

Manchu Skull

by **Emile C. Tepperman, 1899-1951**

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Chapter I

The Left-Handed Swordsman!

THERE was an undercurrent of something strange and ominous in the life of Chinatown tonight. King sensed it at once as he turned into Pell Street from the Bowery. The usual gossiping crowd of yellow men in black alpaca jackets and skull caps was missing from in front of the Chinese Art Theater. The store of Pu Yee, the venerable old curio importer, was closed. The three-story building of the Sung Tong, next door, was likewise dark and deserted. Only the garish neon lights of the Far Long Sin Restaurant, which catered to the sightseeing trade, provided any signs of life in the street.

King walked warily, swinging his silver-knobbed cane in carefully gloved hands. His tall, immaculately clothed figure, and the easy, lithe swing of his body, afforded no indication of the fact that the wallet in his breast pocket contained one hundred thousand dollars in large bills.

It was no new thing for Christopher King to come down to his little office in Chinatown with a small fortune in cash. He was known as a buyer of precious jade, and a man whom the Chinese could trust implicitly. So whenever anything of value had to be sold, King got the first call.

He stopped for a moment to light a cigarette, while still half a block from the Far Long Sin Restaurant. And a short, squat, dark shape sidled out of a doorway.

Instantly, King tautened. He flipped away the match, and gripped the silver-headed cane. But he relaxed at once, upon recognizing the man.

"Hello, Pu Yee," he said in English.

The old curio importer glanced around nervously. Then he shuffled closer.

"Good evening. King san," he said in Cantonese. "Forgive me if I seem to be brusque. But it is dangerous for me to be seen talking to you. You have been a good friend to me, and I must warn you. Death walks at your side tonight! Do not go to your office. Turn back and go home!"

King's eyes narrowed. "You know why I am here?"

The old man shivered. "Indeed I do, my son. And I am afraid for you. There is a woman with black hair who brings death to Chinatown and it is written that you are to meet her. Also, it is written that many must die tonight. Go home, King san, before you meet the woman who brings death!"

Before King could ask him another question, Pu Yee turned and shuffled back into the darkness of the doorway. His squat, alpaca-clothed figure blended with the shadows.

King puffed thoughtfully for a moment at his cigarette. Then he shrugged, and went on. But he walked even more cautiously than before.

He came abreast of the Far Long Sin Restaurant. There was a big rubberneck bus parked at the curb, with a flamboyant streamer tacked along its side, reading:

WORLD'S FAIR CHINATOWN TOUR

A couple of other cars were parked before and behind the bus, indicating that Far Long Sin was getting a nice volume of business tonight. There was music inside, and King got a glimpse of couples dancing on the small island platform in the center of the dining room. He passed the restaurant, and came abreast of the narrow alley alongside the Far Long Sin building.

SUDDENLY he became taut and motionless. There was something going on in that alley—something silent and sinister. He caught the sound of scuffling feet and muted grunts, and then a queer gurgling oath in Cantonese.

It was pretty dark there in the alley, except for a faint trickle of light slanting down from a hallway window in the side of the restaurant building. He caught a blur of swirling figures—four or five of them in black jackets, with steel flashing dully in their hands—surging in upon a single, lone figure which stood with its back to the wall.

And then King uttered a gasp of amazement. For the light in the window above streamed momentarily across the face of that lone defender, and he saw that it was a woman—a white girl with a slim, supple figure, a long firm throat, and coils of black hair piled high upon her head. She was desperately fighting off the Chinese. Her sole weapon of defense was a black leather handbag, with which she was attempting to ward off the biting thrust of those blades.

King's lips tightened, and he came into the alley on the run. His rubber-soled shoes made no noise. As he smashed into the rear of those Chinese, he vaguely wondered why the girl had not cried out for help.

He brought his cane down with a thud upon the head of the nearest Chinese, and felt bone crack under the blow.

The others hissed in startled alarm and swung around—with knives glistening in their hands.

"Slink away, jackals!" King said in perfect Cantonese. He threw a side glance at the girl and saw that she was staring at him with a queer half-smile upon her lips.

The Chinese hatchet men did not retreat. One of their number hissed a low command, and they all surged in at him with knives held low like swords, for the deadly disemboweling stroke which has been used by Oriental knife men since time immemorial.

King laughed deep in his throat. He always experienced a strange exhilaration at the scent of battle. He took a swift step backward, and felt the comforting solidity of the wall behind him. At the same time, his right hand gripped the middle of the cane while his left seized the silver knob. He pulled on the knob, and a glittering arc of whirring Damascus steel flickered before the astonished eyes of the on-surging knife men. The blade licked out like a striking cobra and bit deeply into the throat of the nearest Chinese.

A gurgling cry escaped from the man's throat. Blood gushed as he fell away. King jerked his sword free, sent it once more in a glittering arc that kept the remaining Chinamen at bay. One of their number, half a dozen feet behind the others, lifted a long knife, holding it by the blade between the tips of his thumb and forefinger, poised to throw.

King saw him out of the corner of his eye. He knew the deadly accuracy with which these men could hurl a knife, for he had seen it done a thousand times both here in Chinatown and in the far reaches of the Orient. He knew that when that man cast the knife, it would travel to its mark with the speed of light

and would be as impossible to dodge as the steel-jacketed bullet from a machine gun.

Once more he laughed that deep, booming laugh of his. He took a quick step forward from the wall. His body fell into a long crouch, and his left arm went out in a deadly lunge. The sword pierced the vitals of the nearest Chinaman. The man screamed. King freed his sword, stepped in quickly and caught the falling man by the lapels of his alpaca jacket. He swung the wounded man around just as the knife thrower made his cast. The dagger hurtled through the air, straight and true. But instead of striking King's heart, it bit into the back of the wounded man whom King was holding.

Now there were only three of the knife men left. King came in at them, his swift-moving sword flashing in a blinding series of dazzling arcs as it lunged and circled before their eyes.

Suddenly one of the yellow men uttered a shrill squeal. "It is the Left-handed Swordsman!" he squeaked in Cantonese. "Flee... flee for your lives!"

And as abruptly as it had begun, the deadly battle ended. Three dark shapes scurried down the alley, running with their queer shuffling gait, and leaving their dead behind.

KING did not attempt to pursue them. He stooped, and swiftly wiped the blade of his sword-cane on the jacket of the dead knife man. Then he sheathed the sword and turned to the girl. His eyes narrowed, and a thin smile tightened his features. The girl was gone!

He ran swiftly back to the street. He was just in time to see a black coupe gathering speed as it pulled away. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the white face of the girl at the wheel.

And then the coupe was gone, disappearing down the street with a spurt of power.

King gripped his sword-cane tightly. He had saved that girl from death—and she had not even stopped to thank him.

He turned, and went back to the alley. One of the Chinamen was dead. The other, whom he had run through the body and then used as a shield, was still living. King knelt beside this one. The man had only a few moments to live. He was breathing with difficulty. His slanted almond eyes squinted up at the Left-handed Swordsman with the peculiar look of Oriental fatalism which King knew so well. King's hands went to the man's shirt, opened it. They touched the small gold medallion hanging on a golden chain from the man's neck. The medallion had the figure of a four-headed dragon engraved upon its face, with each of the heads so cunningly wrought that streams of fire seemed to be darting from the nostrils.

King fingered the medallion, and his blood raced.

That same figure of a four-headed dragon was carved on the granite block above the entrance of the darkened Sun Tong building across the street.

The dying man never took his slant-eye gaze from King. There was a rattle in his throat as he spoke in Cantonese.

"Death walks by your side, Left-handed Swordsman! My tong brothers will know how to pay my debt for me—"

A horrid gurgling cough broke off the man's words. His body grew rigid with agony and then went limp. His head dropped back. He was dead!

Chapter II

The Manchu Skull.

KING stood up with a thoughtful frown. His mind went back to the warning of old Pu Yee. The venerable curio importer had used the same words: Death walks at your side!

And Pu Yee's prophecy was also being fulfilled: It is written that many shall die tonight!

As King turned away from the dead Chinaman, he felt the strange, mystic power of the Orient all about him.

His eye traveled to the lighted window in the side of the Far Long Sin building. It was only seven or eight feet above the ground, and it was open. He reached up and pulled a piece of black silk from a nail in the sill. That girl had been wearing a black silk dress.

His foot kicked against something small and hard, which rolled up against the wall and lay there glittering strangely. He bent and picked it up in his gloved fingers. And then, a long, low whistle escaped from his lips. The object he was holding in his hand was round and smooth, almost half an inch in diameter. But, even in the semi-darkness, its scarlet pigeon-blood color was unmistakable.

Its presence here explained a good deal. In his pocket there was the letter which had brought him down here tonight. It was carefully and laboriously written in longhand:

Honorable Christopher King:

I address myself humbly to you, a Superior Man.

Knowing that you interest muchly yourself to purchasing Chinese objects of value, I making you the offer to sell to your Honorable Self the collection of Sung Dynasty Rubies of which I have been speaking with you in the past weeks. The Sung Rubies are about to coming to my hands tonight. One hundred and seven perfectly matched rubies of gorgeous color and purity. These rubies being worth almost a quarter million dollars American, but I wishing to sell at once. So if you will bring with you one hundred thousand dollars American tonight at nine, I gladly selling. Meet me outside of my restaurant at nine of the P. M. And please coming with great promptitude, for there is much danger with this undertaking.

I am begging to be considered your most humble, obedient and trustworthy slave,

On Long Sin.

It was not the first time that King had done business with On Long Sin. King had lived in the Orient most of his life. It was there he had learned to use a rapier, and earned the name of Left-handed Swordsman. Now he was the United States purchasing agent for the American Museum of Oriental Art. He had bought several valuable objects from On Long Sin on behalf of the museum. Always the transactions had been secret, with much stage management. Tonight something had gone wrong!

He couldn't figure where the black-haired girl fitted into the picture. But she must have come out of that window, and she must have dropped the ruby. Now she was gone! And On Long Sin was late for his appointment. It was eleven minutes after nine o'clock.

King slipped the ruby into his pocket, and stepped warily out of the alley. He threw a swift glance up and down the street. Two slant-eyed Chinamen were shuffling casually along on the opposite side as if they were out for a stroll, without any definite objective. They did not look in his direction, did not show in any way that they were interested in him. But King's scalp crawled just a little. In some uncanny way, he was aware that many hidden eyes were focused upon the mouth of the alley. He had just killed two men of the Sung Tong, and the honor of the society would not permit those killings to go unavenged. From this moment on, he would be walking in constant danger of a knife in his back.

He turned away from the alley and walked over in front of the lighted entrance of the Far Long Sin Restaurant. He held his cane lightly in his left hand. His right was in his pocket, fingering the ruby. He saw the two Chinamen across the street stop and look over toward him. By the cut of their alpaca jackets and by the build of their huge, rawboned bodies, he knew them for paid hatchet men of the Sung Tong. Men like these were brought in from the North of China to do the tong's killings. They were of a different race from the smaller knife men he had encountered in the alley. These big, raw-boned North-of-China boys were raised from infancy for the sole purpose of being apprenticed out to tongs in America. If they died in a foreign land in the service of the tong, their bodies were shipped back for honorable burial at home; and their families were paid a sum in American dollars which enabled them to live in comfort for the rest of their lives. These hatchet men would not flee from his sword as had the knife men in the alley.

King smiled crookedly to himself. He turned his back on the two hatchet men, and went into the Far Long Sin Restaurant.

THEY were no longer dancing inside. The dancing had given place to a floor show which was focusing the breathless attention of the pop-eyed sightseers upon the stage, where two huge, iron—muscled Manchus were putting on a ceremonious broadsword contest. The two contestants were clad in white tights. They faced each other, moving about with skillful and wary footwork to the accompaniment of wheezy Chinese music which came from somewhere in the wings. Each man had a tremendous broadsword almost six feet long which was so heavy that it required two hands to lift and swing. They danced about each other with the swords held high above their heads, and, as opportunity presented, they swung down with such deadly force that if the sword connected, it would split the opponent's head in two. But these men were so skillful in warding and parrying, that the blows never landed.

King threaded his way among the tables toward the rear of the restaurant, making for the door which he knew led to the private rooms above, as well as to the office of the owner. But before he reached that door, he was intercepted by a stout, suave Chinaman in evening dress who managed to get in his way without actually seeming to bar his progress.

"Welcome, indeed, King san. We are honored by your presence."

The fat Chinaman's lips were smiling, but there was no smile in his eyes. He did not move out of the way.

"Hello, Fung Tze," King said with deceptive mildness. "Do you mind if I go up to see On Long Sin?"

Fung Tze did not move. "I am so sorry, Mr. King. My master, On Long Sin, is not here now. Perhaps I could help you."

"I am wondering if there was a girl here tonight—a very beautiful white girl, with great coils of black hair. She was wearing a black silk dress."

Abruptly, Fung Tze's eyes became veiled. "I have not seen such a girl in the dining room, Mr. King."

"Perhaps she was upstairs. I think I'll go up and look around."

"I am still so sorry, Mr. King. The upstairs is closed."

"Not to me, my friend!"

King took a short step forward, very slowly.

Fung Tze's slanted eye dropped to the cane. Then his glance lifted to King's face. He shrugged.

"The wise man knows when to yield to superior force!" he quoted. "But I warn you, King san, that if you go upstairs tonight, you go into a danger that is more deadly than even your sword!"

King smiled thinly. "Thank you for the warning, Fung Tze," he said.

The fat Chinaman moved aside reluctantly.

King opened the door and stepped through.

There was no one in the hall here. He mounted the first flight of stairs, and stopped beside the open hall window. This was the window which faced on the alley. He looked out, and his hand tightened on his cane. The bodies of the two dead Chinamen were no longer there. The Sung Tong had come quickly to take away its dead. There would be no recourse to the law of the white man. The tongs administered their own law here in Chinatown.

King shrugged, and went on up the stairs. The old, musty building had an air of staleness and death. Nobody knew how many unfortunates had died in the countless rooms along this corridor—under the knives of yellow killers. King walked stiffly along the corridor, with the cane in his right hand, the knob gripped in his left. He trod lightly on the floor, making no sound, his ears keenly attuned for the first whisper of movement from any quarter. At the rear of the building, he stopped before a door. He rapped lightly with the knob of his cane. There was no answer.

ONLY a faint trickle of Chinese music drifted up from the restaurant below. Otherwise there was no sound. King's gloved hand turned the knob of the door. He thrust it open. A single light from a desk lamp illumined the room. Alongside the desk a leather hatbox stood on the floor.

King's glance rested only for an instant upon that hatbox. Then he gazed bleakly upon the body of On Long Sin in the chair behind the desk.

On Long Sin was sprawled out with his arms dangling at his sides, his head hanging almost straight down over the back of the chair. His throat had been cut from ear to ear. The knife lay on the desk where it had been dropped by the killer.

Tautly, King came into the room. His glance swung keenly from object to object, and returned to that hatbox on the floor beside the dead body.

He knelt beside the desk, carefully lifted the lid of the hatbox.

He sucked in his breath sharply. A shimmering iridescently green skull rested in the hatbox. It was not a human skull. It was carved out of lustrous

jade. But so cunningly had the sculptor wrought, that were it not for the shimmering luster of the precious jade, one might have thought it to be the skull of some long-dead Manchu emperor. The artist had sealed the open orifices of the mouth, nose and eyeballs with patches of white nephritic jade which contrasted sharply with the greenish color of the rest of the skull.

King carefully lifted the Manchu skull out of the hatbox. There was an excited glitter in his eyes. He had come here to buy the Sung Dynasty Rubies. But here was a Chinese antique which was impossible to purchase at any price. To his knowledge, there were only three of them in the world. One of them was at present in the American Museum of Oriental Art, for which he worked. The other two were known to be in the possession of old and honorable Chinese families, who would never have parted with them for an emperor's ransom.

King ran his fingers expertly over the surface of the exquisitely wrought jade. In a moment he assured himself that this was an authentic Manchu skull—one of the three known to be in existence.

He held it up to the light, and the gaunt, scarified bones of the Manchu emperor seemed actually to come to life in his hands. At the top of the skull there was a small opening; plugged with a cork of white jade. He removed the cork, and inserted his finger. The inside of the skull had been carved out so that there was a hollow receptacle. He shook the skull but got no sound. The receptacle was empty.

Carefully, almost religiously, King replaced the Manchu skull in the hatbox and closed the lid.

Abruptly, he heard a noise behind him. He whirled, lithe as a panther, in time to see the door thrust open.

The stout, suavely smiling Fung Tze came into the room. He said nothing, but stepped to one side. Immediately after him, entered the two broadsword fighters who had been giving the exhibition of deadly skill downstairs. They still wore tights. Each still gripped his huge six-foot broadsword. Those blades were not pointed at the end, but they were honed to a deadly cutting-edge which could bite through flesh and bone without effort.

The second of the two swordsmen kicked the door shut behind him. Then the two athletes gripped their swords in both hands and stood with their eyes upon King.

King gripped the silver knob of the sword-cane in his left hand. He grinned crookedly at Fung Tze.

"Is this what you meant when you warned me that I would be walking into danger?"

The fat Chinaman nodded gravely.

"I am so sorry, King san. I have just learned of the fight in the alley. The girl with the black hair escaped. But it is believed that she gave you the Sung Dynasty Rubies. You must turn them over to me at once. Do so, and you may go from here unharmed. You shall even be forgiven for the deaths of two men of the Sung Tong."

"And if I don't turn them over, Fung Tze?"

"Then I am so sorry, King san. You will be killed by these two swordsmen, and we will take the rubies from you. The Sung Dynasty Rubies are not to be sold. They must be returned to the homeland."

"I have no rubies," said King.

Fung Tze sighed. "You have been long known among the Chinese as the Left-handed Swordsman. You have been honored by our countrymen, who have found you a man of your word. If you say you have no rubies, then it must be so. But if that is the case, it follows that the black-haired girl has them. We must know where she is to be found. Tell us, King san, and you may still go free."

King shook his head. "I don't know who she is. I never saw her before."

"You are only trying to protect her. It is honorable for a white man to lie to protect a white woman. But in this case it means your life, King san. The girl killed On Long Sin. She must pay the tong penalty. Speak, King san. Where is she?"

King smiled faintly. "You're right on one point, Fung Tze. Even if I knew who she was, or where to find her, I'd certainly not tell you."

Once more the fat Chinaman sighed. He spoke a sharp command to the two Manchu swordsmen.

"I am so sorry for everything, King san," he murmured, and he opened the door and slipped out.

King was left alone in the room with the two Manchus.

THEIR narrow slanted eyes never left his face. They lifted their heavy broadswords high above their heads, and came around the desk, skirting the dead body of On Long Sin.

King stood still, apparently loose-limbed and relaxed. But one could not fail to see the hot glint of his eyes.

The two swordsmen came at him from the right and from the left. One of them barked a singsong word to the other, and they charged in. The great broadswords cut down at King's head in deadly power-strokes.

King did not jump backward, as they had expected. He was thoroughly familiar with the science of broadsword dueling. The expert swordsman swings down at his opponent, knowing that the inexperienced opponent will surely leap back in a desperate effort to avoid the cutting edge of the blade. The swordsman then takes a quick step forward even as he slashes, so that the keen blade overtakes the victim, cleaving his skull in two.

But, instead of retreating, King crouched low and leaped forward.

He came in under the two blows, and the heavy blades missed him and bit into the floor.

Simultaneously, King's glittering rapier slithered out of the scabbard as he drew it with his left hand. He pivoted on his left heel and lunged. The point of the rapier plunged into the body of the Manchu on King's left. It went in just above the heart.

The Manchu's white tights became suddenly spattered with blood.

King withdrew the rapier just in time, as the man choked and fell forward on his face—the great broadsword clattering to the floor.

King swiveled around to face the attack of the second Manchu. This time the yellow man did not raise his broadsword in the air. He kept it waist-high, slashing sideways with it in a blow which could easily cut a man's body in half. There was no escaping that slashing broadsword. In the split second before it struck, there was no time to leap back beyond the reach of the six-foot blade. Neither could King bend low enough to duck. Instead, King met that blow, parrying it with his thin blade of Damascus steel.

It seemed impossible that the frail rapier could arrest the terrific weight of that broadsword. Already there was a vindictive smile of triumph upon the Manchu's face.

The thin, pliable blade of Damascus steel met the great broadsword in midair. Sparks flashed as the two weapons grated. The rapier bent far back under the impetus of the broadsword. But King's iron wrist held it firm.

The edge of the broadsword slid up along the side of the rapier until it struck the guard just below the silver knob. As it struck, King flipped his wrist up expertly, and the great sword went slashing past King's scalp, not touching him.

The Manchu yelled with rage, and reversed the edge, bringing the weapon back for another slashing blow.

King did not attempt to parry this time. He lunged! His rapier caught the Manchu under the chin, and the thrust sent the point up through the top of his skull.

The great broadsword fell from the man's hand. He was dead before King got the rapier out again.

King's face was inscrutable as he wiped the rapier and slid it back into the scabbard. His eyes were stormy as he looked at the bodies of the two dead Manchus, and at that of On Long Sin.

It is written that many shall die tonight!

Pu Yee's prophecy was being amply fulfilled.

He picked up the hatbox containing the Manchu skull, and slowly walked out of the room.

DOWNSTAIRS, he saw Fung Tze suavely welcoming a new party of guests, as if nothing were happening up above.

Fung Tze turned and saw him.

The fat Chinaman seemed to congeal within himself. For a moment, his eyes betrayed him, reflecting stark unbelief that King could still be alive. Then he swiftly regained command of himself. He bowed from the waist.

"You are a man of many surprises, King san!" he murmured. "Have you killed my two Manchus?"

King studied him a moment. "I could kill you now, Fung Tze. I could draw my sword and run you through!"

Fung Tze smiled at him as if he were merely carrying on a casual conversation with a guest. No one in the restaurant could suspect, to look at them, that these two were discussing life and death.

"Undoubtedly you could kill me, King san. But you will not do it. In the first place, you are not one to kill an unarmed man. In the second place, there are many witnesses. It would be murder under the white man's law."

King smiled grimly. "All right, Fung Tze. I suppose you know I'm going to notify the police?"

Fung Tze turned and spoke swiftly to a passing Chinese waiter. The man stopped short for an instant, as if he had been shot. Then he nodded and hurried away, calling to several other waiters who left their trays and hurried out after him.

Fung Tze's thick lips became wreathed in a smile. "You will only be laughed at if you call the police, King san. By the time you return, there will be no

bodies upstairs. The rugs and the furniture will be changed. There will be no sign of bodies or of a fight. The police will think that you are mad."

For the first time, Fung Tze's eyes dropped to the hatbox in King's left hand. He stiffened visibly, and his face congealed into a yellow mass.

"The Manchu skull—you are taking it away!"

King nodded grimly. "It goes to the museum. I will pay the value of this skull to the family of On Long Sin."

Fung Tze's eyes blazed suddenly. "You are a daring and a foolish man, King san. Believe me, you will soon join your ancestors!"

King shrugged. He turned and walked out of the Far Long Sin Restaurant.

Chapter III

Trapped!

OUTSIDE, something had happened to the bright neon sign in front of the building. It had gone out, as had the street lamp directly opposite. This portion of the block was now in almost total darkness.

King discerned the skulking shadows of the two Sung Tong hatchet men, down near the mouth of the alley.

He transferred the sword-cane to his left hand and the hatbox to his right. Then he started to walk slowly toward the corner. The two tong men came after him, not trying to catch up, but keeping him in sight.

At first, King was puzzled by this. For if they intended to attack, there was no better place than right here.

A moment later, he understood the strategy. He caught sight of several other shapes, waiting ahead. There were men at either end of the block, so that no matter which direction he had taken from the Far Long Sin building, they could intercept him.

There was another thing which puzzled him, too. He couldn't decide whether Fung Tze had acted independently in setting the two broad-swordsmen upon him, or whether he was in league with the Sung Tong. Also, he could not bring himself to believe that the girl with the dark hair had cut On Long Sin's throat.

In any event, he understood clearly that the Sung Tong did not intend to allow him to leave Chinatown alive. They must know that he had the hundred thousand dollars in his pocket, for they had known of his appointment. They must also know what he was carrying in the hatbox. The Manchu skull was worth a small fortune—far more than the hundred and seven Sung Dynasty rubies. The Sung Tong was not going to let him take it away.

He saw those shadows ahead of him converge toward a spot about a hundred feet ahead, to cut him off! There were two men on the sidewalk, and two more were crossing the street.

He did not slacken his pace. But as he walked he twisted the knob of his cane, so that a single flip of the wrist would send the scabbard slithering away, leaving the naked blade in his hand.

At the same time he did not allow those converging shadows to monopolize his attention. He was aware that these hatchet men of the Sung Tong knew his

reputation. In the past, many men here in Chinatown had tried, for one reason or another, to kill the Left-handed Swordsman. None of those were alive today!

These hatchet men might be trying a trick. They might be hoping to attract his attention, while one of their number ambushed him with a thrown knife from one of the dark doorways or alleys along the route. So King kept his eyes on the buildings he passed, watching for any sign of stealthy movement.

Now, only twenty feet separated him from the hatchet men ahead, while those behind were hurrying a little so as to come up with him. They meant to overwhelm him by the very weight of their numbers.

King gripped the knob of his sword-cane tightly. He wondered if this was to be his last adventure. He stopped walking, and put the hatbox down at his feet. He drew the sword out of its scabbard.

The hatchet men crowded in toward him. Knives appeared in their hands. They held them by the tips. They were going to throw. They knew very well that King never carried a gun, relying always upon his sword-cane. So they had the advantage of him.

King started to leap back toward a doorway.

And, suddenly, a long black coupe, which had been parked down near the corner, came roaring down the street with its horn screaming.

King's eyes glittered. He couldn't be mistaken. That was the coupe of the black-haired girl.

The hatchet men turned, startled at the sudden clamor of sound in the street which had, until a moment ago, been deathly quiet. And then their voices rose in screams of terror. For the coupe jumped the curb and headed directly for them.

She slowed down and came to a stop. Then she turned and looked at him questioningly.

King twisted around and glanced through the rear window. There was no sign of pursuit. He fixed his eyes on the girl.

"Why did you come back?" he asked.

The great black coils of hair which crowned her head were disarranged. There was a long rip in her black silk evening gown. Her eyes, black enough to match her hair, were wide open, flashing with excitement.

King decided that she was much younger than he had thought she was. Also that she was certainly no harpy of evil, as old Pu Yee had hinted.

"Why did you come back?" he repeated, a little more gently. "You got away safely."

"I hated myself!" she said quickly. "I hated myself for running away and leaving you like that. I came back to see what had happened to you." She hesitated an instant, then: "I heard what those knife men called you. You are King, the Left-handed Swordsman."

"You've heard of me?"

"Indeed, yes. I've lived in China for five years. I'm Roxanna Moore. I traveled up and down the Yangtze with my father, who was a missionary. Your name is a byword throughout Shansi and Hopei Provinces. They still talk of the time when you rescued Chiang Kai-Chek from the bandits in the hills behind Tientsin—with only a sword-cane for a weapon."

"Thank you," King said coldly. "But let's talk about something more important. A man was murdered tonight in the Far Long Sin Restaurant. That

man was supposed to sell me something. You climbed out of the window of the restaurant. Fung Tze says it was you who cut the throat of On Long Sin."

Roxanna Moore's eyes grew even wider. "No, no! On Long Sin was alive when I came into that room. Then the lights went out, and someone came in and grappled with me. There was more than one man, for someone was fighting with On Long Sin. On Long Sin cried out something, but it was in a dialect I didn't understand. Then the attackers ran from the room. I groped my way into the hall and saw the window; so I climbed out. Those knife men were waiting in the alley. They attacked me, and you came."

"What were you doing in the office of On Long Sin?" King asked.

SHE studied his face for a long minute, as if wondering how far she could trust him. Then she seemed to make up her mind. "I've got to trust someone tonight. I... I brought the Manchu skull to On Long Sin. It was in this hatbox."

"I... I smuggled it in when I came back from China."

King's eyes narrowed. "You smuggled it? For Heaven's sake--why?"

She gulped. Her lower lip began to tremble just a little. "The Sung Tong made me do it. My brother, Dan, has been living here in New York. He worked for an importing house, and he got to know On Long Sin and Fung Tze. He played fan-tan upstairs in the gaming rooms, and he lost heavily. He forged a check and gave it to On Long Sin, and they found him out. The Sung Tong kidnaped him, and they sent word to me that if I wanted ever to see Dan alive again, I must smuggle in the Manchu skull. They arranged everything, and all I had to do was to carry the hatbox off the boat. I had the skull covered with an ordinary hat, but it wasn't necessary. The customs officer didn't even open the hatbox. I brought it directly to On Long Sin."

King stared at her almost suspiciously. "Do you mean to say that the Sung Tong is holding your brother a prisoner—here in New York?"

"I don't know where, but I know he's a prisoner. They brought me a letter from him to prove it."

"All right," said King. "Go on! What happened when you brought the hatbox to On Long Sin's office?"

"I've told you."

He smiled faintly and shook his head. "You haven't told me everything. You haven't told me about the rubies."

Roxanna Moore looked utterly blank. "What rubies?"

Silently he took the pigeon-blood ruby from his pocket and held it up. "Haven't you seen this before? With a hundred and six like it?"

She shook her head. "It's beautiful. But this is the first time I've seen it."

King sighed. "Those rubies were hidden in the Manchu skull. There is a cunning receptacle in it. The rubies came in the skull."

She stared at him, aghast. "You ... you think I'm lying to you?"

"I don't know what to think," he said wearily. "But if your story is true, I'll help you. Come with me."

He helped her out of the car, and picked up the hatbox. Then he guided her to a doorway a few feet back.

"This is my office," he told her. "It's the only place in New York where you'll be safe tonight. The Sung Tong is after your life."

King's office was a small street-front store. The glass window and the glass panel of the door were protected by heavy steel-wire grating. The glass itself was

bullet proof. On the window there appeared Chinese lettering, and alongside it, the same words in English:

CHRISTOPHER KING
Resident Buyer Of ORIENTAL ANTIQUES

King opened the door and led her inside. He went to the back of the office and placed the hatbox with the Manchu skull in the wall safe.

He saw Roxanna watching him.

"What are you going to do?" she asked in a small voice.

"I'm going to check on your story," he informed her. "If it's true that your brother is a prisoner of the Sung Tong, I'll find him for you. And incidentally, I intend to find the murderer of On Long Sin!"

He swung the safe door closed and twirled the dial.

"Stay right here," he told Roxanna. "You'll be as safe here as in a fortress. Open for no one—no one at all. Understand?"

She nodded. "But why should you do all this for me? I'm a stranger to you. Because of me, you've made enemies of the powerful Sung Tong. They'll kill you on sight—"

He smiled. "I was in a pretty tight place when you appeared with your coupe. I'm grateful for that."

Suddenly there were tears in the eyes of Roxanna Moore. "I'm afraid—for you. A Mongolian fortuneteller read my palm in Shanghai just before I embarked. He said that I would bring death wherever I went. I laughed at him then. But so many men have died tonight. And now you're going—"

He stroked her hair. "Don't worry. The Left-handed Swordsman is pretty hard to kill. I think you've told me the truth, Roxanna. I'll find your brother for you."

He pulled down the Venetian blinds over the window, so that no one could look in. Then he left her and went out, setting the double locks on the door so that they clicked shut behind him.

He got into Roxanna's coupe and drove it around the block. It was a rented Drive-Yourself car. But the hatchet men of the Sung Tong would recognize it, and he didn't want it in front of his office as a signpost for them.

He left the car and walked slowly back to Pell Street.

Chapter IV

The Venerable Leader.

PELL STREET was still ominously quiet. The neon sign in front of the Far Long Sin Restaurant was once more alight, but the street lamp opposite had not been repaired. Also, there were lights in the Sung Tong building.

King twirled his cane as he approached the Sung Tong headquarters. His muscles were taut and ready. He saw a small group of the big, raw-boned hatchet men in front of the building entrance. They spotted him at the same time.

Their hands slid into their sleeves, where they kept the long, hungry knives.

King came to a stop, facing them.

"I wish to speak with the Venerable Leader of the Sung Tong," he said in Cantonese. "I have the Manchu skull. If you kill me now, the skull will be lost to you forever."

The hatchet men shuffled uncertainly. They glanced at each other.

At last one of them said: "Wait here! Do not go away, King san."

He turned and disappeared into the building. The others watched King impassively, beady eyes fastened upon him, hands still hidden in their sleeves.

The man was not gone more than two minutes. He appeared in the doorway and said: "Enter, King san. But the Venerable Leader instructs me to say that you enter without the protection of the Sung Tong's hospitality. You may not enjoy the privileges of an invited guest."

King smiled tightly. "I understand. If I were to have the privileges of an invited guest, the tong would be obligated to see that I departed in safety."

"You know our customs as well as we ourselves, King san!" the Chinese murmured. "We honor you for a brave man. And we are sorry that you are coming to your death! But first, since you ask it, you shall be allowed to speak with the Venerable Leader."

King shrugged. He twirled the cane, and mounted the steps. He passed between the tense and silent hatchet men, and stepped into the hallway of the Sung Tong building.

At once the hatchet men came in behind him. The door closed.

King followed his guide down a carpeted hallway. He was conscious of the hatchet men close behind him.

At the end of the hallway, the guide pulled aside a rich Bokhara tapestry which covered a doorway. He stepped aside and motioned with his hand.

King stepped past him into the audience room of the Sung Tong.

His feet sank deep into the thick-napped Afghanistan rug which covered the entire floor. His nostrils dilated with the odor of incense from two braziers on either side of a high ceremonial chair in the center of the room, where sat the Venerable Leader of the Sung Tong, clad in a long silken gown of purest white, and a black skullcap.

King stopped stock-still just within the room, staring with narrowed eyes at this powerful chief of the Sung Tong.

"Pu Yee!" he exclaimed.

The venerable old curio importer was hardly recognizable now, attired in the rich ceremonial vestments.

"My heart is very heavy, King san," he said in Cantonese, "that you come now as an enemy of the Sung Tong. I cherished you always as a friend. I tried to warn you, hoping that you would go back, and not mix yourself with the affairs of the tong."

King came forward slowly, until he was less than ten feet from Pu Yee. The hatchet men moved up quickly, and ranged themselves on either side of him, as if to prevent him from doing harm to their leader. Their slant eyes were fixed upon the sword-cane in King's hand. They knew how swiftly it could flick out of the scabbard and strike. Their hands came out of their sleeves with knives. They would make sure that no harm came to their chief.

BUT Pu Yee smiled sadly and motioned to them to do nothing. "It is written that you must die, King san. You have killed men of the Sung Tong. The honor

of the society demands your life. But out of friendship, I will hear what you wish to say."

"Thank you," said King. He stood stiff as a ramrod before the old man, his eyes cold and hard. "Since it is to be war, Pu Yee, I will state my message quickly. I have the Mahchu skull in my possession. You are holding here as a hostage, a boy—Daniel Moore. I will give you the Manchu skull in return for his life and for a promise that you will molest neither him nor his sister."

A queer light flickered in Pu Yee's eyes. "And for yourself? You ask nothing for yourself?"

King smiled crookedly. "I will take care of myself."

"I would rather," said Pu Yee, "that it was your own life, King san, for which you bargained."

"I do not bargain for that which is my own," King told him coldly. "If I die, then I do not deserve to live."

Pu Yee regarded him thoughtfully. "You are a very brave man, King san. You are the very model of what our sacred Kung-Fu-Tze would have called a superior man. I will be grieved when you are dead. Believe me, I shall be very sad."

King shifted impatiently. "What is your answer to my proposition? I offer you the Manchu skull for the lives of Roxanna Moore and her brother."

"The girl must also give us the Sung Dynasty rubies. That is part of the price for her life. She has brought much grief to the Sung Tong, and she must pay a high price. It is true that we compelled her to smuggle the Manchu skull. But she took advantage of that to bring the rubies through the customs, hidden in the skull. Those rubies were stolen from an honorable mandarin family who are Sung Tong brothers. She must return them or pay for them."

"Roxanna Moore hasn't got the rubies," King said levelly. "She didn't know they were in the skull. It was On Long Sin who did that, on his own hook. He must have had a confederate in Shanghai, who put the rubies in the skull. When Roxanna brought the skull to On Long Sin, someone else put out the lights, killed On Long Sin and took the rubies. The murderer dropped one of them out in the alley, so that suspicion would fall on Roxanna. She—"

He was interrupted by a voice from the doorway.

"He speaks the truth, Venerable Leader!"

King turned, and saw the fat Fung Tze standing in the doorway.

Fung Tze was sweating just a little as he came into the room. He had a leather-covered book in his hand. The edges of the pages were gilt.

"When we moved the furniture from the room where On Long Sin was killed, I found his diary in the desk."

He opened the book, revealing thick Chinese hieroglyphics covering the pages.

"On Long Sin writes here that the girl knew nothing of the rubies. He says that he did not plan to smuggle them in the skull, but that he received word from Shanghai that they would be in the receptacle. I read no further, but came here quickly—"

Pu Yee snatched the book from him. "It is impossible. No one else could have killed On Long Sin but the girl. Unless—" His eyes rested on Fung Tze, but he did not finish the sentence.

Fung Tze drew himself up proudly. "I have always served the Sung Tong loyally!"

"It is written that you must die, King san," Pu Yee said. "The honor of the society demands your life."

Pu Yee read hastily in the book. His face showed nothing. In a moment he looked up, and sighed.

"I am sorry, King san, but this changes nothing. We must be paid for those rubies—or the girl and her brother will die."

"In that case," said King, "there's no use wasting time!"

He slashed down with his cane at the nearest hatchet man, crashing the ferrule against the fellow's skull. Then he leaped forward before the others could bring their knives into play, and seized old Pu Yee by the arm. He yanked the old man from the chair, twisted his arm behind him, then swiveled around, facing Fung Tze and the hatchet men. Pu Yee's body was now a shield for King against thrown knives.

King did not exert pressure against Pu Yee's arm. He merely held him motionless. With his left hand, he flipped the cane so that the scabbard fell away, leaving the blade naked and ready. He placed the point of the rapier against Pu Yee's side.

"Now we can bargain again," he said calmly. "Your life, Pu Yee, for the life of Daniel Moore. Order him released at once."

The hatchet men were crouching, with knives gripped by the blades, ready to throw if they got a chance. Fung Tze's hand stole into his pocket and came out with a gun. But he did not raise it, for it would have been impossible to hit King without striking Pu Yee.

PU YEE stood calmly with King's blade at his side. "It seems," he said sadly, "that superior force must have its way. The young man shall be released—"

His quiet tone was so deceptive that King was almost lulled into a false sense of security. He was almost unprepared for the swift and deadly jujitsu trick which the old man attempted.

Pu Yee twisted like a contortionist, throwing the weight of his body away from the arm lock, at the same time bringing his free hand around in a savage blow aimed at the side of King's neck.

That blow, with the edge of the hand, has been known to kill a man. King had seen it done. One who was not familiar with that trick might not have understood the danger. But King knew.

He bent his head down, burying his neck, so that the edge of Pu Yee's stiff hand struck the top of his head instead. He dared not let go of Pu Yee, for that would mean an avalanche of knives from the hatchet men. So he kept his grip on the old man's arm, and dropped to the floor, dragging Pu Yee with him. He wound his arm around Pu Yee's waist and lifted him over his shoulder, keeping the bulk of his body between himself and the knife men.

Pu Yee squirmed and clawed, struggling madly.

King saw the knife men spreading out in a circle to come at him from all sides. He held the clawing, scratching old man on his shoulder, and began to back swiftly toward the door behind the chair. He did not know where it would lead, but he had no choice.

"Kill him!" screamed Pu Yee. "Do not let him escape--"

And then something happened—something which brought a sudden hush as of death upon the room.

A cascade of lustrous, pigeon-blood rubies began to pour down upon the thick-napped Afghanistan rug.

They were falling from somewhere beneath the ceremonial robe of Pu Yee!

The tong knife men stopped still in their stride. Fung Tze uttered a low gasp. The eyes of all the yellow men became suddenly veiled and ominous.

King breathed a little sigh. Slowly, he allowed the suddenly quiet Pu Yee to slide down from his shoulder. Then he went across the room, past the frozen tong men, and picked up the scabbard from the floor. No one stopped him. No one looked at him. All eyes were focused in silent and dreadful condemnation upon the Venerable Leader of the Sung Tong.

It was Fung Tze who spoke first.

"King san, the Sung Tong owes you apology and reparation. We never thought that our own Venerable Leader had the rubies which we demanded of you. We never thought—that Pu Yee would be a traitor to the tong!"

King sheathed his sword. He smiled grimly. He looked at old Pu Yee, who stood silent and motionless, with the resigned, fatalistic look of the Orient upon his parchmentlike face.

"It was Pu Yee," said King, "who engineered the smuggling of the rubies in the Manchu skull. It was he who entered the office and killed On Long Sin. When he left the restaurant, he saw me coming up Pell Street and attempted to turn me back, knowing that I would complicate things."

Pu Yee bowed his head. "It is all true. I saw a vision of wealth and power. With the Sung Dynasty rubies, I could have gone to another land and set myself up as a prosperous mandarin. I could have lived a life of ease."

Fung Tze motioned to two of the hatchet men. They stepped forward and ranged themselves on either side of Pu Yee. The old man raised his head.

"I am ready!"

Slowly, with the two executioners at his side, he marched out of the room.

"What are you going to do with him?" King asked Fung Tze.

The fat Chinaman looked away. "Do not ask, King san. The Sung Tong has its own mode of punishment for traitors. It were better that you did not know. I shall order that the boy, Daniel Moore, be freed. These rubies—they are yours for the price which On Long Sin set: one hundred thousand dollars."

King nodded. He took the money out of his wallet and handed it over. The hatchet men, at a nod from Fung Tze, began to pick up the scattered rubies.

"Get them ready," said King. "I'll be back to pick them up in twenty minutes—and to get Daniel Moore. I'll have the Manchu skull with me. It's yours."

He started for the door.

"Where do you go, King san?" Fung Tze inquired.

At the door, King turned and grinned slowly. "There's a black-haired girl in my office who thinks she's a jinx. I'm on my way to tell her different!"

