

Death Is Eager

by Norman A. Daniels

Detective Shea Roams Chinatown's Alleys and Rouses Up Rats

DETEKTIVE Patrick Shea of the Chinatown Squad paced his beat restlessly. It was a far stretch from the brilliantly lighted windows of Broadway and Maiden Lane to the dark alleys, the smell of joss sticks and incense, and sometimes the significant odor of opium that emanated from some of Chinatown's doorways.

Shea had served two years on the Jewelry Squad before this transfer and he still didn't know whether he liked it or not.

He stopped outside Ah Foy's silk shop and regarded it with his customary suspicion. He had picked up scraps of information to show that Ah Foy had gained his auspicious start in life by the sale of the juice of the poppy. True, Ah Foy had stopped that long before and now devoted himself to the importation and sale of China's finest silks. "But with the war and all going on in China," Shea mused, "he can't be getting his silks so easy or so cheap. He might be tempted back into dope peddling—you never can tell."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw one of the thick curtains masking Ah Foy's windows draw back an inch and then drop into place again. Someone had been watching him, waiting for him to move on. Shea never disregarded anything that hinted of the illegal. He had learned that even the smallest things could hold significance, especially in Chinatown.

Darting into one of the evil-smelling alleys, he gained a vantage post from which he could observe Ah Foy's establishment. Not that he wanted to meet Ah Foy. He'd done

that his first night on duty. From then on he had carefully avoided the yellow, wrinkled old man. For Ah Foy had a well earned reputation as being the fastest, most voluble talker in all Chinatown.

Ah Foy, hands deep in the wide sleeves of his black silk coat, shuffled out of the alley beside his shop, looked up and down the street for a long moment and then hurried north. Shea promptly followed, clinging to the shadows.

The elderly Chinese turned sharply and headed down another alley with Shea half a block behind him. Shea reached the mouth of the alley in time to see Ah Foy revealed by faint yellow light from a rear window. Two other men, similarly dressed in black silk garb, emerged from the darkness, ranged themselves on either side of the old man and the trio moved on with hardly a pause.

Shea flattened himself against a building. Ah Foy wasn't talking, wasn't saying a word. The detective was puzzled.

The three plodded on while Shea followed carefully to avoid tripping over debris. The men ahead came out on a quiet street, stopped. Ah Foy turned quickly. With the other men at his side he retreated deep into the darkness and huddled there, like a man afraid.

A car pulled up to the curb, the lights doused. A man alighted from the front seat, a man in evening clothes. He turned and lifted a small bag out of the car. It almost threw him, despite its small size. Whatever it contained must have been unusually heavy. He was half



The blackjack had been wrested from him

bent over as he scurried for the alley.

Shea drew his gun and stole forward. The four men, a hundred feet ahead of him, were engrossed in their bit of business, silhouetted against the light from the alley mouth.

Ah Foy fumbled in the sleeves of his coat, pulled out a long, fat envelope and passed it to the stranger in evening clothes. He accepted it, stuffed it into his pocket and with his foot moved the heavy bag toward Ah Foy. Then he bowed politely and turned.

Instantly things happened. One of Ah Foy's companions ran forward half a dozen steps. His right arm shot high and a blade gleamed. It swept down in a murderous arc. Raised again, it no longer gleamed. It was wet and red. The man in evening clothes staggered a few steps and caved to the cobblestones.

Shea blew a shrill blast on his whistle and let go with his gun. He sent the first shot high, hoping the trio might surrender. But they ducked for cover. Shea's cat-like walk had become a run. His footfall came down on something smooth and round—a tin can perhaps. His feet flew out from under him, he went over on his back, his gun clattering from his hand.

DAZED momentarily, he became aware that men were running toward him. He reached for his blackjack, had it free, but he didn't get a chance to use it. Someone kicked him alongside the head. The blackjack had been wrested from him. Another foot crashed against his windpipe, strangling him. He saw his blackjack upraised, start down; saw that his attacker was dressed like a Chinese. Not that it made much difference. A dead man can't identify people and Shea figured he was as good as dead.

He had one last trick and he pulled it. His two feet shot up and out. They hit his strangler just below the knees, brought him down partially and the slashing blackjack

whizzed harmlessly by instead of shattering his skull. He rolled over and over, pulled himself up and reeled a few steps. The three men were gone.

He swore softly, whipped out his flashlight and sent its ray sweeping through the darkness. He found his gun. Somewhere a radio car howled and heavy feet were running toward the alley. Shea broke into a run himself. He wanted the first look at the man Ah Foy and his cohorts had murdered, wanted a look inside that fat envelope Ah Foy had given him.

The dead man lay sprawled on the dirty cobblestones, his arms outflung. A small river of blood ran between the stones. Shea unbuttoned the dead man's coat, extracted the fat envelope. He ripped open the sealed flap. The envelope was filled with neatly wrapped decks of dope. Enough morphine, or possibly heroin, to put a hundred addicts in dreamland for a week.

Shea turned the ray of his flash on the dead man's face. He gasped. This was no ordinary drug peddling murder. The dead man was Jay Pennington, one of Maiden Lane's most prominent jewelers.

"What the devil was he doing in Chinatown at this hour of night, handing over a suitcase full of something heavy for that envelope of dope?" Shea breathed. "It doesn't make sense. This stuff is worth about one grand. What did he pay off in—pennies?"

A hail came from the mouth of the alley. Quickly Shea turned the flashlight on himself. Chinatown cops sometimes got a bit hasty, especially in dark, dismal alleys. Shea had no desire to be featured on the front pages of the tabs as a victim of a brother officer's gun.

"What the hell?" the patrolman who had rushed toward him exclaimed, staring at the corpse. "What is this—a snatch? Or did some clip joint dump him here?"

"Neither," Shea snapped. "Radio car

coming. You stay here. Send one of the radio boys to phone headquarters. The stiff is Jay Pennington, worth about a million. Three Chinks carved him up. I'm going after them."

He hurried to the street and rushed back toward Ah Foy's silk shop. It was dark, but he pounded on the door until a sleepy-eyed boy let him in.

"Ah Foy—him pray to ancestors," the boy answered Shea's question. "You want see—you wait."

Shea pushed the boy out of his path. His gun was again in his hand. Ah Foy had stood by while Pennington was murdered. Shea hated a double-crosser. Even if Pennington had entered the dope racket, he must have paid for the drugs. One thing puzzled Shea. Why hadn't the murderers taken the drugs back? He'd make Ah Foy talk, and talk plenty.

He brushed through thick drapes and found himself in a small room. There was an image of Buddha in a corner. A small altar gave off wisps of smoke from the joss sticks. Kneeling before the image was Ah Foy.

There was no mistaking the elderly Chinaman's slender frame.

Shea leveled his gun. "Okay, Ah Foy, you're under arrest. Get up and don't stuff your hands into your sleeves. You catch?"

But Ah Foy didn't move. Shea sidestepped carefully, keeping one eye on the drapery covered doorway. Either Ah Foy was faking, enticing him close enough to strike—or—

Suddenly the kneeling man seemed to sway a little, then pitched over on his side. Shea gulped. He saw the narrow shaft of a Chinese dagger sticking out of Ah Foy's throat in front. One of the dead Chinaman's hands was still wrapped around the handle of the knife in the vain attempt he had made to withdraw it.

SHEA didn't touch anything until he spotted

the light brown bag which Pennington had carried. It was in a dark corner of the room. He used his handkerchief in opening the catches and stared in amazement at a beautiful assortment of muddy stones. A peculiar odor emanated from them—like the smell of fish just out of water.

“I see,” Shea murmured. “Pennington cheated Ah Foy and Ah Foy had one of his men kill him. Then he came back and prayed at the altar a minute before he drove that knife through his own throat. A neat way out—except I don’t believe it.”

He found the chattering, frightened boy in the hallway.

“Telephone,” Shea shook the boy. “Where?”

The boy pointed a trembling hand toward a door. Shea called headquarters.

An hour later he walked out of the place behind the men from the morgue. Ah Foy’s body preceded him on a stretcher. He watched it stowed away in the morgue wagon before he turned north, hands clasped behind his back, eyes fixed thoughtfully at the sidewalk flags moving slowly by beneath him.

The medical examiner had declared it a suicide. Inspector Mallory of Homicide had listened to Shea’s story and given his snap judgment.

“He killed Pennington and knew we’d get him, especially after you tackled him and his hatchetmen. He figured it was better to die by his own hand than be strapped in the chair. Too bad you haven’t a line on the birds who helped him, Shea. See what you can do.”

At one o’clock Shea pulled the box at the end of his beat, listened for the buzzer to see if the desk wanted him and then slammed the door shut. He started away, walking slowly, thinking things out. He heard the squeak of a window pulley above him and involuntarily glanced up. An object came hurtling down at him.

He ducked. The falling object crashed

with an astounding noise. A glance told him that it had been a small, old fashioned safe. Now it was just a mass of broken, warped metal. If it had struck him, he’d have been on the sidewalk, minus whatever brains he was accused of having.

Shea wasted no time. He went up the rickety old steps of the building, three at a time, gun ready for action. Reaching the fifth floor he saw an open door. He headed for it, kicked the door wider and stepped into a lighted office. A man in overalls lay on the floor holding his head and groaning.

Shea helped him to his feet. “What happened?” he demanded. “I’m a cop so you can talk.”

The man massaged his scalp and winced at the sight of blood on his fingers.

“I don’t know for sure,” he groaned. “I heard somebody in here so I looked in. There ain’t supposed to be nobody in the offices at this hour. I saw a couple of guys, dressed in black silk suits. I just had a glimpse but they were Chinks sure enough. One of ’em cracked me with something that felt like the Chrysler Building. That’s all I know, officer.”

“They tried to crack me too—with a safe,” Shea said morosely. “If it hadn’t been for the creaky window pulleys, they’d have succeeded. Come back after you see a doctor. I may need your help.”

Shea walked over to a desk in the office, consulted the phone book and noted Pennington’s home address. He phoned for an ambulance for the injured janitor. Then he descended to the street and hailed a taxi. He was leaving his beat, a violation the rule book said could be condoned only in an emergency. Shea figured an attempt on his life was emergency enough.

He paid off the driver and bolted into the big apartment building where Pennington lived. Ascending to the jeweler’s apartment, he saw a light under the door and jabbed the bell. Someone approached in almost a rush.

Shea deftly transferred his gun from holster to side pocket and kept his finger on the trigger.

The door was not merely opened, it was flung open. But the welcoming grin on the face of the opener faded into a look of amazement and fright.

Shea chuckled. "Who'd you think it would be, Norse—Santa Claus?" Shea asked. The man Shea addressed as Norse stepped back, made an effort to recover his composure. "I— I figured it was somebody from the Homicide Squad," he said lamely.

Shea gave a derisive grunt. "Since when have Homicide Squad dicks been greeted by guys with big grins on their pans? You were expecting a bearer of good tidings. May I come in?"

This last was asked with fine Irish sarcasm.

Norse backed away. Shea stepped into the luxurious living room. Curiously he beheld the room's odd feature: one complete wall had been turned into a glass tank in which scores of brilliantly colored fish swam about excitedly. The water was a bit muddy.

"You're crazy, Shea." Norse fell into a chair. "Somebody from headquarters phoned and said Pennington was dead. I figured they'd be up and I—I wanted to help."

Shea pushed his big fist close to the cowering young man's nose.

"You're a damned liar," he said. "Talk straight and talk fast. Since when was Pennington mixed up in the drug traffic? You've been working for him four years now. Talk!"

Norse retreated into the depths of the chair, afraid that the big fist would strike. Shea, in his Maiden Lane days, had been known as the toughest of tough cops.

"I'll talk, Shea," Norse whimpered. "Yes, Pennington was mixed up in a dope ring. He peddled it to big shots. He used to get his stuff from some Chink named Ah Foy. But I didn't have a hand in it, honest I didn't."

"I can believe the last part," Shea said. "You wouldn't have the nerve. Okay, Norse. Get your hat and coat, we're going down town."

"Down town?" Norse gulped. "I haven't done anything. I didn't sell any dope."

Shea was yanking Norse to his feet when the door bell buzzed.

"Answer it," Shea ordered in a whisper. "And don't block the door unless you want a slug in your belly."

Norse obeyed. He let in a gangling, beady-eyed man who, upon seeing Shea, grinned.

"Who's your pal, Norse?" Shea asked.

The man answered himself. "Nick Ferrari. So what, copper?"

"How'd you know I Was a cop?"

Ferrari laughed. "Flat feet and flat head. Put the rod away, copper. I haven't done anything, see? Neither has Norse. He's a pal of mine and we had a date to do some drinking, that's all. You gonna stop us?"

"Not at all," said Shea. "I'm just taking you both down to headquarters. I don't care how much drinking you do there, so long as it's water. Come on."

Shea had a fleeting premonition that things weren't right. The two seemed too willing to go with him. He stepped out into the hallway, stopped dead—and knew why. The wrong end of a gun was pressing against the small of his back. One of Ferrari's pals had been waiting.

"Drop the roscoe, copper. Come on— drop it or you'll get it right here."

Norse edged toward the stairway but Ferrari grabbed him. Norse squealed in alarm. Ferrari hit him a hard blow across the mouth, then dragged the struggling jeweler's assistant back to the door and kicked him inside.

The gunman backed Shea into the apartment. The door closed. The gunman came around to face the detective. He was a short, ugly man with a peculiar glitter in his

eyes. Shea knew the signs. This gunman was a hophead, primed to the gills and ready to kill at the wink of an eye.

“So the wise dick got this far, huh?” the man sneered at him. “Too bad for you that the safe didn’t land on your noggin, Shea. Your troubles would have been over.”

Shea sized him up. “So it was you two mugs. That’s one to mark down in the book, boys. I’ll put it right alongside the charge of murder facing you. Two murders in fact. Nice, kind hearted guys you are. You let Ah Foy kneel at his little altar and pray before you jammed that knife into his throat.”

“Shut up,” Ferrari snapped. Ferrari was jittery. His courage had not been reinforced by dope. “Keep that trap of yours closed or I’ll do it for you permanent.”

“Yeah,” the short man breathed. “Let him have it. He goes out anyhow.”

“Not yet,” Ferrari ordered. “First I want to find out how much this rat Norse told him. I never did trust this heel and there’s no telling who else he talked to. Frisk the copper.”

The hophead went over Shea. Shea shuddered with distaste at his touch. The hophead overlooked the badge, pinned under the lapel of his coat, and Shea didn’t remind him of it. The hophead jerked his neck toward a door at the end of the room.

“In there, while we sweat Norse. I’d let you watch and see a real third degree only I think maybe you might offer him some advice. He don’t need none except from us. Move.”

SHEA backed toward the door. Ferrari opened it, put the flat of his hand against Shea’s face and gave him a mighty shove. Shea tripped and reeled backward. He fell heavily.

Ferrari spat in his direction and issued a warning. “You’re on the eighth floor, copper. If you open the window and yell for help, I’ll plug you in half a second.”

The room was pitch dark. Shea wondered why the two killers had given him the grace of even a few minutes of life. He heard Norse give a muffled scream of agony. He found himself sweating sympathetically. Those two killers wanted to know how much had been spilled about the murders and they didn’t care how they elicited the information. When they were finished with Norse, he would be next.

Another yelp from Norse told him he wouldn’t have long to wait. Norse wasn’t the type to stand much pain. He’d sing like a canary in a minute. Shea found a light switch. He was in a small study. There was a desk, a chair and a bookcase. He opened the desk, found a small black covered book, skimmed through it. Even in this tight spot he was doing his job.

He needed a weapon—a sturdy weapon that might be of some use against guns. He thought of ripping off the leg of the chair, but that would make a racket, arouse Ferrari and his drug soaked partner, and bring them in to murder him ahead of time.

“A break,” he muttered, “even a small break like that creaky window that saved me from being smashed by the safe—”

Creaky window! Hastily he unpinned his badge, catfooted to the one window. He worked furiously, using the edge of his badge as a screw driver. His sweating labors were rewarded. The wall panelling came away, revealing the heavy cast iron sashweights. He untied them both, hefted them in his hands with satisfaction. No better skull-smashers could be imagined.

He placed one of them on the bureau where it would be available for quick use. The other he balanced in his right hand, standing well back from the door. Norse wasn’t yelling any more, which meant he was talking a blue streak.

The minutes crawled by. The weight felt like a ton in Shea’s hand, but the heavier it

felt the better Shea felt, and at last he heard footsteps approaching the door. A key turned in the lock and the door swung open. Ferrari was the first to step in, his gun dangling carelessly in his fist.

Shea let fly with the iron weight. It hit Ferrari full in the chest, bowled him over and knocked him completely out. The hophead screamed. Shea snatched up the second weight and charged. The hophead fired only one shot before Shea was upon him. The bullet plowed into the wall. Shea brought the weight down and broke the hophead's gun wrist.

Norse was making for the door. Shea beat him to it, hurled the younger man into a chair and stood over him, feet spread apart.

The hophead moaned in agony. Shea kept him covered with his retrieved weapon. Ferrari was still unconscious.

"You talked to those mugs," Shea snapped at Norse. "Now you'll talk to me. You put stones in that bag which Pennington turned over to Ah Foy. Those stones came from his aquarium—they even smelled fishy. What did you take out of that bag?"

"I won't tell," Norse answered hoarsely. "You can't make me and if you torture me like those—those others did, I'll tell the judge and jury. You can't make me talk."

"I don't have to," Shea growled. "I know. I found Pennington's record book. He used to buy gold in the form of old rings, watches, pins. He melted it down, turned it into pure gold and fashioned it into bricks. He was delivering what he supposed was the bricks to Ah Foy, and the envelope which your two pals gave him should have contained money.

"Ah Foy was buying pure gold from private sources because he couldn't get it from the banks. He wanted the gold to transport to China as his donation to aid in the war against Japan. Ah Foy's brother is a general far inland. He told me that, months ago.

American money wouldn't be of use to him but gold—pure gold—that would be of value. Ah Foy died for a cause. You—like the louse you are—exchanged the gold for stones taken from Pennington's tanks."

Norse said nothing but his face was confession enough.

Shea manacled the hophead and Norse together. He then phoned Inspector Mallory and detailed what had happened.

HANGING up, he straddled a chair and said: "Norse—you kept the gold bars here. Ferrari and his pal didn't want to take any chances on losing the stuff. You figured you wouldn't give it back until they turned over your cut in cash. You were smart there because if they laid their hands on that gold, you'd have been killed. Where did you hide the stuff?"

"Find it," Norse said sullenly. "Ferrari couldn't. Neither will you. I won't tell where it is until the District Attorney promises me immunity."

"You're in this right up to your neck, Norse. The gold won't mitigate the circumstances. Besides I know where it is. Give me two minutes with that big fish tank and I'll find it. I'm betting ten to one you buried the stuff in the sandy bottom of the tank. The water is still a little muddy."

Shea faced the hophead. "Punks like you deserve what you're going to get. To provide a motive for Pennington's death, you planted that dope on him and kept Ah Foy's money for yourself. You wanted to make it look like a drug ring murder. You dressed like Chinks too, only you didn't fool me. I saw you meet Ah Foy in the alley. You stuck guns in his ribs. I knew you weren't friends or Chinese because if you were, Ah Foy would have talked a blue streak. He was the fastest, most willing talker in Chinatown."

Shea—soon to be Lieutenant Shea—went on. "Norse was the only person who knew Pennington's business. He tipped you

off.”

Norse cursed weakly. Outside a siren howled.

Shea grinned. “You’ll be going out of here between a couple of cops, Norse—while I disturb the poor fish again. In a way, Norse,

you and your pals remind me of those fish, except that they’re swimming and you’ve been hooked. You’ll have time to think over the error of your ways in the deathhouse. Ah Foy has gone to join his ancestors, but where you’re going is another place entirely.”