a dirty ship! The little captain make my poor plain-clothingmen work like dog' all afternoon, cleaning. I am so old, he jus' have me boss them. Lucky for me!" Tsang laughed dryly. "But I get a little broom and pretend to make sweeping in cabins. I come to this cabin where we now are. It interest me very much. While I am here, the Captain comes walking up deck. He is talking in foreign tongue, that I suppose is the Italian, to the half-breed navigator.

"I can understand nothing of it. Then luck comes to me, for they turn to English. The Captain says:

"I am not sure of Toni. He sell' us out if he can. . . . Toni, I learn later, is the Number One engineer of ship; and just now, Pre-born, he is running the engines below, with pistol at back of his head. The Captain says: 'From now on,

I think we better talk English when we make plans, so Toni can't hear.'

"The half-caste answers, 'But how about the China boy you just hire? He talks English.'

"Oh, he's old man and half-witted. He wouldn't understand if he did hear us. But what I want is to get Fletcher aboard tonight. That blackmailing letter of mine will start him toward Lung Hwa Pagoda. You oughtn't to have any trouble in throwing a sack over his head and bringing him to the sampan and then along that canal down to the ship. But use rough stuff if necessary, because I must have him for that Chinkiang matter. . . .'

"Then the two move away. I have heard enough. Those words solve another knotted problem for me. The Captain does not mean to kill you, even though he finds that you have not brought ransom money. Therefore, I do not need to follow to Lung Hwa Pagoda. It would be better, I say to myself, for you to be on ship here. Then I can watch and help you if there is danger. So I stay here. Next morning, you are brought aboard."

Tsang Ah-bou dropped into a thoughtful silence. Nor for several moments did Fletcher speak. Through the open door of the cabin, they could see the low blur that was the flat delta land of the Yangtze, the richest in the world in fecundity. At last Fletcher asked.

"What do you make of it all? There is something dreadfully wrong here. It's in the air. Why should a member of the Italian nobility play absolutely fast and loose with his reputation, as Mazzino has been doing? Borrowing money on his ship, then pretending to burn it? Blackmailing me, then forcing me to guarantee money that he planned to steal?"

Tsang rose from his squatting posture and threw out an arm, embracing the cab-

in with his gesture. "The answer to your question, Pre-born, lies in this room, here."

"What do you mean? That it was occupied by a woman? I thought yesterday that it might have been the cabin reserved for the Count's light o' love. But I began examining the decorations and I realized that they had been put in when the yacht was built. According to all probabilities then, the cabin was built for the Count's English wife. I think I told you, over the long-distance 'phone, that Mazzino was married to an Englishwoman. That was part of the information I got from Baron Ravenna, the Italian consul——"

Tsang threw up a hand. "Yes, I know. You told me. Wait, I will show you something that I found in this room, when I was pretending to dust it."

The small detective fumbled in his girdle and first drew forth a pair of horn-rimmed, thick-lensed spectacles. He settled them upon his rudimentary nose-bridge with a sigh of relief, for he was near-sighted. Next he hauled from that capacious carry-all that serves the Oriental for coat and trousers pocket, a small morocco-bound book.

"Yesterday, I found this in closet there, with woman's clothings. It was on floor of closet, among shoes, as though hurriedly thrown there."

Tsang lifted the book for Fletcher's gaze and the latter gave an ejaculation of excitement:

"By Jove, it's a diary! In English?"

"Yes, Pre-born. Read the last writings; they are of the most interest. Dated March 27th, 28th, 29th. A little over a month ago."

**T**SANG switched on an electric light, hooded by a shade of pink silk yet sufficient to make reading possible. Fletcher read:

"Captain Bernini tells us today that we shall reach New Zealand a week from tomorrow. I shall be glad. I have a premonition of evil about this voyage. Today I told my husband that, but he only laughed. He said that was because I did not like Bernini. My husband is too trusting. He also laughed, when I told him that I thought the Captain was a drug fiend."

Fletcher turned the page to the next-to-the-last entry. Tsang Ah-bou waited in silence while the bank manager read:

"A glorious day. As my husband says, I think my fears must be the result of too much imagination and not enough exercise. Even Captain Bernini is, in high good humor. A vulgar man, almost slimy—the way he sometimes leers at one. Even that brutal-looking half-caste that he brought on at Tahiti as navigation officer seems less repellent. Bernini told me this morning that the half-breed is half Chinese, half Italian, and that he longs to go back to Canton, where he was born. Then the Captain gave one of his peculiar leers and said he thought that his navigator's wish would be granted before very long. I do not suppose he meant anything by such a statement; certainly my husband does not plan to include China on our itinerary. It is too far north. Because of my cough, the doctor's orders were six months in the South Seas. . . . Here I am, becoming suspicious again: but why did Bernini trump up those excuses against our deck man and our two engine-room men and discharge them at Tahiti? And how did it happen that those other Italians and the half-caste were waiting at Papeete, to take their places?"

Fletcher turned the page to the final entry:

"A beautiful sunset. To the right a lonely atoll. The last rays have caught a coconut palm, and it looks as though it were on fire. We haven't seen a ship now for five days, not even an outrigger canoe. Yet I thought we were going to cruise from island to island. For the first time, I think my husband is worried, although he continues to laugh at me. This morning he quarreled with Bernini. I could hear their voices raised. I know it is about our itinerary that they quarreled, for I caught my husband's words: 'But my orders are to head for the Marquesas Islands.' . . . That is queer! A moment ago, I could see the atoll; now it's gone. . . . Why, the ship seems to have turned completely around! There must be something wrong. I'll put this away and go on deck. I can finish it later."

Fletcher softly closed the book. "And those were the last words the Countess ever wrote!"

Tsang Ah-bou nodded. "I wanted you to read that, Pre-born, first. Now that

you have, will you come with me? We're going to interview the man that I've got locked up in the Captain's stateroom. I'd like you to be witness if he makes rash statement. . . . But, wait, let me get you another drink of brandy, before you start."

THIS time Fletcher diluted the raw spirits, but the brandy dulled the pain to the point where he could contemplate the passage along the deck without cringing away from the motion.

Tsang turned the key in the lock and, followed by Fletcher, entered the one stateroom that the yacht contained. On the floor, huddled where the detective had callously tossed him, was the dapper little man. His eyes were still glazed, but a glimmer of consciousness was beginning to creep back into the pupils.

"Now, Captain Bernini," Tsang began briskly, "you are going to make confessing before two witnesses to dastardly murder of your employer, Count Mazzino, and his wife, the Countess."

As though some powerful galvanic battery had been applied to his heart, the small Latin sat upright. His face, however, became like a mask.

"O! Ch'ung? W'at dis mean, *bein?* You lose your mind?"

"Do I need make repeating? You are going to confess with great thoroughness, Captain Bernini——"

"Bernini?" interrupted the small Latin. 'Dat is name of rascally skipper I put off on atoll, jus' as I plan to do wit' de good Fletch'r w'en we leave China. I am Mark Antonio Frascati, Conte di Mazzino, Lieutenant Commander of the Italian Navy on reserve list, Knight of Order of Victor Emmanuel."

"Yes? And your wife——?" prompted Tsang softly.

The small Latin scowled. "W'y you

bring up her name? W'y you wring my heart, *bein?* She was beautiful an' good woman. I take her to South Seas for her *polmone*—how you say it?—her lungs. But she die. Too much blood come' from lungs, one day, last month. Hemorrhage. I bury her at sea."

Fletcher groaned inwardly. This man was too clever for Tsang Ah-bou. His story, even, rang true. It might *be* true!

The Chinese detective smiled with a trace of admiration. "That is good story. That is fine story, my friend. What size man was this Captain Bernini that you put off on desert island?"

"How you mean?"

"What size man? Large? Tall? Fat?"

"Oh! W'y, he was——le's see—he was 'bout six feet. Thin."

With a leisurely motion, Tsang drew from his girdle the automatic pistol Fletcher had seen in evidence earlier in the evening. Handing it to the American, he said quietly:

"If this man make' one single little move, you shoot."

Somewhat mystified, the bank manager nodded.

Tsang then moved toward the desk which filled one side of the room. Opening it, his hand moved with precision through drawer after drawer. At last he found the object for which he had apparently been seeking.

"Ah, my good Bernini, you grow little reckless as you become older. You shouldn't have kept this!"

The small man on the cabin floor faced about with a snarl. His eyes gleamed with a baleful light.

"Ey-yah!" Tsang shouted. "Watch him, Pre-born!"

Fletcher jerked up the point of the pistol to cover the man; but with inexplicable speed the Italian caught the weap-

on from the bank manager's grasp. Fletcher, in turn, snatched for it and managed to deflect the muzzle. The same instant there was a deafening roar in the confined stateroom and the knife-like, cutting odor of smokeless powder.

The American stared stupidly about him, then down to the floor. There, sprawled at Fletcher's feet, lay the Latin, coughing and choking. On the breast of the beautifully tailored white drill coat, a powder-scored hole was becoming edged with red.

"My God, Tsang! I've killed him!" Fletcher muttered.

"No, Prior-born." The detective's voice was as calm as though making some simple explanation to a child. "He killed himself—trying to shoot me. You turned aside the pistol muzzle in time. No, his death was an accident—or the will of Shang-ti, the great Overlord." Tsang was silent a moment, staring bemusedly down at the already-dead man. "I am sorry it happened. He cheated—how you say?—the executinger. He died, just as I was finishing case very pretty against him. In his desk I find his passport. It is in Italian, French and English. Here it says:

"Physical Description: Height: five feet four. Age: fifty. Weight: one hundred twelve pounds. Born: Sardinia.' The passport is viseed for Tahiti, Straits Settlement, Hongkong and Shanghai.

The picture is of this man. The name is Luigi Bernini."

Tsang paused a moment, then added: "I think he will prove to be a man wanted internationally, a gun-runner. One of the—how you say?—scavenger birdling' that gather when news comes of revolution. No more will he run the gun! Tomorrow morning I shall have the exquisite pleasure of tossing overboard the guns that are stored below. And as each one sinks in river, I shall say: 'There you going. You can not shoot the heart out of my poor countrymen.' I am what you call a military pacifist, yes?"

The detective looked toward Fletcher. The latter stood, face grown pasty white, not heeding Tsang's triumphant words. The Chinese uttered an exclamation of contrition.

"Ey-yah! What a fool, I. I forget you are not use' to scenes like this, Thrice Honorable. And I am not seeming very grateful, when I remember how bravely just now you have save' my life—turning the point of that pistol!"

Tsang's words seemed to steady Fletcher. "Did I actually save you?" he mumbled. "It's—about—time. For you have risked your life, fifty times, to save mine."

"*Vieau katchi!*" quickly answered Tsang. "For you to save mine was brave. For me to do the same was but part of my humbly tiresome profession, my friend."

---

Into this Universe, and *Why* not knowing  
Nor *Whence*, like Water willy-nilly flowing;  
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,  
I know not *Whither*, willy-nilly blowing.

What, without asking, hither hurried *Whence*?  
And, without asking, *Whither* hurried hence!  
Oh, many a Cup of this forbidden Wine  
Must drown the memory of that insolence!

—*Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám.*