

THE ACCIDENTAL ORIENTAL

By BERTRAM B. FOWLER

Meet the World's Only Chinese Hockey Player! A Regular Skating Fu Manchu . . .
But Good!

I WAS sitting in the Wolverine office at the Garden that morning, very busy feeling sorry for myself, when Pete Shelby returned from his scouting trip in Northern Ontario. I thought that I had troubles. Managing a hockey team in competition with the Canadian and the United States Armies was getting me down.

I had just lost my two best forwards to the Canadian Army. Uncle Sam had grabbed my goaltender and one defenseman. The Wolverines had started the season with the best team in the league, but as the season progressed they were steadily drifting from that category.

At the exact moment my unhappy thoughts arrived at this conclusion, in waltzed Pete, his skate-scarred pan beaming, as he said, "I've got it, Dave! I've dug up the greatest find since Eddie Shore came out of Saskatchewan."

I looked past Pete and dang near swallowed my store teeth. What Pete had brought in looked like Fu Manchu in a store suit. A round felt hat two sizes too small was perched on the blackest, straightest hair that I had ever seen. His face was the color of coffee and was hung on a pair of cheek bones so high and wide that his ears were bent from trying to hear around them. He blinked at me with jet black eyes that slanted up from his flattened nose. The blink was absolutely the only expression on his face.

When I caught my breath, I said, "Listen, stupid! In case you have forgotten, this is the office of the Wolverines. The Wolverines are, or were, a collection of hockey players. And, I might mention in passing, that this is not the casting office for the Chinese Art Theatre."

Pete said earnestly, "Dave, take my word for it, this is one of the slickest hockey prospects I have ever turned up."

Before I could make a crack he went on, "Are the boys working out this morning?"

As we headed for the dressing rooms, Pete said, "This boy is Joe Eagle, a full-blooded Cree. He is not only one of the greatest living hockey players,

but he is also due to be one of the greatest drawing cards this league has ever seen. I have thought up one that will get us more publicity than the U.S. Marines."



I should have known. For, besides being one of the best hockey scouts in the business, Pete is the world champ at thinking up crackpot ideas that generally backfire.

But I was too busy watching a miracle. I leaned on the boards at mid-ice and watched as dizzy an exhibition of skating and stick-handling as I have seen since Howie Morenz spark-plugged the old Canadiens. He was a sort of whirling dervish on skates.

I voiced the usual thought to Pete. "And I suppose this guy will be grabbed by the Canadian Army about the time I sign him up."

"That's the beautiful part," Pete chuckled. "Joe has already tried to enlist and has been turned down."

"I can't believe that part about the Canadian Army," I told Pete. "If you had told me that you had gotten a release on him from Chiang Kai-shek, I'd be more apt to believe you. Only I never knew that they played hockey like that in Shensi Province."

“You’re a smart guy, Dave,” Pete chortled. “Right away you see the publicity angle.”

HE HURRIED on as I gave him a glare. “To you and me this guy is Joe Eagle, a full-blooded Cree from Ontario. To the general public he is going to be Chen Kai Chan, the only Chinese hockey player in the world. With that pan he could convince the Chinese Ambassador himself. I’ve already talked it over with Joe and he has agreed to play it that way.”

“Nix on that. Nix on any such screwy idea.”

Pete went persuasive on me as we walked back toward the office while Joe Eagle changed into his store suit. “It’s a natural, Dave. Can’t you just see the sport lads? He’ll pack every rink around the circuit. Inside of a week he will be the biggest sensation hockey has ever seen.”

I put iron in my voice. “Nothing doing. The Chen Kai Chan stuff is out.”

Pete sighed. “That’s too danged bad, Dave. Because I was so sure you’d agree with me that I told Chris Waters when I met him on the street. I introduced Joe as Chen Kai Chan. Chris beat it back to his office to write Joe up in his syndicated column.”

I opened my mouth to blast Pete and closed it again as the troop of sport writers crowded into the office behind us. One of them said, “What is this that Chris Waters has put on the wire about a Chinese hockey player? Is somebody trying to rib somebody?”

Pete looked at me warningly, as he said, “So Chris has got it on the wires already.”

Then he broke forth enthusiastically, “It’s the truth. In a few minutes you’ll meet him. He’s from Shensi Province in China. He learned to play hockey in a missionary school. When he was brought to Canada by one of the missionaries he became the great hockey player that he is today.”

The boys hung around until Joe Eagle came into the office. You could see all the doubts fading out as the boys looked at his Fu Manchuish features.

Pete introduced him in a loud voice, “Boys, meet Chen Kai Chan.”

THE boys crowded around. I felt my mouth sag open as Joe Eagle clasped his hands in front of him, and gave a dippy little bow as he said, “Miserable person is honored beyond his desserts.”

That was the pay-off. There was just one more

question that the boys had to ask. When was I going to unveil the Chinese wonder?

I mumbled, “Tomorrow night. I’ll start him tomorrow night against the Panthers.”

The sports guys went tearing out. I turned to Joe Eagle. I had one more surprise coming.

Joe Eagle almost smiled as he said, “I think the idea has considerable merit. The masquerade should be a simple one to maintain.”

I just waved an arm. “Sit down, bud, and we’ll talk about a contract.” I glared at Pete. “And may heaven help you if this whacky idea goes sour on me.”

There in the office I got the lowdown on Joe Eagle. He was an educated Indian. He had learned his hockey and gotten his education in a little obscure Quebec college. Realizing this, I allowed his and Pete’s confidence to lull me into a phony security.

Pete was not wrong on the sensation that Joe’s debut would make. The sport pages had gone to town on the idea of a Chinese hockey player. What Pete omitted the boys filled in. And the crowd turned out.

They piled into the Garden and howled for the Chinese wonder when I stuck my regular starting line upon the ice. Then I unveiled Chen Kai Chan. I put him on at center with King Regan and Oakie Walker on either side of him. They were a pair of cagey old guys who knew how to cover a solo playing center.

IT TURNED out that Joe Eagle didn’t need much covering. He was a whole forward line in himself. He was as fast and as tough as a whiplash.

The guy had the grandstand stuff of a Morenz or a Shore. He ran the opposing forwards ragged, jumped sticks and waltzed through the defense. Once, when he got hit hard by the boards he whirled in the air like a cat, hit the boards with his skates and bounced like a rubber ball to land on his feet. He had overhauled the fellow who plugged him and snaked the puck away from him before the guy had traveled ten yards.

He scored three times on solo rushes. In between times my first line of Bing Burke, Abbie Gangon and Dutch Silliker caught the jab of the competition and went hog-wild, piling up a few more needed markers.

The crowd went nuts. For them Chen Kai Chan was the Chinese firecracker. He had speed to burn;

was as elusive as a ghost and had all the color of a red flannel shirt.

It was like that all around the circuit. We played tail-enders to packed houses. In the most hostile burghs the crowd came to ride us and stayed to yell themselves hoarse for the skating fool from Shensi Province.



We came back so far out in front that the sports boys were already handing us the championship. But that didn't make so much difference to the old turnstiles. They would have clicked for Chen Kai Chan if we'd been floundering in the cellar.

But, in spite of it all, I didn't like it. Because I knew that all this was too good to last. In my quiet hours I was haunted by the horrible fear that I was being stalked by a fickle fate.

Maybe it was because I was psychic. It was a very uncomfortable feeling but it had its points. It saved me from passing out that day when Colonel Winters came into the office with the beaming smile on his face that always tells me when the colonel is going to give birth to a great idea.

IN CASE you don't know, Colonel Winters is Winters' Root Beer; "as cool as Winter snow; as invigorating as frost on a ski run." Colonel Winters also owns the Wolverines. And, while he likes to see his boys out there in front of the pack, he is also a fine old gent who is always receptive to an idea for helping this or that worthy cause.

It is because of this generosity on the part of the colonel that we have, during the past few years, played benefit games for every organization from the Committee for the Propagation of Culture Among the Aleutian Eskimos to The Society for the Prevention of the Subjugation of Iceland. It is all very laudable and works no harm to anyone that I can see.

On this particular day the colonel beamed at me and said, "David, I have just arranged for a most timely and fitting benefit game to be played in the

Garden two weeks from now."

He eased himself into his special chair, nursed his expansive tummy in his clasped hands and beamed some more as his pink jowls trembled with satisfaction. "Your signing up that Chinese hockey player was a stroke of genius, David, a stroke of pure unalloyed genius. Have you heard, David, of that enterprising and dynamic organization, The Friends of Resurgent China?"

I braced myself. The colonel ahemed and continued, "Well, I have been approached by Mr. Hui Li, their special envoy now in New York, with an appeal for such a benefit game. Naturally, I assented wholeheartedly to such a worthy cause."

The colonel was so happy about the whole thing that he didn't notice how I was taking it. "It will be a most memorable occasion; a most memorable and highly important occasion."

The colonel evidently mistook my speechlessness for attentiveness and went innocently on. "Mr. Hui Li wishes to make of it a gala event. Since the Chinese Art Theatre is now playing in the city and Miss Chi Lai Fang, a Shensi Princess, is a member of the cast, Mr. Hui Li has arranged a most ambitious and colorful program. He wishes to bestow upon our Chen Kai Chan the Order of the Exalted Sons of the Dragon, First Class. First Class, David."

"First Class is right!" I thought explosively. "Just ducky!"

I hardly remember when he went out. I do remember sitting there for a long time, mumbling to myself. "Shensi Princess," "Order of the Exalted Sons of the Dragon—First Class."

The only first class angle about it was the class of the mess into which Pete Shelby had dumped me up to by bended neck.

Fortunately Pete was in town. I got him on the phone after I was once more capable of speech and yelped into the instrument, "You get the hell down here, you highbinder. Get down here and see what I've got to dump in your lap."

When Pete came in, I gave him the lowdown. "And from now on you'll handle this mess, you double-crossing dummy. It was your idea to build this Joe Eagle into the Confucius of Madison Square Garden. It was you who saddled us with a skating Fu Manchu. Now it's going to be you who'll get us out of it. If you don't it's your job. I'll not only fire you but I'll get you blackballed from here to Alaska."

“Now wait, Dave,” Pete protested. “Just a minute. There must be some way to handle this.”

“Okay. Okay,” I yelled. “You find the way. The whole trick is in your lap. You handle Mr. Hui Li and his Shensi Princess. You fix up a nice acceptance speech for your phony Chen Kai Chan, something graceful and eloquent in the pure Shensi dialect, suitable to the occasion of the bestowal of the Order of the Sons of the Exalted Dragon—first class—on a two-bit hockey-playing mandarin from the Cree Nation. You built this up. Now you can have all of it. And I hope that, when this mess is over, they will take you over to Chiang Kai-shek and have his boys make very fine hash of you.”

IT WAS a very low Dave Crosby who took his hockey team to play in Montreal and Toronto while Pete Shelby stayed in New York to work on his problem. Fortunately, Joe Eagle was still playing the same whirlwind brand of hockey and had the rest of the boys playing way over their heads in an effort to live up to his standard. So we took both Toronto and Montreal in a walk, while the crowd forgot their own heroes and screamed for the Chinese cyclone.

But always before me was a picture of myself slinking by devious routes out of the country at the close of that game for the benefit of the Friends of Resurgent China. For if the thing I feared were to happen, my name would be mud everywhere south of the Arctic Circle.

It was in this spirit that I returned to New York on the day before the fateful game. I was no sooner in my office than I bounced Pete Shelby, looking exceedingly chipper and carefree.

He slapped me on the back and chirped, “Cheer up, Dave. I’ve got it all fixed. There’ll be no headaches for anyone. In fact, after this game is over, our Chen Kai Chan is going to be more of a public hero than ever. I’ve arranged everything.”

I could get no lift from Pete’s optimism. For it is a firm conviction with me that Pete can fix things only one way—worse.

Pete rattled on, “I tell you, Dave, it is in the bag. I’ve been to see this Miss Chi Lai Fang, the Shensi Princess. And she is no more a princess than I am Adolph Hitler. She is just a very smooth and pretty Chinese gal who was born in this country. Her old man is Charlie Fong and runs a laundry in San Francisco.”

“She might be the daughter of a Japanese junk

dealer as far as I am concerned,” I growled. “Which would still leave her several jumps ahead of us. She does not have to make a speech of acceptance in Shensi from a background of Ontario Cree. She has only got to look decorative on this occasion. Our Joe Eagle is the guy on the spot—remember?”

Pete sounded as though he were trying to be patient. “Will you listen to me, Dave. I told you it was in the bag. When I got this dope on Chi Lai Fang I went to her and laid my cards on the table. For one thousand bucks she has agreed to give us a lift out of this hole. I figured that a thousand bucks was cheap if it gets us into the clear and leaves us with a Chen Kai Chan who is a bigger drawing card than ever.”

“A thousand bucks is mere chicken feed in this situation,” I agreed. “But I can’t see how, for any amount of money, this Chinese laundry princess can wash up our bundle of trouble.”

“If you’ll only listen to me for a couple of minutes,” Pete said, “I’ll show you how simple it all is. Although she is no Shensi princess, the gal gets around, and has a very wide range of boyfriends. One of these boyfriends is from Shensi Province and is at present taking aviation training upstate. I have looked the guy over and he is about the size and build of Joe Eagle. Also the guy can skate. Do you begin to see the possibilities?”

“I see,” I rumbled, “the possibility of us getting our necks stuck out so far that we can only pull them back minus our heads. You don’t mean to tell me,” I added sarcastically, “that you expect to put a Chinaman who can skate on the ice and expect him to play hockey like Joe Eagle? Your idea is as sour as most of your dumb-bunny brainstorm.”

PETE sighed and said, “Will you listen till I get through? We start the game with Joe Eagle at center. The Chinese big shots up in that special box are not going to see Joe Eagle at close range. To make sure of that we are sticking a strip of adhesive over one of Joe’s eyes and playing him wearing a pair of eyeguards with the excuse that he has been hurt in practice. The ceremonies come off between the first and second periods. I’ll have this Shensi boyfriend of Chi Lai Fang’s all dressed up in the twin of Joe Eagle’s uniform. Joe skates off and this guy skates on, minus the eyeguards but wearing a strip of adhesive over one eye. All this guy has to do is skate over to the boards where the ceremony

will be pulled off and receive the Order of the Exalted Sons of the Dragon, and speak a few well-chosen words of thanks in Shensi dialect. After that he will return to the dressing room and Joe Eagle will come on for the second period and skate the ears off the Panther forwards. At the banquet afterwards this same Shensi guy will take Joe Eagle's place at the table and everybody will be satisfied."

I just shook my head and said, "To me it stinks."

"It's foolproof," Pete insisted.

I shook my head again. "Nothing that you have any part of is foolproof. If it was, you couldn't have any part of it in the beginning."

But, even as I growled, I knew that we would have to go through on Pete's schedule. I hadn't a single alternative plan to offer. Indeed, my head was just an empty place where fears were whirling around dizzily.

I sat in the Wolverine's box and watched the team come out. My first glimpse of Joe Eagle made me feel a little better. With his eyeguard on Joe looked like any Chinaman you could pick out. Then the game started and I forgot everything in the kick I got out of that period.

Joe Eagle was terrific. He was stupendous and colossal. He played a brand of dizzy hockey that turned the rink into a screaming madhouse. He jumped sticks. He did backflips and turned cartwheels when he was body-checked. He skated like a fool and his stick-handling was something that all hockey managers dream of finding some day.

He scored three goals on the most amazing solo dashes it has ever been my good luck to see. When the period ended the crowd was on its feet, howling, as Joe Eagle skated with the rest of the boys to the runway. The crowd was howling for Chen Kai Chan to come back and go through with his ceremony.

I knew that this was the crucial moment and held my breath while I cowered on the bench.

I did not breathe again until Pete Shelby came out of the runway with his substitute.

Looking at this Shensi guy, I felt better. Minus the eyeguards and with the hunk of adhesive tape slanting down over one eye he looked more like Chen Kai Chan than did Joe Eagle.

HE COULD skate well enough to carry himself gracefully out to the spot in front of the box full of Chinese dignitaries. And he did it very well, indeed, bowing to the howling mob as he skated out to his place.

I felt better and better as the ceremonies proceeded. The special Chinese envoy came down and pinned a decoration the size of a soup plate on the guy's chest. He made a long oration in verbal firecrackers and the crowd cheered.

Then Joe Eagle's substitute bowed very low and made a speech in what seemed like the same tongue and the crowd cheered some more.

This Chinese nightingale, Chi Lai Fang, was there with the envoy and she was even more decorative than Pete had said. She was trimmed up like a Chinese New Year's parade. Her pale yellow face was one that could very easily make time with any sound male between Shensi and Ontario Provinces.

Then the guy skated off with the decoration on his chest shining like the rising sun and I began to breathe normally. He'd gotten over the first and toughest hurdle. After this passage the banquet should be a pipe for him.

After the game I met Pete in front with the Shensi substitute all dolled up for the big party. By that time I was feeling pretty good. I should have known better.

Joe Eagle's substitute was at the right hand of the Chinese envoy and the fellow was doing a nice job as a stand-in. He was carrying on a very animated conversation with Mr. Hui Li and both of them were beaming as though they had something between them that was giving them a heap of pleasure.

The only thing that gave me any qualms was the face of this lotus flower, Miss Chi Lai Fang. They talk about the impassive poker pans of the Chinese. But I saw in her eyes a light that I did not like. It was the sort of look you see on the face of a cat after he has just dined very well on canary.

Then, suddenly, Mr. Hui Li got to his feet and began to make an excited speech. He had issued no more than two or three bundles of his fusee words when the whole crowd went crazy. They all banged on the table and yelled. They could not have been more excited had Mr. Hui Li just told them that the last Jap army in China had been wiped out.

When he sat down, up jumped Joe Eagle's substitute and made a speech that was even more

impassioned than Mr. Hui Li's, if I'm any judge of a voice that crackled like a radio in a thunderstorm.

About that time I got a look at Pete Shelby's face. He had his ear down close to the Chinese party on his left. This old party was evidently translating the speeches. And, as he listened, Pete's face was turning a delicate shade of green around the jowls.

In the middle of my inner conviction that someone had slipped a fast one across, Mr. Hui Li jumped to his feet and said, "For the benefit of our good American friends I shall give the gist of what you have heard in English."

He patted Joe Eagle's substitute on the shoulder, beamed at him, then beamed even more widely and warmly upon Colonel Winters and me. "My compatriot, Mr. Chen Kai Chan, has made a most momentous decision. We gathered here tonight to honor a countryman who has excelled in a truly magnificent occidental sport. Now we learn that our illustrious young guest has other and, to us, more important abilities. Mr. Chen Kai Chan has just informed me that he is an accomplished and expert aviator."

I saw it coming and groaned. I couldn't duck. I just had to sit there and take it.

"Mr. Chen Kai Chan," the envoy continued, "has just accepted a commission in our air force. He will set forth immediately for China to lead a squadron of fighting planes to help bring freedom to our homeland."

I do not remember much of the rest. I was dimly conscious of much cheering and hand-shaking and all that. Most of the hand-pumping was done by Colonel Winters who was beaming as though he knew he was one of the principal benefactors of the human race.

I do not remember anything clearly up until the time when I finally got back to my hotel and into a huddle with Pete Shelby and Joe Eagle.

"You fixed it fine," I groaned. "You did a beautiful job. China now has Mr. Chen Kai Chan and we have Joe Eagle left. Maybe you can tell me now how the hell we can put Joe Eagle into a game without getting mobbed in the first rink in which he

shows his face."

Pete had lost all his starch. He could only grumble, "How the devil was I to know that that Chinese Garbo was a double-crossing little crook? How was I to know that she was putting the bite on us for a grand as payment for putting us on the skids?"

JOE EAGLE then spoke up. "Don't waste your breath in recriminations, gentlemen. I should have resigned from the club next week, in any event."

All I could manage was a croak of mingled indignation and relief.

"Oddly enough," Joe Eagle explained, "I received only this morning a letter from the Canadian authorities. There was a mistake in the reports on my examinations. They have reclassified me. I leave tomorrow to report in Toronto to the Royal Air Force and start training in aviation."

I sat there for a long time, just shaking my head. After awhile I said weakly, "Leave me, both of you."

I was sitting there when the telephone rang. It was Colonel Winters. He fairly burred over the phone, "David, my boy, I have just received, by special messenger, one thousand dollars' worth of United States War Bonds, made out to the Wolverines. That lovely little Chinese Princess sent it in gratitude for the Wolverines' magnificent contribution to China. David, my boy, you have made me very happy. If you will run down to my hotel at once I would like to discuss a new contract at a substantial increase."

I hung up and set out for the Colonel's at a trot. After all, there are more things than virtue which are rewarded in this world. I wanted more than anything else to get the Colonel's name on that contract. I could then spend the next three years in repentance, free from financial worry. I would humbly repent of having become a party to the artificial manipulation of racial strains and blood stocks. Which was very wicked of me. When nature has already caused so much confusion no man should attempt to add to it.