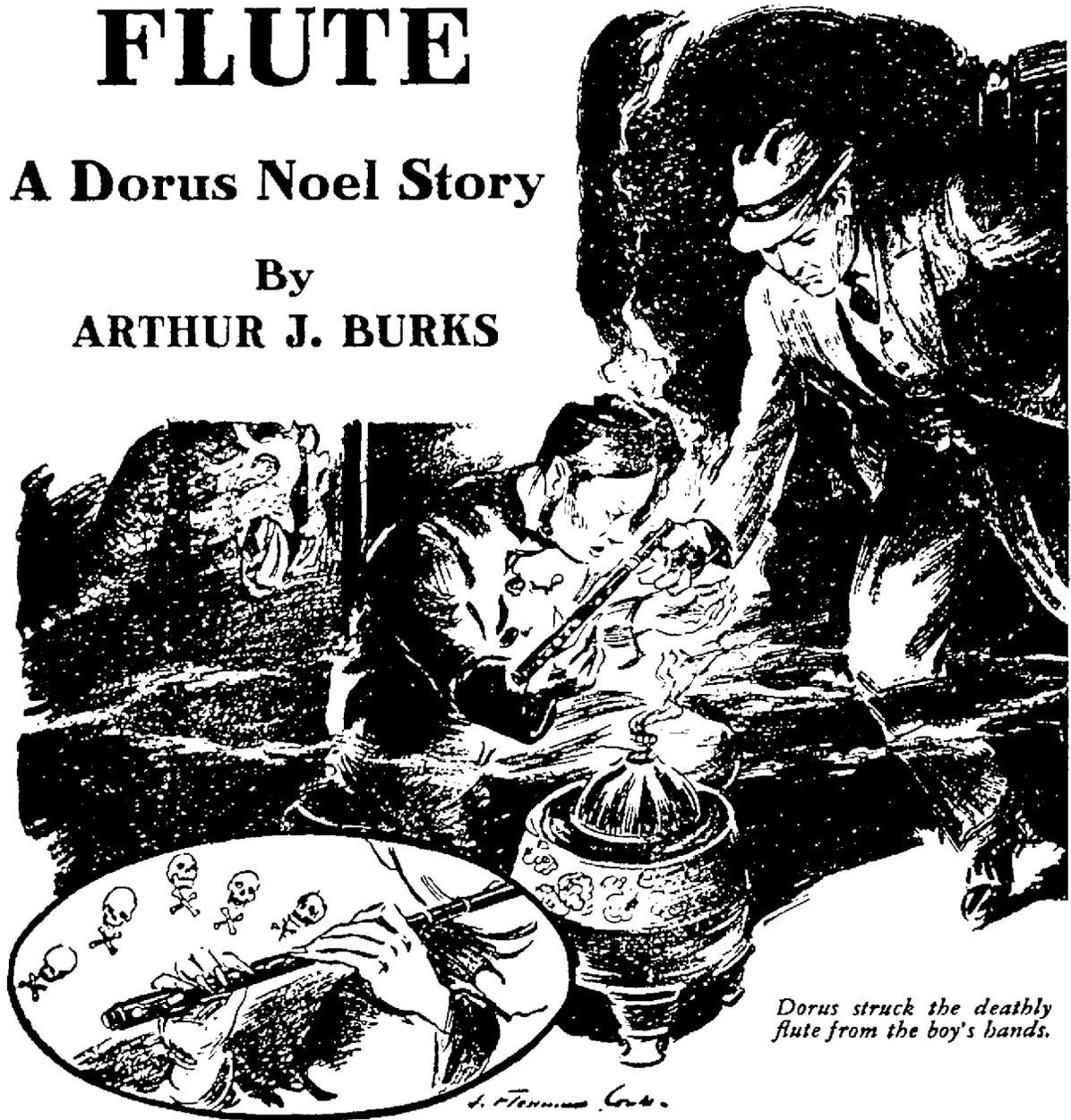


DEATH OF THE FLUTE

A Dorus Noel Story

By
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NOT ALWAYS DOES THE PAST BURY ITS DEAD.
OUT OF THE YELLOW WATERS OF THE PEI PO
CAME A STRANGE VENGEANCE TO SINGLE OUT
DORUS NOEL IN THE TANGLE OF NEW YORK'S
CHINATOWN.

CHINA had left her mark upon Dorus Noel. He thought of that now as he sat musing, in his house on Mott Street, in New York's Chinatown. From somewhere out in

the street, or perhaps in a store next door, a clock sounded the hour of three in the afternoon. At the same time some of his own priceless clocks began to strike. One of them he especially

loved because it always gave him a smile. It was a beautiful gem incusted thing which had been given to Emperor Ch'ien Lung by Louis Fifteenth of France ... and when it struck the hour eight tiny human figures in blue came out on its top and danced a tinkling minuet.

A second clock was all of glass, save for its works, which were surrounded like a serpent by a circular staircase. When this clock struck three it did it in odd fashion. A gold ball came through a hole in the fourth step and rolled down three steps, making a tinkling noise. At four o'clock the ball fell a step further, taking the additional hour to travel back up the circular stairway.

Now the one clock danced the minuet, the other rolled its golded ball down the three steps, thus striking the hour. Dorus Noel sighed.

"Thank all the gods," he murmured, "that Chu Chul is dead. He must be. With my own eyes I saw his clutching yellow hand sink under the muddy waters of the Pei Ho at Tientsin, and I waited for two months for his resurrection, which did not transpire. My work here in New York will be easy compared to the years-long game of hide and seek with The Cricket."

Noel had formed the habit of talking to himself because he found it easier to think, and he did not speak in Chinese because, in China, anybody who listened might have been a minion of Chu Chul. Now he rose from his desk and strode to a mirror on the wall, threading his way through the many treasures which filled his study. He passed the red lacquer screen with its decorations of tiny bird feathers. He circled the crooked screen just inside the door, which kept out evil spirits because they could only travel in a straight line.

He faced the mirror, before which his "boy" Liu Wong had placed two burning joss sticks for some strange reason of his own. Noel leaned forward, staring at his own handsome face, which looked far too old for his twenty-six years. He had lived three lifetimes in that age, and Chu Chul was responsible for most of his aging. His brown hair, almost red, should, he decided, have been gray. He lifted his hands, one of which was oddly twisted – memory of Chu Chul's pincers of torture – and pulled the shirt away from his chest, exposing it.

Then he stared long at the mark on his white skin. It was three parallel, horizontal bars, perhaps an inch in length, crossed by a diagonal transversal. They frere the Chinese character "wong" which means "ruler," or "master of men." They were not Noel's chop. They had been burned into Noel's skin on the one occasion when Noel had fallen into the hands of The Cricket, in the cat-and-mouse game they had played. Even now Noel could remember every word The Cricket had spoken to him in Tangku when he had wielded the branding iron:

"So that you shall never forget, Dorus Noel, that The Cricket is your master, your ruler...as he is master and ruler of many men...and women. If it happens that you live you will go through life bearing my mark. And never, alive or dead, will you ever win over me. I never forget or forgive...and I pay my debts of vengeance!"

Right now Noel could hear the singsong voice of The Cricket speaking. He shook himself to dispel the fancy.

"Thank God that's over, and The Cricket is dead."

NOEL returned to his desk... thinking back... recalling, planning on how he should perform his secret tasks in Chinatown. Here he must learn all over again. Here he would have what he had always hoped to have; contact with China, however slight, and contact with his own kind.

He didn't realize how the hours had fled until his stomach told him it was time for dinner. The two clocks struck. The eight little figures danced their minuet. The golden ball rolled down from the eighth step. It was seven o'clock... and vague shadows were creeping into the study. Liu Wong should long since have summoned him to dinner. Oh, well, perhaps the "boy" had forgotten that dinner was at six-thirty instead of nine as in Tientsin. He would remind him. Liu Wong should long since have summoned him by making his strange music on the "wooden fish" – a hollow fish made of wood, suspended from the kitchen ceiling, and used as a gong.

But only silence came from the kitchen. Noel did not even smell the enticing odor of food. Strange, strange indeed. In China the

circumstance would have put him instantly on guard. But this was the United States. He started to rise. Then his hands fell back from the desk and he sat bolt upright in his chair. All the color drained out of his face. Perspiration beaded his forehead swiftly. His eyes went wide, mirroring horror, a premonition of disaster... for at last there came a sound from the kitchen. It never should have come from there, yet it came... and it sounded a tocsin of warning to the brain of Dorus Noel. For the sound which came was the note of the five-note Chinese flute. How well Noel remembered the five-note flute! Two Chinese musicians who knew the flute and the secret code of the Classics, could even talk with one another on their flutes, in a weird telegraphy which no "foreigner" could ever hope to understand.

It had been the telegraphy of Chu Chul! God!

BUT still Noel sat as one transfixed... and his mind named each of the five notes as he heard them, names that would have meant nothing to an American, even when translated, yet which in themselves gave a note of mystery, as the five-note flute ran its weird scale. Noel's lips shaped the names of the notes: *Hung, Ssu, Chang, Chur, Fan*, and his brain translated their senselessness into English: *labor, four, top, measure* and *reverse*. He kept repeating them over and over again, while inside him the still small voice of warning began to cry out louder and louder.

"Don't concentrate on the five-note flute. Don't concentrate on the five-note flute! Don't speak the names of the notes, either in Chinese or English!"

With a distinct effort of will, for it seemed almost as though he were being gradually fastened to his chair, Dorus Noel leaped up and raced to his kitchen. There, beside a cold stove, his eyes set in a fixed stare, his face streaked with oily sweat, sat Liu Wong, his "boy." Liu Wong did not hear him come. He did not look up. His lips caressed the end of a flute Noel had never seen – or had he? Liu Wong swayed from side to side... and his lips ran the five-note scale without emotion, as though the lips had been dead, or the man himself had been performing in some

strange hypnosis, or were a puppet pulled-by strings in the hands of an invisible prompter.

At Liu Wong's feet was a brazier from which rose a thin spiral of yellow smoke, writhing and twisting like a nightmare snake as it rose to curl its tendrils about the face and head of Liu Wong. The smoke from incense powder, Dorus Noel knew instantly... and something more. He put his face over the smoke, inhaled a little, merely sniffing. His senses reeled. He staggered back. Then he jumped in, struck the flute from the hands of Liu Wong, jerked the boy away from the brazier, pulled him to a window which he flung open. Then he began to slap the boy on either cheek with his open palm.

Even as he labored with Liu Wong, Dorus Noel's lips shaped words in mandarin:

"Sheng Huang!"

It was the name of a poison which could be administered in burning incense powder. A little of it stupefied much of it killed. Noel struck the boy until Liu Wong's face was almost a livid bruise. Dully, his eyes looking far away, his face empty and stupid, Liu Wong began to regain consciousness. Noel darted to a taboret and brought a small drink of rice wine. Liu Wong gulped it and gagged, but his brain was reacting.

"You strike me, master," he said, his voice dull, lifeless, but no longer stupid. "Why?"

Dorus Noel whirled the boy around.

"Look!" he said.

Liu Wong looked at the flute and the smoking brazier. His face showed instantaneous fear. Then it became stolid, expressionless. One who did not know Chinese would have thought him unconcerned. Noel knew that inside Liu Wong strange fires were raging. He knew what Noel knew; that here was warning of impending death, both to Liu Wong and to Dorus Noel.

"So," said Liu Wong softly, "Chu Chul is not dead! He is here, in New York. He always said he would have revenge, master!"

"Yes," said Noel. "It is either The Cricket or one of his advance agents."

"How could he enter the United States?" asked the boy, but the answer didn't really matter, though Liu Wong waited for it.

"Who is there," said Noel, hopelessness in his voice, "to prevent The Cricket from entering anywhere? What happened? How did it happen?"

Liu Wong shrugged.

"I do not know," he replied. "I became sleepy. I slept. I wakened, and it was like swimming up from a deep well, to find my master slapping my face."

"You were swaying over the yellow smoke," explained Noel, "and you were playing the flute of five notes. I heard it in my study. I listened, unbelieving. I almost lost, Liu Wong, do you understand? He almost had me. I might have become unconscious... had I listened to the five notes long enough... and then Chu Chul could have entered, and..."

Liu Wong straightened.

"It is a warning," he said. "It is like Chu Chul. It pleased him to try to destroy you by using me, who worship you! It is Chu Chul's way of jesting."

Liu Wong held the burning brazier under a water faucet. He moved like a man under the influence of liquor. His face was blank, still sweating. When he had quite finished and the room had been fanned clear of the stifling fumes, Liu Wong spoke to his master.

"I shall seek Chu Chul," he said. "I shall slay him before he touches my master. I go to the house of the joss to pray for good fortune."

Noel placed a sympathetic hand on the shoulder of the boy.

"You know you are helpless, Liu," he said softly. "He has but to see you to command you... even to returning to slay me, your master! He ruled you too many years with his will."

"I shall go to the joss house and burn candles and make a prayer," insisted Liu Wong. "Then I return to make food for you, for never must you take food from any hand save that of Liu Wong."

"And while you are gone?"

"Chu Chul will not hurry. It pleased him to warn you. Now he will leave you to grovel in fear until he strikes again. It is Chu Chul's way."

Liu Wong stepped out onto the street and Noel watched him walk down Mott Street toward the nearest joss house.

"Poor devil!" muttered Noel.

HE returned to his desk, his back against a wall, to await the return of Liu Wong. Now that he was warned he had no fear. He had crossed mystic sabers too often with Chu Chul to really fear him after the first shock of discovering that the evil genius of North China was not dead, but living. His thoughts were busy.

The eight little figures danced the minuet.

The golden ball rolled down eight steps. Liu Wong had been gone almost an hour. Fear for his safety at last broke in upon Noel's musings. Had Chu Chul regained control of his onetime minion? Would his next attack on Noel be in the shape of a rush by Liu Wong himself, knife in hand? It was not possible. Noel looked toward the door, but it was masked by the twisted screen which kept out evil spirits. Even as Noel looked, however, he heard dragging steps on the pavement outside and the screen fell into the room with a crash.

And crashing down atop the screen, Liu Wong fell on his face.

From his lips he poured out his soul in *mandarin*.

"He tried to send me against you, master, but he failed. For this once the will of Liu Wong was stronger than the will of Chu Chul!"

NOEL jumped to the fallen man, turned him over. At the same time, out on Mott Street, a police whistle sounded shrilly. Somebody had seen this thing which now rested at Noel's feet and had notified the police. Far away a siren began screaming. But Noel scarcely heard it. Curious Cantonese who must have followed Liu Wong from the joss house had entered and were standing all around Noel and the supine man. Noel looked quickly at their faces. All were extremely "American," though all were Chinese. Chu Chul was not among them, nor any of his minions, Noel was sure.

Now he looked down into the face of Liu Wong. The man was suffering agonies and was trying not to show that he suffered. His face was a bloated horror. His body writhed and twisted in spite of all he could do to prevent it. His face was mottled like a bird's egg... and it had been savagely slashed to the very bone by what might

have been the talons of an evil night bird of prey. A fighting cock, with steel spurs on every toe, might have made such marks... provided his legs had had the strength of a strong man's arms. In a matter of seconds, Liu Wong would be dead, of horribly administered poison.

Dorus Noel's face was hard, as expressionless as that of any Chinese face around him.

He spoke in quick mandarin to the dying man. The Cantonese audience looked at one another. None was likely to know mandarin, so widely different from Cantonese.

"What did it, Liu?" Noel whispered.

"*Nang tze*, the two edged knife," came writhing through the puffed blue lips of Liu Wong, "it happened – it came out of nowhere – when I fought the spell and refused to turn against my master."

"Who did it? Chu Chul?"

"Not Chu Chul. Another... a minion of The Cricket..."

Then, with a great convulsive writhing, Liu Wong was dead. At that moment two uniformed officers entered, trailing a man in plain clothes who smoked a cigar and stared with arrogance at the circle of yellow faces around the dead man. The Cantonese exchanged glances which meant nothing to Detective Lieutenant Hamas, but spoke volumes to Dorus Noel. Said the glances:

"Here this pompous fool is back again, trying to unravel one of our mysteries. Smart as he thinks he is he can't see his two hands in front of his stupid face."

All this and more Noel could read in the glances.

"Who are you?" the plainclothes man snapped at Noel.

"Dorus Noel."

"What-cha doin' in Chinatown?"

"I live here."

"Hell of a place to live. No place for a white man who don't know Chinks. Better move out. Takes fellows that knows these birds to get along with 'em. Who killed this jaybird? Did you?"

"No. He was my servant."

"Don't look like any Chinks I know."

"He's a Tientsin man."

Hamas stared at Noel, plainly uncomprehending. Noel didn't think it necessary to tell him that Tientsin was a city in North China. Obviously it would have been news to Hamas.

"Yeah, or, yeah," said Hamas, nodding. "I thought so! What killed him, did you say? Or do you know who done it?"

Noel spoke the two words Liu Wong had just used.

"*Nang tze!*"

Hamas whirled on the two officers.

"Go out an' scour this rabbit warren until you grab a guy named Nang... Nang... well, his last name sounds like a bee buzzin'. You may have to handle some Chinks rough, but get me this Nang... Nang... whatever his name is. This is the fastest I ever wound up a case!"

He knelt over Liu Wong.

"Lord, certainly carved him, eh? Never saw anybody bloated an' lookin' quite so awful as this. Hope we can sweat outa this Nang... Nang... what he used. The newspapers will eat it up, if it's oriental enough."

"You'll need me?" asked Noel. "I live right here. Just moved in. If I may go?"

"Oh, sure, this is simple. Dorus Noel? Fine. I'll send for you if I need you. Better take my advice and get outa here. Gotta know Chinks to live among 'em."

NOEL didn't answer. He donned his hat and strode down Mott Street, hoping that he could follow the back trail of Liu Wong, feeling all the time how futile it was to try, since Chu Chul would come to him if he gave him time.

"Chinatown knows him!" Noel thought. "He's already cast his spell over the Cantonese. I can't expect any help from them, not even if I give away who I am. He will rob them blind, bleed them of all their wealth, and they won't open their mouths. It's up to me, and I have to travel alone. But that's best. See what Liu Wong got for his loyalty to me. I can never again ask anyone to share my feud with Cho Chul. But how to find him?"

This was Chinatown at night. Lights showed dimly behind smoke blackened windows. Sprawling characters indicated the type of

business which went on behind those windows. Noel knew the characters... for characters did not change with different dialects... China had but one written language. He read the names of shops, "delicious fragrance," "fragile willow tree," "graceful longevity," "gorgeous good fortune," – it was almost like being back in China.

Dorus Noel stopped dead in his tracks. People bumped into him. He didn't mind, didn't feel them. Would Chu Chul dare, here in the United States, to do the things he had done in China? Would he dare, actually, to destroy and torture a white man, almost in the heart of New York? Noel knew he would, but he must take a chance somewhere. He hadn't yet had time to learn the rabbit warrens of Chinatown, if indeed he would ever be permitted to learn them. Here he wasn't known, because he was under cover, save to the man, far out on Park Avenue, who had given him his police job in Chinatown. Of that man on Park Avenue he knew only that he was connected with the police, a very high connection, too. He had given Noel a telephone number, to be called in case of grave emergency.

Noel hurried to Canal Street, crossed it, strode west to Lafayette, already in New York, in contrast to Chinatown – and entered a cigar store. He called the secret number, that of his secret police superior, on Park Avenue. The voice he remembered answered. Noel spoke his name by way of identification, and was answered.

"If," said Noel, "I have not been heard from by you within twenty-four hours from this moment, turn Chinatown upside down to find me. Remember I told you of The Cricket?"

"Yes," the far voice was low and soft, but with a hint of steel in it.

"He's in New York, in Chinatown. He or one of his men has just killed my servant, Liu Wong. I'm going after him, in my own way. Know Detective Hamas?"

"Yes."

"Let him play with the Liu Wong case. He can't do any harm. I know how it was done... all of it but not, exactly, by whom. I shall discover that, or die."

"You'd die to avenge a Chinaman?"

"He died for loyalty to me, sir," said Noel sternly. "How could I do less? And let me tell you something: a Chinese is not a Chinaman, he's a Chinese!"

Then Noel, the ghost of a smile on his face, clicked up the receiver. He took a deep breath, turned back into Chinatown. He locked his doors, and windows, with the exception of one window – the window by which someone had entered his house, lighted the poisoned brazier at the feet of the sleeping Liu Wong and thrust the five-note flute into the "boy's" hand.

Noel, in his eyes a dreamy, faraway expression... sat down on the stool which Liu Wong had occupied, on which he had sat to play with senseless lips the flute of his erstwhile master, Chu Chul.

"A strange manner of returning to China and ways that are dark," thought Noel, "but it's one way to get to Chu Chul. Wouldn't this puzzle Hamas?"

But he didn't smile. He talked to himself at random, mustering his courage. Then he placed the flute to his lips and began to run the five-note scale. As he did so he rose to his feet and moved softly, like a sleepwalker, to the window which gave onto darkness. Far away he heard the banging of a gong in some joss house. From next door came the chattering of many Cantonese, busy with chopsticks and rice wine. He heard the shrill, high-pitched laughter of young girls.

BACK and forth he ran the scale ...up and down... and as he he did so he listened, carefully. He would never know how to "talk" on this flute; but he knew that somebody would hear it.

"What is this sound?" the Cantonese would say... and eventually the word would reach someone, maybe several, to whom it would have meaning. In his mind's eye he could see skulking figures come forth from behind secret panels... sent out by the man who had burned that mark on the skin of his chest. Dark alleys would disgorge the minions of Chu Chul. They would approach the sound of the five-note flute. Then...

All at once he had his answer.

It came from somewhere beyond that window of his, which opened on blackness and

an alley that ended on a cul-de-sac at either end. His answer came in the same sounds he was making... the voice of a five-note flute. Only the answering flute made a sound like ribald laughter. It was jeering, sneering... almost demoniac. While he listened Noel could almost hear the queer, chattering laughter of Chu Chul... could almost hear it in the voice of the second flute. Chu Chul and his queer laughter... people who heard it might think The Cricket mad. Perhaps he was, but he had a brain that, mad though it might be, was one of the greatest, trickiest, Noel had ever encountered. The man was genius. A genius who was mad for power, a man who possessed strange knowledge not gained from books, even though he was a master of the Classics, and could repeat by heart whole sections from the Book of Changes.

Chu Chul was a dreadful menace. Once he had all but held North China in the hollow of his hand. He would have, but for Noel. Now he was here, in America... and Americans would be like babies in his hands. He would be able to create an organization which would control the city... the nation... if the whim seized him. So Noel was fighting for something more than mere vengeance for the slaying of Liu Wong.

But still he hesitated, wondering what he should read into the voice of the second flute. The sound of it was approaching, apparently over the housetops. Sometimes it seemed in the alley outside, sometimes atop Noel's own house, sometimes in the room with him... but always coming nearer. What was its message? Noel remembered how he had almost been tricked when he had listened to the flute as played by Liu Wong, how he had fought off the numbing hypnosis. Now he would deliberately court it.

Chu Chul would not slay him... until Chu Chul, inexpressibly vain, had had his opportunity to gloat over his victim. He would be in Chu Chul's power, and whether he got out of it again, depended upon himself.

He sat down and ran the five notes twice again. Then he placed the flute beside him on the floor and bent all his will to reading some message into the five notes of the second flute – which now was no longer approaching. His brain caught the names of the notes, ran them through

again and again. *Hung, ssu, chang, chur, fan – hung, ssu, chang, chur, fan.* Over and over he named, the notes as the unseen flutist played them, until the Chinese names – he thought now in the mandarin which was as much his language as English – became like a soothing litany. He knew his limbs were becoming numb, that his will was going out of him – out through the window, into darkness.

He sat, eyes wide open, staring at the open window.

Five minutes passed. The flute still played softly, but he did not hear it. He seemed to hear nothing. He did not seem to see the two evil faces which lifted above the window sill, nor the two shadows which seemed almost to flow across the window sill, into the room. He did not appear to feel it when one of the shadows snarled at him, and kicked him viciously in the ribs. He merely shook a little on the stool, and continued to stare straight to the front. They picked him up and carried him to the window... and he was still in the sitting position, knees drawn up. They dropped him to the alley below... and still he was in the sitting position, though he fell on his side... and remained there, motionless.

They carried him to the end of the cul-de-sac opposite the boarded end of the alley where the street was. A panel opened. Two shadows, carrying between them a figure which sat on air, as though it were Buddha, passed into utter darkness... moving down a flight of steps.

On a roof two houses removed from Noel's, a crouching third shadow chuckled. A yellow hand tucked a flute into a long sleeve. The shadow darted across the housetop, dropped over the edge... and darkness swallowed it. A pale yellow face was touched for an instant by a ray of vagrant light, before it vanished.

But Dorus Noel, who sat in midair in a Buddha-like posture, was not unconscious, not under the spell of any hypnosis. He had fought back from it at the last moment. Perhaps he could fool Chu Chul into believing him a victim of hypnosis – “power-over-you” – and then he could remember every twist and turn of any labyrinth through which he might be taken.

The two who carried him stopped in the darkness, in the midst of a dank smell – and

rapped lightly on the panels of a door. The door was swung open, and over Noel's ears, all about him, poured the chattering laughter of Chu Chul. There was no mistake then, and Chu Chul was in New York, gathering strings of terror into his hands.

"Take him to the brazier," said Chu Chul in English. Since Chu Chul did not speak Cantonese he had to use English, for the Cantonese of Chinatown spoke but the two, English and Cantonese. It was odd that Chinese must address Chinese in English.

Then Noel knew that he hadn't fooled Chu Chul with his fake hypnosis. However, perhaps the man just would not chance it. Noel decided to continue the trick, even when, sitting on the floor in the position he had assumed and had never changed, his head was thrust into the yellow smoke which he could see through his widely staring eyes. It was almost impossible not to blink, but he managed even that.

And Chu Chul laughed.

"Fool!" he said. "Do you think to trick Chu Chul so easily? This time I shall give you something to remember!"

To get it over with quickly, Noel inhaled the *Sheng Huang*... and darkness filled with bobbing lights flowed over him. He did not even know it when he was lifted again and borne away.

He came to himself with his head throbbing. In his nightmare, preceding his awakening, he had heard the golden ball on one of his clocks roll, down four steps... three o'clock in the morning. Now his wrist-watch, on the hand directly before his eyes when he began to come awake, assured him that it was three in the morning. He did not even puzzle over the seeming coincidence. To one who knew the mysteries of China, that his dream coincided with the fact was trivial, of no consequence.

Chattering laughter. He turned his head dully.

Sitting at one end of a long room, on a dais, dressed in the royal robes of China – a travesty of empire – was Chu Chul, The Cricket! He was small enough to be a Cantonese. His skin was yellow, pitted with smallpox scars. His black eyes seemed to have no pupils. His hands were like claws. He was beardless. He sat leaning forward,

stoopingly. It was thus he walked, too... a twisted caricature of a man.

"So, we meet again, Dorus Noel," he said. "Did you think I would be so foolish as to think I could gain power over you across the housetops as I could Liu Wong? You were smart, as usual, but not smart enough – also as usual. I thought it better to put you out entirely, in order that you might not, if I allow you to escape, remember the way back here with the stupid police who, stupid though they are, are still too strong for Chu Chul – at least yet! When will you learn that you are a baby in the hands of Chu Chul?"

NOEL said nothing. Let Chu Chul enjoy his gloating, while Noel recovered his wits entirely, after his dose of the *Sheng Huang*. Noel was husbanding his strength. His side hurt where he had been kicked. His dull eyes studied Chu Chul's retainers, all Cantonese but one! There were a dozen of them. Yes, Chu Chul had started an organization. It would specialize, if Chu Chul remained Chu Chul, in murder, robbery, kidnaping – everything that would bring terror to men and wealth to the coffers of The Cricket.

"I thought you were dead," said Noel.

"No Dorus Noel will ever slay Chu Chul," replied The Cricket. "I decided to change for a while. I came here. Strange that you should follow. I like it here. There are greater opportunities."

"Who killed Liu Wong? Oh, I know that you ordered it. Who did it?"

Chu Chul smiled. His eyes played over the faces of his minions. They shifted uneasily. Noel watched the traveling eyes of Chu Chul, which rested for a fleeting moment on the face of one man. Noel spoke quickly in Tientsinese.

"He's the only North Chinese with you," he said... and saw by the larger man's face that he had understood. "In the United States, when a man slays another human being, he dies. What is his name?"

He saw sweat break out on the fellow's face.

Chu Chul, enjoying the by-play, answered.

"Sung Liao!"

The body of the North Chinese jerked at mention of his name as though he had been

pricked with a needle. He was larger and darker than his Cantonese brethren. Noel rose to his feet.

“Well,” he said, “what are you going to do with me?”

“I’m not going to kill you,” replied Chu Chul. “Not when I know that within twenty-four hours of your death the police will turn Chinatown upside down to find you! Let’s see, these were the words you said over the telephone to your plainclothes superior who lives on Park Avenue...”

And Chu Chul gave the telephone number and the exact words that had passed between Noel and his employer. Noel’s heart sank.

“You’ve already got to the police with your bribes,” he said bitterly. “So they’ve tapped Mr. Blank’s telephone wires? Well, what are you going to do, then?”

Chu Chul laughed, the laughter breaking off into a chuckle.

“One can be electrocuted for a slaying,” he said, “but when one puts out the eyes of an enemy one cannot be so severely punished... and one is then forever free of the danger of being spied upon by a man, little and insignificant though he is, Noel, who can be so irritating. So, I shall put out your eyes... and let you find your way out of here and out of Chinatown!”

Noel’s face did not change expression at all. For he still had an ace in the hole. There was one thing about him Chu Chul did not know... that he was the master of the art of *ta chuen*, Chinese equivalent of *jujutsu*.

“Bind him and bring him to me!” snapped Chu Chul.

THE Cricket leaned forward over a burning charcoal brazier at his feet. It was the one un-Chinese thing in a room decked out with true oriental splendor – for the charcoal burner was a Japanese *hibachi*. Chu Chul lifted from the coals a pronged piece of steel. The tips of it were white-hot. They would pass easily astride his nose. The tips of white-hot steel would put out the world’s light for him forever, in the batting of an eye.

“Jump quickly, the man is tricky!” snapped Chu Chul.

The Cantonese, while Sung Liao held back fearfully – wondering what manner of white man

this was who spoke the Tientsin dialect – jumped in at Dorus Noel, who waited until the last moment, and went into amazing action. He was still loggy from the *Sheng Huang*, but his strength, coupled with his knowledge of *ta chuen*, placed on his side the element of surprise. A hand reached for him. He grabbed the wrist with his left hand, thrust his right under the elbow, reached up over it, caught the wrist he held – and bore down swiftly with all his strength.

The Cantonese squealed in agony as his right arm snapped. He fell back, screaming... and from the hand of Chu Chul darted a black, gleaming thing. It struck the Cantonese of the broken arm in the side ...and in a trice he was down, writhing as Liu Wong had writhed – while the black streak which had struck him returned to the hand of Chu Chul.

Chu Chul laughed.

“I do not like failures in my organization, new as it is.” he said.

To Noel, fighting now against the remainder of the Cantonese, that black streak meant much. It was a knife, fastened to a rubber about the wrist of Chu Chul. The knife had been suspended above a brazier in which *Pi Hsuang* – a poison resembling spun candy or glass – had been burning, mixed with any sort of fat which would congeal into a coating of grease, on anything touched by the poisoned smoke.

After such treatment the knife – the *nang tze* which had tortured and slain Liu Wong – would be black with the grease, and the grease filled with *Pi Hsuang*.

SIGHT of what had happened to their fellow spurred the Cantonese to greater effort. They attacked Noel with the desperate fury of wild beasts. Noel broke another arm, and the man came in still fighting, with the arm dangling grotesquely, and his face ravaged with agony. But even as the wounded man fought, he glanced ever and anon at the grinning, evil face of Chu Chul. Chu Chul, by his barbarous cruelty, by his slaying of the one, and Liu Wong, was proving his strength to the Cantonese. Give him six months and he would be able to laugh at the police of New York City.

“He must not! He must not!” down in Noel’s heart the three words kept repeating themselves. Chu Chul must be beaten, forever. If only there were some way....

Two men were down, both unconscious... one with his head twisted under him at an odd angle. Noel didn’t mind killing... for this organization, when it was strong, would specialize in murder. Now Chu Chul ordered Sung Liao into the fray. Chu Chul was enjoying himself. Noel knew that he was beaten when Sung Liao took a hand. The chances were all in favor of Sung Liao’s knowing *ta cheun* – else Chu Chul would not have brought him from China as bodyguard.

In desperation Noel decided upon a different sort of move. There was no advantage in beating these Cantonese, even if he were able to do it – for Chu Chul probably had a score of others behind half a dozen panels, awaiting his signal to enter. Noel suddenly broke from the fight, hurled himself at Chu Chul. Chu Chul laughed as Noel darted in – laughed and jumped back. But he held the hot tongs in his hand, menacing the face of Noel. Behind the Cantonese were charging. Sung Liao was now leading them. Noel hesitated. Then he stooped, caught up the *hibachi* of live coals... and though the *hibachi* burned his hands to a crisp, he hurled the coals full upon the person of Chu Chul.

Chu Chul’s yellow hand released the pronged length of white-hot steel. It fell to the steps of the dais... and smoke rose from the rich carpet which covered the steps. Chu Chul screamed and tore at his clothing. Noel grabbed for him, but in the instant his hands would have touched his enemy ... Chu Chul laughed through the pain he must have been suffering – a laugh filled with menace... and promise of revenge – and dropped into his dais, pressed something on an arm of it. Instantly the dais whirled so that Chu Chul’s back was to Noel, and shot toward the wall. The wall opened. The “throne” of Chu Chul went through the panel. The panel closed.

Noel whirled back as the Cantonese jumped him, knowing that even though he hadn’t captured Chu Chul, he had almost saved himself – for Chu Chul never would have left the scene of a fight so delightful to a man who liked the

sort of jests that Chu Chul liked, had it not been that the coals from the *hibachi* had set his clothing afire. His own safety came first, vengeance afterward. What if Noel escape? Chu Chul could always get him back... his own life might not be restored to him if he lost it.

So Chu Chul had simply vanished. It was a way he had.

Noel was being borne down by his attackers. But he remembered where the pronged steel had been dropped. He fought with the fury of a wildcat until he drove his enemies back for a moment – not difficult to do now that they were not made desperate by the sight of Chu Chul, who would slay any who failed without compunction – and caught up the steel.

He sprang directly at Sung Liao, the pronged length of steel, now a dull red, held in his left hand. His right hand leaped forward. Sung Liao’s mouth was open in amazement, that this man could move so quickly and surprisingly. Noel grabbed at Sung Liao. The forefinger and middle finger of his right hand went into Sung Liao’s mouth, while his thumb fastened under the jaw. It was as though he pinched the man’s lower jaw with two fingers and thumb.

“Bite down on it, Sung Liao,” he said calmly, “and I’ll yank the lower jaw out of your head... and with this piece of steel I’ll do to you what your master would have done to me.”

He said it in Tientsinese, in the tone a master uses when he commands a servant... and Sung Liao, his face alight with terror, did not even move.

“Now lead me out to The Cricket, Sung Liao,” went on Noel. “Or rather, tell me how to lead you, I’ll keep this hold until we are back in Mott Street.”

The Cantonese charged... but he kept them back with the pronged steel.

“The Master will slay me,” said Sung Liao, moaning, babbling his words crazily around the fingers of Dorus Noel.

“If that were possible,” said Noel grimly, “it would save the State of New York the trouble. But you are going to burn, Sung Liao, as proof that even Chu Chul cannot save his minion from justice.”

Trembling, Sung Liao pressed something on the wall, and again a panel swung back. Sung Liao nodded. They stepped through into darkness – darkness and the odor of burning clothing and burning flesh – closing the panel in the faces of the charging Cantonese.

With the closing of the panel a light flashed on, to show Chu Chul sitting on his dais, crouched on his “throne,” while tendrils of smoke rose from his rigid body. He appeared to be dead.

“Thank God!” said Dorus Noel.

But Chu Chul was not dead. Noel wondered if, after all, there were any power on earth or above it that could destroy the baleful creature known as The Cricket. For, with smoke twisting over his features, with the odor of burning cloth and flesh filling the room, so that it stank in the nostrils and sent Noel into a fit of coughing – The Cricket opened his eyes.

NOEL had never before looked so deeply into eyes that were so utterly malignant and baleful. Chu Chul tried to move his hands. The blackened things tried to form themselves stiffly into fists. The mighty will of Chu Chul was driving its awful power to his hands, trying to make them do his bidding. Noel knew what Chu Chul would have willed: that his hands leap forward and clutch about the throat of Chu Chul’s enemy.

But the hands would not be used.

Chu Chul’s lips writhed back from blackened teeth. His gums were raw and bleeding slightly. He looked like some beast, snarling in a trap.

By an effort of will which Noel regarded as miraculous, Chu Chul rose to his feet.

He tried to put out his right hand, but it refused his bidding.

“See?” came hoarsely from Chu Chul. “My hand will not obey me, but even in death it will not be thwarted, for you feel it, Dorus Noel, even when your eyes tell you it does not move! You feel it rising to fasten at your throat. To the end of your days you will waken, night after night, obsessed by fear of Chu Chul, even in your sleep and, until you are fully awake, you will fight like a madman against my strangling fingers!”

It was horrible. Dorus Noel could distinctly feel the fingers as Chu Chul had just said. He knew he would always feel them.

Chu Chul did not cry out to his minions who battered at the door through which Noel had just come with Sung Liao. There was pride, majesty, in Chu Chul’s bearing. If he were destined to die none would witness his passing. It was awful that the smoke rose about The Cricket’s nostrils, yet the man did not cough, his words were clearly, terribly enunciated. Little fires – fires which were too hot for Noel to forge through, even had he been able to release the murderer, Sung Liao to do so – licked at the flesh of The Cricket, and Chu Chul did not seem to notice. He was mighty in defeat, arousing in Noel greater fear of the man than had ever been Noel’s when Chu Chul had had all his faculties.

“Chu Chul is never beaten!” said The Cricket hoarsely. “If the cat has nine lives, Chu Chul has nine times nine ... and all of them shall be dedicated to the destruction of Dorus Noel and the working out of the mighty schemes of The Cricket.

Noel wished to beat out the flames, but the very eyes of The Cricket seemed to forbid him even a show of sympathy. Really Noel had none, for here stood a monster whose killings would have bathed Mott Street with blood. But Noel could appreciate the Satanic greatness of the man.

The Cantonese were still battering at the door as Chu Chul, his eyes set in a fixed stare which never left the white face of Noel, bent in the middle and fell back upon his throne. The flames licked up, and the smoke rose in tendrils... and the black eyes of Chu Chul were set in their stare.

The panel cracked. With another charge it would give away and the Cantonese would enter. Noel was satisfied by his reason – though deep inside him there was a doubt, always would be a doubt – that Chu Chul was dead. He was satisfied that the dead man was truly The Cricket, for he saw the distinguishing marks on the man’s scarred flesh which were the sign manual of The Cricket and his followers.

A VAST relief flooded Noel. But even as he turned away hurriedly, while his enemies began to break through into the chamber where Chu Chul had risen to his most exalted heights of greatness, he could feel those unblinking black eyes, boring into his back. All his life, he felt, he would feel them. They would go with him, watching him, spying upon him, no matter where he went or what he did. He tried to shrug his grim impressions away and partially succeeded. He forced Sung Liao to lead him out of that labyrinth. On Canal Street he delivered Sung Liao to a copper.

“For murder,” he said briefly. “Watch him carefully while you call the wagon.”

Then he telephoned the Park Avenue number.

“The Cricket is dead,” he said flatly, doubting his own words as he heard them. “You will find him in the basement of the shop called Graceful Longevity.”

As he clicked up the receiver the sound of heavy traffic came to him from the busy street. The very rule of the whole city, of which this traffic was a part, had just been saved from transfer into awful hands. He grinned as a taxicab rubbed fenders with a truck, and both drivers said, almost at once, the ancient formula:

“Why’n hell don’t’cha watch where ya goin’?”