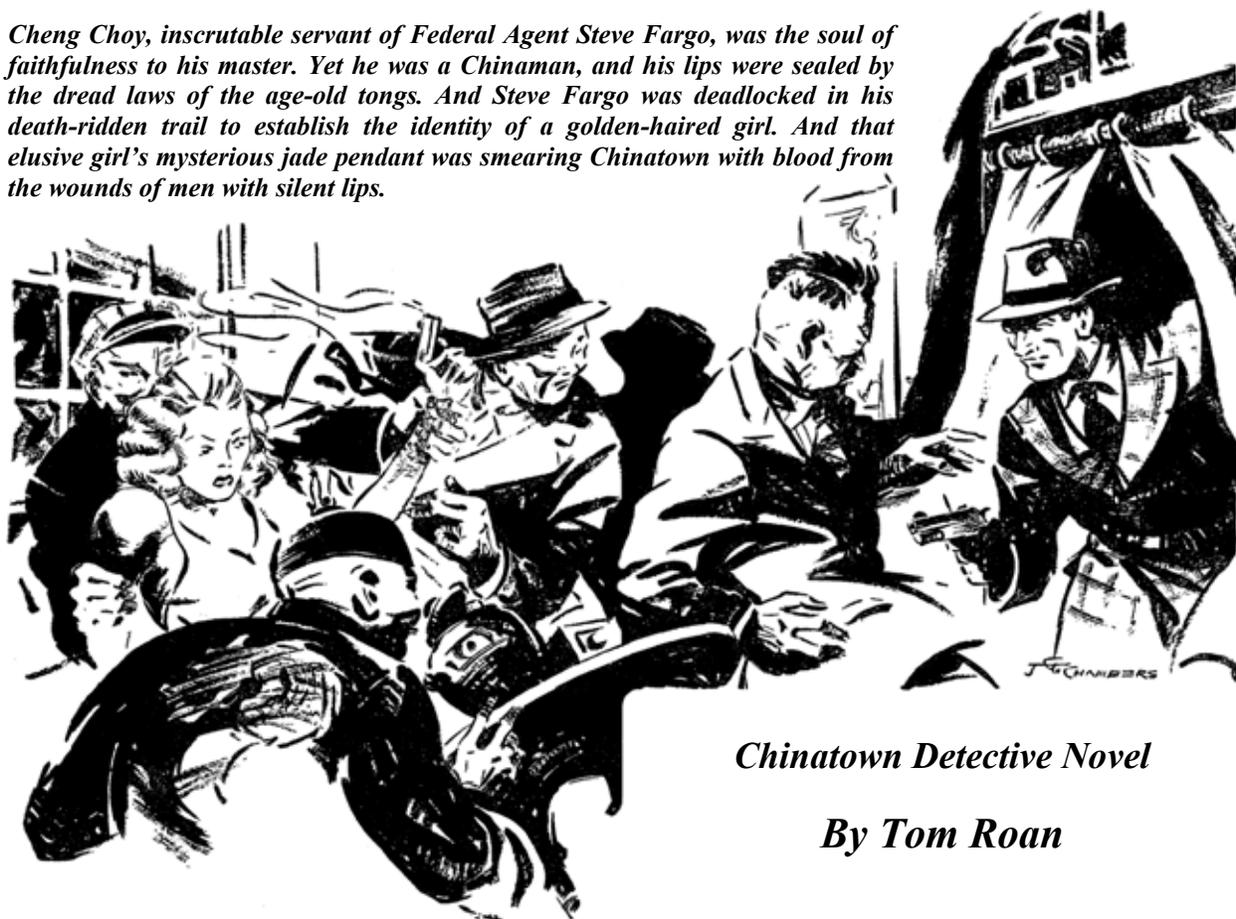


## Shadows of the Crimson Tong

*Cheng Choy, inscrutable servant of Federal Agent Steve Fargo, was the soul of faithfulness to his master. Yet he was a Chinaman, and his lips were sealed by the dread laws of the age-old tongs. And Steve Fargo was deadlocked in his death-ridden trail to establish the identity of a golden-haired girl. And that elusive girl's mysterious jade pendant was smearing Chinatown with blood from the wounds of men with silent lips.*



*Chinatown Detective Novel*

*By Tom Roan*

**A** RAPID burst of shots, coming with the far-reaching sound of heavy plates of glass falling on stone and shattering into countless slivers; then a long, fierce scream charged with terror; excited voices rising and falling; then the fast pattering and scurrying sounds of feet rushing away in the darkness; another burst of shots; then a silence broken only by the distant moaning and groaning of a foghorn somewhere over the dark, fog-pooled waters of San Francisco Bay. . . .

That was about all that Steve Fargo, crack G-Man of the Bureau of Investigation of the United States Department of Justice, had heard as he stood there with his broad back to a damp stone wall in the foggy darkness of a narrow, cobblestoned runway among the tangle of rundown old buildings and shacks on the upper rim of Chinatown.

It was after two o'clock in the morning—one of those quiet Sunday mornings in June. At least, it had been quiet until those sounds came. It was a certainty that the firing was some underhanded work of the gunmen of the Shee Lum Tong to mark another bloody record in that raging yellow war which had been going on for weeks both on the surface of the ground and down in those winding catacombs and secret passageways leading to ancient temples below the streets and alleyways of that Old China world there under the very shadow of San Francisco's staid and dignified Russian Hill.

It was all of a minute before Fargo could locate the exact direction the sounds had come from. In any other quarter of this big, hilly city of all nations, lights would have been instantly turned on in every house and a noisy outburst of excitement would have followed. But long and bloody wars

here in this quarter among the tongs had taught the people their lessons. No one stirred in the drooping old buildings and shacks at either hand. Not a window was raised, not a door as much as cracked open.

A big man of twenty-eight, broad-shouldered, blue-eyed, dark-haired and almost boyish-faced, Fargo took his time, feeling that he was being watched. He took advantage of the fog and darkness there in the runway to cloak his movements.

He moved on, rounding the corner of a house, keeping close to the wall. He eased past a battered line of old garbage cans that carried their queer, half-fish, half-spice odors of the Orient. Then he was conscious of a faint whispering of voices behind the dark shutter of a window somewhere above his head. Immediately the whispering ceased.

Fargo reached the mouth of a courtyard that carried the smell of stables for horses on his right and the unmistakable odor of a beehive to his left. Fog and shadows pooled the courtyard, and he crossed it to enter another passageway between two ramshackle brick buildings. He had made one turn down the passageway, following it for something like seventy feet before he eased quickly against a wall. He stood there with his thumb on the switch of a flashlight in his left hand and a heavy automatic pistol ready in his right.

There was a weak glow of light ahead of him now. As his eyes adjusted themselves to it, he saw limp figures lying in a widening pool of dark blood in the center of a tiny courtyard. He saw something else at the same time. It was a cringing figure hiding there behind three old barrels and a large packing case half-filled with straw in the passage mouth just ahead of him.

**P**OLICE WHISTLES were sounding by this time, some of them comparatively near, some of them faint shrillings in the distance. He heard the high-powered riot car coming up from Headquarters down in Kearny. He heard it turn in somewhere close at hand with its cutout wide-open. Then it came to a stop with its motor chugging and a final, dying wail of its brass siren.

Fargo eased forward another pace, the automatic and the flashlight ready for action. A faint breath of perfume came to him, a strange perfume, intoxicatingly pleasing. He was about to take

another pace forward when something sent him squeezing closer to the wall.

It was then that a policeman's powerful flashlight cut its widening beam of silver down through the darkness and fog from the flat roof of an old building hidden from Fargo's view to the left. The fog distorted the beam, turning it into a wide glow, but there was enough light for Fargo to see that there were other figures lying there in the little courtyard. They were, as far as he could tell by the first glance, Orientals garbed in loose-flowing, blue silk. As the light brightened he saw the figure of a white man, also in blue, and on it Fargo caught a glimpse of a silver shield. It was the body of a policeman.

But all Fargo's attention was now on that dim outline of a figure crouching there behind the barrels and the old packing case. He was scarcely ten feet from it. Suddenly it arose, stealing backward noiselessly. Before it reached him, Fargo knew it was a girl.

To make certain there would be no outcry just yet, he quickly pocketed his flashlight. He braced himself. His left hand slid out, straight along the wall and level with his shoulder. As the girl eased past it, it suddenly crooked, the hand closing on a startled mouth and shutting off a quick gasp of fear. He pulled the girl to him then, the hand still gripped over her mouth. He spoke a quick, low warning.

"Easy, little one. Not a sound out of you just yet. You may have more company close by that I'd like to see."

It was then, and just as if everything had been timed to a split second, that a hand closed on Fargo's right elbow from behind. It seemed a rather small hand, though one with long, tapering fingers that possessed a painful, claw-like grip. At the same instant, another hand slipped quickly across his shoulder.

He caught a glimpse of a long, straight blade with a jeweled hilt that sparkled in the light glowing from the roofs above. The knife seemed to loop downward, its keen edge coming up swiftly under Fargo's throat, halting there. A whispering voice spoke.

"Death is but the wink of an eye from you, and he who dies from a stroke of the Golden Sword of Heaven must abide countless thousands of years with the old men devils blowing across the sky and muttering curses to their ancestors in their flowing

beards. Release her, white man.”

That strange, sword-like knife there at his throat made it impossible for Fargo to move or even speak. A quick move, and his throat would have been cut from ear to ear. The blade was so sharp it was like the edge of a razor. He stood rigidly still. The hand on his elbow slipped down his arm, easing the big automatic pistol out of his hand.

The man whispered something in Chinese. The girl broke away a second later. Fargo still had his arm half around her, his hand cupped over her mouth. With a quick jerk she snatched the hand downward, thrust it away, whirling.

A wet wall to the right filled the passageway with reflected light for just a moment. Fargo caught one good, quick look at the girl's face and figure. She was almost as tall as himself, wearing a dazzling green dress with a band of blood-red at her throat and a coat of highly expensive fur of some kind. To his amazement he saw that she was a white girl of somewhere close to twenty—a tall blonde beauty with wide brown eyes and a flawless face that might have been carved from the clearest ivory.

The light vanished even as she darted past him. The knife swung away from his throat. He was given a slight push forward. Something struck him. Afterwards, because it left no bruise or broken skin, he knew that it was a sandbag. It came down on the top of his head, sprawling him forward loosely, leaving him unconscious with its single blow.



FARGO could not have been down more than two minutes. He came up shaking his head. Police whistles were sounding all around him now. He rubbed his hand across his face. It was the left hand, and as he rubbed his face something as cold as ice brushed his chin. He took out his flashlight, and saw an object hanging to one of the three buttons of his sleeve—something that had caught there when the girl snatched his hand downward from her mouth and allowed the hand and arm to slide roughly across her chest.

It was an odd thing, a large, strangely elaborate pendant of the finest green jade set in a heavy frame of Chinese gold of ancient workmanship. A tiger's foot of exquisitely carved gold was linked to the end of it. The foot was as large as a man's thumb. Its claws were of jade, sharp, wicked-looking things clutching a small broadsword that

could not have been other than Viking in its odd design.

Pleasingly startled with his find, Fargo flashed his light over the cobblestones underfoot, hoping that the girl had unknowingly left something else behind. His automatic lay there on the wet stones. There was nothing else. He picked up the gun, thrusting it in his pocket together with the pendant.

Here at last was a clue. That the pendant was a talisman of some kind he was certain. It belonged to somebody who at least would know something about the daring and bloodthirsty activity of the Shee Lum Tong. It was something that he would guard zealously, one that the police would certainly not know about until he was ready to tell them.

As for the girl, he had hopes that he would never forget that startlingly pretty face with its amazingly large, gold-brown eyes. She was no ordinary creature, not just some girl who had picked up with the Chinese.

“And the duck who held the knife at my throat,” he growled, whisperingly, “was no ordinary Chink either. No ‘washee-washee’ cluck. A high-bred, or I'm a liar.”

A beam of his light, flashed up and down the passageway, showed him that it was empty save for a half-dozen uniformed policemen coming down a fire escape from the roof of an old building back there at the turn. He turned then, going on into the courtyard just as a swarm of detectives from the riot car entered it from a passageway at the other side.

It was the old, old story of Chinatown in the grip of a tong war. Police and detectives were rarely given even an inkling of the true reasons for such wars. They had flared there with their violence and blood since the Gold Rush Days of old California when every man's law was a knife in his boot or a gun on his hip—days when the yellow man had bartered his women and girls for gold, for land and houses. It was a quarter always choked with its own dark secrets, secrets that sealed the lips of even the dying struck down by an enemy hand.

There in that little courtyard lay seven men. Six of them were Chinese. The seventh was a policeman sprawled down there against a dripping wall with an unfired six-shooter in his hand and four bullets through his body.

Fargo went through his part of the investigation automatically. This particular angle of a tong war

was always the “automatic” part of it. It was the comparatively simple business of picking up the dead, of finding out who they were, what their social and business connections were, and how they were killed. The police surgeons would have a lot to say about that, cutting away and sawing in the dead bodies to trace every bullet.

The dead men were armed with automatics and revolvers. Some of them had fired a few shots, but it had been a massed slaughter from the start, for the positions of the gunmen who had lain in wait for them were soon established. By the positions and the number of bullet holes in the walls, it was soon concluded that there had been at least four gunmen hidden on the roofs of two squat buildings there on the east side of the little courtyard. At least three others had been hiding in a long-deserted hut made of packing case boards and flattened oil tins huddled into the semblance of a shack against a blank wall on the west side of the courtyard.

## CHAPTER II MYSTERY GIRL



CAPTAIN BIG BILL DUGAN, the broad-fisted, six-foot Irishman of fifty in charge of the detectives, knew his Chinese. With one flash of his light, he recognized them. His face was immobile.

“The pudgy one’s Sing Tom, one of the richest Chinks in all Chinatown,” he grunted. “This one’s old Wo Hop, owner of a cat shop down in Butterfly Lane with a couple of his sons—got a mint of money. This is Loo Wing, gambling house in Pacific disguised as tea and herb shop—rich. This is Lun Lee, owner of a string of laundries. This is Wu Fat, peanut stand in Grant Avenue as a blind for something—we’ve never found out. This is Hong Luk Soon, medical student—bright chap—son of old Hong Ah Fook, the big-shot lottery man.

“And over here, of course, is Dan.” A growl rumbled in his throat as he walked back across the court to where the body of the officer lay against the wall. “Poor old Dan Gillett, liked by every man, woman, kid and dog that knew him. Good officer, nearly twenty years on the force. Wife, six sons, three daughters. Fine family. Only one of the boys and one of the girls married. This is going to be hard on them. Dan must have come drifting back here at the wrong moment. An accident, I’d say.

The Chinks are careful when it comes to shooting a white man, especially an officer.”

Doors around the courtyard were pounded upon with knuckles, nightsticks, and even the butts of revolvers. It took time and patience before sleepy-eyed Orientals finally appeared. Mutterings and mumblings arose. A toothless old woman thrust her head and shoulders out a window, looking down in the bright glare of the many flashlights. She shrieked a few times at the sight of the blood, and withdrew to her bed.

“A close relative among the dead here, probably,” whispered Dugan. “It’s rare when they let go like that. But it’s no use to try to follow it up. ‘No slabby, no slabby.’ That’s all we’d get if we spent a week. That’s all we’ll ever get from any of them.”

He was absolutely right about it, just as Fargo knew he would be. Asking questions of these supposedly sleepy-eyed people routed from their beds was just some more automatic procedure. Everybody was “Velley slorry. No slabby. Sleeppee velley muchee. No hear um shootee.”

“And the chances are,” whispered Dugan behind his hand again, “that half these squirts have been to Yale or Harvard or some other seat of learning.”

**T**HIS ONE AND THAT one admitted knowing Sing Tom and Wo Hop. They admitted knowing others. “Now and then slee un ‘long stleet.” As to what they were doing here in this courtyard—well, they looked like they were dead. Oh, very dead! “Maybe fawlee downee go boomee!” Shots? Why, the very first anybody heard of them was when the detectives and policemen mentioned them! No, nobody had heard a sound. “Maybe they got shot somewhere else and were thrown down here just to make honest people trouble and lose a lot of sleep. Everybody was very tired. Maybe-so police could come back at some other time. Maybe-so have a clup of tea. Very sorry.”

“Following the wisdom of the Three Wise Monkeys,” finally grumbled Dugan, waving them all away with a snarl of disgust. “‘See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.’ It pays big dividends for them to be like this, Fargo. They go on living by keeping mum. They die when their tongues get loose. It’s always the same. I’ve been investigating these things for nearly thirty years down here. Where were you when it happened?”

“Up that way, through that passageway and around a few turns.”

“Didn’t you see or hear anybody running?”

“Heard plenty,” parried Fargo, fingering the pendant safe inside a deep pocket. “Devil of a lot of yowling and a race right after the shots were fired.”

“Odd to see the government taking a hand in this.” Dugan looked at him closely, quizzically.

“Oh, I just happened to be down this way.” Fargo grinned. Police and federal agents rarely told each other their secrets.

“Well, you know us.” Dugan glanced at two white-coated figures coming into the courtyard with a stretcher from an ambulance that had pulled up in a nearby street to take care of the dead. “Anything, anytime. We’re always ready to help you.”

“Thanks.” Fargo lighted a cigarette. “I’ll remember that, and maybe call on you.”

“You won’t.” A faint grin moved Dugan’s lips. “It’s the old story, Fargo. Jealousy. Every man wants to hug his honors to his own bosom in this game. I hug mine, you hug yours, but I wish somebody else had my job this morning.” He glanced toward the stretcher bearers as they were lifting the limp body of Officer Gillett. “The news is going to damn near kill Dan’s family. I was best man at his wedding. It falls to my lot to carry the news to Maggie and the kids.”

An urge came to Fargo to tell him of the jade pendant, the beautiful girl, and the Chinaman who had held the sword-like knife to his throat in the passageway but he overcame it. For the present it was a secret he would share only with old Sam Coffin, up in the Post Office Building—and just about now drinking his ‘nth cup of strong coffee from the Chink’s across the street to keep awake.

For as Big Bill Dugan knew his Chinamen, Steve Fargo knew his policemen. He had never encountered more than one out of ten who did not have a close friend connected with a newspaper, and tales like this made sales, boosted circulation. To get a story of a beautiful white girl having been at the scene of this yellow war shooting would ring bells in San Francisco. That pendant with its tiger’s foot, its claws and the sword, would add the fire of mystery to the tale. No reporter could possibly keep a story like that from his editor’s desk.

Having a nose always for blood, reporters were swarming into the courtyard when Fargo quietly withdrew from the scene. He dodged them to keep

his name out of the papers, and hurrying along an alleyway, soon found his way to Grant Avenue.

THE STEEET was deserted save for a taxicab standing on the corner. Fargo made his way quickly to the cab. An overly-polite young Chinaman wearing no uniform except a cap, which seemed quite too large for him, was standing beside it. He bowed Fargo into the cab, and hastily closed the door.

“Post Office Building,” ordered Fargo. “Make it snappy!”

The cab started with a lurch. It went over a devil of a bump, one that almost threw Fargo off the seat.

“Lubbish,” cackled the Chinaman, turning his head. “Stleet cleaner no comes.”

Fargo glanced back as the cab swung around the corner. The driver slammed it in second gear, climbing a steep hill. It occurred to Fargo then that this Chink was one hell of a driver.

But there were other things that commanded his thoughts. The night’s events and that pendant gripped him as no other case ever had. His curiosity was at top pitch. He switched on a little side light. No more than he could quit thinking of the girl, no more could he resist another peep at that pendant.

It was a splendid thing, a rare thing, as old, he knew, as the hills. The jade was a trifle rough. He took out a small pocket glass, looking at it closely. Carved in the jade, so devilishly small that it would take a much stronger glass than this one to read it, was something in Chinese. He gave it up after a moment, and sat there studying the thing.

Its workmanship was amazing, so delicate, so artistic and perfect. There was something in that spread tiger-foot to instill a feeling of awe in a man. He was so engrossed with it that he was again almost thrown off the seat when the cab swung quickly to the curb in a dark street on the side of a hill.

“Lookee!” warned the driver.

Fargo pocketed the pendant. He pocketed it carefully and closed a gold-plated snap on the pocket. All alert now, he leaned forward. In the glare of the headlights he saw something that startled him.

It was a girl lying on the sidewalk with a thin stream of blood oozing from the side of her mouth. She was almost stark naked. Her pumps, her stockings and her clothes were torn off. Her long, golden hair was down, flung in every direction as if

mad hands had pawed through it ruthlessly.

He was on the sidewalk in a second. His flashlight came out of his pocket. He dropped beside the girl, examining her quickly. A beautiful creature, this half-naked woman lying there with only the sheerest of silk ripped to shreds and left on her body. He stood up with an oath as the driver came rushing up beside him.

IT must have been ten minutes before he returned to consciousness. He awoke with a dull throbbing and buzzing in the back of his head. He was cold, shaking with a chill. Groggily, he sat up, finding himself there on the sidewalk where the girl had been lying. The cab was gone. The girl was gone.

Shaking his head suddenly to clear it of that



Hell, this was the girl of the pendant, the girl of the dark passageway! There could be no possible mistake about it. A second's examination told him that she was alive. He whipped off his topcoat. The driver helped him as he wrapped the coat securely around her. Then, gathering the girl up in his arms, he turned back to the cab.

"To that private hospital out on California!" he snapped. "We've got to hurry. Never mind the lights. Burn the wind."

He settled the girl back in the rear seat of the cab, and remembered vaguely pitching face forward as something struck him on the back of the head.

confounded throbbing and buzzing, he felt his vest pocket. The snap was open. The pocket was turned wrongside out. He jerked to his feet with an oath.

What was Sam Coffin going to say when he told his story. Enough! And Sam Coffin could ride a man ridge-backed and bowlegged in thirty seconds, and with as many words.

That girl—she had made such a complete fool of him—he would make her pay through the nose for that. But first there were things to learn.

The gate was not fastened. Fargo pushed it open, and saw a muddy passageway streaking away in the light of his flashlight. Here now was evidence enough. Here was where the girl had been running, barefooted, taking long, leaping strides, as if racing for life from some pursuing foe. And here

were the foes—the tracks of four men there in the mud.

Now things were clearing. Forty feet back from the old gate, he saw where the four men had waited, crouched down at the end of big wooden bins there on either side of the passageway. Here were their tracks, pressed deeply in the mud, this pair showing a heavier man with larger feet, this one showing a smaller man.

Here was where a devil of a struggle had taken place. That the girl had fought fiercely, was a certainty. The tracks showed that she had twice broken away, and here were fragments of her clothing.

Near-naked, the girl had escaped, rushed out the gate, slipped and buffeted herself into unconsciousness on the sidewalk. Fargo could see, also, how the men had made their way to the old bins. Here was where they had come out of a brick-paved alleyway behind the house. Here was where they had slipped along the walls, hurrying to their places of hiding to settle down and wait.

He gave his attention to the girl's tracks before she was encountered. Here they were, coming up the passageway—alone. Now what the devil had happened to her escort, that Chink who had been so handy with his infernal knife?

The tracks answered the question. They answered several more. The girl's led on to a high board fence between two buildings, and here, now, were her escort's tracks. They had stood there in the mud for several minutes while they peered through cracks in the fence and at something beyond the fence. What?

Fargo grinned. Why, through that crack was the confounded passageway in which he had been sandbagged the first time. Yes, there were the old barrels and the packing case half-filled with straw. It showed how the girl and her escort had so quickly whisked themselves out of sight. Right here was where they had discovered that that queer pendant was missing. The tracks fairly shouted it. They had stopped, had turned back quickly.

"And I must have been coming out of the ether when they looked back through the cracks," he muttered. "They couldn't take a chance with me right then."

But where had the girl's escort gone? Well, right here. Fargo found it after a short search. The man had eased through the window of a deserted house. There was the mud on the floor. The tracks

went down a flight of concrete steps into an old basement. They crossed the basement, and here was where a lock on a door had been jimmied.

The door let into the furnace room of an adjoining house. In here the tracks disappeared in the doorway of an old coal bin, but it was simple to see where the girl's escort had been going. A window above the coal bin was open. Fargo crawled through it, struck another muddy passageway, and a minute later almost whistled with surprise.

He was back at the confounded courtyard where the massed shooting had taken place. Here was where the man with the muddy feet had stood peeping through a planked fence. Here he had turned, hurrying along.

"Followed me from here," muttered Fargo. "The son of a gun must have been mighty desperate about it. That jade thing is surely valuable to them."

The tracks now showed that the man had moved rapidly, keeping out of sight. Here was where he had rounded a corner. Here, close beside the passageway that Fargo had followed down to Grant Avenue was another mere runway, a dirty one filled with rubbish, puddles of water from the fog dripping off the buildings, and stretches of mud. Here was where the fellow had taken a little slide for himself, with his feet suddenly going out from under him in the mud.

Now, right here, was where the man had gone over a fence. Fargo climbed over it, and found himself in a side street. Below him was Grant Avenue. He chuckled. Things were rapidly clearing. He hurried on down to the corner. An ambulance with a clanging bell and a screaming siren shot past him, going devil-bent for a hospital somewhere.

Now what?

### CHAPTER III

#### THE CRIMSON TONG'S QUEEN



THE QUESTION was soon answering itself, but Fargo stood there for a few moments watching that swaying ambulance. It barely missed a big milk truck a block away. It skidded around it, careened crazily, righted itself with a wild swaying back and forth across the avenue, and was gone on around a corner.

Fargo's gun was still in his pocket. Darned nice of the Chinks! He grinned, but it was a trifle cold without his topcoat. He turned on around the corner and saw a crowd down the avenue near the spot where he had taken the cab. He moved toward it, seeing that it was made up of policemen, detectives, reporters, and a small, curious-eyed crowd of half-dressed spectators. Captain Big Bill Dugan was there with his hands jammed in the pockets of his topcoat.

"A new angle, probably," he explained as Fargo walked away from the crowd with him. "Or, perhaps, just a little dovetail to fit into the other. Why, by the way," his eyes widened slightly, "where's your topcoat? You had one less than an hour ago."

"Sent it up to the offices in a cab," lied Fargo, feeling cold behind the ears now, and entertaining a wish that he had remained as a teller in his father's bank back in Virginia City, Nevada, instead of borrowing himself sleepless nights, embarrassment, and no end of worry in this Department of Justice game. "What's your excitement here? Another Chink?"

"Yes," nodded Dugan. "A Chink and a Polack this time, the latter a taxi driver. The driver pulled up there at the curb. Must have been only a short time, from what he said. It was after the shooting in the courtyard, because he knew nothing of it. He rolled in here at the curb, and like a lot of drivers was about to scoot down in his seat for a little nap. Some Chink came hurrying up to him all out of breath. The avenue was deserted at the moment. The Chink goes to the left side of the car, tells Mr. Driver one of his tires are flat, and the driver leans out to take a look. Bam! It happened. Mr. Chink sandbagged Mr. Driver. Must have been in a devil of a hurry. The driver says he dully has a memory of being slugged three or four times. Must have had a hard head at that, though he finally went out as cold as a barrel of frozen mackerel."

"The devil, you say!"

"Worse than that, Fargo." Dugan took a package of cigarettes out of his pocket. He selected one, lighted it, and inhaled deeply as he whipped out his match. "The Chink hauls the Polack out of the cab then. Somebody must have been coming, and he had to hurry. Know what he did?"

"Why—why, no, of course not!" stammered Fargo. "What did he do, Dugan?"

"Mr. Chink simply slides Mr. Polack under the

car." Dugan took a long pull at his cigarette. "Somebody came up to the cab then. The Polack must have been returning to consciousness. He thinks he was. Anyway, the rear wheels of the cab lurched over his chest . . . Say, what the devil's the matter?" He was suddenly looking owlishly at Fargo in the light of the street lamp. "Your eyes look like saucers."

"Lubbish!" grunted Fargo, thinking of what the Chinaman had said when the cab lurched over something with a devil of a bump just as it got under way. "That—er—that's just a pet word of mine, Dugan." He tried to laugh. "How much was the driver hurt?"

"Several cracked ribs, no doubt." Dugan was still watching him critically. "He was as cold as a monkey wrench back on an Iowa farm in January when we found him."

"Well, I guess they'll fix him up pronto in the hospital."

"Yeah, I guess so. But see here, smart boy," Dugan straightened himself with a shuffle-like movement of his shoulders, "where have you been since you took a run-out powder on us in the courtyard?"

"Who? Me?" Fargo grinned. "Why, Dugan, old sock, I was off looking for a cow to milk. Where the devil were you since then?"

"Me?" Dugan turned back suddenly toward the crowd, his big shoulders slightly drooping. "Why, sonny, I'm Little Boy Blue. I was blowing my horn to keep the sheep from the meadow and the cows from the corn."

They laughed as they walked away. Fargo went on down to a corner, rounding it. He found a cab at last, and this time saw that it was not one with a polite Chinaman at the wheel.

"Post Office Building," he ordered. "The nearest way, too."

He settled back on the seat. A chill went down his spine. He was missing that confounded topcoat, but he had, at least, cleared some of the mystery.

"To think," he muttered under his breath, "that I let the same Chink sandbag me twice in one night."

FARGO was in a nervous stew when he reached the Post Office Building. Sam Coffin was waiting for him up there in a big, corner office on the third floor.

"There's no rest for the wicked." It was old Sam Coffin's slogan. An immense man, hairless on the

face and head except for bushy, always-bristling eyebrows as white as cotton, he sat there in his favorite chair, fast asleep.

“Come out of it!” ordered Fargo, shaking him.

“Oh, it’s you, eh?” Coffin’s eyes blinked. He lifted his arms, stretched, yawned and groaned. “What’s new?”

“Plenty!” Fargo spoke quickly. “Glad I found you here alone. We can talk over things without the other boys interrupting. Square around here to the desk so I can talk to you.”

“Oh, well!” Coffin yawned again, stretching, and ending the yawn with a long, squeak-like grunt. “Go ahead, Steve.”

Bit by bit, detail by detail, Fargo told Coffin of his night’s work. He blamed himself bitterly for the loss of the pendant.

For once Sam Coffin did not take it upon himself to chide him. Instead, Coffin only chuckled now and then. In a fashion, he seemed downright pleased with the night’s work.

“I can’t say that you blundered very much, Steve,” he finally agreed. “This detective business often makes more headway with a few blunders than without ‘em. I’d say, offhand, that you’ve done well. You at least know now who the Shee Lum is fighting. I’d say you’re close to finding out a lot about it. If you have made mistakes, I can but quote you this little passage: *‘Ko king hun yo tse tsu hun, Jen fei sheng hsien shu neng wu kuo?’* All of which simply means something like this: ‘It is stated in the classics, who but the sages are free from faults?’”

“Look here, Sam,” Fargo looked at him with his face flushed with excitement, “you know Chink about as well as I know my profanity, don’t you?”

“My dear Steve,” smiled the old man, patiently, “that is not what I would call ‘Chink’ in the least. It’s just an old, sleepy man’s little prattling. For twenty years I was stationed in Shanghai in the service of the United States government—”

“And that explains it, of course,” beamed Fargo. “Why, with your twenty years in Shanghai—”

“You about get to the point of being able to order a bowl of shark-fin soup with a request that they leave the snake out of it if you’re a trifle squeamish about such matters. In Shanghai alone, there are something like twenty-six dialects spoken. But,” he suddenly shrugged, “why go into that? It can wait for another time, my boy. I just want to say that tonight when that knife was placed against

your throat and the duck spoke so flowery there behind you—well, son, he gave away a secret the police have been trying to find for weeks. ‘He who dies from a stroke of the Golden Sword of Heaven!’ Very good. A thousand books could be written on that, my boy.”

“Don’t talk to me in your usual riddles now, Sam!” exclaimed Fargo. “What is this Golden Sword of Heaven foolishness?”

“There is not one pinch of foolishness in it, Steve.” Coffin leaned a little closer. “It is one of the world’s strongest and largest fraternities. Look at those killed tonight, and that will give you some little idea of the upstanding character of its members. I’ve suspected that it was the Sons of the Golden Sword all the time that the Shee Lum are after.”

“But—but what is it?”

“Well, if you won’t rock the boat, I can tell you.” He took time to light another one of his black cigars. “Most people shun a little learning, but this’ll probably give you an idea of how tongs were started in China. I’ll be as quick as I can.

“**M**ANY years ago, about the time of the Vikings—for it couldn’t have been anything else—there was a large village kept in perpetual slavery at the foot of a chain of mountains somewhere along the China coast. A king whose name I have forgotten kept the people of that district under an iron heel, oppressing them with all manner of hardships. He was not really a king, but in that wild section he was none the less when one counted his many soldiers, his hundreds of wives, and his enormous wealth drained from the people.

“The people were utterly helpless. There was not one ray of hope for them. They were, at the outset, a peaceful folk, given to farming and stock raising. They lived only on the chaff from their grain and the entrails of their stock, the rest going to the self-styled king, his pretty wives, and his soldiers. The people were bowed under their misery. They lived simply in hell, with the king constantly racking his evil brains to think of some new brutality to force upon them. Death was their only pleasure.

“Then, one night after a violent storm at sea, ‘A chariot of fire came down from heaven.’ A falling meteor, of course. It struck near the village with a tremendous explosion—‘A mighty showering of

burning jewels blinding to the eye and striking terror to the heart.' The people were in a panic. They thought the end of the world had come. They thought other things when two of the wisest old men of the village ventured to the place where the meteor had struck. They found, lying near the place—'A white god with a crown of gold and ivory horns upon his head, a necklace at his throat, a band of gold around his waist, and a great broadsword of gold at his side.' That, my boy, was the beginning of the Golden Sword of Heaven."

"But—but," stammered Fargo. "I—"

"You do not yet understand, no," nodded Coffin. "The man the old men found could have been nothing other than a Viking whose boat had gone down in a storm. They guarded him zealously, at the risk of their lives. 'For a long time he lay as dead, and then by signs we made known our troubles.' And then, Steve, this Viking proved himself a wise one. He kept himself hidden. He learned the language of these simple people. At night he drilled them as soldiers—fighting was the best thing he knew.

"One morning well before the gods had driven the monsters of darkness from the sky, we were high in the mountains. As one we fell upon the castle. The blood ran down the mountain sides in rivers as red as an angry sunset. The dying fell before us like rice straws blowing willy-nilly in the wind. When the sun came, the white god of the Golden Sword placed his foot upon the chest of the evil king and cut off his head, and—with a voice that cried out with the strength of a roaring sea—flung it down the mountain side. We kneeled and wept at his feet, washing them in a river of tears."

"That, Steve, was the birth of this tong. For years, the man ruled, holding his subjects by his kindness, lifting them from their poverty to their rightful places in the sun. He must have been a remarkable man—and a fighting son of a gun."

"Well," Fargo sat there frowning, "that helps a little. Still, it doesn't explain—"

"The girl, eh?" Coffin smiled. "Well, probably not. I don't know all the tale. I only know that tong after tong had been formed against it. They have all failed to overthrow it. As to the girl—well, dad-burn it, somewhere in the tale there was a queen, a white queen. Where the Viking got her is not clear."

"But—but this girl, Sam? What the devil is she? She's white, a raving beauty if I ever saw one in

my life."

"And," finished Coffin, "with little doubt, the queen of the Golden Sword, Steve."

"Well," Fargo stood up suddenly, "all I can say is that that passageway was one hell of a place to meet a queen."

#### CHAPTER IV STALEMATE DILEMMA



NEWSBOYS were yelling their heads off on the streets when Fargo left the office and took the cab of a little pinheaded driver with rusty-red hair and two huge buck teeth capped with gold.

The papers had their own story of the night's slaughter. It made perfectly good reading for the public, but that was all. Fargo was sick of it all when the redheaded driver drew the cab up in front of an old brownstone house on Russian Hill.

It was quiet in his huge, high-ceilinged bedroom with the gas logs there in the fireplace and the old-rose rug on the floor. He lay there thinking, thinking, thinking. The story Sam Coffin had told came back to him. He went over it dozens of times. Then he dozed.

At four o'clock he was up, having catnapped the whole of Sunday morning and afternoon. Cheng Choy, his servant, had his "breakfast" ready there on the old teakwood table. There was no hint of fog now, only a bright June sun streaming down on the city. In the distance the bay lay like a great mirror tinged with a cool sky-blue. On it the great ferries were swimming back and forth like giant white beetles. Across the bay Sausalito basked against the tall hills as green as emeralds.

Cheng Choy moved about noiselessly. Without a doubt he recognized that the bachelor boss of the house had awakened with a nasty humor this afternoon. He was a man Fargo had remembered since he had been able to remember anything. Old Cheng had been a servant in his father's Nevada house when he was born. Cheng was like a fixture, a man's hand or arm; a faithful soul of honor—and yet a Chinaman.

"Cheng," Fargo looked up suddenly from his grapefruit as the Chinaman was pouring the coffee, "I want to ask you something. You've been with me since I can remember. You were with my father and mother years before I was born. I want to know something. It will be in the strictest confidence, one

I'll never violate, old man. Did you ever hear of the Golden Sword of Heaven?"

The old man looked at him for fully thirty seconds. He shook his head slowly, positively, absolutely.

"No hear of Slowd of Heaven," he answered. "Bye and bye, maybe you likee buy one, huh?"

"No, damn it!" growled Fargo. "I was only thinking of buying a mule to kick you with. Look here, what sort of a tong-man are you? Hip Sing? On Leong? Shee Lum? Or Golden Sword—or what the devil you're of a mind to call it?"

"Me only Chinee boy," smiled the old man. "No tong me belongee, Mlister Stevee. Long time me stlay Nevadee."

"Oh, sure!" Fargo waved his hands. "I know all about that, but look here, you old fraud, you know about this war going on down the hill there, don't you? . . . No?" He frowned as Cheng Choy shook his head. "The devil you don't! Well, confound it, go on and pour that coffee."

And that was that. Queer ducks, these Chinks. Here was one who would lay down his life for him, and yet he would not admit a confounded thing.

**D**ARKNESS was settling when, wearing one of his brown topcoats, he went down to the Post Office Building, getting there a few minutes before Sam Coffin came wheezing in.

"Your other coat's here now," Coffin told him. "I had one of the boys check up on it. It came right after you left. One of those delivery agencies down in Chinatown sent it."

"And where'd they get it?"

"Oh, they don't know." Coffin chuckled. "'Man bring 'im, tall and not very short, very thin and very broad; wart on his chin, only he didn't have a wart; fat, only very lean; big black mustaches, only they were sandy, or maybe red, and, maybe, no mustaches, anyway.' About the usual line. I've had a nice sleep. Where're the other boys?"

"Probably sleeping or out seeing their best girls," grunted Fargo, going over to the old hat-rack to find his coat. He examined it carefully. "Well," he finally grunted, "she was at least decent enough to send it back. What's on for tonight, Sam?"

"Same thing, my boy—watchful waiting."

"I'm tired of it, Sam!"

"We all get that way, Steve." Coffin banged himself down in his old chair. "It's part of the game. Sit down and have a smoke. The night's

early yet."

"Well, maybe so, and I'm liable to see my golden blonde of that golden-sword business. If I get my eyes on her again, I'll have her up here in a jiffy."

"Oh, no, you won't, my boy!" Coffin stood up suddenly, putting his hands on Fargo's shoulders. "Never kill the beautiful goose that lay the golden egg, Steve."

"What do you mean?"

"That she is far better loose, for the present at least, than bundled off up here," explained Coffin. "She was there at the scene of the shooting all right, but that doesn't yet say that she should be picked up. The chimneys and the walls of the buildings were there, also."

"Look here, Sam," Fargo's right hand closed on the big man's shoulder with a quick, hard grip, "I believe you know more than you care to talk about. Confound it, we're not getting anywhere with this thing. You don't seem to want to get anywhere. I think you know that dame. I think—"

"But," cut in Coffin quietly, "a good soldier follows his orders, my boy, and doesn't get hot under the collar. It might gently occur to you one of these days that the government is interested in stamping out the Shee Lum Tong in any fashion it can be stamped out, and not in anything else."

"Then—then you do know the girl?"

"Why, I didn't say anything like that!" Coffin turned away suddenly. "But, my boy, for all that may matter, the President may know her, and—just as a tip, son—if you brought her here, I'd only turn her loose."

"Well," groaned Fargo, "why don't you just send me to an insane asylum and be done with it?"

"It is not at all necessary, Steve." The old man chuckled. "Stay with this case, and you'll probably go there on your own accord."

Puzzled, disgusted, Fargo left him an hour later. He prowled off down Market Street, gawked for an hour with the window shoppers, and found himself standing in front of a theater at nine o'clock.

It was here that he saw her. A long, black sedan slowed for a crowd of women crossing the street in front of the theater. For a moment the girl was right in front of him, looking calmly at him through one of the long windows of the sedan. She was gone then, the car whipping on down the street.

Fargo startled a taxi driver sitting there in his seat, half asleep, at a parking space just below the

theater. He snatched open the door of the cab, bounced himself inside, slamming the door behind him.

"Follow that car!" he snapped. "There's five bucks in it for you if you keep it in sight."

#### CHAPTER V BLOOD FLOWS AGAIN



SAM COFFIN or no Sam Coffin, Steve Fargo was going to see where this "goose of the golden egg" was going, whom she was going to meet.

The man in the driver's seat of the sedan was large and dark—a half-caste, probably. He was driving right on down Market Street, and suddenly swung into Grant Avenue, making a left turn in spite of the waving arms and bellowing voice of a red-faced policeman, who immediately started blowing his whistle. The officer was raving wild a few minutes later when Fargo ordered the taxi driver to keep right on following the sedan.

It was ticklish work, but the taxi driver was an expert. He grazed his fenders on a streetcar as they shot across Sutter Street. He wailed all the brakes at the intersection of Bush, throwing traffic in confusion and bringing a howl of curses from motorists.

The sedan had turned up Pacific before Fargo's cab reached the intersection. He saw it just as it was pulling away from the curb. He saw the girl, too. She had left the car and was running up the steps of a quaint old house. Fargo had his cab pull to the curb. He gave the driver his fare and the tip.

Hurrying on up Pacific, he transferred his automatic to the right pocket of his topcoat, and was soon in front of the old house. It was one of the oldest there along the street, one that had been remodeled. The windows and doors were of Chinese architecture.

The girl had already gone inside, but as Fargo slipped up the steps he saw a dark figure flatten itself behind an offset in the wall of the vestibule. He headed toward it.

There was no argument, no noise. When Fargo had come just so close, the figure in the darkness lurched for him. There was a gleam of a knife, a long, curving-bladed thing. Fargo threw up his left hand and caught a dark wrist. He slammed the man down across the head with his automatic. The man fell forward, the knife dropping from his hand. At a

glance Fargo saw that it was a short, evil-faced Chinaman.



*The shots were like the ringing of an anvil.*

Fargo turned quickly now and shoved open the doors in front of him, and the noise of a struggle came to him. He saw it all then. There was the girl, down a dimly lighted hall. She was fighting wildly with four short, stocky Orientals. Fargo saw her break away. A small automatic pistol flashed twice in her right hand. One of the men reeled backward, going down against the wall. The girl fell from a blow then, the pistol flying out of her hand. One of the men stepped over her quickly, clawing at her throat. He leaped and ran with the other two scattering as Fargo came dashing forward like a raging bull.

"That one, quick!" cried the girl, rising to one elbow as Fargo reached her. "Don't bother about the others! They're gone! Get that man! *He has it!*"

He darted on down the hall, flinging himself out a back door. A figure ahead of him was going over a tall back fence with all the agility of a cat. Fargo followed. There was a clatter of old garbage cans in

a narrow passageway as he dropped over the fence. In the dim light to his right he saw the fleeing figure again. Up like a springing trap, Fargo was after the man.

It was a wild race. They went over back fences, through courtyards, and darted through a deserted building. Once more they were together in a long passageway with no chance for either of them to turn to the right or left. Suddenly the man in the lead whirled. A gun spat two quick, stabbing gashes of fire from his right hand, then he turned darting on.

FARGO was gaining rapidly now. He saw the man ahead whirl again, darting toward the safety of a deep doorway in an old brick building. Again the man fired. Fargo felt the wind of the bullet as it passed his cheek. He saw another flash, but he was getting in close now, zigzagging. When he was twenty feet away, the man stepped out of the doorway to take deliberate aim.

With a sudden swing to one side, Fargo let him have it. The shots were like the ringing of an anvil. Quick, certain shots, either one enough to kill, but a man took no chances in a jam like this. Ten feet away, Fargo fired his fifth shot, for the man there in front of him was still on his feet. He fell then, rocking backward, a dead man as he struck the ground with four of the bullets in his body and one buried inside his skull.

A Chinaman! Fargo knew that before he flashed his light. There the man lay, sprawled flat on his back, his closed left hand drawn up on his chest and tightly closed on something, the right one still gripping the butt of his pistol.

Fargo knew what he was going to find, even before he pried open that left hand. It was the jade pendant again. He looked at it closely, saw that it was all there even to a piece of stout gold chain that had been around the girl's neck. He carefully placed the thing in his pocket.

It seemed but a minute later before Big Bill Dugan came galloping down the passageway with three policemen at his heels. He pulled himself to a stop, breathing heavily.

"Oh, you again!"

"I've just killed a Chink, Dugan."

"So you have, my boy." Dugan was examining the Chinaman in the glare of his powerful flashlight. "Man, you must have used a submachine on 'im. He— Say, come here, Callihan." His voice

rose to an excited pitch. "Take a look at this duck! You, too, Charley. It looks like our little federal playboy has pulled a scoop on us. Do you know this Chink?"

"Sure, I know 'im." It was Callihan who spoke. "Why—why, it's the Yin Shee Kid."

"None other," exclaimed Dugan, rising now and turning to Fargo. "You've done a fine job tonight. There must be rewards of twenty thousand on this bird. The Yen Shee Kid. Wanted in Denver, Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, Seattle, and on two jobs here. Murder, every one of the charges, Fargo!"

"Well, you cops take him," ordered Fargo. "Say what you want to say, Dugan, but keep the reporters off of me whatever you do. Better let your men here take charge. You'll come with me—if you will. I've got another job that demands some fast action."

"Sure, I'll come with you—anywhere, after tonight's work, my boy. However," his tone suddenly sobered, "I hope that it doesn't get passed around that Big Bill Dugan, the flatfoot, has taken it upon himself to run regularly in bad company."

"Oh, I've been in worse, Dugan!" Fargo shot that at him with a grin. "But I don't know when."

With more policemen arriving, Fargo and Dugan left the scene abruptly, knowing that the least said now was the best. It took almost twenty minutes to get back to the house where the girl had been left.

"Sing Tom's house," grunted Dugan. "What the devil do you want here?"

"Maybe a lot, maybe nothing."

The man he had knocked out in the vestibule was gone. The front door was still fastened. In the hall, Sing Tom's wife, an enormously fat woman of somewhere in her sixties, met them. Three servants came then, wide-eyed, wondering.

Again it was the old, old story. Nobody knew a thing. They had seen nothing, heard nothing. Fargo threw a regular fit.

"You're all damned liars!" he barked. "Say, you," he stepped close to the big woman, "what made those marks around your neck and your wrists?"

"Every one of these clucks has been tied up recently," growled Dugan. "Look at all their wrists, their necks!"

They searched the place from top to bottom. They searched the yard, the court. It was a certainty the girl was gone, and it was a certainty also, to

Fargo, that she had been tricked into coming there. He said nothing about the man he had seen the girl shoot there in the hall. The fellow had evidently recovered enough to get away by his own efforts, or the others who had fled had returned for him. The floor and the wall where the man had dropped had been recently mopped. As a matter of fact, the wall and the floor were still damp.

"Well, my boy, now what?" demanded Dugan with one of his slow growls when they were finally out of the place. "I'm just a little poodle pooch tagging along and wondering what it's all about. You've hit something mighty deep tonight, I'm sure of that, but I still don't like being kept in the dark."

"Dugan, you're a prince of a fellow." Fargo took him firmly by the arm. "I wish I could let you in on a thing or two. I hope I can before I'm done, but I'm just another one of these little poodle pooches in this thing, or, maybe, just a dumb duck paddling about. One of these days we'll probably have a good laugh about it. Just now, I have others to report my actions to."

"It's funny, isn't it?" Dugan looked at him with a dry little smile. "I think I understand, son. Even the chief seems to have cards up his sleeve down at headquarters. But," he shrugged, "a good soldier takes orders."

"I had the same thing suggested to me not long ago," grinned Fargo. "Maybe it was a good suggestion after all."

They separated a short time later. Fargo had a queer feeling that he was being watched. But he had that confounded jade thing again. This time he would be hanged by the thumbs before he would lose it again. He hailed a taxi, and kept his hand on his gun, but the feeling continued to cling to him that he was being followed in all that swim of traffic on Market Street.

But the jade was still there when he reached the Post Office Building. He felt better going up in the elevator. He felt even better when he saw the lights burning beyond the glass door of the office. He pushed open the door, stepping briskly inside.



SAM COFFIN sat in his chair with his back to him. Frank Dean, another one of the federal agents, sat at a window with his feet on the sill. Fargo was swinging the door closed behind him when the cold muzzle of an automatic pistol was pressed

against his spine.

"A move—and you're dead!" whispered a voice, fiercely.

He whirled in spite of it. As he whirled he caught a glimpse of two short, stocky Orientals. Something told him they were the same men who had been struggling with the girl in Sing Tom's house. The rest was blotted out with the quick, blinding blow of a blackjack coming down on the top of his head.

He remembered going down. He remembered being struck again. It could not have been more than two minutes—all of it. He found himself up, clawing at the door, the infernal jade pendant missing from his pocket. Coffin and Dean were still sitting there in their chairs, their backs to him.

With a snarl, he darted down the hall. He rounded a corner, stumbled, and fell sprawling. There on the floor, each lying in a widening pool of blood, were the two men who had robbed him of the pendant just a couple of minutes before. Hard-lipped in their throats were knife strokes that had probably killed them without a single outcry.

And the damned pendant was gone again! Fargo knew it before he searched the two bodies there on the floor. He stood up, rubbing his aching head. At that moment, Big Bill Dugan turned the corner of the hall.

"I saw you were being followed," began the big captain. "The moment you left me, a fellow who caught a cab— Say, what the hell's happened now!"

"Don't ask me!" growled Fargo. "I'm only the king boob in this play."

Leaving Dugan there with the bodies, Fargo hurried back into the office. There was no need to look for the killer or the killers. Whoever was responsible for this lightning double killing had already made good his escape.

Coffin and Dean were sitting there in their chairs just as Fargo had first seen them. Coffee cups from the little Chinese restaurant across the street were there on the desk. Fargo hurried on to Coffin, grabbing him by the shoulder. The old man was sound asleep. Fargo shook him, tweaked his nose, and slapped the big, red cheeks. Coffin finally cracked open his eyes, looked up stupidly, and immediately went back to sleep again.

It was the same with Frank Dean. Fargo shook him, slapped his face, almost threw him out of the chair. Dean stirred just a trifle, smacked his lips,

and started to snore.

And then Fargo discovered that he, too, was getting suddenly drowsy. He stumbled to a window, opening it. The wind came in, scattering papers from the desk to the floor. He stood there at the window, his head clearing. In about two minutes, Sam Coffin stirred, yawning. In another minute Dean moved, taking a deep breath as he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. Fargo, once the men were awake, lost no time in telling them what had happened.

"Hang it," muttered Coffin at last, "that accounts for the sweetish smell you remarked about, Frank. Somebody shot something into the office through the keyhole."

"And put you birds deader to sleep than dead men!" exclaimed Fargo. "And now we have a couple of right-nice murders down the hall. Come on."

Big Bill Dugan had sent one of the elevator operators for the policeman on the corner. The man had arrived by the time Fargo, Coffin and Dean reached the bodies.

"The police seems to get only the mop-up jobs," grumbled Dugan. "It's a nasty mess. Do you fellows care to give me a little information about it?"

"That's up to Sam, here," Fargo told him. "I'm passing the buck right now and getting out of here. You birds can talk it over to suit yourselves."

THE FEDERAL AGENT left them then without waiting to give Coffin a chance to protest. He wanted to get out in the air. He hated questions, and he knew that the reporters would soon be here, notebooks in hands, as busy as hounds after a hare.

A swing to the right took him into Market Street. He trailed down it at the heels of the crowds. In an hour he was back in Chinatown, puzzled and wondering. In final desperation, he went to his apartment on Russian Hill. There he spent hours pacing the floor and scowling. It must have been nearly four o'clock before he went to bed.

For the first time in several days, he slept soundly, barely stirring until he awoke at noon, finding old Cheng Choy standing beside the bed with a cup of coffee and the morning papers. In a grouch, he got up and took his shower. He shaved, and then telephoned the office, knowing even before he did it that Sam Coffin would not be there at this time of day.

Chinatown called him back to it, though he did not have the slightest idea why it called him. He certainly did not expect to learn anything down there at this time of day; yet at two o'clock he stood on a corner, leaning against a lamp post when a big limousine shot past and turned into Butterfly Lane.

In the back seat of the limousine was that girl of girls.

Fargo was after the car now, hustling along. He saw it pull up in front of Wo Hop's cat shop. He saw the girl leave the car. She passed quickly into the cat shop, and the limousine moved on, disappearing around a bend in the alley.

Steve Fargo banged into the shop. But the girl was not there.

It was a large room, filled along the sides with cages. Against its rear wall stood a wide counter. It was not entirely a cat shop. It was a place where all manner of pets were sold. There were monkeys to his right, a dozen puppies in a long pen on the floor to his left. Birds and bird cages were scattered about. Toward the rear were the cats, all of them nervously pacing their cages. In one cage he saw two tiger cubs.

He stamped his feet, but nobody came. He was merely surrounded by these pacing cats in their cages. They were as nervous as the devil about something. He could not understand it when the tiger cubs started snarling and snapping. They glared at him with eyes that were like balls of fire in the darkness of their cages.

The monkeys in their cages now started an outlandish squeaking and squawling. A parrot cawed and broke into a wild cackle of hysterical laughter. A canary started a weak, half-pitiful chirping. Fargo stamped his feet again. The place was getting on his nerves.

Then he saw the blood. It was coming toward him in a widening streak, coming from behind a big, empty cage to his right, down a sag in the floor. Fargo turned to the cage, looked behind it.

There on the floor, flat on his back with his legs and feet drawn up, lay a Chinaman. The man had been bound and gagged. His throat had been cut from ear to ear.

CHAPTER VI  
MAW OF THE IDOL



FARGO turned, staring at the walls.

Evidence blamed the girl, and yet it could not have been her. She was only about a minute ahead of Fargo. She would not have had time for this murder. But where had she disappeared to? There was no place for her to hide, no back door, only one window, and that was barred and screened and facing a brick wall scarcely a foot away. He looked at the floor. It was old and oiled but unbroken by anything that even looked like a trap door.

It was a certainty that that knockout beauty had not just walked in here and turned to thin air and vanished like a ghoul up the stove flue. He started examining the cages, pulling at them. They were made, for the most part, in tiers. He jerked at them, tried to twist them.

He must have touched something, for the tier containing the tiger cubs swung outward, showing the entrance to a narrow passageway. With his gun in his right hand and his flashlight in his left, he entered it.

Without doors or windows, the hall came to an end against a rusty sink, above which was a rusty soap tray and a dirty towel. He heard something just in time to step into the offset and switch off his light.

In the darkness he heard three men come out of the wall in the rear side of the hall. There was a soft whispering in Chinese as the men hurried on into the cat shop. He heard the cages swing cautiously to one side, and the men were gone.

Flashlight snapped on again, Fargo eased forward, examining the wall. There was no break in it that he could see, but a big spike just above his head attracted his attention. He took hold of it, twisted it, pulled it, and pushed on it. Noiselessly, a long slit in the wall swung open in front of him. He stepped into it and found himself in a large, empty room.

It had evidently been a dancehall in the full-swing of the old Barbary Coast days. A platform stood against the rear wall. On it was the broken-down remains of an upright piano and a warped drum with the heads gnawed out by rats and mice. On the walls were gaudy murals, most of them badly done, all of them lascivious. One, a tall blonde, blazingly naked, looked at Fargo with

drunken eyes and her tongue pushed out. For a moment it seemed like the girl he was following had suddenly turned, mocking him.

The doors were locked, front and rear, the locks rusty, untouched for years. That meant there was another confoundedly hidden way out of the place. In all the dust, he located it. A man simply punched a finger-marked eye of the blonde, and the wall opened with a slight clicking sound; and here was a flight of stone steps leading downward.

He was below the surface of the ground now, winding and twisting along evil-smelling passageways. He lost himself two or three times, taking a wrong turn here and there. It was like being in a labyrinth with no end of twisting and turning. He switched off his light, ducking into a niche in the wall as two excited old Chinese came hustling out of a place like a closet, hurrying away in the darkness.

With another lead in front of him, he wound down a circular passageway, slipped and almost fell at the bottom of it, and stumbled out into a monstrous, stone-vaulted room. In front of him, lighted by a single taper, was a huge brass idol.

Sam Coffin's story of the Golden Sword of Heaven came back to him instantly. The idol was decidedly Nordic. It was of a man—"A white god with a crown of gold and ivory-horns upon his head, a necklace at his throat, and a great broadsword at his side." A powerful figure with a broad, arrogant face, high-cheeked, the mouth wide and strong, the great sword on his lap. And now that damned pendant again! There was the necklace! There was the likeness of it at the idol's throat, one as broad as an ordinary man's chest.

**T**HE EYES of the huge image were weirdly fascinating. They were of jade, larger than saucers, and pear-shaped—like that pendant thing. Hunting a way out of this room now, Fargo came back to the thing several times. Each time those eyes held him, gave him a queer, cold feeling down his spine.

Fargo saw that there were Chinese characters carved in the pendant and in the jade of each eye. One of the eyes, the right one, looked smoother than the other. He finally climbed upon the idol's chest to look at it closer. He touched it with his left hand. There was an instant sound of water spilling somewhere. The thing's enormous mouth opened. Without hesitation, he stepped inside of it, and

found a ladder standing there inside the idol's throat. Somewhere to the left of the ladder's foot a light was burning softly.

He went down the ladder with the idol closing its mouth. It was at the foot of it that something leaped upon him from behind. It was a man, a regular giant, and now another piled upon him, riding him to the floor. He fought desperately, frantically, but it was scarcely a minute before a mob had piled atop of him and his hands had been bound behind his back and a gag thrust into his mouth.

Things moved rapidly now. Something was thrown over his head. It was close-fitting, hood-like, of heavy cloth. He was kicked, jerked, and hurried along down a flight of steps, around a dozen turns, and suddenly the hood was snatched from his head. He stood there blinking.

Before him was a larger idol. Standing before it were priests in the masks of devils, of dragons, snakes and toads. Dozens of weird colored lights were burning in carved bowls of brass and lantern cages. Now he saw the girl.



SHE sat up there on a throne in the idol's lap. Beside her, crown on his head and great sword on his lap, sat an old, monkey-like white man. The man was dressed like a Viking. The girl was, too. She wore a short leather skirt. Her legs were bare except for sandals on her feet. A golden-cupped bodice shimmered across her bosom. She looked Fargo straight in the eyes. He thought he saw her lips move in the merest hint of a smile.

He turned then, and saw that the great room was jammed with men in robes; and then everything was turned to confusion by a quick flow of Chinese from the old man beside the girl. Whatever it was, Fargo knew that it had something to do with him.

The hood was pulled down over his head again. In a minute he was whisked away, shoved along roughly by powerful hands on either arm and in the middle of his back. Suddenly he was halted, and the hood was snatched off.

Now he stood in a long, low room. A man had stepped ahead of him. The fellow swung open a panel two feet square in the wall and about shoulder high. A long, black coffin was pulled out of the opening, the foot of it eased to the floor. Its lid was removed. The man said something.

Fargo tried to fight. He fought like a man

infested with seven devils. It was useless. The powerful men swarming around him picked him up, slammed him down in the coffin, flat on his back, and clapped on the lid. The foot of the coffin was lifted then. With Fargo still struggling inside it, the thing was slid back into the wall. The panel made a dull, booming sound as it was closed.

Federal Agent Fargo lay there with a light burning somewhere, and stared up through the heavy, plate-glass window in the thing, looking at a low arch of whitewashed bricks. A side door was opened down near his hip. He felt the prick of a hypodermic needle, and then numbness settled over him. He became quiet. His nerves settled.

He awoke swinging through the clouds without a care in the world. He was, if he knew anything about it, heaven-bound. Over his head the sky was the most vivid blue he had ever seen. Every cloud was a cloud of silver. The air was like a strong, heady drink, intoxicating him with happiness at every breath.

It was nice to be dead. He had never thought of it as this. He had thought of it only as suffocating darkness, of lying in a coffin, gradually rotting; of the damp earth finally coming down in his face—a long, eternally long, dark death. But this was not so. A stride carried him leagues upon leagues. He wandered through great celestial halls of dazzling splendor. He stopped and bathed and drank from gushing fountains where crystal waters flowed and dropped into falls thousands of miles long with the bubble and sparkle of the finest champagne. He walked arm in arm with princes and princesses over whose faces halos glowed.

He found her—she of the short leather skirt, with her legs bare except for the sandals on her feet. He took her in his arms, and together they flew away, from cloud to cloud, celestial hall to celestial hall.

**F**EDERAL AGENT FARGO awoke quite suddenly, after years of wandering and lovemaking in the sky, and found himself in the arms of an ox-eyed nurse who must have weighed three hundred pounds. He had smeared her lipstick all over his face and her face. Now, like a man suddenly seeing a ghost, he released her with a yell, crowding back higher on his pillow.

A doctor came from somewhere. He felt of his pulse, plucked up his eyelids, looked at his eyes, and smiled. His words made Fargo want to crawl

under the bed and hide.

"Your snakes," said the doctor, "are just about gone."

"Where—where am I?" gasped Fargo.

"In the Larkspur Sanitarium," smiled the doctor. "This is your third day, Mr. Fargo."

Fargo slid down in the bed, covering his head with the sheet and the blanket. About an hour later, somebody hauled the sheet and blanket down with a big, fat hand. He looked up into the worried face of Sam Coffin.

"Feeling better, son?"

"Sa-a-ay, yo-o-u," Fargo sat up with his teeth chattering, "what—what am I doing here, you old fool?"

"You cracked up on us, Steve." Coffin pulled up a chair, easing his inglorious bulk into it. "You sure were in a mess. It took four of the biggest bulls in the San Francisco Police Department to subdue you. You didn't know me. You didn't know anybody. You were as crazy as hell! Where'd you get that damned bell?"

"Bell? What bell?"

"That thing you were clanging up and down the street when they ran you down and caught you with nothing on but a gee-string around your middle. You must have imagined you were the returning Messiah."

"Say, what're you talking about, Sam?"

"You!" The old man was blunt. "The papers are full of it, Steve. You were picked up Tuesday afternoon romping through Golden Gate Park and clanging one of those large, old-fashioned breakfast bells you still see now and then around country hotels. You were absolutely howling mad. You dived into the tank with the seals. You stood in the fountain, taking yourself a shower. You hugged all the women you could get your hands on—and with no regard to breed, size or shape. The way you've been carrying on with this big nurse here—well, that's liable to end up with a breach of promise suit against you. *What in hell happened to you, boy?*"

"Why—why, I swallowed a funny bone, you old hellion! Will you get my clothes and let me get out of here and go soak my head in a barrel of pickled fish?"

"But—but what happened?"

"Well, you'll play hell finding out. Get out of here. Let me alone. I'll never live this down—and somehow, I feel that you are at the bottom of all of it."

He felt like that the next morning when a suitcase filled with clothing for him arrived from San Francisco. In nervous jerks, he dressed. He had finished when the fat nurse came in. As red as a beet, he stood there stammering and hawing.

"I—I guess I—er—went crazy," he was finally winding up. "I—er—I'm sure—thankful for all the kind things you must have done for me. I—er—I guess I'll say goodbye to you now."

"Is that all, Steve?" The woman looked at him with those big, startling, ox-like eyes. "After—after all the things you said, I—well, I just couldn't believe you were completely out of your mind all the time."

HE never knew how he got out of there, but he managed it. He caught an electric train for Sausalito, and at last found himself on the big ferryboat *Eureka*. Reaching the ferry building, he took a cab straight for Butterfly Lane. He banged in the cat shop, ready for murder.

"What did you do with the duck who had his throat cut?" he demanded of the slant-eyed, sleek-faced young Chinaman standing there feeding something to a sick baby monkey with an eyedropper.

"Thloat cuttee?" The Chinaman looked at him with bland surprise. "Maybe long placee you comee."

"Listen, Chink!" Fargo caught him roughly by the shoulder. "Don't make me stomp hell out of you right here on the floor. I'm asking about a cluck who had his throat cut behind that cage."

"Maybe so you clazy in head, huh?"

"I'll break yours if you don't quit stalling me. Speak up, damn you, and whack out your gibbering."

"Very well, sir." The Chinaman bowed, gently returned the sick monkey to its cage, and put away his eyedropper. "If you do not care for the pidgin English you white men expect every Chinese you meet to speak, allow me to repeat, and with all sincerity, that I haven't the slightest idea of what you're talking about."

That stumped him. He walked over to the tiger cubs' cages, pulling them away from the wall, but there was no opening there now. He stamped up and down the shop, raving. At last he went out and sat down, farmer-fashion, on the curb. Something moved him to put his right hand in his coat pocket. He pulled a card out of it, stared at it, and gasped as

he read:

HOOPER, HOOPLE & HOODLE  
SANITARIUM  
*We Have Cared For The Weak-Minded  
Since The Gold-Rush Days*  
SPECIAL HANDLING FOR THE  
VIOLENT

Well, what the hell, Bill! He turned and looked back at the cat shop. A policeman—one that he did not know—had come up. The officer had been talking to the Chinaman. Now he came straight to Fargo.

“Listen, you!” he ordered gruffly. “Clear out of here. Go somewhere and sleep it off, or I’ll run you in!”

When Fargo took a taxi to Russian Hill, he felt like jumping in a big hole. About the only thing that kept him from it was the realization that, like buzzards at a carrion feast, the reporters would gather around him and say: “Here’s that Fed who clanged the bell and imagined he was September morn in the fountain out in Golden Gate Park.”

Old Cheng Choy tried to sympathize with him, and was given a rounded-out cursing for his pains. He went to his bedroom, tore off his clothes and piled on the bed.

“I’m not here!” he barked. “Not here to anybody who phones or calls. If you let anybody in, Cheng, I’ll cut your damned throat.”

He was through with the Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Justice. He was finished with all this damned sideshow business. But he could not sleep. He smoked two packages of cigarettes. He lit a dozen cigars, and set the rug afire with his damned old pipe. He was again a fit subject for that Larkspur Sanitarium long before darkness settled.

Then there was the telephone in the hall, buzzing, buzzing, buzzing—and Cheng Choy lying like the good old Chinaman he was. Lying by all that was holy, by all his hopes of ever bowing before the living Buddha. Fargo, his sympathy aroused at last, finally called him in just to pat him on the back.

“Mlister Coffinee,” explained Cheng, “callee, callee. No takee wlord you no here. Dlamn mad. Foamee at mouthee.”

“Well, let him go right on foaming at the damned mouth!” ordered Fargo. “I’m not here. I’m

never here any more.”

“You stlay outee Chineetown now, Mlister Stevee?”

“Sure, I’m staying away!” he vowed. “I’m through.”

SEVEN O’CLOCK TO NINE—and then into the apartment came Sam Coffin, face redder than ever, perspiration streaking his cheeks in spite of the fog outside. He came bristling in like a house already smoking to take fire. With a fling he tossed two riot guns on the bed.

“Get some clothes on you!” he barked. “Damn you, I’ve been ringing your telephone off the wall and cussing your lying Chink long enough. Hurry, man, it has broken at last.”

“Yeah?” Fargo looked at him with a sneer. “So has the ice—I suppose, up on the Yukon. What the hell of it?”

“No time to argue now, Steve!” The old man waved his hands excitedly. “We’ve got to rush. It’s broke at last!”

“Well, go ahead and fix it—whatever it is. I’m a private citizen from now on, Sam. I—”

“Get some more clothes on, Steve!” cut in the old man with a roar. “We’ve got to work fast on this thing. For weeks we’ve waited for this.”

“Very nice, this waiting business.” Fargo sat on the side of the bed, calmly lighting a cigarette. “Have a cigarette or a cigar, and then get out of here before I throw you out.”

“Steve! Steve, *my boy Steve!* Hurry, son. We’ve got to take it now. Why, Steve, they’ve got Ann Pastel, holding her, and with her is her great grandfather, John Maddox!”

“Ann Pastel?” Fargo rolled the words on his tongue. “And John Maddox, eh? Who’re they, a couple of rich clucks with a lot of pull back in Washington?”

“Ann and Maddox are two of the greatest secret service people the United States has ever had!” raved Coffin, jerking to his feet. “Both born in China. Both kingpins in the tong of the Golden Sword of Heaven—the one tong this government, as well as China, supports to the last ditch. Ann Pastel, that girl you’ve been raving about, fool! At last we’ve uncovered the hangout of the Shee Lum Tong. About every damned villain belonging to it from Seattle to San Pedro is here tonight. It’s a sweep, Steve.

“Ann’s played hard and fast. They even brought

that pendant out of China for the first time in history, knowing the Shee Lum Tong would go after it tooth and nail. It is a power, man. Something that would rock China. The mere possession of it! Can't you see? It was the bait—Ann's daring bait! That's what I meant when I said don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg. She has played the most desperate game any man or woman could play.

"Steve! Steve!" He threw up his hands. "Man, can't you understand? Can't you vision that woman on the torture racks? Maybe in the spiked boxes? Maybe with a blade swinging above her throat?"

"Ann Pastel!" cried Fargo, suddenly whirling to the riot gun on the bed. "Why, Sam, even her name is beautiful!"

## CHAPTER VII SECRET OF THE BUDDHA



SIRENS screaming in the night, police cars roaring, the reserves called, fenders clashing. . . . Wild-eyed Orientals running helter-skelter, fleeing and shrieking in any direction to get out of the way. . . . Two big, black sedans roaring down Market Street, stopping for none of the lights and scattering policemen and pedestrians as they made wrong turns, cut through traffic and churned on up Grant Avenue, over California, down the slope, and slammed in with wailing brakes at the mouth of an old alley paved with broken cobblestones.

Uniformed figures shot in every direction. There was no time to lose. Big Bill Dugan leaped on the running board of Coffin's and Fargo's sedan as it crashed to a stop against the curb. He was a sweating Irishman, lugging a sawed-off shotgun loaded with buckshot.

Men were everywhere. Uniformed figures were on the roofs, powerful flashlights going. They dived into basements, into innocent-looking tea stores, joss houses, and even into an undertaker's parlors. They filled alleyways and runways. They tore off the lids of sewers, and went down into the ground.

"This way!" A thin-faced old Chinaman had darted up to the side of the car. Fargo recognized him as the owner of the little restaurant across the street from the Post Office Building. Now it dawned on him why Coffin had been drinking so

much coffee of late; coffee that kept the little Chinaman always coming and going back and forth from the office.

Another screech of sirens came as they were piling out of the car. It was the fire department this time—a company coming to rope off the streets and keep the curious crowd back. One simply had to protect such fools in a raid like this.

"This way! This way!" repeated the little Chinaman. "We go damn-soon-quick catch 'em back way—hurry like hell!"

They darted up the alley, rounded the corner of an old building, slipped through an opening left by two missing planks in a back fence, and scurried along now in inky blackness. They went through an old chicken market, stumbling over long-abandoned coops and crates. They kicked two doors down and punched out a window that opened on a vacant lot.

Now they were in weeds up to their neck. They came to the ruins of an old house, rounded the corner of it, and slipped in at a window. Here the going was tricky, dangerous. In places the rooms had caved in. They were down on their stomachs twice, wiggling under beams. They came to the rotted stairs of an old cellar, going down them single file, the steps groaning and crumbling.

Filth, rat beds, broken timbers, and damp piles of broken laths and plaster faced them now. They wormed their way over them and around them. They came to an old furnace, squeezing their way around it in the close, stinking air. A swarm of rats nearly as large as housecats took flight ahead of them, their wicked little eyes gleaming in the glare of the flashlights.

At the rear of an old coal bin, the little Chinaman from the restaurant stopped at a thick-planked wall, running hands flighty with nervousness over it. Something clicked. The old wall opened.

An underground passage now, bricked on either side, arched with stone overhead—an abandoned sewer, one of those big, tunnel-things by which a man can travel all over a city by following network after network. It was dank and gloomy, filled with a filthy muck. Fargo gasped for breath, and plunged on, the riot gun ready.

Forty or fifty yards of this, and then they came to another old sewer line. Here the air was a little better. They breathed easier as they swung in a direction that seemed to be taking them straight

toward the bay. They jogged along, heads bobbing, feet shuffling. It seemed to take an hour, and now they could smell the bay, the odor of tar, of rotted old pilings, the tang of salt water sharpened by the scent of dead fish.

through the heart and killed on the spot.

Down to one knee now, Fargo was still blazing away. Big Bill Dugan's sawed-off shotgun roared just above his head, almost breaking his eardrums. And now wails and cries ahead of them, a gun still



Now another turn, up a long slope, going, it seemed, back the way they had come. Now up an iron ladder, with the little Chinaman from the restaurant showing an inclination at last to keep in rear of the hurrying men as much as possible. They came to a round-domed chamber with dripping stones overhead. The Chinaman pointed to one of the largest stones.

Fargo pushed it. It swung back on a pivot. Down on his hands and knees like a wiggling cat, he slipped through the opening and found himself in a square-walled passageway.

Noise came to them now. It was a reverberating *boom-boom*—the axe-squad at work somewhere, smashing their way through some door that was blocking their forward drive. Now the little Chinaman running there beside Fargo cried out something. The words was scarcely out of his mouth before quick, licking ribbons of ugly-red flame jerked in the darkness ahead.

**F**ARGO started shooting, the riot gun blazing. The little Chinaman beside him whirled with a groan, both hands going to the pit of his stomach. He went down against the wall with a wail. Frank Dean, pushing up beside Fargo, dropped then, shot

blazing as the hand that held it plunged to the floor. Now, no more resistance. Fargo and Dugan hurried on.

Against a wall they found three men: big, sullen-faced fellows, riddled with lead. Here again they were faced with one of those hellish walls with no opening in sight. It was not for long. With blood streaming through his fingers as he shuffled forward, the faithful little Chinaman from the restaurant was up and again on the job.

"Pushee," he moaned, pointing to another stone. "*Hard!*"

And then into a larger passage with the noise of scurrying feet and high, sharp voices ahead. Somewhere, sounding far away, an old Tommy-gun crashed a ten-round burst. Heavier guns answered it, rolling their deep sounds through underground rooms and passageways like thunder wagons in a dead-black night.

On, always on, no stopping for anything now until they came to a door of solid steel in front of them. Now, once more, a dying man wobbling along with glassy eyes, the little Chink of the restaurant came. He pointed not at the door, but to the side of it, and again, Fargo was attacking heavy stones. They slid through an opening at last, struck

another one of those damned passageways, and went flying down it.

Through two more doors, and then a planked hall swarming with cockroaches—the usual Oriental filth in such places as these. The hall widened into a large room heavy with incense and as dark as a stack of black cats. At the other end of it was a large Buddha of brass and teak, the fat hands folded on the bloated belly, wide mouth coldly placid.

Then shots came in an unexpected staccato, pierced by fierce yells, a wild, eagle-like crying, and wolfish wailing of men stricken with terror and making a desperate, die-to-the-last-man stand of it there behind the high Buddha.

Hot slugs flew from the guns as Fargo and the others scattered to the right and left. Big Bill Dugan's old shotgun was pouring it into them. Altar bowls flew, struck by bullets and buckshot, making a hellish clattering on the floor. Men sobbed out curses to their ancestors. A wail here announced a dying man, a rat-like squeak there marked another. Something hot burned through Steve Fargo's right thigh, leaving his leg numb save for a queer tingling and jerking.

Suddenly the room was clear, with a few figures fleeing down a hallway there behind the Buddha. Then Sam Coffin's voice snarled out a command:

"Right after 'em, Steve! Make them pay through the nose for Frank and this poor Chink!"

On then, with Dugan reloading his gun as he ran. They poured lead into the hallway to clear it. They rounded a bend, and once more a hail of bullets slapped the walls to their right and left.

Now into a great lounge room where a hundred men were milling, their eyes wild, their faces ghastly in the light. There was no fight here, but the noise was like swift barking of savage dogs.

"Line out!" roared Fargo. "Hit the walls or hit hell!"

**T**WO CHINESE in priestly garments came out of a side room with lanterns. Somebody switched on a battery of electric lights. The priests were all excited, pleading and arguing. Oh, they knew not a thing. This was surely a most unpardonable invasion.

Fargo knocked one of them down with the butt of his gun. It was like striking a holy man at the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem. In a body the crowd surged forward. Big Bill Dugan swept the floor

with a roaring charge of buckshot, breaking legs, driving them back.

Uniformed men were breaking through. First it was that fighting axe-squad from headquarters, then came strings of men with flailing nightsticks which rattled like trap-drums on foolish heads that tried to duck and dart past them. Then came swarms of detectives.

"Start clearing them out!" boomed the voice of Sam Coffin. "Don't let a man get away. Sock them in without bail."

They held on to the priests. Swarm after swarm of the others were led away. Men were sent back in the passages. The dead body of Frank Dean, and the dying figure of the little Chinaman from the restaurant, were carried away.

But still they did not have Ann Pastel and John Maddox. Where they were was the mystery. Fargo was hammering on the two priests unmercifully. He knocked them sprawling, shook them like a Great Dane shaking cats, mussed them up in general. With bleeding lips and snarls, they refused to utter a word of anything except to declare innocence.

Fargo turned them over to Dugan. What that fighting Irishman did to them was a caution, but still they did not know a thing.

"It's like poking castor oil down a wildcat with a hot awl!" raged Sam Coffin. "Here, boys, bring your axes. We'll start chopping hell out of that damned Buddha in the next room. Maybe that'll bring the devils around."

Limping along with the others, Fargo followed. The axe squad started in on the Buddha. The priests stood there as unmoved as stone until an axe struck something and started a quick sound of spilling water. Then, with a wild screech, the priests tried to flee. Fargo caught one behind the left ear with his fist, knocking him ten feet against the big belly of a policeman who promptly smacked the man over the head with his club and snatched him to his feet. Dugan got the other one.

The Buddha had started to move. Wicked eyes leering down, placid lips smiling coldly, the whole thing was moving to one side. A flight of stairs took shape, lighted by an electric bulb below. Fargo was like a hound going down it with Dugan at his heels. They stopped at the foot of the stairs with a yell. It was a scene that would have stopped any man.

IN front of them was John Maddox, the old man Fargo had seen on the throne beside the girl. He sat on a block of stone, his arms thrust out in front of him and crushed to pulps between two large, smooth stones with a jack-screw above that likened the thing to an old-fashioned printing press. The man's head had rocked to one side, lying there on his shoulder. He looked up, his eyes bulging with his pain. A smile moved his wrinkled lips.

"Thank heaven, you got here," he mumbled, and died.

Fargo darted on, limping almost unbearably now. Another cry came from him. There was Ann Pastel, hanging on the wall, clothes in shreds, held two feet above the floor with short, stout chains fastened to eyebolts set in the masonry. She looked down, her lips trembling, her face red from weeping.

"They didn't get it," she moaned as Fargo unfastened her chains, taking her from the wall, and—for the second time since he had known her—wrapped her in his coat. "They didn't get it. Today I placed it in a safety deposit vault at the bank."

Things grew a little hazy after that. Fargo realized that his trouser leg was like a wet rag, warm up near his thigh and cold down around his ankle. His foot made a squashing sound as he walked, leaving a nasty smear of red on the floor as he walked. He must have sat down somewhere, must have leaned against the wall. It was like going to sleep, but he came to in an ambulance, going hell-bent somewhere. A doctor in a white coat sat there. To his right, on the second bunk, lay the girl. He looked at her, felt for her hand, held it.

"I've heard a lot of things about you, Steve," she told him, grimly, and yet smiling as if through pain.

Doctor or no damned doctor, he had to tell her something. It was something that positively could not wait.

"You are the most beautiful thing in the world to me!"

"You are not so bad, yourself, Steve."

The doctor was a polite man. He looked at the ceiling of the swaying and jolting ambulance as their hands tightened.