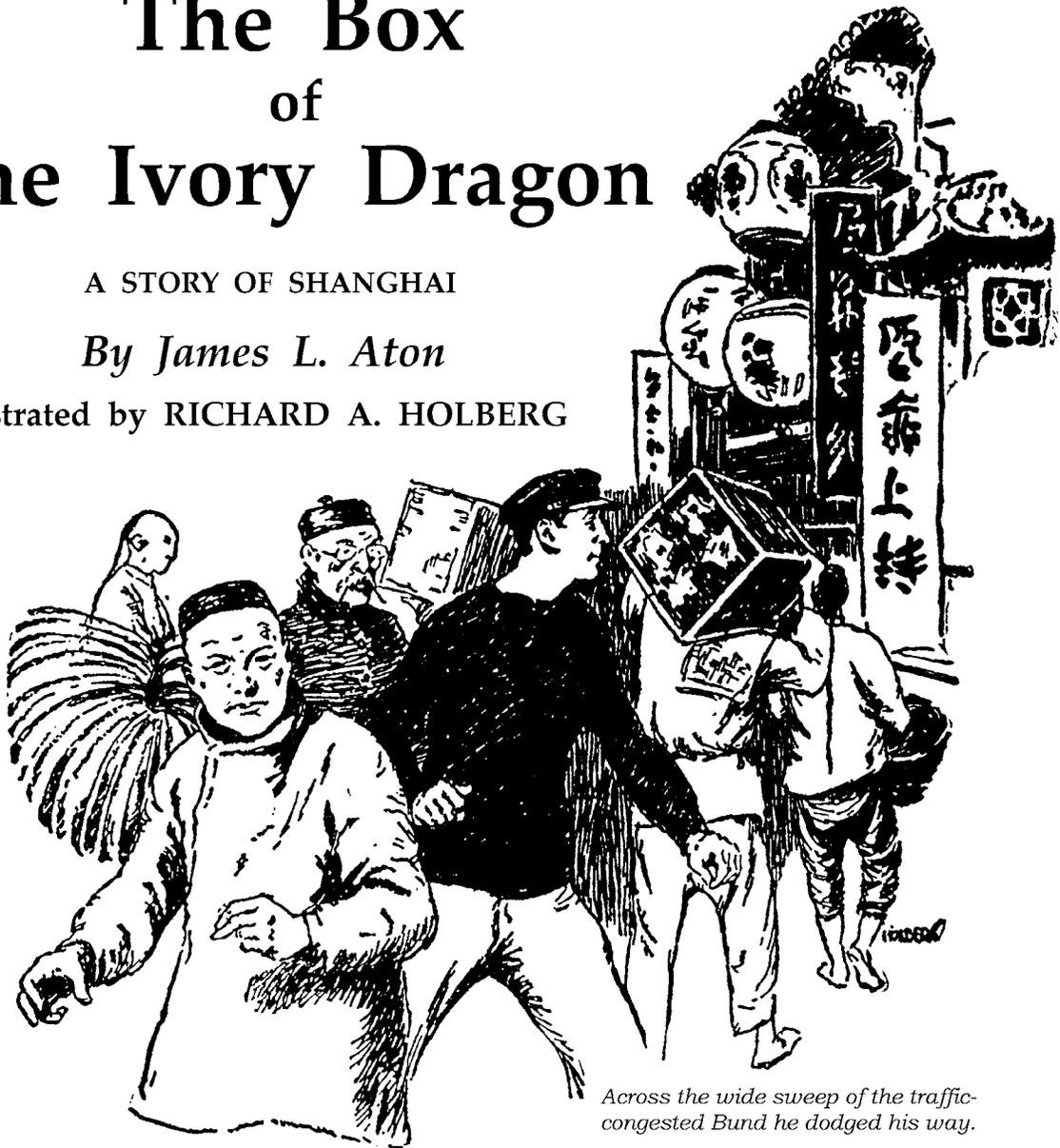


The Box of The Ivory Dragon

A STORY OF SHANGHAI

By James L. Aton

Illustrated by RICHARD A. HOLBERG



Across the wide sweep of the traffic-congested Bund he dodged his way.

SHANGHAI . . . February . . . Clammy morning . . .

The great city where East meets West shivered in damp and foggy cold. Sikh policemen muffled in greatcoats hummed manfully as they breasted the frosty air. White men of affairs whirled along to work in closed cars; lesser white men damned fate in rickshaws. Chattering coolies in quilted winter coats lurched along the Bund in vain search of warmth.

The strip of garden between Bund and harbor that in summer had sheltered the choice loafers of Asia was now abandoned to the cold—and to Kelley.

Quite unmindful was Kelley of the air's

wintery sting. He had no greatcoat and no gloves; yet he lolled on a bench, facing the chill from the harbor, and did not shiver. Part of his inner warmth came from an overdose of hootch; more of it came from the marrow of the man, grown mighty on winter seas.

From the misty harbor came a raucous medley of fog-horns. The lone man on the bench ignored them expertly; he was otherwise busy. Deep from his pants pocket he had pulled the handful of small coins that made up his available cash assets, and was looking them over—appraisingly, yet not cheerlessly.

“Heck!” he meditated. “Guess I’ll have to hunt for a job!”

He was a big man, was Kelley—too big for speed. There was a military erectness to his shoulders; a hint of the stevedore in his huge hands, the roll of the sea in his legs, the devil-may-care glint of the soldier of fortune in his steel-blue eyes. With more fire than wisdom he had adventured to the ends of the earth—and had now no more than a jingle of small change to show for all that he had fought and dared.

Of the coins in his palm, many were pocket pieces, rich with associations, but poor in purchasing power. The pennies were from dirty Singapore . . . the eight-sided annas from red-and-yellow Bombay . . . the copper sens from the toy streets of Tokyo . . . the smart yellow franc from a wine-shop in Marseilles . . . the quarter from singing New Orleans. The few Shanghai dimes and coppers that topped the heap were reminders of the five hundred dollars that he had squandered in four glorious days on shore.

The thought came that he might walk up Broadway to a native money-changer and swap his assortment of alien coins for a Shanghai big dollar; but—

“Nix!” he muttered. “I won’t do it— I’ll hunt for a job.”

From his coat-pocket he took the paper he had picked up that morning off the street, and began awkwardly to seek the column that told of help wanted. He was no reader; it would have been more in keeping with his genius to have prowled along the water-front, seeking a berth on an outbound steamer. But he had been on salt water steadily for a long year; he had it in mind now to stay on shore and see somewhat of this land of China.

The want ads, when he found them, were few in number, as becomes a land where the man-supply exceeds the demand: “Number one office coolie, able to speak French, English and Mandarin” . . . “Experienced compradore by established house in Tientsin” . . . “Chinese student will exchange letters with American man for mutual self-improvement—” . . . “Russian Countess travelling to France wishes companion who will act also as nurse-maid” . . . “Missionary family will employ trained amah—call mornings only” . . .

“Nothing for me,” reflected Kelley. Already his huge hands were crumpling the paper when a line in the lower right-hand corner caught his eye:

American with military training for special

service. Apply at once, top floor, 600 N. Szechuen Road.

Kelley started. Across the wide sweep of the traffic-congested Bund he dodged his way, and stopped in front of a stately Sikh policeman who held the head of a narrow cross-street.

“Hey, Bud, where’s this location?” The American put his finger on the ad.

The bearded Sikh read the name, then pointed—a vague gesture indicating some far-off indefinite spot in the teeming city back from the harbor. Kelley went his way along the narrow cross-street, keeping his eye out for some fellow white man from whom he might seek more explicit direction.

In the middle of the third square back from the Bund, he first saw the Lank Man with the Brown Beard, bargaining with a Chinese peddler who had spread his wares of polished brass out on the narrow walk.

“It’s worth five dollars.” The Lank Man held a brass bowl in his hand. “I’ll give you that—no more.”

“No can do,” the peddler was saying. “Eight dollars best price. I tell you true.”

Kelley forgot his objective for a moment and stopped to stare.

Indeed, the Lank Man with the Brown Beard would have won many stares on any street in any city. Some would have gaped at his abnormally lank tallness, some at the outsprouting luxuriance of his whiskers, some at the light summer suit and topcoat that flapped about his leanness in the moisture-laden winter wind. Whether in New York or London, in Shanghai or Winnipeg, he would have stood forth, unreal, foreign, alien, one apart from the conventionalities of this world. American he was, but, rarest of all Americans, an artist—glorious rebel against the ways of the majorities.

“I cannot afford eight dollars,” began Brown Beard. “I—” he glanced up and saw Kelley gaping. “How do you like it?” He held out the brass bowl. “The tracing, I admit, is crude—but the shape! Man, only a Chinaman could dream of a curve like that.”

Kelley became aware that Brown Beard was speaking certainly to him.

“I don’t know nothing about that junk,” he admitted. “It all looks alike to me.”

“Each of us has his separate dream.” Brown Beard looked keenly at Kelley. “There are some things, I fancy, in which you could see beauty.” He

handed the bowl back to the watchful peddler, then with a deft motion drew something from his inner coat-pocket "There, what do you make of this?"

Kelley looked curiously at the dagger which Brown Beard placed in his hand.

"That's Jap stuff!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Samurai, or whatever you call it. That's a real one—you don't see many like it. They held 'em like this——" He illustrated "Doggone hard things to dodge."

He continued to hold the dagger, studying it with approval.

"That's a dandy!" he said, avidly. "That's a real curio. I'd rather own that than some of them old ones I saw in the Tower of London."

Brown Beard's eyes were fixed thoughtfully on Kelley.

"I thought you'd see beauty in that," he said as he put the dagger carefully back in his pocket. "Now you can understand how I see beauty in yon brass bowl."

"No, I can't," disputed Kelley. "A bowl ain't no use; a dagger is—anyway, it has been. Just think—maybe kings have been killed with that there weapon."

"Maybe they have." Brown Beard was still eyeing Kelley; the intentness of his gaze was well-nigh disconcerting . . . Kelley's mind swung back to his errand.

"Maybe you can tell me where this street is." He drew the paper from his pocket and pointed to the ad. "I won't try to pronounce it."

"Ha!" There was meaning in Brown Beard's ejaculation as his eye caught the ad. "Six hundred North Szechuen!"

"Is that some place you know?" demanded Kelley.

"Looking for work?" countered Brown Beard.

"You've guessed it. Do you want to hire me?"

The Lank Man seemed on the edge of saying something vitally important. His eyes devoured Kelley as a critic studies a canvas. Kelley shoved the paper back into his pocket and turned away.

"Let me know when you're ready to talk," he said gruffly.

The Lank Man was at Kelley's side in an instant.

"Here, I'll show you the way." His hand rested on Kelley's arm as he pointed out directions. "You'll find it easily," he concluded. "It's on a main street. And pardon me for not answering; I went to thinking of something else. I'm very often absent-minded, you know. I'm glad we met. My

name is Hamilton—Wall Hamilton. I hope we'll meet again."

"Same here!" Kelley was a welcomer of friendships. "My name's Kelley—plain Kelley."

"Good luck, Kelley!" The two shook hands. "Better look into that job thoroughly before you take it—don't set yourself up too high, and don't believe everything you see. Good-by!"

"He's a nut," mused Kelley as he went on his way. "I've seen 'em like that before. He's different though—that kind are mostly so wrapped up in themselves that they don't even see you. He's got eyes like a detective—" the big man chuckled. "Heck, wouldn't he surely make a right funny detective!"

II

THE front door coolie at 600 Szechuen Road grinned understandingly at Kelley holding his morning paper, opened the door wide enough to admit the big American, pointed up the stairs.

"Topside," he said briefly.

Kelley climbed — one flight, two flights.

A door stood open before him; he looked into a wide, low-ceilinged room. Soft coal smoked in the fireplace. A man—a white man with smooth black hair, heavy eyebrows, rich olive complexion—sat busy with documents at a square table. He glanced up inquiringly at Kelley in the doorway.

"I'm looking for a job," said Kelley, and pointed to his paper. The man at the table exhaled authority—gave Kelley the feeling that he ought to salute.

"Be seated!" From his voice the man was American. "I'll be through shortly."

There wasn't much in the room to attract Kelley's eye as he sat comfortably waiting. Sagging cracks in the white-washed ceiling . . . a map or two on the wall . . . a shelf of sheepskin books . . . a telephone . . . beyond the fireplace a rifle atop a wide mahogany chest. Kelley eyed the chest hopefully—here, he surmised, was an arsenal.

The man at the table was more interesting to look at than was the furniture of the room. Smooth skin, straight nose, strong chin, thoughtful mouth, glossy hair, all blended into insolent handsomeness. His air was capable, assured—the air that speaks of hundred-thousand-dollar

positions. Kelley compared him to Brown Beard: the one a ragged roamer, dickering with a peddler on the street—the other a dependable man of affairs.

“I hope I land the job,” wished Kelley, and smiled at Brown Beard’s advice that he be wary of what he saw. “I guess I know the real thing when I see it,” he argued inwardly. “I guess Hamilton’s the one that needs a guardian—not me.”

He waited for a long hour. The man of affairs worked steadily at his documents, occasionally consulted the map of China that hung on the wall, once made use of the telephone—to relay a cablegram in code to the Department of State at Washington. Kelley was more and more impressed; plainly this man stood high in Government service.

At length he swung around.

“Name?”

“Clay Kelley.”

“Military service?”

“Three years in the Marines.”

“Discharge?”

Kelley dug the treasured paper from an inner pocket and handed it over. The man at the table studied it closely, compared it with a typewritten docket which he drew from the table drawer, handed it back finally without comment.

“Last job?”

“On a tramp—the *Mary Peter*. I quit last week—here’s a paper,”

Kelley proffered a “to-whom-it-may-concern” signed by the captain of the *Mary Peter*. The man gave it scarcely a glance.

“Have you been in China before?”

“Not before last Monday,” admitted Kelley.

“Any friends here?”

“Not to speak of.”

“Any money?”

Kelley grimaced. “Them sing-song girls are good gamblers,” he said with apparent irrelevance.

The man bowed his head for a few seconds in thought.

“All right!” he said with decision. “You’re hired.”

“What for?” It was Kelley’s turn to interrogate.

“Secret Service,” the man at the table leaned forward confidentially. “I’ll have to tell you a bit; I see you’re the sort that can be trusted.”

“You bet I am!” bragged Kelley. “You can just bank on me.”

“My name is Leighton,” went on the other.

“I’m working directly from Washington—even the consular officers here don’t know that I’m on the field. That’s to avoid any possibility of a leak. It’s ticklish work—I’m cooperating with a like man from London. We’re looking for exports of opium. A good deal is smuggled out from here. If we can stop it, it will be easier than trying to uncover and confiscate it at port of entry. Understand?”

“Sure!” approved Kelley. “That’s a good idea. It’s nothing to land opium in ‘Frisco—I’ve seen it done enough times. Where do I come in?”

“So far I’ve been doing only preliminary investigating,” continued Leighton. “I’m onto the gang now that’s doing the smuggling—it’s an organized ring, you understand. I have authority to conduct a raid whenever I have a chance to confiscate a sufficient amount to make it worth while. Raids will call for more or less force; I need a man who can give a blow or two when there’s need, and who can be trustworthy and discreet. I’m giving you a chance at the job.”

“When do I start? What do you pay?”

“You start today. I may arrange our first raid to-night. The salary is two hundred per month gold, and necessary expenses.”

“I’m hired!” Kelley expanded his chest luxuriously. “Lead me to it.”

“The car is ready,” said Leighton in a low voice. “Let’s go.”

It was eight o’clock—a dark rainy evening. Kelley had put in a lazy day, loafing most of the while in a room adjoining Leighton’s office. He was tired of inactivity—hungry for action.

The two of them piled into the back seat of a touring car, atop two silent and impassive Chinamen. In the front seat sat two more—one of them driving.

“These boys are fairly trustworthy,” whispered Leighton. “They’ve been with me for a year. They’re Chinese—of course I don’t dare trust them too far! They might be tempted to drop the loot in their pockets and make away. That’s why I’ve hired you.”

The car leaped away at reckless speed. They skidded through curving narrow streets, dodged rickshaw runners and foot-passengers, shot past a loaded tram, swung around sharp corners, passed saluting Sikh policemen, scraped the curb to avoid an aged woman with a teapot who was tottering on bound feet down the middle of the road. The driver honked incessantly. Through the rain gleamed the



"That's a dandy!" he said avidly. "That's a real curio. I'd rather own that than some of them old ones I saw in the Tower of London"

"That part's all easy," said Kelley. "You couldn't pack enough Chinks into a seven-room house to scare me. What I want to know is where to look for the opium."

"That's what I'm coming to," answered Leighton. "One of these boys has been in the house and knows exactly where the loot is planted. In the third room back you'll find a mahogany chest with brass corners. It's a Chinese chest with a Chinese lock—easy to break open. Put this jimmy in your coat pocket."

The driver turned and spoke a word in Chinese to Leighton.

"We're almost there," said the chief. "Now listen: you'll find that chest full of clothes; throw them out. Clear at the bottom you'll come to a little box of carved ivory about two inches square. Don't stop to open it—drop it in your

pocket quick and get away. We want to be gone before a crowd gathers; if we have to call for police help, it will make complications."

"Just that one little box?" asked Kelley incredulously.

"Just that," answered Leighton. "That's enough. There's enough opium packed in that little cube to pay ransom for a king."

It was too easy . . . So reflected Kelley as he bent above the mahogany chest in the dimly lighted room and threw garments of tapestried silk out upon the tile floor. The aged door-tender had dropped from a tap of his fist; the two Chinese boys with waving revolvers and threatening shouts had herded the scared inmates of the house into an angle of the courtyard and were now standing guard while Kelley looted the chest. Nothing to do now but drop the little ivory box into his pocket and get away. Hardly a blow struck! It was too easy—it wasn't good sport.

The tiny box of carved ivory was in his pocket; he straightened up and turned, to leave.

Sudden uproar in the courtyard—fierce shouts of fighting men! Kelley, uncomprehending, started for the doorway.

lights of tiny native shops. Once Kelley spied a painted woman leaning out into the night from an upstairs window.

"We're raiding a house where there's opium hidden," Leighton spoke with the sharp detail of a stage director. "It's a Chinese house — seven rooms, one behind the other, with open courtyards between. There's only the one entrance. I'll stay with the car so as to ensure you a safe retreat. Two of these boys will guard the door of the house. You and the other two will do the actual raiding. I hardly think you'll meet with any resistance. Show the badge that I pinned on your coat, wave your revolver, and shout 'Police'—that's a word they all know."

The shouters broke in upon him—a posse of fierce Sikhs with clubs and guns—turbaned Sikhs of mighty stature, dressed, in policeman blue. Kelley had no thought for catastrophes. Were not these his allies? Was not he also on the side of the law? Leighton evidently had been driven to call them to his help.

The club of a Sikh lammed the side of Kelley's head. About him flamed spinning stars; he reeled. Sikhs grabbed his arms and kept him from falling—dragged him roughly through the door.

The courtyard whirled before his dizzy eyes—waving torches—shouting policemen—his two Chinese confederates held captive—a lank white man in light summer suit with an outsticking beard of brown.

“What the hell?” whispered Kelley. His head sang; his thoughts were chaos. Wait till these dam' Hindoos find out their mistake—clubbing the very men they were sworn to aid. Just wait! The laugh will be on them all right then.

On they jerked him furiously—through room and court and room, out into the street. He looked hopefully for Leighton to set things right. In vain! Leighton and his car had disappeared.

Kelley's dizziness passed. He turned on his captors.

“See here!” he remonstrated. “You got things mixed; you——”

The police flourished their clubs; their grip tightened on his arms. Off into the rain they started. Kelley decided to be sensible. He shut up, and went along.

III

THINGS were happening too blamed fast; Kelley's slow mind couldn't keep up.

Only a minute ago there had been those fool policemen dragging him off to jail. And then through the darkness had loomed up the Lank Man with the Brown Beard. He had halted the Sikhs with a sharp word of command—had sent them about their business with a jabber of Hindustan—and now was leading Kelley off by the arm to God-knows-where—just the two of them footing it off alone through the rain.

“How come?” demanded Kelley.

“You're out on bail,” explained Hamilton, “paroled to me. I know these Sikhs pretty well—I've been around Shanghai for some time. They

know who I am and where I live. I convinced them that I knew you and that I'd be responsible for you; so they agreed to let me take you to my room and keep you till morning. I haven't much of a place, but it's better than jail.”

Hamilton's explanation was labored and prolix. In a keener listener than Kelley it would have roused suspicion that he was handling only the fringe of the truth. But Kelley wasn't the suspicious sort.

“I saw you back there in the house,” he said. “The way you stood there, I thought at first it was somebody bossing them policemen; and then I saw it was only you. How did you happen along just when you did?”

“Oh, I often roam around at night,” evaded Brown Beard.

Kelley brushed cold drops of rain from his eyes. They were headed against the wind, and it was keen going.

“This is a hell of a night to roam around,” said he.

“What made you do it?” countered Hamilton.

“We was out on official business,” explained Kelley. “Them police will find they made a big mistake; they arrested the wrong men.”

“Do you call it official business to break into a Chinese house and rob it?” asked Brown Beard quietly.

“Look here!” blustered Kelley. “I guess I know my business. You don't need, to think I'm a thief.”

“It's what the judge will think,” said Hamilton bluntly. “He's pretty short with Americans who break into Chinese houses. Only last month he sent two chaps to Bilibid. They forced their way into a Chinese residence under the pretext that they were international police searching for opium. When the Sikhs caught them, they were making off with five hundred dollars worth of jewelry. They're up for three years at hard labor.”

Kelley had no answer. Here was something to worry about. . . . Suppose Leighton shouldn't come forward to clear him. . . . But of course he would; he was the sort you could bank on. Kelley reassured himself thus again and again.

Hamilton was likewise silent, his head down against the rain. There was no further talk until they were snug in his warm room.

The room was a medley of Oriental curios—painted silks and crescent swords on the walls—vases and candlesticks on the mantel—choice bits of lacquer and brass and cloisonne on the round

table.

"This is a swell room," said Kelley as he dropped into a chair before the open fire. "I sure appreciate what you're doing for me. I don't want you to think I'm a crook."

"I wouldn't let you loose in here with my curios if I thought that," said Hamilton. "All the same, you have to admit that the evidence is against you. Why don't you open up, Kelley, and tell me all about it? I happen to be a friend of the judge, and if I have the facts, maybe I can help you out."

"I'm going to tell you," said Kelley. "But I want you to keep it all confidential. Maybe you can keep it from coming out in Court. I'm employed in the Secret Service, you see, and that's why." He went on and told his tale through to the end.

"And I got the opium," he wound up triumphantly and pulled the little ivory box from his pocket. "Got it just before those fool police butted it. Good thing they didn't search me, or I wouldn't have it now."

Brown Beard gave the box no attention for the moment.

"What makes you so positive that your man Leighton is in Government Service?" he asked.

"I saw his papers," testified Kelley. "And I heard him sending a cablegram to the Secretary of State. And what's more, I'm a judge of men; I know an official when I see one. He's a big man; he ain't no ordinary sort like you and me."

"But supposing you're wrong." Brown Beard

turned a plate of ancient porcelain, over and over in his slender hands as he argued. "Supposing he wanted that house robbed and put you up to do it—so that he wouldn't get caught at it himself. What then?"

Kelley looked about stubbornly for an answer—and found it between his fingers.

"Here's the box of opium," he retorted. "I guess that shows he was telling me the truth. There's enough dope in this here little box to pay a king's ransom."

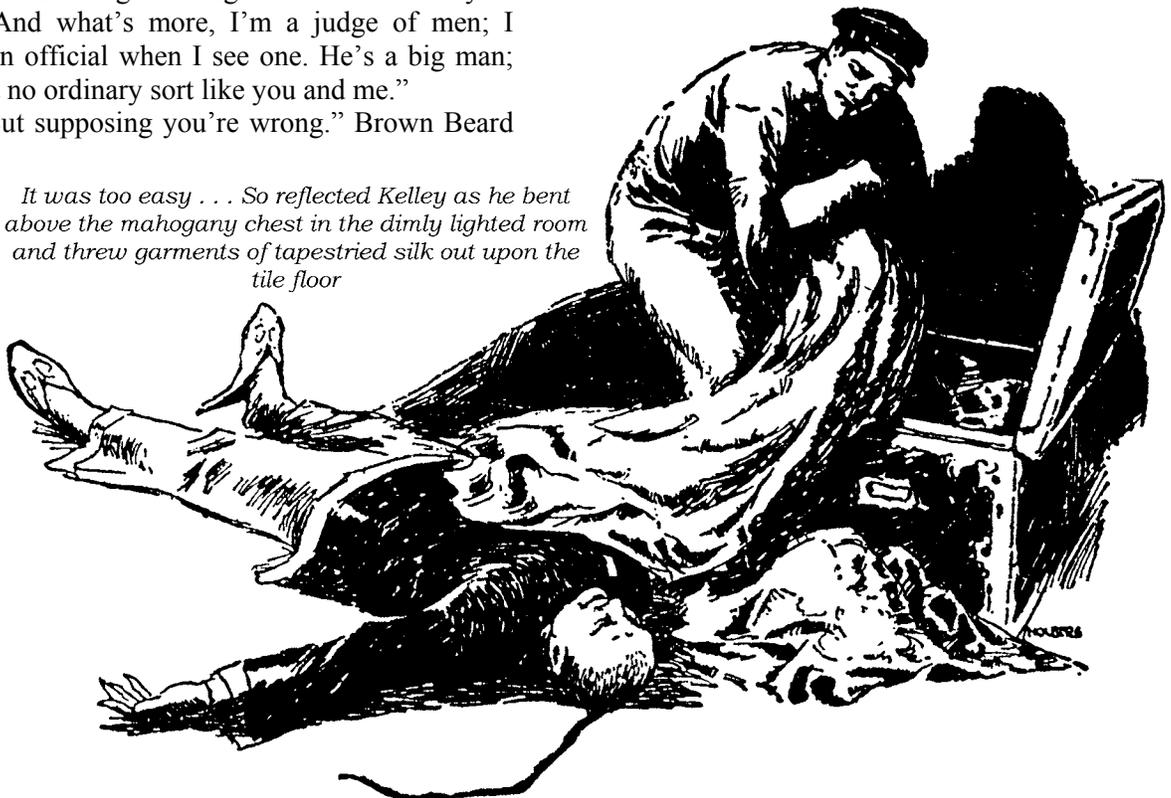
"Must be going up in price," said Hamilton drily. He took the ivory box from Kelley's hand and glanced at it casually.

"By George!" he exclaimed, and sat up suddenly, straight and tense. His eyes devoured the carving on the little box with the rapt devotion of the connoisseur. He was again an artist, forgetful of all save the things of art.

"What's the idea?" asked Kelley, "That's just an ordinary little ivory box."

"Ordinary!" cried Hamilton. "Kelley, that's the most exquisite carving I've ever seen—the very soul of Canton done in ivory. And old!—see, it has the delicate yellow of antiquity!" He had taken a reading-glass from the table and was intent on the design carved on the box. "The imperial

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dragon," he went on, half to himself. "I understood there was only one box of this pattern in China. I wonder—" He broke off and sat looking for many minutes at the curio while Kelley watched with yawning indifference. "Did you look at the opium?—inside the box?" demanded Hamilton suddenly.

"Why, no," answered Kelley in bewilderment. "Leighton said it would spoil the evidence to open the box. But if you want to—"

"Oh, never mind," yawned Hamilton. He rose to his lank height and set the tiny box on the mantel. "It's tied with a peculiar silver cord that would take a while to undo—and I'd hate to cut it or break it. Kelley, you have one virtue: when you get an idea, you hang to it like a bulldog; but you have one Weakness: there's room in your skull for only one idea at a time—and therefore, you're a fool. . . What say we go to bed?"

Kelley had slept through typhoons and hurricanes, and he was not the sort to keep awake over the logic that had dubbed him fool. He stretched out on his back beside Hamilton in the comfortable bed, and slept—and snored.

"Kelley!" said Hamilton sharply.

"Here!" Kelley had finished breakfast before the cheerful open fire in Hamilton's room, and was amiably picking his teeth.

"What's your honest opinion of Leighton this morning? Do you still believe he's on the square?"

"Why should I believe any different?" evaded Kelley; it was the most definite answer that he could make.

"In that case, you'd better go and see him this morning," ordered Hamilton. "You'll not be wanted in Court till afternoon. I'll look for you back here at one o'clock. Perhaps Leighton can help you get clear. Here, take him his little box of opium." He handed the ivory box to Kelley as he spoke. "Now trot along."

"I thought you wanted to open this first," Kelley sought to temporize.

"No, no," said Hamilton wearily. "I've seen opium before. Besides, I have a busy morning and want to be alone. One thing, though—" His voice had the ring of command. "*Do not tell* Leighton that you have been with me. Now good-by—and good luck!"

Kelley went. He had the feeling that he was walking in the midst of mystery, but he lacked the brains to think through. Between forces that he

could not understand, he obeyed their pulls and pushes — and trusted to Kelley's luck.

It was a drab morning, but North Szechuen road was vivid with color. It was a little while before Kelley realized that the color was that of many turbans wound 'round the heads of black-bearded Sikhs.

"All the policemen in town is out this morning," he muttered. "I hope they don't start pitching on me again."

Onward he went with fear and trembling. The groups of armed Sikhs watched him, but offered no interference.

The front door coolie at Six Hundred peeped out cautiously.

"I want to see Leighton," announced Kelley.

"No can do." The coolie sought to close the door, but Kelley's foot was in the way. Kelley shouldered his way in, shoved the little coolie to one side, and made his way up the two flights of stairs.

Leighton had not heard him coming. He sat at his table in the cheerful room upstairs, his head buried in his hands. A revolver lay close to his elbow. The fire was cloyed with the light ash of many burned papers.

"Here I am," said Kelley.

"What do you want?" Leighton leaped warily to his feet; his hand reached for his revolver.

"Didn't you want me to come back?"

"What for?" Leighton's voice was suspicious and hard; the poise and self-possession of yesterday were gone; his mouth worked nervously.

"Why, to work, of course. I'm hired by the month, ain't I? The police butted in on me last night, but they let me go again. I'm out on bail."

"There'll be nothing for you to do for a few days," said Leighton, nobly pulling himself together. "Not till I get word from Washington. You may go where you please now. Tell me where you're staying, and I'll send for you when I want you."

"I have to appear in court this afternoon," related Kelley. "The judge is liable to send me to jail if he don't know I'm in the Secret Service."

"I'll telephone him," promised Leighton glibly. "He'll let you off all right."

"I got the opium O. K." Kelley pulled the little ivory box from his pocket.

"You did!" Leighton sprang forward and tore the box from Kelley's hand; his voice trembled

with eagerness. "By Jove, that's it! Good for you! Did you open it?"

"No, of course not. You said not to. And I was lucky enough to keep it hid from the police."

Leighton made no reply. He turned his back and stood facing the window. He pulled a knife from his pocket; Kelley guessed that he was cutting the tiny silver cord that held shut the ivory box.

"All right?" Kelley took a step forward in his eagerness to see.

"You fool!" cried Leighton; he swung furiously on Kelley. "You ass! You crook! What the devil do you mean?"

"Mean?" Kelley in perplexity stooped and picked up the box that Leighton had dashed to the floor. A few waxy brown pellets were still clinging to its inside. He put them to his nose and sniffed. "That's opium, ain't it?"

"Of course it is," Leighton screamed with rage into Kelley's very face. "I suppose you call it a joke—you big thick-head! Do you think I'd go to all that trouble to get ten dollars' worth of dope!"

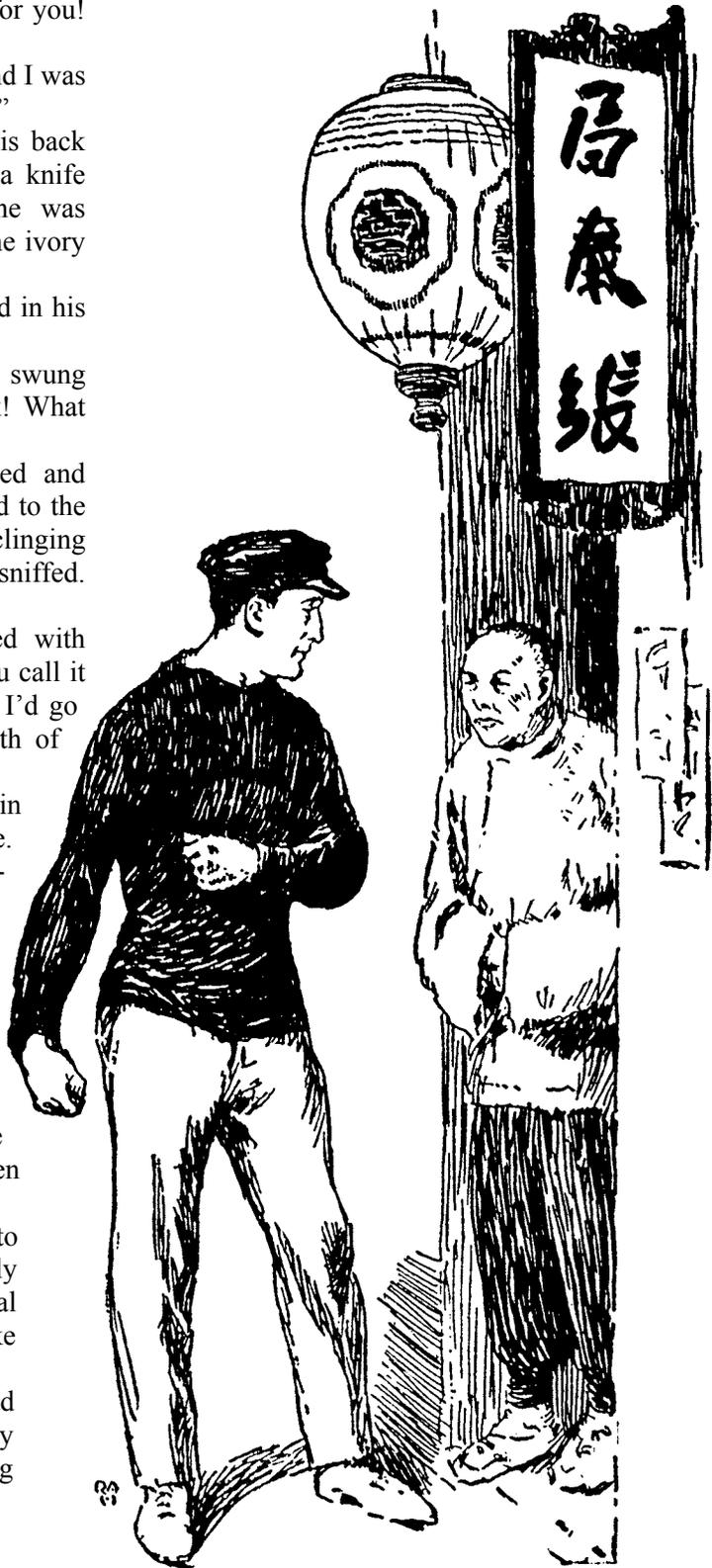
"Well—but——" Kelley grew angry in his turn. "Stop your cussing and talk sense. Look out——" His hands went up in self-defense.

He was a big man and strong, but he was slow—no match for a foaming wildcat like Leighton. He found himself thrown down two flights of stairs as neatly as if he had been a sack of rice. The front door coolie took hold handily and dumped him forth into the cosmopolitan publicity of North Szechuen Road. The door behind him banged shut.

"Well, heck!" Kelley got staggeringly to his feet; his hand still clutched instinctively the tiny ivory box carved with the imperial dragon. "Everybody says I'm a fool. I'd like to know what it all means."

The ring of turbaned policemen had gathered closer while he was inside. They gazed at Kelley after the manner of strong men, but let him pass without interference.

"Guess I'll go back and see Hamilton," muttered Kelley as he started off. "There's one thing I can tell him for sure; that man Leighton is nothing but a blamed crook."



The front door coolie at Six Hunderd peeped out cautiously.

Hamilton was sitting in his armchair before the open fire when the door opened and Kelley limped in.

"Back already?" he asked without rising.

“Didn’t you find Leighton?”

“Sure I did! He’s a crook! He threw me downstairs.” Kelley flopped into a chair and gently massaged a bruise on his cheek.

“That’s too bad. Sit still awhile and rest. I’ve been studying some of my curios.”

Hamilton’s occupation indeed was manifest. A brass bowl lay in his lap; a pair of porcelain vases and the Samurai dagger beside him on the table. His hand held a tiny object that glittered green.

“I wouldn’t give a rap for all that stuff,” said Kelley stiffly, “except that dagger—that’s a real humdinger.”

“You’ll enjoy looking at this one.” Hamilton handed across the tiny bit of green. “Handle it with care; it’s valued at ten thousand dollars.”

“Ten thousand dollars! Gee! What is it?” Kelley looked with awe at the treasure—a mite of cool green stone carved into a pendant an inch and a half long.

“That the finest specimen of carved jade in China. It was stolen last summer from the Imperial Museum in Pekin, and there’s a reward of a thousand dollars for its safe return. You and I will start for Pekin tomorrow to collect the reward.”

“Where did you get it?” Kelley failed to grasp the significance of the “you and I.”

“Last night, while you were snoring,” was the answer. “I took it out of your little ivory box and left some pills of opium in its place.”

“Oh! Then that——” Kelley sat and thought with growing understanding—pleased at his own astuteness in being able now to see through the whole mystery. “Sure, I see it all now. Leighton and his gang must have found out some way about the jade and wanted to steal it. And they hired me to be the goat—the yellow bunch! Say, he pretty nearly fooled me at that. I could have sworn he

was on the square.”

“He’s a good actor,” said Hamilton. “And he’s shrewd; it’s mighty hard to get anything on him. Even now——”

“And he told me it was opium,” chuckled Kelley. “It was sure a joke ori him when he opened the box and found it *was* opium. He’s a crook all right He ought to be arrested.”

“That’s being attended to,” said Hamilton patiently. “My men will pick him up this morning when he leaves the house. Perhaps you saw a few of them in the street.”

“Your men?” asked Kelley. “I saw some policemen. Who the dickens are you?”

“I’m in the Secret Service,” answered Hamilton. “I’ve been here in the East for some time—trying to round up a few birds like Leighton.”

“You a detective?” said Kelley bluntly. “Well, there sure ain’t nobody would guess it—not in fifty years.”

“Thanks!” said Hamilton. “That’s all to the good. But about this pendant——” He leaned forward and pointed with his pencil to the details of the Carving. “Observe here the cluster of pomegranates—and here the gnarled tree—and here the teahouse beside the one-arched bridge. The wisdom of a thousand generations graven on an inch-long gem.”

“I can’t see nothing to that,” said Kelley. “Looks to me like it’s all bunk. But, say, I want you to tell me one thing.”

“Yes?”

“You called me a fool,” owned Kelley. “And I am. But how did you guess it? And what made you believe I was honest?”

“Experience,” answered Brown Beard drily. “Much experience—in the appraising of curios.”