

Tong Torture

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

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THE body of the dead Chinaman was the first thing that Nick Ronson saw when he came into the library of the wealthy Gregory Deming. Next to the Chinaman was another lumpy form.

The man from the medical examiner's office was just starting to work on the body of the little yellow man. He was not pleasant to look at; he had been shot through the head, and the bullet had come out in back.

Nick turned an inquiring glance at the others.

McGuire, of homicide, was sitting in a straight-backed chair and talking confidentially to Gregory Deming. Deming, the well-known collector of jade, seemed to be all broken up.

Not so, McGuire. The homicide man was smoking one of Deming's expensive cigars with evident relish. His trousers were pulled up at the knees, and the cuffs were an inch or so above the tops of his purple socks, which he wore without garters. He glanced away from Deming, and his self-satisfied look changed to a sulky frown when the manservant preceded Nick Ronson across the room—taking care to give the bodies a wide berth—and announced to the jade collector, „Mr. Ronson, sir.“

Deming pulled himself together, arose with a word of apology to the homicide man, and offered his hand to Nick.

Nick shook hands with him, then said to the police detective, „Hello, Mac. How's tricks?“

McGuire scowled. „Pretty good till you showed up. Anybody send for you, or did you just smell trouble?“

Deming smiled apologetically at McGuire. „Sorry. I've been so upset I forgot to mention it before. I thought it best to hire a private detective as a bodyguard. These Orientals, you know—“

„Sure, sure,“ McGuire growled. „It's your privilege, Mr. Deming.“

Nick said, „I didn't understand that you only wanted a bodyguard. I could have assigned one of my men for twenty-five a day. I don't usually—“

Deming interrupted. „I know, Mr. Ronson. But I don't want an ordinary operative. I know you're worth more than that yourself—but I'm ready to pay it. You can write your own ticket.“

Nick shrugged. „All right, if that's the way you feel about it.“ He glanced across at the bodies. „Who did all the shooting?“

Deming said nervously, „I did.“ He pointed to an open wall safe. „I got back earlier than usual tonight, and found the Chinaman at the safe. He had stabbed Frayner.“ Deming closed his eyes hard as a surge of emotion swept over him. He indicated the body under the sheet, next to the Chinaman. „That's Frayner. He was my secretary; been with me for five years; just been married—and he has to be stabbed to death protecting my jade collection from a common thief!“ The collector turned back to Nick, his chin quivering. „That Chinaman must have had the combination, because the safe was open the way it is now. When I surprised him, he came at me with a knife—the same knife he killed Frayner with. Luckily, I was armed, and I shot him.“

McGuire got out of his chair. „Everything checks,“ he told Nick. „There's the knife on the table. The Chink's prints are on the safe. I called downtown, and Inspector Glennon said it wouldn't be necessary to bring Mr. Deming down now. It's a plain case of robbery and murder.“

Nick said. „So what am I supposed to do around here? What're you afraid of, Mr. Deming?“

The tall, graceful jade collector was looking at the body of the yellow man with somber eyes. „I'm afraid there may be—reprisals. These Chinese—“

NICK walked over to the body. The medical examiner was through, and was making out a report. On the dead man's middle finger was a wide gold band. Nick bent and saw that there was an inscription in Chinese characters etched in the gold. He could read the hieroglyphics almost as well as he could read English; he had spent many eventful years in the East. That particular inscription he had seen often before. Translated, it meant roughly, „Respect the gods, but have as little as possible to do with them.“

Nick arose from the body, and faced Deming. „Did the Chink get anything out of the safe?“

Deming nodded. He produced two pieces of jade from his pocket. Each piece was five and a half inches long. There were jagged edges on one side of each. Nick took them from Deming, and fitted them together. The jagged edges fell into place, the two pieces became as one, forming a little icon, or image, representing a man squatted upon a low pedestal.

Across the front of the pedestal was engraved the same inscription as on the dead man's ring!

Deming was saying, „That's a figure of Confucius, carved in nephritic jade. The workmanship is consummate; the piece is perhaps two thousand years old. It is absolutely impossible to estimate its value in dollars. I wouldn't sell it for a million.“

McGuire took the cigar out of his mouth to say, „The Chink had both pieces in his pocket. That's all he was after.“

There was a thoughtful expression in Nick's eyes as he handed the image back to Deming. „Looks to me,“ he said, „like you'll need more than protection—you'll need life insurance. This image comes from a shrine of Kung Fu-tsu, which is the Chinese equivalent of Confucius. The shrines of Kung Fu-tsu are under the special protection of the Kung Tong, and the dead Chinaman there is a member of it.“ He shook his head. „No thanks, Mr. Deming. I can't take the assignment. When those boys have it in for you, it's just too bad.“

McGuire said sneeringly, „Just yella, huh?“

Nick glared, was about to say something nasty, when Deming interrupted hastily. „Look here, Ronson. From what I've heard of you, you're not the man to turn down a job because it's dangerous. That's why I called you in. I want to keep this jade, and I also want to stay alive. I'll pay you five thousand dollars to fix it so I don't have to worry about this Kung Tong any more—and I don't care how you do it!“

Nick considered for a moment. Then he said, „They may want indemnity—for him.“ He nodded toward the body.

„I'll pay it—whatever they ask. And the fee to you for arranging it.“

„All right,“ Nick agreed. „You keep to the house—don't go out till I see what's what. I'll send a couple of my men over to take care of you in case these boys start something prematurely.“

Deming said, „You want a check?“

Nick nodded. „In advance. I don't guarantee results, and I'd hate to have to sue your estate for it.“

Deming made a wry face, but he sat down and wrote the check.

Nick took it, grinned at McGuire, and went out.

In the street he hailed a cab, and said, „Corner of Race and Marley.“

WHEN he got out of the cab he walked down a half block, and stood for a moment, looking up at the bleak brownstone facade of the house on Marley Street.

He made sure that his .32 Special slid easy in the holster beneath his armpit, walked up the five steps of the stoop, and rang the bell.

Almost before he had his finger off the button, the door was opened by a short, skinny Chinaman, who, when he saw Nick, bobbed his head and said squeakily, „Hello, Misteh Lonson. Come lite in. Charley Mee waits for you.“

Nick said nothing, but his eye went to the gold band on the middle finger of the Chinaman's right hand. It was the same kind of ring that the dead Chinaman in Deming's living room had worn.

Nick stepped into the dark hall-way, and the servant closed the door. Then he turned and led the way toward the rear, saying, „Please to follow me, Misteh Lonson.“

Nick thought he detected a subtle gleam in the skinny Chinaman's eye, but he had long ago learned the futility of trying to read any sort of meaning into the expression of a Chinaman's face. He went along behind him till they reached a massive oak door at the end of the corridor.

The servant rapped in a peculiar way—twice, then once, then three times very swiftly. Almost at once there was a click, and the heavy door started to swing open.

The room within was only dimly lighted by a single low lamp that stood near the door.

In the middle of the room was a long table. There were chairs around this table, but none was occupied except the one at the head, facing the door. In this chair sat a very fat, motionless Chinaman.

Nick stepped into the room, and the door closed mechanically, leaving the skinny servant on the outside. Nick noted that the fat man was manipulating a row of buttons on the table. These, doubtless, controlled the door—also, perhaps, various other gadgets in the room.

Nick walked up to the end of the table opposite the fat man and said. „Hello, Charlie. How did you know I was coming?“

The fat man spoke impassively. His countenance, which was almost entirely in shade, hardly seemed to move, except for his lips. His English was as good as Nick's, with the exception of a slight lisp. „This poor offspring of a snail,“ he said, „is overwhelmed with humiliation that he cannot rise to fittingly greet the eminent Mister Ronson. But the disabilities of old age weigh heavily upon me. I—“

„Can it, Charlie,“ Nick interrupted him, unceremoniously. „I know you're a fraud, so why waste all the words on me. How did you know I was coming?“

Charlie Mee did not move. His voice took on an edge of sharpness. „You are the same old Nick Ronson—always getting to the point. What difference does it make how I knew? You are here. You have something to say?“

Nick nodded. He put both hands on the table, leaned forward. „I have, Charlie. And this is it. You're the head of the Kung Tong. I know it, because I learned it once when I did you a service. I was well paid for that service, and we are quits. I ask nothing for that. But I have come now to offer you something.“

Charlie Mee said nothing, did not move. He waited in silence, the epitome of the patient Oriental.

Nick went on after a moment. „Today, one of your brotherhood broke into the home of Gregory Deming, the jade collector. He stabbed Deming's secretary to death, and attempted to steal a jade figure of Kung Fu-tsu, Deming surprised him, and when this member of your Tong attempted to attack, Deming shot him in the head.“

Still the fat man maintained silence. Only his eyes were now glittering dangerously.

Nick continued. „Deming was justified in shooting your Tong member. But he's afraid the Tong maybe out for blood—so he's engaged me to keep his skin whole. I have taken his money, therefore it follows that I must fight his enemies. I should be very sorry if you felt that you had to avenge this member of yours who killed Deming's secretary.“

Nick stopped. He had made his position clear.

For a long time Charlie Mee gazed at him impassively down the length of the bare table. Nick wondered what devious thoughts were going through that Oriental mind.

Finally Charlie Mee stirred and spoke. „The laws of the Tong forbid me to speak freely to one of an alien race, Mister Ronson. But I am sorry that you have taken this man Deming’s money. For it is written that Deming must die—and you must fail in your task. Let me give you a warning—return this money and wash your hands of it. There is safety for you in that course. Otherwise, much as I regret to say it, death waits for you, as well as for him.“

„You don’t understand,“ said Nick. „Deming is willing to pay a cash indemnity to satisfy the Tong. You can practically name your own price.“

Charlie Mee answered him, speaking very slowly. "There is no indemnity, Mister Ronson, that will satisfy the Kung Tong. Deming’s life is forfeit. We will purchase the jade image from his estate.“

NICK took his hands off the table and stood up straight. His hands hung loosely at his sides, and he nudged the armpit holster a trifle forward with his left arm. „Then it must be a war between us, Charlie. You know I never back out of a job.“

The fat man nodded. „I know that, Mister Ronson, and that is why I took precautions when I learned that Deming had sent for you. I knew that you would come here first, for you are a straightforward man, a worthy opponent. But you are beaten. Deming is beaten. It is regrettable that you, whom I truly admire, must go down to destruction with your client.“

Nick smiled crookedly. „All right, Charlie, we understand each other fine—you love me, and I love you—like brothers. In fact we love each other so much we’re gonna have a little private war.“

The fat Chinaman nodded. „Reluctantly, I agree with you. It is war!“ He leaned forward a little, his eyes staring opaquely along the table.

„When,“ Nick asked, „does this war start—when I leave your house?“

Charlie Mee’s fat lips twisted into a smile. „I am so sorry, Mister Ronson. The war must begin—now! Even though you are a guest in this poor house of mine, I cannot afford to allow you to leave it alive. You are the only white man who knows of this house. Now that you are an enemy, you must die!“

Nick scowled. His hand flashed to his armpit holster, but stopped when Charlie Mee rapped out an imperative, „Wait!“

The fat man raised a forefinger on which the elongated fingernail gleamed to a claw-like point and indicated a section of the wall at Nick’s right. „I told you,“ he went on, „that I had taken precautions.“

Nick, standing rigid, his hand within an inch of the gun butt, flicked his eyes to the right, and started.

There was a panel in the wall which must have opened soundlessly. Framed in the opening, knelt a raw-boned, high-cheeked hatchet-man. He was dressed in black, with a black skull cap. Beady eyes were sighted along the barrel of a Browning rapid-firer which was trained unswervingly on Nick’s middle! A yellow hand fingered the lever tautly.

Nick swung his eyes back to the fat man. He still kept his right hand taut, and spoke through thin lips. „It won’t do, Charlie. Your playmate will get me, all right, but I’ll crease you, too, for sure. You know I can do it; right through the heart.“

Charlie Mee smiled. „Indeed, you are renowned for your skill with a gun. But I have anticipated that, too. These buttons on the table are not the only ones. My feet—“

Even as he spoke, his feet moved, and a sheet of steel shot up from what had looked like a groove in the table. The steel snapped up to a height of about four feet, effectively screening the fat man from Nick’s view.

At the same time, from behind the barrier, Charlie Mee uttered a short string of commands in Cantonese.

Nick rolled away from the table, his hand snaking out the gun at the same moment that the Browning in the hands of the hatchetman began to spit flame and to chatter wickedly in the semi-gloom.

Nick heard the wicked spat of the slugs tearing into the floor just beyond the spot where he had been. If the raw-boned Chinaman had been more adept at handling the quick-firer, he could have raked the room and torn Nick to pieces. As it was, though, he kept his finger on the trip, and exhausted the entire drum before he could shift; it takes a lot of practice to swing a Browning, even in a short arc, before the drum is empty.

The hatchet-man didn’t realize his ammunition was out, and finally got the Browning around so that it bore on Nick. But it no longer spouted lead. He looked down at it with an expression of puzzlement.

The quiet in the room after the smashing chatter of the gun was oppressive.

Nick was on his knees on the floor. The hatchet-man raised his head in sudden panic as understanding came to him that he was without ammunition. He dropped the rapid-firer, and his hand darted to his sleeve, came out with a glittering, curved knife. But Nick was on his feet, grinning and yelling, „Oh Boy!“

He darted quickly across the room, and brought the barrel of his gun down on the Chinaman’s skull. Yellow skin cracked, and the hatchet-man dumped forward on the floor, face down on the Browning, the knife still clutched in convulsive fingers.

Nick swung around, stepped toward the far end of the long table where Charlie Mee had been. Charlie Mee was no longer there!

He had evidently slipped out through another panel when the shooting started.

Nick came back to the open panel. The hatchet-man lay across the opening, and the panel, which had started to close, had stopped its motion when it hit him.

Nick stepped through and found himself in a long, dark corridor. The walls were of some sort of metal, lined with asbestos. Sound proof. Which accounted for the absence of police after the shooting.

The dim light from the room behind left the far part of the corridor in blackness. Nick went along slowly, gun at his hip, left hand feeling the wall.

Suddenly, up ahead, a door in the left side of the corridor opened; a shaft of weak light illumined a form that leaped into the corridor; the door was closed.

Nick knew that he was outlined by the light behind him for the benefit of whoever had come into the narrow corridor. Instinctively he crouched, just as a gleaming knife flashed through the air above him. The knife caromed against the partly closed panel behind and clattered on the floor.

Its tinkling clatter was only an echo, though, of Nick’s heavy gun roaring in the darkness. He shot three times toward the one who had thrown the knife,

and then lay flat on the floor for a moment. At first there was no sound from up ahead, then a slight shuffling noise, and a groan.

NICK ran forward; getting out his flashlight. The man he had shot lay half reclining against the wall. He was small, yellow, with deep sunken eyes—another hatchetman. Three distinct bubbles of blood spurted from his chest. Nick's shooting had been perfect.

Nick threw the light in the Chinaman's face, and even as he did so, the man's eyes glazed and there was a death rattle in his throat.

Nick's back was to the door that the hatchet-man had come out of, and he hastened to rectify that by hurrying away down the corridor. He glanced back at intervals, expecting the panel to open again, but it didn't. At last he reached the end of the corridor, and felt a door knob; turned, and found the door locked. He wasted no time, putting a bullet right smash into the lock between the jamb and the door. He tried the knob again, and the door swung free. Nick stepped out into the night and found himself in a back yard.

There was a litter of garbage cans around, and he started to make his way through them. He heard a window creaking open in the house above him. If he were spotted now, he could be picked off with ease. He looked about for cover. His hand rested on one of the garbage cans, and he saw that it was empty. Just as the window came up, he vaulted into the can and ducked his head.

From his retreat he heard Charlie Mee say in Cantonese, „Do not shoot; it is not desirable to attract attention to ourselves at this time. Go down into the yard and search. He has not had time to escape from there.“

A moment later a voice from down in the yard near the door called out, also in Cantonese, „He has come through here, master; the lock is shot away!“

Charlie Mee ordered, „Search the yard carefully, then. Look in all the trash cans. Do not let him escape!“

Feet scurried in the yard. Nick held his gun steady, barrel pointing up toward the sky. He could see a single star above him, and a slowly moving cloud that was moving up to obscure the star.

Suddenly a gaunt yellow face hid the star and the cloud from his view. The face started to shout, and Nick fired. The face disintegrated, and Nick jumped straight up, put a foot on the edge of the can, and vaulted over.

A chorus of shrill yells came from various parts of the yard. Flashlight beams flitted about. Nick stepped over the body of the Chinaman who lay alongside the garbage can, and darted across the yard.

From the window above, Charlie Mee shouted in shrill sing-song dialect, „Shoot! Shoot now! He must not escape!“

Nick swung his gun up and took a pot-shot at the sound of Charlie's voice, and knew that he had not hit him, for wood splintered the framework of the window up there.

Lead winged past him, a slug tore at his sleeve. But the Chinese are notoriously poor shots, and he reached the fence unwounded. A dark shape hurtled at him, and Nick straight-armed that shape with the hand that held the gun. The shape uttered a pained yelp, and collapsed.

Nick hoisted himself up on a garbage can alongside the fence and jumped. Shouts rose to a tumultuous crescendo behind him; a gun barked from the window above, and just at that moment Nick's foot caught on a projecting nail as he was clearing the fence. His arms went out wildly into the air, and he

hurtled over into the next yard. He landed heavily on concrete, the breath knocked out of him for the second.

He heard one of the Chinese in the next yard call out, „He is killed, master. Your aim was true!“

Charlie Mee replied from above in his unhurried voice, „Come up, then, quickly. Leave his body. We must abandon this house before the police come.“

Nick got up and felt about for his gun which he had dropped when he fell, picked it up, and sped away through the yard, down an alley.

He saw the back of a policeman who was just turning the corner on the run from Race into Marley, and he walked away rapidly in the opposite direction.

At the corner of Claremont Avenue he hailed a cab and gave the address of Deming's home. Just as the cab got under way, a police radio car tore down Claremont and rounded into Race, with siren shrieking.

The driver called back through the open sliding window, „Must be another shooting. The way these cops ride, you'd think there wasn't nobody on the streets but them!“

Nick didn't answer; he was busy loading his gun.

A LITTLE surprise was waiting for him in front of Deming's house. There was a police radio car at the curb, a headquarters' car, and an ambulance. A small crowd was being held back from in front of the entrance by a couple of bluecoats.

One of the cops stopped Nick as he shoved his way to the front row of the crowd.

„What's happened?“ Nick demanded of the cop.

The uniformed man didn't vouchsafe him any response, but pushed him back into the crowd. Nick lunged, shoved the cop out of the way, and sprang up the steps of the house.

The policeman roared, „Hey, you!“ and leaped after him.

Nick gained the entrance, and bumped into a giant of a man in plain clothes who was just coming out.

Nick gripped the man's sleeve, panted, „H'ya, Glennon? Tell this flatfoot I'm okay, will you? He wouldn't listen to me!“

Inspector Glennon scowled at Nick, and grudgingly said to the cop, „It's all right. Get back there and hold that crowd.“

Then the inspector took Nick by the arm and urged him into the house. „You're just the baby I been looking for, Ronson. There's something stinks in this whole business, and you're the fair-haired boy that knows all the answers!“

„Sure,“ said Nick. „I know all the answers. Any time you're stuck, just ask me. Only suppose you tell me what's happened around here?“

Glennon looked down from the height of his six-foot-two to Nick's measly five-foot-ten, and said, „Nothing's happened, baby. Nothing—at—all !“

He piloted Nick into the living room, and Nick gasped. The living room looked like a temporary field hospital. McGuire lay stretched on the sofa, groaning, while a white-coated interne wrapped bandage around his head.

Munsey, one of Nick's operatives, sat in the easy chair while another interne taped his arm. The body of the Chinaman whom Deming had killed was still on the floor next to that of Frayner, the secretary. Both were covered now.

Nick's other operative, Joe Brody, was standing by the couch trying to help the interne bandage McGuire's head. Joe Brody had his right trouser leg rolled up above his knee, and his leg was plastered up with gauze and adhesive tape.

Inspector Glennon let go of Nick's arm and said, „Well?“

Nick said, „What was it, Joe, a raid?“

Joe Brody turned from the couch and grinned sheepishly. „Just that, boss. The Chinks took us unawares. I was in here with Deming, and Munsey was outside at the door. McGuire, here, was keeping Deming and me company until the morgue wagon came for the stiff.“

„So what happened?“ Nick asked impatiently.

„So the first thing,“ Brody went on, „we heard a battling around at the outside door, and a shot. So I get up to take a look-see, and just at that minute three wild Chinks bust in here with a sawed-off shotgun, and let fly without a single word. It got us all except Deming who was sitting in that chair over there, out of range. Then when I was on the floor with this stuff in my leg, I tried to go for my gun, and one of the Chinks covered me. So I had to lay there while they dragged Deming out.“

Nick's eyes were smoldering. „Nice!“ he grunted. „Fine protection we gave Deming! What happened to him?“

Glennon coughed. „They took him away in a delivery truck marked, *FANCY GROCERIES*. There was an alarm out for the truck inside of five minutes, but it did no good. We found the truck down on the West Side, abandoned. They must have switched to another car.“

Nick asked, „Did Deming have that jade figure on him?“

Brody shook his head. He took the two pieces of jade out of his own pocket. „No. He had given them to me to hold. And the dopes never stopped to make sure he had them. I guess they were a little nervous, even with the riot guns.“

Nick snatched up the two parts of the jade figure. His eyes glinted.

Glennon growled at him, „Look here, baby—what's this all about? Where were you while this was going on?“

Nick laughed mirthlessly. „Where was I? I must have been at a movie. Or maybe I was having my nails manicured.“ He turned to go. „Take Munsey home when he's fixed up, Joe. And don't feel too bad about it. I should have put an army in here instead of just two guys.“

Glennon's thick arm came up to bar his way. „Hold everything, baby! Where the hell do you think you're going with that jade! And where the hell do you think you're going—anyway?“

Nick stopped short and glared at him. „I'm gonna earn my five grand, you dope, by getting Deming out of one hell of a pickle. You should be the last one to stop me. I'm doing cop's work for the department, and all I get is abuse!“

„All right, all right,“ Glennon soothed. „Don't get huffed up. That jade figure is evidence, an' we'll need it. You can't take it away like that.“

„This jade figure,“ Nick said slowly, „is what is going to save the police department a hell of a lot of razzing. Because it's going to bring Deming back with a whole skin. Do I get it, or don't I?“

Glennon stared at him stonily for a long while, then shrugged. „You're a hard guy to get along with, Ronson, but I got to play this your way. You're in the saddle. You wouldn't want to take me in on the know with you, eh?“

„I wouldn't,“ Nick told him.

Glennon sighed. „Go ahead, then.“ His brows came together, and he poked a finger under Nick’s nose. „But if you muff this, and let Deming get bumped, I’ll ride you out of town—and don’t you forget it!“

Nick pocketed the jade, grinned across the room at McGuire who was sitting up on the couch looking like a Turk with the bandage on his head and a scowl on his face. „So long, Mac,“ he called, and went out with a mock salute to Glennon.

OUTSIDE, he saw the same cab driver who had brought him to the house. The driver grinned, and said, „I figured there’d be some sort of a ride back, so I hung around.“

„All right,“ Nick grunted. „You get a good ride. Take me through the Holland Tunnel to Hoboken—and squeeze the minutes!“

At the corner of Ninth and Peasley, in Hoboken, Nick got out of the cab and said, „If you’re looking for more business, you can wait around. I might be coming back.“

The driver grinned, showing a hole where two teeth were missing. „I’ll wait. You seem to be the kind of a guy that always comes back.“

Nick left him and walked up past two or three buildings till he came to the dirty plate glass window on which was lettered:

Sam Mee Hand Laundry

There was a light in the store, and three undersized yellow men were working away industriously, with the sweat pouring down their necks and soaking their undershirts. They were all south of China boys, meagre of build, but wiry, and dangerous in a fight.

One of them came behind the counter when Nick entered, looked at him expectantly, as if waiting for him to produce a „tickee.“ But when he got a good look at Nick, his face became blank, devoid of expression. His body seemed to go taut.

Nick said, in Cantonese, „It is many months since I have seen you, Sam Mee. Your health is good, I trust?“

The other two Chinamen looked up from their work when they heard the fluent flow of sing-song syllables coming from the white man’s mouth. Sam Mee did not show by a single flicker of expression that he understood what the detective had said. His hand stole along underneath the counter, while his eyes remained locked with the visitor’s.

Nick saw the movement out of the corner of his eye, and shook his head reprovingly. „The wise man knows when he has met his superior,“ he quoted in Chinese. „Do not try to press that button which will warn those inside, Sam. You remember the time that I saved you from a murder charge? You remember how fast my shooting was then? I can still shoot, Sam.“

He spoke very softly, but Sam Mee stopped the motion of his hand, brought both hands to the top of the counter.

„I remember,“ he answered, „the service you did me, thereby placing the whole Kung Tong in your debt. But this is a matter that is deeper than the life of any of us. My brother has told me about your visit to the tong house, how you chose to take the other side. He thought you were killed there, but I see he was in error. Now that you are still alive, I beg of you, do not go behind the rear

partition tonight, for you will exhaust the patience of the gods. It will surely mean your death, and I will be sad.“

Nick wagged his head from side to side. „Sorry, Sam, but I got to see this through.“

He walked sideways toward the rear of the store, keeping an eye on all three of them. At the rear wall he felt around with his hand until he found a button. He pressed it, and a section of the rear wall slid open. He stepped through, and the sliding door closed behind him.

He was in a lighted, bare room. A wiry yellow man sat before a closed door at the far end. The yellow man snarled, his hands moved like lightning, and a knife came hurtling through the air. But Nick was already on his knees. The knife imbedded itself in the closed panel, and the Chinaman reached for a gun.

Nick flashed his own out of its holster, covered the other. The Chinaman froze, hand inside of his shirt.

Nick said in the other's tongue, „You are not ready to go to meet your ancestors yet. Do not draw that weapon.“

His words were convincing enough, for the Chinaman took his hand slowly out of his shirt, raised it and the other in the air. Nick came up close to him, said in English, „It hurts me to do this, brother, but you know how it is!“ His left fist crashed against the Chinaman's chin, and the hatchet-man went down in a heap with a muted groan.

Nick gripped hard on the knob of the door the hatchet-man had been guarding, and turned it slowly. Then he pulled it toward him very gently. The door opened.

Through the slight crack thus made, Nick could see a room luxuriously furnished in oriental style. But he could only get a view of a small portion of it. He saw a black-garbed yellow man stooping intently over something that might have been a table.

Then he heard a smothered cry of agony, and tore the door wide open, stepped in, gun at his hip.

THERE was a table in the center of the room. Deming, stripped to the waist, was strapped to the table. Charlie Mee was standing close by, regarding the proceedings with a benign expression.

The black-garbed hatchet-man, Nick now saw, was one of three around the table. He was holding a strange sort of thing that looked like a pin cushion with the pins reversed, the points sticking outward. The cushion was attached to a bamboo handle, and just as Nick stepped into the room, the hatchet-man had finished sweeping it down across Deming's naked chest in a raking blow that caused the pins to scrape bloody furrows in the jade collector's body.

There was a bandage over Deming's eyes, and he strained against his bonds in agony.

Nick said nothing, just swung his gun in an arc to cover the four yellow men. One of the black-clothed ones made a motion to go for a gun, but Charlie Mee, with a movement that was surprisingly swift for so fat a man, put a restraining hand on his arm.

The hatchet-man let his hand drop to his side, and stared at Nick out of narrow, wicked eyes.

Charlie Mee walked around the table, came close to Nick, with his hands spread out, palms up. He said very low, in Cantonese, „You are a man of

miracles. I was aware that you knew of this place, but I thought that you were killed; my heart is glad now that you were not. Since you seem to have us at your mercy, I ask you to wait another moment; you may learn something that will surprise you. Please answer me in my own tongue—I do not wish that Deming should know you are present.“

Nick looked into the fat man's eyes, and shrugged. „I will wait, and see what I shall see.“ he answered. „But I am not to be taken unawares.“

Charlie Mee nodded wordlessly and returned to the table on which the blindfolded Deming was strapped. He spoke to him in English. „Where, my friend, is the image of Kung Fu-tsu? Before we go on with the Death of a Thousand Cuts, you have another chance to speak.“

Deming groaned. „I tell you, I haven't got it! I gave it to that private detective. Get him. If you torture him, he'll give it to you. God, let me up! I can't stand any more!“

Charlie Mee bent lower over him. „Tell us, then, once more, what happened in your house when you killed the brother of the Kung Tong—not the story you told the police and Mr. Ronson, but the true story!“

Deming spoke with difficulty. His chest was heaving, little rivulets of blood were running down his body from the cuts onto the table. „God! I've told you that already. Can't you let me alone?“

Charlie Mee said patiently, „There is a man here whom the Tong holds in high esteem. We wish him to hear the story from your own lips. Speak quickly, and we may spare you further—er—affliction.“

„All right,“ Deming moaned. „That Chinaman had half of the Confucius, and I had the other half. He wouldn't sell, he wanted to buy my piece. He brought his part to my house to compare it—I got him to do it, making him think I was willing to sell. And when he came, I killed him; killed him, and took his half. Together, the two halves make the most precious piece of jade in the world. I would have killed a hundred men to own the whole thing!“

Nick's eyes opened wide while Deming spoke. He took a step toward the table, his face purpling, but he stopped as Charlie Mee bent lower and ordered, „Repeat now, the part about the secretary.“

„I killed Frayner, too,“ Deming croaked hoarsely. „Frayner came in just when I shot the Chinaman. He saw me do it. I hit him on the head, and then stabbed him with the Chinaman's knife. Then I touched the Chinaman's fingers to the safe and made it look like robbery!“ His body sagged weakly in the straps. „Now, you devils, let me up,“ he gasped.

Charlie Mee straightened up over the table, and his eyes met Nick's. Then he waved the three hatchet-men back. The one with the pincushion went to a corner and put it away.

Charlie Mee said to Nick, still in Cantonese, „You see, my friend, the nature of the cause you have espoused? I could not explain to you before because the laws of our Tong forbid us to speak of our wrongs to one of an alien race, even if it means death to those we love. We must work out our own vengeance.“ He smiled a little. „But I have violated no Tong laws. I told you nothing. This man has spoken for me. Now you know.“

Nick slowly put his gun away. From his other pocket he took the two jade pieces, laid them together and handed the image to the fat man. „This is yours,“ he said.

Charlie Mee took the icon, and for the first time he smiled. „I was desolated when I had to order you killed, but the Tong comes before all else, as you well know, who have yourself lived among my countrymen. Had you died, I intended, when the image was recovered, to follow you into death to seek your forgiveness. I am a happy man.“

Nick took from his wallet the check that Deming had given him and tore it to bits.

Charlie Mee looked at the pieces of paper and said, „The Tong knows how to reward its friends. You shall not be the loser for having destroyed that check.“

„The man on the table,“ Nick said sternly, „must be turned over to the law.“

Charlie Mee bowed graciously. „We are done with him. He is yours. The price he would have received for his half of the jade shall go to the dead man's relatives as indemnity.“

„All right,“ said Nick. „You deliver him. I'll go ahead and prepare Inspector Glennon.“

From the table came a moan, and Deming called out weakly, „What are you going to do with me? What are you going to do with me? God, don't cut me with those pins anymore!“

„You,“ Nick said in English, „are not going to be cut any more. You are going to burn!“

And he went out to find his cab.
