To

EDWIN CHARLES MAYER

"pal” and ever-eager companion in those olden, golden

days of marbles and baseball bats, fishlines and

swimming holes—days (hat are truly golden

because he was part of them!

Chapter I

BEQUEST

BOYCE BARKSTONE leaned forward in his chair, aghast.

“And do you mean to tell me,” he repeated, unbelievingly, to the attorney seated facing him, “that my grandfather left me only a handful of beans—out of an estate of practically $>100,000? And left the $100,000 itself—or nearly so—to that fool Academy for the Proving of Social Theories?”

“I’m sorry to say I do,” echoed the white-mustached man facing him in the bright high-up skyscraper office, and contemplating him gravely at the same time through round owl-like tortoise-shell eyeglasses. “For you’ve just read his will—or the carbon copy of it. With which at least, Boyce, I can say I had nothing to do. It was my partner who actually drew it up—for, like yourself, I’ve been out of town for a week, you know—though even he tried to argue your grandfather out of it—but to no avail.”

“My God!” commented Boyce Barkstone, passing a hand over his forehead and shoving away the lock of brown hair that persisted in falling downward over his steel grey eyes. “That’s—that’s what comes of knowing a few smart- alecky wisecracks—and handing ’em out—free gratis!” Glumly he gazed out of the broad window next to the capacious chair in which he sat, which looked down on the morning traffic pouring, this sunny June morning, past 47th and Broadway, far far below; then, withdrawing his gaze, he contemplated himself glumly, across the thickly

green carpeted and mahogany-furnished office, in the tall cheval mirror fastened to the closet door in the opposite wall, seeing only, however, just a young man of 28 or so, with steel grey eyes, who, not so terribly long ago, as it seemed to him, had been wearing a blue naval coast patrol uniform, but who today, now that the war was over and gone, was dressed in a brisk pepper-and-salt suit, and four- in-hand tie with a colorful plaid of just such a degree as a modern New Yorker might safely wear.

Oliver Tydings—of Tydings and Plenderleith, Attorneys- at-Law—was, in the meantime, gazing puzzledly at Bark- stone, tapping thoughtfully on his glass-topped desk with the fingers of one hand, adjusting with the other a small bronze ashtray to a better position, moving slightly the little onyx desk clock whose hands now stood at 9:01 o’clock.

“What on earth do you mean, Boyce?” he asked curiously. “About knowing ‘smart-alecky wisecracks’—and handing them out free gratis? Just because you’ve run your grandfather’s poky, stodgy little real-estate business for 6 years, there at the 242nd Street station of the Broadway Subway—or 6 years minus your year-and-a-quarter time out while serving on that Navy coast patrol vessel—doesn’t mean you can’t speak—as a young man might—any longer. Real-estate men aren’t supposed to be old fogies, are they? And besides, the matter has nodiing whatsoever to do with your grandfather’s will, so far as I see it.”

“Oh, no?” was Boyce Barkstone’s sepulchral rejoinder, the while he gazed oddly, in turn, at the other. “Well, listen to this little incident then.” He paused. “The last time I saw Grandfather alive—which, according to die date on this will, was the morning of the day he drew the will— I said, inadvertently, and not knowing I was addressing him—it was a beastly comedy of errors, understand—a ghastly mistake—a case of—of two other men, as you might put it—anyway, I said to him—inadvertently and unwittingly: ‘Nuts to you, you old fool!’”

“Oh-oh!” echoed the attorney. And gazed, understanding written on his face for the first time, at a large white tag, attached to a tiny white cotton tobacco bag sealed with wax, csk, the uppermost side of which tag bore

handwriting which read:

Beans to YOU, sonnyboy, as per my will!

“And so that’s what’s back of his bitter bequest, eh, Boyce?” he echoed, “That you’d said to him—to your own grandfather—who had befriended you—‘Nuts to you’—and called him an old fool to boot?” He frowned deprecatingly, though still puzzledly, unbelievingly. “And so you said that to him, in the morning? And he comes straight down here, in the late afternoon, and makes out a will which leaves to you—”

“Beans—yes!” retorted the younger man frankly. “The perfect comeback! Nuts to him—from me; beans to me— from him! Of all the prime snappy retorts in all History, this—this wins the hand-painted rolling-pin. Oh, not because I got cut out of his estate—no!—I give you my word on that—but because he should even die thinking he had to slap me down. Why, Mr. Tydings, those words from my mouth were all due to a miserable grotesque mistake in which I didn’t even know I was addressing Grandfather —didn’t even know I was talking in his direction.”

The other man passed a hand helplessly over his brow. “We-ell,” he said undecidedly, not wholly and unreservedly accepting such a statement, “I—I don’t just get it, of course; but if you didn’t know it—well, it looks as though your little mistake—‘error’—or call it what you will —has tossed a hundred thousand dollars squarely into the laps of a bunch of crackpots down there in Greenwich Village that call themselves by the hifaluti..0 of the Academy for the Proving of Social Theories—and who don’t even need the bequest, thanks to the fact that that fool ‘Corporation Not for Profit’ already has a hundred and fifty thousand in its treasury due to a bequest from old Beachcroft, the one member they had who was rich, and thanks to the more important fact that they never ‘prove’ any social theories except with words, words, words —which cost absolutely nothing.”

“I know—I know,” nodded Boyce Barkstone. “But again, I tell you, my saying ‘Nuts to you, you old fool!’ to Grandfather was—was a mistake.”

“Mistake Fd rather say it was,” commented the lawyer dryly and skeptically. “And a ‘mistake’—as you persist in terming it—that’s cost you a hundred thousand, Boyce. For Balhatchet Barkstone certainly had nobody in the world to—”

He broke off, and withdrawing one of the drawers of his desk took forth a large photograph.

“Of course you have one of these, I suppose—it’s the last one, I think, the old gentleman had taken. He gave me this

one a couple of months back.”

“No,” said Boyce interestedly, catching a glimpse of the front of it, “I haven’t. He ran out of copies before he got as far as me—then the photographer burned up, and no more could be gotten.” Curiously and sadly he contemplated his grandfather, who, when living, had been his only existent relative—his grandfather whom he would never again see in this world. The photograph showed Balhatchet Barkstone seated in a huge handcarved throne chair—a little and exceedingly slight-looking man, showing plainly all the 76 years which had been his when he had died, with black string tie etched sharply against his white shirt—a combination of clothing he always wore, rain or shine, Sundays or weekdays!—so frail in stature one would imagine any breeze would have blown him away—his white hair so thin on top that he seemed practically bald. Either his eyes held a twinkle, else the twinkle was suggested by certain small radiating humorous wrinkles at the corners of the eyes, but at the same time, there was severity in the tightly compressed lids of those eyes, and in the somewhat tight line of his lips, which betokened one who brooked no discourtesy, laxness, weakness, follies nor foibles!

The lawyer set the photograph up on the back of his desk, against the wall, a bit apologetically, as does a man doing another man an honor after it is too late to mean anything.

“But as I was saying,” he resumed, “when I thought to fetch out this photo of him, Balhatchet Barkstone certainly had nobody in the world to leave his estate to but you, Boyce. Unless ’twas the old Negro—I’m referring to Josiah,

of course—who, after all, has only been with him io years as it is. And I think he rewarded Josiah very handsomely for that io years of service—in that bequest of $10,000 cash, plus the full use of his bungalow up there on Van Cort- landt Park during the entire year of Probate—and then all the furnishings therein.”

Boyce Barkstone’s face was grim.

“It was Josiah who was die cause of my being cut off this way,” he said quietly.

“You mean,” queried the lawyer, “that he influenced your grandfather against you?”

“Oh no, no, no,” Boyce hastened to explain. “That’s the last thing on earth that faithful old Negro would ever do. No, it was because I thought I was talking to Josiah, when I said, ‘Nuts to you, you old fool!’—and was, instead, talking to Grandfather.”

The lawyer passed a hand helplessly over his chin. “Frankly, I don’t get it. It’s not like you, Boyce, to be insolent or—or uppety even with a Negro servant. It—but what on earth are the circumstances? If you don’t object to revealing them? After all, they’re water over the mill now, you know.”

“Water over the mill is right,” said Boyce Barkstone grimly. “And water that, believe it or not, Mr. Tydings, has swept away all possibilities whatsoever of my marrying the girl I love. For there just happens, you see, to be some damned peculiar complications in my getting cut off this way without a red penny. But I shan’t trouble you with ’em! No. But here are the circumstances of the little incident which has cost me $100,000 and, believe it or not, the swellest girl in the world.”

Chapter II

MISTAKE GROTESQUE

“Now just a minute,” said the lawyer, leaning forward, frowning. “Don’t forget that I’ve met that girl you were to marry, and talked with her, too, the several times she’s stopped off here, for you, with an abstract or something you wanted us to examine. And even diough she’s one person who knows what the real Lap of Luxury is, she’s not the girl, if you ask me, to walk out on you just because you’ve failed to inherit. I’ll—I’ll stake my life on that. And so, when you speak of your failure to inherit any money as indubitably sweeping away your marria— Boyce, you’re not by any chance, are you, short in your accounts up there— in the business?”

“Ow-woo!” said Boyce Barkstone to himself, though without moving a muscle of his face. “Is that getting close! If he knew the curious facts of what’s wrong up there—” He broke off speculating to himself, and looked curiously toward the other. “The executors, who took over everything last night, haven’t said I was, have they?”

“We-ell—they haven’t had time to audit yet, remember. But that business of your grandfather’s was a business, you know—and audited completely, moreover, when you came back from the War and took over again, and you’re officially entered in its records as manager and treasurer— and so if you were short, I could understand your words— Now please don’t be offended—” He broke off helplessly.

Boyce Barkstone looked him straight in the eyes. “I’m not in the least offended. And I still say that this little disinheritance—or shall I call it bean-inheritance—has cost me that swell girl. Though why, I can’t just say. But I may also add that I haven’t stolen or embezzled a red cent —if that’s what you mean. Or—or even borrowed it. What I had reference to a few minutes back is just something— well—personal. I—I won’t attempt to go into it.” He stopped. And to himself only added, “He’ll be finding out soon enough, when they audit those books!”

The lawyer looked relieved.

“That’s fine. So tell me then—about this incident which you say has cost you your grandfather’s fortune and this girl. Which latter, of course, I refuse to believe.”

Boyce only shrugged his shoulders to that.

“Well, on the morning of June ist,” he began, “which is, of course, 6 days ago—and the day, as it also appears, this will was drawn—you say your partner said it was drawn around 5 o’clock that day?—yes?—well, on that morning I was in the office, bag packed, ready to go to Frisco by the noon train and get the affidavit of that chap in the Golden Gate Hospital there, which would straighten out that quit claim on that Newark property. And which, incidentally, I got, and have turned over to the executors. So as I say, I was in the office, winding up details, and Grandfather was in there with me—a place he seldom or never came to—didn’t even keep a key to the place. We had been having a discussion about several matters, one being that he suggested that the place just be closed up during my absence—to which I wras glad to accede, naturally, as I didn’t care to have some outside real-estater

messing around with my books and records; the other point involved a little more dispute, for it was about a point of business policy. On which we both disagreed. And so we had a bit of discussion on it. Oh, nothing acrimonius, you understand—nothing acerbic—just a mere difference of opinion so far as I was concerned.

“We both left the office at the same time,” Boyce continued, “after I had put up a card in the door saying, ‘Closed Temporarily till Further Notice.’ I locked up, and we parted then, Grandfather saying he was going over to see the Horticultural Exhibit in Bronx Park which opened that morning, for—”

“What,” queried the lawyer, “made your grandfather so interested, ever and always, and so well versed, in flowers, vegetables and grains? He was always going to all sorts of agricultural exhibits.”

“The fact, I suppose,” Boyce ventured, “of his having himself grown up on a farm. Coupled, of course,” he added, a bit sourly, “with his eternal interest in practically everything in the Universe except his own real-estate business, which he really operated, you know, just to keep an old man’s name alive and active, and—I’ll admit—to give me a respectable job.” He waited politely to see whether there were to be more interruptions, then went on with his story. “Well, Grandfather told me goodbye and told me to wire him only in case the chap failed, for any reason, to deliver the affidavit. After which, I went on over to the bungalow to see Josiah. For Josiah, let me explain, thought he had a long lost sister in San Francisco, and wanted me to look her up for him; and I wanted to get from him all

possible leads he had to her. The leads were very slight— I may anticipate a bit here and say that I found her all right!—only she’s been dead 30 years! All right. But, over there at the house, Josiah asked my advice on another matter. A matter concerning—”

Boyce paused a second, to get at his facts from the right end thereof, then continued with his story.

“It seems,” he went on, “that a new Negro had come in on that block facing the park—some old fellow, far, far older than Josiah, and who was acting as houseman or valet or something to some new residents. And this old fellow had fastened on poor Josiah to bait. It seems that, old as he was, he considered himself very much a chicken— wore a loud checked suit, a big glass diamond pin, sporty yellow shoes, and acted like a colt, trying to win the affections of all the yellow girls who work as servant girls along that quaint street facing the park. Josiah had, unfortunately, led with his chin, early in the game, by chiding die sporty old coon and saying to him, with a sniff, ‘W’y you don’ leab all dem young gals alone?’ The old sport had come back at Josiah so quick it had taken Josiah’s breath away; for the ancient roue had said, as near as I can figure it out: ‘Go blow yo’ tin trumpet elsewhah, yo’ moronic quatah-wit’—to which, Josiah, being, as you probably know, an old-fashioned Negro, and very slow-witted, couldn’t think of a single comeback. And every time, after that, that the sporty old Negro met Josiah, he handed Josiah some kind of a hot-shot. So Josiah wanted me to give him— Josiah—some sort of an all-round comeback to hand this old smart-aleck next time—and every time—the latter

dished out a crack. Well, I figured I knew just the proper comeback to ’most any sort of crack, and I had just finished saying, to Josiah, in the parlor there, ‘All right. You say to him, next time he hands you any kind of a hot-shot, this:—’ when the phone rang. ‘Hold ever’thing, Josiah,’ I said, ‘till I answer that call, and I’ll be right back in and give you your half-Nelson for this old Senegambian.’ With which I went to answer that phone. It was, however, a wrong number. But I was looking up at the hall clock as I answered it—my own watch had stopped, you see—and I was knocked galley west at the time, for I saw that I was going to miss my confounded train sure unless I got pronto over to diat subway—if not quicker. And so, grabbing up my handbag in the hall, out of the house I piled—like nobody’s business—like a hayrack on fire—without even saying hail, goodbye, nor farewell to Josiah. Leaving him, to all intents and purposes, waiting in the parlor for my words of wisdom. But, halfway up the block, a political sound wagon was going by, broadcasting some radio program, and just then its loud-speaking radio was giving the correct time. And I saw I was a full half hour to the good—I realized then that the confounded hour hand of that old hall clock must have gotten loose again—and had fallen by a half hour. So I turned and went back, in order to complete, for Josiah, what I had broken off. I hadn’t, it seems even drawn die door tight when I lammed out, so it hadn’t locked, and in I went—on my own steampower—went down the hall the half dozen feet or so to the parlor door, stuck my head into the parlor, saw Josiah’s reflection moving in the half- swung-open polished door of the back parlor where he’d

presumably repaired meanwhile to do something, and shouted out, loud enough for him to hear: ‘Nuts to you, you old fool!’ And went.”

“And,” the lawyer said, nodding gravely, “ ’twas, of course, your grandfather in that other room? And not Josiah? But how—when your grandfather had said—” “Yes,” declared Boyce sadly. “It was Grandfather. As I discovered a minute later myself. Though too late! He had evidently changed his mind about going to Bronx Park early, and had retraced his steps over to the house, but had come in the back way. And Josiah, as I also found out shortly, had gone out into the back yard. All of which I discovered only after I’d gone out again—the second time, that is—drawn the door to, and gone down the street. For, looking back, about a quarter block down, I saw Grandfather’s white head bobbing about in the back parlor window, and at the same time saw Josiah out in the back yard, in his shirtsleeves, doing something. At which I said to myself: ‘My God, I hope Grandfather didn’t think I was peeved about our little discussion, and said that to him?”’ “But why didn’t you go back,” demanded the attorney, “and explain?”

“I did! But couldn’t walk into the house, because the front door was locked. So I rang. But Grandfather wouldn’t open. I rang again and again, in fact. I saw him peering out through the thick lace curtains, but he wouldn’t open. So I knew he was angry as hell. And that, if I expected to make that train at all, I could do nothing but write him, on the way, and explain.”

“Well, did you?” asked the lawyer puzzledly.

“I did. In a penciled note, written on the train. Which, damn it, I found yesterday at my room on Waldo Avenue, after flying back in order to be at the funeral, returned as ‘No such street.’ For I’d had a mind slip, and written ‘Van Cortland Parkway.’ And the overly officious mail clerk who returned it to me on that mere technicality has cost me plenty.” He was silent.

The lawyer too. And regretfully so, plainly. Then he spoke.

“He came down, around 3:30 or 4 that afternoon, with blood in his eye. His spiritual eye, of course, I mean! As I’ve told you, however, I wasn’t here myself. But he found Alex in, and insisted on drawing up a will. And did! And named MacKinlock and MacKinlock, those private bankers who so often serve as estate auditors, bankers, and executors, as Administrators and Executors, since Alex, of course, told him we here meticulously refrain from that sort of thing because of the enmities it creates. And your grandfather deposited the original of his will, as now you also know, safe and tight, with MacKinlock Brothers late that same day.”

“And died 3 days later of coronary thrombosis?” mused Boyce Barkstone sadly. “I could scarcely believe it, when that wire finally succeeded in reaching me, night before last, in Frisco, at that second hotel I went to—why, I could hardly believe it yet even when I was aboard the plane fetching me back yesterday just in time for the funeral.” He paused, ruminating. “Hm? And he died but 3 days after his will? It seems almost as if Gran’ther had been prescient of his impending death.”

“Oh, he could have had some peculiar premonitory heart symptoms, possibly,” assented the lawyer undecidedly, as one who was not familiar with such matters. “Though obviously it was your hot-shot—directed, to be sure—ahem —to Josiah, for—for use against Josiah’s enemy—” There was the slightest hint of dubiety in his tone, which indicated he wasn’t sure yet but that Boyce had contrived an artful explanation of that incident in case Balhatchet Bark- stone had recounted it to Alex Plenderleith “—which sent your grandfather down posthaste to make that will. And— but by the way, you say, MacKinlock and MacKinlock took over yesterday as Administrators—I mean, of course, the real-estate business uptown there?”

“Oh yes—yes. Right after the funeral yesterday. I was just unlocking the door of the office there, thinking to do a little cleanup work, after my 5 days’ absence, when a couple of their representatives, accompanied by a deputy sheriff or something, and some court official, barged down on me. All armed, of course, with a court order. I turned over to them all the books and records—the bank book, showing money on deposit—an undeposited check—everything—offered to carry on free for a while—but they frowned me down—said they would put their own man in. So I took their receipts for every item—account book— journal—ledger—cash book—and was out. But gosh!—I thought I was ‘out’ only because they saw no reason for a hundred-thousand-dollar heir to be holding down a job that some poor man could use better.”

“Executors have a devil of a lot of power,” was all the lawyer would say. “Which is the reason Alex and I won’t function that way: enmities. But be it so.” He made a helpless gesture with his two hands. “Well, at least, Boyce, you won’t have to be made a fool of through any confounded newspaper stories, for MacKinstry MacKinlock’s brother, you know, is County Clerk—and the will, MacKinlock told me, was filed for probate day before yesterday without a single clerk knowing—nor a newspaper man. Not that MacKinlock and MacKinlock were thinking particularly of you—no!—such a sensational story would reflect unpleasant notoriety on them too, you see. And—anyway, the point is that when you’ve received your bequest—the actual act of which receiving might have made an interesting tabloid newspaper picture—any story that lies in the affair is dead.”

“My bequest?” echoed Boyce bitterly. “A handful of beans. We-ell, since Grandfather’s will so kindly specifies that my legacy may be handed me by you, or by Mr. Win- well, without the usual probate delay, may I have it, such as ’tis?”

“Why, of course,” said the attorney. “You’ve officially got it already, as far as we’re concerned. For it’s there in the bag—is the bag, in fact, on the table in front of you. Just sign this receipt—here—” He drew over a typed receipt. “Yes—right on that line. More or less a technicality, but it has to be filed by MacKinlock and MacKinlock, at the end of the year, in Probate Court. Yes—that’s okay—all right— and you have your legacy!”

“Which,” said Boyce Barkstone ruefully, “I shall now proceed to contemplate. What a pity the newspapers aren’t present, yes, no?”

Chapter III

THE RIGHT SOIL!

DOURLY, Boyce Barkstone reached out his hand for the little bag which contained all he was to receive from a man worth, he well knew, practically a hundred thousand dollars. But suddenly nearly there, he reached, instead, for the carbon copy of that i-page foolscap document which had awarded the bag’s contents to him.

“I think I’d like first,” he said dryly, “before the great event, to re-read, again, that paragraph which allots me my huge share of the Balhatchet Barkstone Estate. If, that is, you don’t mind?”

“Not at all,” said the lawyer sadly.

And so again, frowning because of a sardonic something in his grandfather’s words which he could not yet fathom, Boyce re-read that paragraph. Which ran:

And to my grandson, Boyce Barkstone, I leave a handful of beans, sealed in a tobacco sack, and left with the attorneys who drew this will, with the proviso that this bequest, having no intrinsic value, shall be given him immediately by my executors or its custodians, without necessity of his waiting the year of probate, and with the idea that perhaps he may find a good spot—the right soil, in short!—to plant all his beans in, where, growing simultaneously, they may grow him a valuable crop!

Boyce looked up ruefully.

“That ‘simultaneous’ business is, I’d say, rather laying on

the irony,” he commented. “Since how else would beans grow? By a stop-and-go system, with a starter? Or how?”

“Unfortunately,” replied Tydings, “I did not select your grandfather’s language. Alex said he dictated that paragraph himself.”

“I doubt it not,” commented Boyce. “It’s got all of gran’ther’s biting irony in it that I’ve seen him exhibit now and again. And it—” He broke off, with a sigh.

And then, shrugging his shoulders, shoved the paper away, and took up the cotton sack. Gloomily, he ground the wax-sealed neck of the sack against the edge of the glass desk top, and the wax crunched so that the string, twisted around the neck of the bag, became untwistable. In a second he had drawn open the neck of the bag, had frowningly poured forth the beans into his hand, thence rolled them lugubriously forth onto the glass top.

They were a dozen or so in number—16, in fact, as they came to rest—for they had fallen into little groups: two groups of four—two of three—and one of two. And—at least to Boyce Barkstone—brought out graphically the last shred of irony in his grandfather’s bequeathment of them, as to their being planted in one spot! Or, as his grandfather had elaborated, one soil! For they comprised not only many and various sizes of beans, but many shapes, as well, and embraced various colors, to boot, particularly in the case of one flamboyant huge gnarled specimen which suggested itself to be some sort of tropical rooster.

“We-ell, he gave me quite a nice assortment,” Boyce said ruefully. “I see at least a half dozen varieties amongst the crowd!”

The lawyer seemed to be trying to find some comforting answer in this comfortless situation.

And the best he seemed able to marshal was:

“Well—er—Boyce, that will at least add to the interest in finding the—er—particular spot that contains the particular soil where all can be planted! And—and grow.” “Oh—yeah?” retorted Boyce, a bit savagely. “Well, you’ve heard of the man who leaned over so far backward that he was facing frontward again? By that I mean, Grandfather may have had a hell of a swell orgy of being ironical, but he may have overlooked the fact that in so doing he— Now I’m no bean expert,” Boyce broke off, “but diat lima bean there is a Michigan product—if I know my Michigan, since I don’t know beans—while that little round black fellow there, now about to jump—there he goes!—”

“Yes, jumping bean—it’s the light from the window heating up one side of him.”

“Is it? Well, I’ve heard it’s due to a larva, deposited in that bean by some Mexican moth in Mexico where it originates.”

“Yes, I believe I’ve heard that too,” nodded Tydings. “But whatever the explanation, we’ll agree it’s a Mexican bean, not so? Indeed, I see that Mexico is quite well represented! For I see all the ingredients of a bowl of chili—if I mistake not!—but the meat. Those 3 red kidney beans there? So it looks at that, doesn’t it, as if you’ll have to harvest your crop to the Mexican army?”

“I can take it!” said Boyce dryly. “That well-meaning crack of yours, I moan! For I know you’re only trying to cheer me up a bit, the best you can. And why not? What’s

done is done. But when you even intimate I might harvest this crop to the Mexican army, I might point out one little beano here who doesn’t know Mexico, I’ll wager, because—” He held up a small round bean. “Do you know what kind of a bean this is?”

The lawyer shook his head. “No. Though I happen to know what kind of a bean this one is, though.” And he picked up the flamboyantly-hued gnarled one.

“Well, as I said,” Boyce remarked, “I don’t know beans— but this one in my hand is what’s known as an English dwarf bean—and I know that only because, when I visited England, I lived with a chap who grew them exclusively. But what kind of a bean is that peacock in your hand?” “That one,” declared Tydings, “I know, because my sister, who’s been to Australia, has a necklace of ’em. It’s d a Tonqua bean—of New Guinea. But of course, Boyce, the name attached to an agricultural product doesn’t mean anything other than where it was first named, and neither of us have disproved my facetious thesis at all. For Cortez may have brought that so-called ‘English dwarf bean’ from Mexico to England. While Captain Cook may have brought that New Guinea bean to New Guinea from Mexico, where it became ‘discovered’ and named long long after.”

“Yeah?” retorted Boyce. “But how’s about climates? And how’s about the fact that spring hits at different dates in either hemisphere? Now it strikes me that that ‘simultaneously’ in Grandfather’s will—that ‘a good spot’—singular, instead of plural—that ‘a valuable crop’—gives me a straightaway open-and-shut chance to—but first—first!—

before I—I make a fool of m’self—do you know anybody who knows anything about beans? About the growing of ’em, I mean? Their care? Their harvesting? Etc?”

“Why—yes,” was Oliver Tydings’ bewildered reply. “Abner Hopfear, supreme head of the Dutchess County Hothouses Association. He’s a practical world-expert who has laid out and conducted hothouses for potentates and millionaires all over the world, from India to Australia. A real dirt-farmer, though. You want to ask him something personally?”

“Right,” said Boyce Barkstone cryptically. “If you could get him on a wire. Could you?”

“Why, of course,” responded Tydings.

He looked into an indexed leather-bound notebook lying atop a desk-speaker at the rear of his desk—a book which evidently constituted a roster of past clients—and then raised his desk telephone, dialing it, as Boyce could see, for “Long Distance,” but reaching forward, as he did so, and switching on the desk-speaker so that Boyce could listen to the conversation—or, perhaps, so that he, Tyding, could later listen to Boyce’s!

Long Distance’s voice came back in the speaker, clear and decisive.

“Long Distance operator. What connection do you wish?”

“Millbrook, Dutchess County, New York. The number is Dutch-4791. Mine is Broadway 4-5391.”

“Don’t hang up,” the girl told him. “We have direct lines to the Dutchess County Hothouse—er—Dutch-4791. Hold the wire.”

Then, a second later:

“Here’s your party.”

Which party proved to be a young man, judging from the voice.

“Dutchess County Hothouse and Truck Farms talking,” he said.

“May I speak with your superintendent, Abner Hopfear?”

“We-ell, Mr. Hopfear’s pretty busy on the experimental far—but who is calling?”

“His attorney.”

“Oh—I see—hold die wire.” A pause, then a clicking, and the voice of a man which had in it the twang of a real dirt farmer came on—a voice whose enunciation almost proclaimed that its owner had straw sticking from his ears.

“Abnear Hopfear speakin’.”

“Abner, this is Oliver Tydings—yes—’way down in New York. I’ve a client here, Abner, who wants a little specialized information of some sort on the growing of—well, I fancy it’s on the growing of beans! Though I’ll put him on the wire—if you don’t mind. For I consider you the last word in the entire world on the growing of vegetables— and general vegeculture.”

“Why, shore I’ll give it to him,” said the man. “If I kin! Though I reckon I hain’t brung up vegytables and hothouse pro-ducts all over the world, fer 40 y’ars, an’ in 40 kentries, ’thout perhaps knowin’ a leetle bit. But put him on, an’ I’ll he’p him out best I kin!”

The lawyer extended the phone to Boyce. “Just use the transmitter end, as I did,” he said. “The box will respond

as a receiver.”

Boyce took the extended instrument avidly. For a curious idea was bouncing around in his brain. And he wanted to learn if—

“Mr. Hopfear,” he began, “Barkstone is my name. I’ve— I’ve a handful of assorted beans here—ver-ry assorted, when it comes to that—and I’ve made a bet of—of $500—that I can plant them all in one spot somewhere—in one patch of soil, that is, you understand?—and with perhaps some artificial fertilization, which isn’t—ah—prohibited by the terms of the bet—have them all sprout—grow—come up. And—but can you give me an idea where such a spot on the globe—containing the proper soil, that is—might be? And what sort of artificial fertilizer, if any, I might have to perhaps use, wherever such spot—such soil—might be?” The practical farmer laughed. “Wa’ll, yo’ng man—fer I see from yore voice yo’re yo’ng—an’ on’y a yo’ng man’d make sich a ’spensive bet ’thout asking his questions fu’st! —if they’s very many types o’ beans in that thar handful you got, yo’re a mite out o’ luck. Fer—but I—I take it ’at you got, mebbe, a black-eye bean—heh?”

“Why, yes—one of ’em does have a sort of black spot that, with the white of the bean, makes it look like a little black- eyed eyeball.”

“And some diff’ent kinds o’ kidney beans, heh?” “Different ki—we-ell—come to think of it—the kidney beans in this group are a bit different. One is—”

“Dark red, mebbe, heh? And one not so dark?”

“Well, I thought—”

“Yes, many does. Thinks ’at kidney beans’s jest kidney

beans! Have you got a big kidney bean, mebbe, what hain’t red at all?”

“Why, yes—I have—but I thought it was an albino.” “Wall, that’s what some has called it—th’ Albiny Kidney —on’y ’tain’t a albiny, at all, an’ shouldn’t orter be called that. Fack is, that thar bean has lots o’ names, and plenty more are give it by them what tries, ofiF an’ on, to grow it!” “I see,” nodded Boyce, trying to hold back some satisfaction in his voice. “Hard to grow, eh? Well, maybe I’ll be making up a few more names for it myself, when I’m growing it. For—anyway, continuing, I’ve got some English dwarf beans—that much I do know—”

“English dwarf? Cain’t say as I know o’ that bean.” “Never heard of—but you—Mr. Tydings said you were—”

“Yas—I am—a pract’cal grower o’ all what grows an’ kin’ be et—or used. But I hain’t no college perfessor. Ever’ bean has some ’ficial name—yes—but more times than not th’ ’ficial name hain’t ever used. Describe that ’ticler bean, ef you don’t mind. Fer I b’en to England—laid out a hothouse fer a rich man in Lancashire.”

Boyce described the bean, which was easy, since he’d lived once with a grower of it, and the bean itself now even lay before him.

“Oh—that ’un? We called that th’ Windsor bean—while the he’pers roun’ thar called it the Bally Broad Bean. Shore, I know that bean moughty well. As I say, I hain’t no perfessor, an’ I don’t know die Latin names—nor all the fool variants, as they is called—but I know the durned bean itse’f—be shore o’ that. Well, what else you got thar—what

you really know?”

“Well, I’ve got one that’s been identified by Mr. Tydings himself here as a Tonqua bean, if you know what that—” “Tonquas? Shore! Down in Australy they’re knowed more as New Guinees. But I b’lieve Tonqua is the ’ficial, legal, ’cepted name fer that ’un. I tried to bring some up fer a millionaire outside Sydney, but they seem to hanker atter that island o’ New Guinea lyin’ thar jest to the no’th.” “I see. Well, I’ve got a jumping bean, of Mexico—” “Oh, yeah? Wall, ef you was to consult a perfessor on that so-called ‘bean’, as I did onct, he’ll tell you as that that famous ‘jumpin’ bean’ hain’t no true bean at all! A fac’. Fer I axed a scientist ’bout that onct atter I’d noted, in a listin’ o’ beans I’d jest glanced over—a listin’ put out by the U. S. Department o’ Agryculture—that there little black jumper wasn’t ’eluded in the listin’!—and found also that ’twa’n’t in no dicti’naries I had around. And I foun’ that th’ jumpin’ bean, though it’s a seed, hain’t a real bean. Though, pshaw, ever’body does seem to call it a bean, don’t they? Like they calls the soy bean a bean—when, in act’yality, th’ ‘soy bean’ is a pea. A fac’! ’Pends, I ’sposc, them things, on what in tarnation blazes a ‘bean’ mought be said to be, heh? But now le’s see. You got any limy beans?”

“Yes—one. The only one I could identify right off die bat.”

“Yes. Wall, you—you got any Oley Olsons?”

“Oley Olsons?”

“Wa-all now,” said the other man troubledly, “I think they is called, in colleges, Swedish beans?”

“Well, what are—Oley Olsons—Swedish beans—or whatever the name should be—like?”

The other man gave a description, unusually detailed, unusually minute. And Boyce nodded as he gazed at those in front of him and saw two of such.

“Haow many kin’s o’ beans you got thar, alt’gether, youngster?”

“Well—now that you’ve pointed out that all kidney beans aren’t just kidney beans, I’ve—well—I’ve got—let’s see?— oh—about io or n kinds altogether, more or less.”

The other chuckled.

“Wall, Mr. Bettin’ Man, I’m sorry to say as that yo’ve lost yore bet han’s down. ’Tain’t jest, yo’ngster, the simple matter of a mere spot to sow ’em in—a mere patch o’ soil, as you’ve put it—an’ as mebbe yo’re bet has put it—an’ th’ makin’ o’ that patch o’ soil art’ficially fertile to accom’date th’ hull bunch—it’s a matter o’ climates—an’ soils ’ith diff’ent textures an’—an’ diffent ’mount o’ moisture—an’ ith di’ent av’ege temp’tures—an’ all that. Why, you got beans thar what’s abs’lootely anti-thety-cal to each other in th’ conditions under which they kin be planted—an grow. Now them thar Windsor beans you say you got, they won’t grow nohow ’cept in a foggy coldish sort o’ land. An’ how many places like that, ’sides England, air there? Oh—a few—yes. Now them Oley Olsons, they has to be growed in a no’then kentry like Sweden. Whar the days is sho’t. Don’t ask why! Fer I dunno. Fer the limy, Mich’gan’s the best, though they kin be growed all the way down to the Mason and Dixon line. Even fu’ther—though not in Mexico, y’ understand—no! That Tonqua has to be growed

in New Guinee—’r in places whar the climate is hot like ’tis thar. Meanin’ hot whar they’s mountings nearby to stir the air over ’em. And that kidney bean what hain’t got no color, that bean—which hain’t no albiny, but is a white kidney bean what’s knowed by lots o’ names—anyway, that bean is a problem in itse’f in growin’. Fer it—you see, yo’ng man, beans is the tarnationest critters they is in the hull world. They has to have a whole range o’ climates alone fer ’em even to come up. Some won’t show th’ noses o’ their derned pods ’cept’n it’s hot, dry an’ dusty; fer others, it has to be cold an’ dry; fer others, it’s got to be hot an’ moist; and fer others, cold an’ moist. Beans! Why, yo’ngster, they hain’t even no single hothouse, nowhar in th’ world, whar you could grow, under the same roof, no dozen specymens o’ beans as asso’ted as them what you got thar. They is one gentry on the globe—yes—whar you could grow ’em all. But no one spot o’ soil whar—”

“One country? One country—did you say?”

“One kentry, I said! But no single spot—no single patch o’ soil—nossir. That kentry, yo’ngster, is Chiny—whar ev’vy kin’ o’ soil an’ climate knowed kin be found, sence Chiny’s so big an’ extends so fur south and no’th—with some of it in mountings, some in swamp, an’ some near the sea. They ain’t no single spot—no bit o’ soil—in Chiny, whar all them beans—an’ all other beans diey is in th’ world—could grow. But they is that kentry, ef’n you kin git a few co’spondents, or local consuls, to sow them beans fer you, each in its own ’tic’ler ’propriate soil.” Mr. Abner Hopfear paused. “An’thing else I kin tell you?”

“That’s a-a-all I want to know,” said Boyce energetically.

“Thank you, Mr. Hopfear. That’s a-a-all I want to know! Good—bye.” And he hung up. And turned to the lawyer triumphantly.

“Well—you heard? My grandfather has given me a scientifically impossible task! He gives me the problem of sowing those beans in a soil—in a ‘spot,’ he even particularizes it—which permit them to grow and thrive simultaneously. His own word, too, that ‘simultaneously.’ All of which—as you heard—is absolutely impossible of accomplishment. Outside of sowing ’em all over China. But China—hell fire!—China isn’t a spot. China’s half the world! And parts of China are months removed from each other in seasons alone. A bean that would have to be sowed in the south of China would almost be geting harvested before—before one that had to be sowed in the north was out of the ground. Now, by gosh, you must admit I’ve found a way to qualify under that will. By breaking it! And inheriting, as I think I have a moral right to do, as Grandfather’s legal heir. What—what about it?”

And, exultantly, he waited Tydings’ answer.

Chapter IV

AN ALIENIST SPEAKS

THE lawyer regarded Boyce with a half-amused, half- pained expression on his face. Then, taking off his round tortoise-shell eyeglasses, and fastening them on his thumb, he half shook his head.

“My poor boy,” he said, “you’ve become so swept away by what looks to you like a brilliant legal idea that you can’t see that—well, you’re like a man who can’t see the beach because of the sea.” He was regretfully silent a moment. “Boyce, I would gladly ‘bust’ that will skyhigh for you, if that were possible, for that bunch of crackpots down there in Washington Square shouldn’t have jot nor tittle of that hard-earned money. But—” He made a helpless gesture with his glasses-pinched finger. “Nothing in your grandfather’s will, confound it, is contingent on your planting those beans. No further legacy—or phase of inheriting—or anything else—depends on your even sowing a single bean—or pair of such—much less successfully bringing one or two or more up. My partner Alex is one of the best drawer-ups of wills in all America—and Alex wouldn’t, in the first place, be guilty of even drawing up a will that held a loophole by which it might later be broken. And this will of your grandfather’s is a perfect example of Alex’s best! You can’t possibly break it, Boyce, on the basis you outline simply because nothing is made contingent on your use of the bequest in question. Your grandfather has but ‘suggested’—and ironically, of course—that such-and-so

might be a procedure to follow. He has left you those beans—yes—but only with the ‘idea’ of thus-and-so—but hasn’t made it imperative that you do anything with them but toss them into Long Island sound if you so wish. No, Boyce”—and unhappily he put his glasses back on the end of his nose—“I’m sorry to say—and I say it as one who would be glad to divert this money from those crackpots who think they prove social theories, but prove nothing— I’d be glad to abort it—if it could be. Don’t you think I studied all that out before you came down here this morning to hear an advance reading of it? There is—” He took off his glasses again. “—There is, Boyce, quite nothing whatsoever in this entire document by which you could break it other than, of course, the old, old ‘standby’—” he paused regretfully, as a man who hated even to mention the suggestion—“other than—insanity,” he finished, with tight lips.

Boyce Barkstone scratched his chin. “But damn—I wouldn’t bring an insanity charge against a sane man for— for ten times a hundred thousand dollars. I accept your dictum about the—the hopelessness of my fool idea of trying to break Grand’ther’s will on the impossibility of his bean-sowing suggestion. I—I was too carried away to see what you’ve correctly pointed out. But about—about calling him screwey—hell fire!—of course, after all, I’m no alienist, you know—there might, after all, have been some screw loose in poor Grandfather—I saw only one side of him. Which—damn it—seemed a hundred-percent sane. But— but if there was a screw loose—then—then, damn it, I think I’ve more right to his money than that fool Academy

for the Proving-up of Social Theories, I take it?”

“Yes, they’re the screwiest outfit in New York,” said the lawyer tight-lippedly. He was studiedly silent. “Well,” he mused aloud, “there’s a quick way to find out—what you suggest, I mean. About your grandfather’s mental status. Even more, about what the nature of the expert testimony would be—if your grandfather’s mentality were attacked. I can—will, in fact—call up Dr. Lanway Aveyard, the psychiatrist—the best in the United States!—who knew your grandfather well. For they were members of the same club, you know. The Philosophers’ Club, on 39th Street. Not that everybody in it is a philosopher—God, no!—I know one reformed bootlegger is in it, though he has a yen for philosophy! And everybody likes hi—anyway, be assured that I am a really neutrally-minded individual in this matter, Boyce, because there’s nothing in my pocket whether you got Balhatchet’s money—or old Josiah—or the Academy for the Poof-Whoof-Whoof—or the Society for Examination of Dog Skulls, which society, believe it or not, actually exists in New York. Aveyard may know something that he keeps to himself, inasmuch as he’s never been consulted by your grandfather. And if it were detrimental to your grandfather’s mental status, he may drop a hint—could be safely subpoenaed then as a wit— ITowever —here goes!—we’ll see. I know him fairly well. We’ll find out!”

Again he raised the telephone that was connected to the now turned-on desk speaker.

And dialed it, though without looking, this time, either in his private indexed address book, or even the telephone directory, for any number. A girl’s voice—presumably a reception-room girl—answered. The lawyer spoke. “This is Attorney Oliver Tydings—and do you think you could put me onto Dr. Aveyard at once, or—or am I in consultation hours?”

“Oh my, no,” the girl replied. “That is, I mean that consultation hours won’t begin till this afternoon. Indeed, Dr. Aveyard hasn’t even started out yet for his morning’s work at the sanitarium. He’s going over some case histories of patien— Now I’m new here, so I— Mr. Tydings, you say the name is?— I think that will be all right, but will you just hold the wire, please?”

A few seconds elapsed; then a calm, judicial voice came on the wire. Rather, out of the desk-speaker. It was a voice that suggested the deepest and soundest judgment on the part of its owner. “Dr. Aveyard speaking,” it said. “Did I get it right—that this is Oliver Tydings?”

“Yes, Dr. Aveyard—Oliver Tydings. Say, Doctor, a matter has come up that—well, I’m not going to speak categorically now—but quite frankly—open-and-shut.

Doctor, you knew Balhatchet Barkstone very well, that I know, and so might I ask—or—or mightn’t I!—whether there was anything, in your estimation, wrong with him? Mentally, of course, I mean.”

“Oh-oh!” half-laughed die medical man. “Have you a will that you want broken?”

“Well, not I particularly. I’m just inquiring on behalf of a client.”

“Well, it’s a will, of course. Who wrote the will, if I might ask?”

“Alex Winwell, my partner.”

The other laughed. “You don’t think a mere alienist could break one of Alex WinwcH’s wills, do you?” But the voice grew serious. “Well, Oliver, I don’t know what it’s all about, but if you really want an answer, all I can say is that Balhatchet Barkstone was about the sanest man I ever knew. He had a sense of humor—dry humor—damned dry —yes—but with it a sense of extreme justice. I believe that if a man ever did him a wrong—or gave him an insult— he’d repay him in like measure to the finest degree; that is, if he owed a man a farthing but no more—he’d either find some way to split an American penny and pay him—or else he’d send to England to some numismatist and get the exact coin with which to pay off. And so, when it comes to the matter of his mental condition, Balhatchet Barkstone had nothing whatsoever wrong with his mind. He wasn’t even eccentric, as we alienists regard that much-abused word. The only thing that might set him off from other men might be the originality of his thought. I considered— so did Doctors Hanse and Lewell, both psychiatrists like myself—that the lecture Balhatchet Barkstone gave at the Philosophers’ Club, a month or so back, embodied the most amazingly unique concept ever arrived at.”

“What—what was die lecture?” asked Oliver Tydings, with what seemed, at least, to be a note of desperate legalistic optimism.

“Why, the subject of it was—” And the medical man called off slowly: “ ‘Continuation of Proclivities and Talent the Only True Basis for Calculating Legal Family De- sccndancy.’ Its thesis was, of course, that when family

proclivities—and talents—die, or become so diluted that they no longer are recognizable—or expressed—that an outsider who possesses qualities, or proclivities, or like talents, is in actuality a closer heir than the one who is an heir-at- law or a so-called ‘blood descendant.’ ” The alienist paused. “He specifically objectified his main thesis by pointing out certain great fortunes that have been made here in America alone by certain inventors of new food products—new games—even, in one case, a fortune-telling device—even, of all things, a certain device of wheels and discs which, it is said, helps authors to construct plots—it was a phase of our industrialism in which he appeared particularly interested —yes, that fortunes are garnered from such simple ideas— anyway, he showed concrete example after concrete example of how certain inheritors of A-i brains of that type have failed utterly to improve the family-invented product, be it a food, or be it a game, or be it what it may be, while mere office boys and porters in the same businesses had improved the products vastly, and even added better ones. And, he asked point-blankedly, who, from the point of view of such benefits as accrue to those who consume such products, were the real and logical heirs of a business of that type?” The alienist paused again. “Of course, his general thesis would be mighty difficult to put into practical application and execution—certainly, when you get away from such concrete fields as foods, games, and so forth— though the practical application of his thesis is not entirely impossible, eventually perhaps, in a few hundred years, when, say, specific talents can be actually measured by machines, as even Balhatchet suggested roughly. His lecture

was, of course, in the main, but an advocacy of the thesis embodied—and frankly indicated that perhaps only in a hundred years, at best, might the psychological machinery for setting it into practical application be set up.”

“And you say, Doctor, that two other alienists heard that lecture?”

“Yes, myself—a member of the Philosophers’ Club—and my two guests. And a Matteawan State Hospital cub, named Doctor Peedard, who was a guest of one of my guests. Later, we all had a session over some Scotch and soda. And our unanimous dictum was that only the sanest man in America could have given that lecture and remained—in our opinions!—sane, as did Balhatchet Bark- stone. That is to say, we all agreed he was the most logical reasoncr, the clearest thinker, we had ever heard.”

“Wc-ell—thanks, Dr. Aveyard. I—I presume that in a court contest, you—and these two physicians—and the— the insane asylum cub—would all testify that way?”

“How else could we?” queried Aveyard. “Believing as we do. And how else would we, having all put ourselves of mutual record, as it were, over our Scotches and soda?” “Hrmph—yes—perhaps.” The lawyer seemed to be casting about. Then came a sudden shrewd question, as Boyce Barkstone, listening attentively, realized. “Have you ever, Doctor, examined Balhatchet Barkstone neurologically in your office? I mean for—”

“I get it!” laughed the other. “Yes, I have. And not long ago. He had a touch of neuritis. I went all over him, including the usual psychiatrical tests which might bring out whether it might have been a psycho-neurosis.

He was also a hundred-percent normal in that office examination, and eventually we found that the neuritis rose from an abscessed tooth.”

“Yes,” grunted Tydings. “Well, one last question, Doctor, and I’ll let you go. Has anybody rung you, and asked you where you stood on Mr. Barkstone, since Mr. Bark- stone’s death—or since his burial—anybody, that is, connected with—ahem—the Academy for the Proving of Soc—”

“Yes, there has. Tutwilliger Maynard, of our Philosophers’ Club, did. He is a member of that crowd down there. And he indicated that he’d learned, from some firm of professional executors, that there was a little bequest left them.”

‘‘Little bequest is right!” grunted Tydings. “We-ell, thanks, Doctor, for your time, and now I’ll say goodnight—”

“And goodnight to you, Oliver—even though ’tisn’t even near noon yet,” the alienist laughed.

Oliver Tydings hung up disgruntledly, and revolving partway about again in his swivel chair, gave a peculiar gesture with his hands.

“Well, Boyce, that’s that! You heard everything. If Lany- way Aveyard says your grandfather was sane, then your grandfather is—or was—saner than either of us two put together! For Aveyard’s known as The Man Who Can’t Be Bought!—simply because he’s known as a man who never takes a fee for testifying in court cases. Juries believe him implicitly because of that fact. I would say, therefore, what I already suspected: that you can’t break

Balhatchet Barkstone’s will on the score of mental weakness. And as for the mere eccentricity apparently involved— in the absence, I mean, of his motive in leaving you those beans, known only to you and to me!—well, eccentricity itself appears to be no stigma, at least here in America, denoting mental weakness or incompetency. And even worse, as you heard from Aveyard’s own statement, those crackpots down in Greenwich Village have learned already that he’s ready to testify in a direction that will uphold their inheritance of your grandfather’s estate completely.”

Boyce said nothing. For there was nothing to be said. And a long silence fell between the two men.

It was broken, at length, by Oliver Tydings.

“Well, do you want your beans, or shall we toss ’em into the cuspidor?”

“Heck—no!” retorted the younger man savagely. “I’d keep ’em—if for nothing else than to lay out in front of listeners when I’m an old man, and say: ‘These, gentlemen, are what I received from my grandfather in the long, long ago; me—his legal heir—his only blood relative— back in 19-umpty-um—and then I’ll relate the sad tale.”

“Which,” pointed out the lawyer sagely, “they won’t believe. So what?”

“Well,” laughed Boyce, but quite mirthlessly, “if you really think that—and that gives me a real idea!—I’ll just have ’em read the story for themselves—by asking them to read the clipping.”

“Story? There isn’t going to be any story, as I told you,” the lawyer pointed out. MacKinlock and MacKinlock have provided there be none here, through their brother being

Probate Court Clerk.”

“Oh—yeah? Well, MacKinlock and MacKinlock—who already have acted rather nasty in the brusque way they took over last night, are going to have another think coming! For they haven’t, you see, reckoned on me. Sure! For I’m going to plant those damnfool beans this afternoon— and on Grandfather’s grave, right in the cemetery. No fooling! And when the caretakers rush down on me and ask me what I’m planting—and I show ’em beans!—and then they ask me what right I have to plant beans in a cemetery—I’ll quote from his will—especially his idea of ‘the proper soil’ to make them all come up!—and point out: what more logical soil could I select than Gran’ther’s own sifted rich covering? And I’ll refer ’em to MacKinlock and MacKinlock—and the cemetery’ll be full of police in a minute—reporters, too!—and still I’ll stand firm on the principles at issue. Wadda story! With pictures of me sowing the beans—the grave—maybe old Josiah, the family servant who didn’t get forgotten—maybe MacKinlock and MacKinlock, too! Anyway, then I’ll have, won’t I, for my hearers—in the year Umpty-Ump to come—the whole story from A to Izzard? And can say to them: ‘Read it and weep’?”

“Oh, Boyce, surely you wouldn’t—”

But Boyce Barkstone, with teeth set, was already meticulously gathering up his beans, and putting them equally meticulously into their bag. In order to plant them, one and all, that afternoon, in Woodlawn Cemetery, exactly as he had just proclaimed he was going to do!

Chapter V

A GIRL WITH AUBURN HAIR

ONCE downstairs, on Broadway, however, Boyce did not board the subway which would take him directly up to Woodlawn Cemetery. That, he told himself grimly, would be a little affair for this afternoon! Instead, he boarded the Broadway subway there at 47th Street, and settled down glumly for an equally long ride northward. But to Van Cortlandt Park. And a certain place ahead of that! After a while, his train emerged from the tube; rapidly New York continued to shrink vertically as he rode northward; soon he was at 168th Street, where houses and stores were newer and smaller—a region that but a few decades ago had been prairie. He did not, however, ride all the way to the Van Cortlandt Park terminus station at 242nd Street, across from which, housed in its little i-story orange- brick structure, stood the real-estate office, with its bright new desks and furniture, that had given him employment now for 5 years, and a few blocks from which—in Waldo Avenue—was the lavender-papered cubicle with brass bed where he roomed. Instead, he got off at 231st Street— third station ahead of the terminus—and with face set, made his way over to where Albany Crescent intersected Kingsbridge Terrace—both new neat little curved bungalow-populated streets; and, rounding the first corner, stopped in front of a red brick bungalow which was his destination, but which he was not going to have to enter!

For the precise party he wished to see was out on the

lawn, her back, however, to the street, a sunbonnet swinging from one petite arm, so that her beautiful copper-red hair gleamed in the morning sunlight—in the other hand, a shears with which she was trimming the rosebushes that stood by the front porch of the house.

Carmine Jeleffe! Whom, a few days ago, he had intended to marry—and who believed implicitly that they were going to marry. But who now would have to be told—

“Boyce!” she exclaimed, as, turning casually, she caught sight of him. She dropped her shears carefully, point down, in a loop in her sea-green gardening dress, and came over to the tiny low hedge marking the junction of yard and sidewalk. “To find you here, in the morning, of all times, is surprising.”

“Why not?” he said. “I’m not just a veteran without a war—but I’m a man without a job! The Executors, you know, took over the business last night, for auditing and liquidating and all that.”

She looked at him, a bit startled. “We-ell, of course they would have to do that, wouldn’t they? Then won’t you come inside—gentleman of leisure? Mother and Father went over to Brooklyn early today, and from sheer boredom I came out and tried my luck at improving Nature. In these rosebushes.”

“No, darlin’,” he told her solemnly. “Not today. I’ve got a number of errands to complete, and so won’t be coming in today. Though, so far as that goes, I’ll probably never again be coming in on any other day either.”

“Never again be coming in?” Carmine’s deep brown eyes were full of utter bewilderment. “On any other day either?” she repeated. “Why, darlin’, have I offended you in some peculiar way?”

“Heavens no, hon’,” he assured her. “Never that.” His own face grew weary. “Carmine, I’ve just come from Grandfather’s attorney. And I won’t be able to go dirough with our marriage now.”

“Oh,” she returned, plainly thinking he was joking, “walkin’ out on me—heh?—now that you’ve inherited a hundred thousand dollars?”

“No,” he said unhappily. “Never walking out on you. And besides, I didn’t inherit the hundred thousand. Nor even any thousands. I’m—I’m left out of the will.”

“Well, thank God,” was all the girl said. “Now I can prove to Father what I always told him: that if I ever wanted to marry a poor man, I’d marry him. How soon shall we advance the date, now that you’ve inherited nothing?”

“You’re sweet,” he returned. “The kind of a girl that comes only once in a lifetime. But just the same, our marriage is affected—seriously. So much so, darlin’, that it’s off! And besides, I didn’t inherit ‘nothing’—I inherited something. A handful of beans.”

“Beans?” she echoed, astounded.

“Beans,” he said quietly. And, withdrawing his bag, loosed the string and poured them in his hand for her to see. She stared at them, flabbergasted.

“Was—was your grandfather angry with you?”

“I’ll let you answer that,” he told her, “when you’ve heard the story. Come—I will go into your house—as far as its front steps!” ^

Manifestly hopelessly puzzled, she accompanied him over to the steps, and dropped down at his knees, on the step below that on which he seated himself. A couple of children running a kiddy car hove into view. “H’lo, Miss Jelly,” said one, as they sailed past.

She waved a hand, and turned attentively to Boyce.

And, pouring back his beans from his clenched fist into their cotton receptacle, and replacing it in his breast pocket, he told her all of what he had told Oliver Tydings.

And finally reached the end, with a curious gesture of his two hands.

“Well, Boyce ol’ boy,” was her relieved comment, “I am sorry for you—really—because I know you did want one fling, anyway, at being wealthy. Now me—I’ve had all that, hon’, down there on Riverside Drive, before Father lost all his money, and I tell you, honestly, it isn’t worth the having. So much so do I know that, that I’m going to start hunting us a walk-up flat downtown this very afterno—”

“But wait!” he said gravely. “I—I can take that not having a hundred thousand simoleons to blow—that isn’t so killin’—but—you see you haven’t heard all yet! We can’t marry for the same reason that—well, that I just won’t be coming inside this house any more after today. Because, in short, I’ll either be a fugitive from justice, or out on bail from a criminal charge, or worse, in jail—if nobody cares to bail me.”

“Boyce!” Her red lips fell open. “Boyce? You—you didn’t steal anything, did you, from the receipts of your grandfather’s business?”

“Gosh no,” he groaned. “As I’ve already assured Tydings. But you haven’t asked—nor did Tydings, and I’m glad he didn’t—what was the cause of Grandfather’s and my little argument, that day I last saw him. Yes, the day we locked up the place, and I came over to the house to see Josiah a minute. Well, it was this. The Donnweils, up above Van Cortlandt Park there, took advantage of the clause in the mortgage that the Balhatchet Barkstone company had on their estate, to prepay it. They came into an inheritance, you see: and they came in that morning and paid it smack off. With $7000. $2000 in certified checks, and $5000 in cash. Grandfather, as I told you, was in there that morning too, right after they’d left, and he insisted on appropriating the currency. So I asked him for a receipt for it. He got very peeved—asked me since when the owner of a business had to account to himself, like a $io-a-week clerk, every time he went to the—er—washroom.”

“But that wasn’t right,” protested the girl. “For after all, that business was one in which you are the recorded manager and treasurer; and even under bond for all the money you handled. And—and your grandfather’s business will be audited?”

‘‘Is being audited—right this minute,” said Boyce sepul- chrally. “And the books and records will show I should have $5000 more assets than I have. Cash assets, at that! I haven’t the ghost of a receipt to show I ever gave that money to Grandfather. The outfit down on Washington Square to whom he’s left his estate will demand it from my bondsmen, and will get it. My bondsmen, in turn, will send .me to jail. So there you are. Can you dope out an answer to that one?”

Now the girl’s face was grave. “My God, Boyce, that— that is a terrible contretemps. Didn’t your grandfather ever think of the possibility of his dying suddenly and unexpectedly?”

“Who does?” Boyce asked sagely. “Like everybody else in the world, he evidently figured, at best, that he would die only eventually. And because of that little possibility made a will that cut me off. And the existence of that will oddly is due to the identical incident which I’ll be trying ineffectually to hand to a judge in explanation of how I happen to be short in my accounts—namely, Gran’ther’s grabbing off that five thousand smackers without a receipt. For I came back to the house that morning, as I told you, to give Josiah that wisecrack; Gran’ther heard it; thought

1 was boiling about the dispute about his own money. And so cut me off.”

The girl drooped visibly.

“And are you still bonded with that Lower New York Bonding Company?”

“Yes. For $25,000.”

“Urn—that’s awfully bad, Boyce. The head of that company, as I know from Father having gotten so much business for them—including your original first bonding—is Aaron Smeltz. And he’s—he’s a terror! He sent a young secretary of the Fulton Street Fishmarkets, Inc.—whom his firm had bonded, and who was short but $50—to jail for

2 long years. He’s a terror, Boyce. So much so that Father quit all dealings with him 2 years back.” She put a hand on his arm. “Listen, darling, can’t you destroy the books of

the real-estate business?”

He smiled mirthlessly. “Commit a felony? However, books—bank account—undeposited checks—even $5.63 petty cash on hand—were all taken over late yesterday by Mac- Kinlock and MacKinlock, named Executors of Grandfather’s will. The books are probably being audited right now; and, being damned simple—if you don’t mind my frank expression—the excellent way / kept them, MacKinlock Freres will be asking me any minute ‘how’s about it’!”

“MacKinlock and MacKinlock,” she repeated. “Now wait! I know the confoundest tattletale who ever existed in the business world, and she works for them. Maisie de Long. Though ’twon’t be for long, for Maisie tells everything she knows. Listen—I’m going to give her a ring, ask her ‘what’s new in her business’—and if any piece of scandal has broken in that office, she’ll spill it to— Now wait, Boyce.”

She rose, and went into the house.

He waited dejectedly, tapping the porch step with the toe of one foot. The kiddy car with the two children—a girl and a boy—flashed past the house again. He grinned at the two faces that smiled at him as they raced past. He liked kids—girls or boys—boys or girls—he’d always wanted one of one or the other; had expected, thanks to marrying Carm—

He sighed.

And now Carmine was back, her face pained.

“My goodness, hon’, I did get an earful! Maisie says the firm has just discovered a horrible discrepancy in some

assets on an estate and is trying to locate the thief to question him. As they doubt that the final inventory, comprising only furniture, will bring that much to light.”

“Inventory?” he repeated. “Oh yes, of course. Inventory. That means they’ll be out to Gran’ther’s house in anything from another hour to a few hours to 24 hours. To inventory every stick of furniture in it! Every objet d’art. Every item. So as to be ready to realize every cent for the estate. For many objects won’t go to Josiah—not being technically ‘furniture.’ Though even if they did, they have to be listed and tied up a year.”

She was looking at him questioningly.

“Tied up for a year?” she was repeating. “By inventory? Then that book I loaned you, Boyce—and which you said, last Friday, was still on Josiah’s bookshelf where you’d left it off—will be inventoried as part of your grandfather’s estate.”

“You mean, of course,” he parried, “that book of Chinese Wisdom?”

He felt shamefaced, but tried to conceal it.

“Of course,” she said. “What other book could I have mean— Boyce, you’re floundering. Does that mean that you haven’t read it yet?”

“I did not, alas,” he said gruffly, “read it. I confess all. That I took it from your pretty hands with much and many promises that I would read it—or read at least as much of it as you had, which was a fraction of it, as I recall it— and put it, wrapped and tied in the original paper you yourself got it in, on Josiah’s shelf when I stopped off there that night, because cleaners and decorators were due

next day in my own room on Waldo Avenue—and I never, never took the book down again. Tis still there on Josiah’s shelf as I left it.”

“But, darlin’, we must get it back. For after all, it isn’t even mine. It was only entrusted into my care, as I told you, by Uncle McDolphus of—yes, we must get it back. For after all, Uncle McDolphus warned me, ever so solemnly, when he entrusted it to me—he was moving, you see, and had stopped off at our place after coming from wherever he bought it—well, he warned me that under no conditions was I to let it get away from me. Just why, I haven’t the remotest idea. Unless it’s a work that’s out of print or something like that. But he did warn me, all right, all right, about not even letting it out of my own collection of books.” Now she looked a bit pained. “I, of course, being a woman, unwrapped it and peeked at it, found what it was, and then—then I loaned it to you. And now—well, we must get it back, Boyce. For Uncle McDolphus wouldn’t have—” She said no more.

“Yes, I understand,” he acceded grimly. “For a man named Hutchcock McDolphus certainly must know darned well what he wants, and why he wants it, and would— well, I suppose if he knew right now who had his so valuable book, I’d be the one he’d name, right off the bat, in a game of Who-I’d—assuming a man named Hutchcock McDolphus would ever descend to playing Who-I’d. For—”

“Boyce! What are you talking about? Game of Who-I’d? What-”

“Oh,” he deprecated, “an asinine game sweeping New

York just now. It starts out simply enough, with your answering a self-propounded question consisting simply of ‘—who I’d like most in the world to meet personally’—but later—•”

“That ought to be easy,” she pronounced calmly. “Everybody in the world has one person they want most to meet.”

“Yeah?” he said. “Just try to think of such in a group, when the next step in the fool game is—but all right— who would you like most in the world to meet personally? Now me, I’d like to meet the woman who loved Hitler.”

“In heaven’s name, why her—assuming she even exists?”

“Just to see what she found in the world’s worst-hated man—to ask her what she thinks of him today, now that he’s merely history, and a plenty bad greasy smudge on it— just to—but all right. I was purposely giving you umpty minutes to think—and now I’ll wager you still can’t say who you’d like most in the world to meet personally. Answer fast!”

“Muriel Ordway, the opera singer,” the girl replied promptly, sighing.

“Muriel Ordway, the opera singer?” he repeated. “Never heard of her, but then op’ry’s not my meat. Well, why Muriel Ordway? When there’s millions of other people in die world? Why—•”

“Why?” the girl breathed. “Just a matter of a little-girl dream, that’s all—of a beautiful woman who sang even when I was a child—a woman who looked like a—a combination of an angel and a fairy-queen—whose intelligence came right over the very footlights, and—but my chances of ever, ever, ever meeting her are nix, nil, and nihil—

and—well, where do we go from here in the game?”

“We play no games today,” he replied gruffly. “With inventoriers scheduled to descend on Grandfather’s estate. For the only way to get back that book of your uncle’s— without barrels of red tape—and then, maybe never—is to get it back before Grandfather’s estate gets inventoried— before the Executors’ men pounce on it there, and finding the book all wrapped and tied, figure it to be a valuable item and list it as part of Grandfather’s estate. And get it back I shall—if only for the reason that I’ll need it.” “You’ll need it?” she asked wonderingly.

“Right! Because the name of the book, I think you said, was ‘The Way Out’? And I’m sure as shooting that within 24 hours I’ll be on the inside of six stone walls—rather, 4 stone walls, a cement floor, and a cement ceiling—waiting for somebody to go my bond only so that I can go to trial later for embezzlement. Yes, I’ll need a ‘way out’ all right!—far worse than you need a ‘way in’ to the acquaintanceship with your super-hyper-goddess, Muriel Ordway! I’ll need the way out, in short. So goodbye, darlin’—” He leaned over and kissed her. “I go now to rescue the precious tome. And I’ll see you—in court!”

Chapter VI

VOICES THREE

THE pink-shirtsleeved, sallow-faced, jet-haired man lying on his back on the couch-bed, in his bizarre living quarters in upper New York, a small cold-water compress across his eyes—migraine!—felt like a disembodied spirit in a great black void holding conversation with 3 other disembodied and quite invisible spirits. At least he would have felt thus, if he could have expressed himself in this way. But conversation with the spirits in this case went smoothly enough—invisible though they were to the man on the couch. For the reason that—

Indeed, the man on the couch, patting the compress a bit tighter over his eyes, was himself speaking, in a low voice.

“So his line’s busy, eh? Because of talkin’ long-distance with Chi? Well, that means he’s making his res’vations at the Palmer House there. So ever’thing is set now f’r the Snatch. All right, then. Any questions? Before we got to begin keepin’ quiet again around here? Fire ’em—if any of you has any.”

And now, out of the black void caused by the tight compress on the jet-haired man’s eyes, came a voice from one of the disembodied spirits.

“I ask vun. Subbose dot dot voman she goes to der air- fielt to zee him off? Afder she hass b’en off-ge-put?”

“Why, you Heine thick-head,” snapped the man on the couch-bed, toward the so-thick voice, with all the irritability of a man feeling pains back of his eyes, “don’t you know wimmen can’t take cooriosity? Hell, a 40-mule team won’t be able to pull her there when she hears— Listen—if you want to lay part of your share of the ransom dough she won’t be there, I’ll take you—any amount. No, that’s in the bag. Next?”

Now a new voice broke in.

“I ask wan, Boss. Eeez thees: What eef he no can get ras’vations at that Palmer ’Ouse? Then we gonna be up the—”

“Aw hell, you dago idiot—don’t you know this ain’t wartime no more? Hell, Chi’s lousy with hotel space. The hotels slug you at the dee-po to get you to stay with ’em. He’s only reservin’ so’s to get somethin’ de-luxy. No, ever’- thing’s okay there. Next? P’fessor?”

The voice that now answered was in some ways an educated and finished voice—but, whether or no, was completely minus any trace of an accent.

“I’m happy to say that I have nothing—at least at this juncture.”

“Okay,” said the man on the couch-bed quickly, and with considerable asperity. “Then maybe I c’n ask one! Of all o’ you. Here ’tis: What time do op’ry stars get t’ hell out o’ bed ev’ry day?”

“About now, Chief,” came the same finished voice that had spoken last. “All members of the histrionic world rise about this hou—”

“His—trionic world. Jesus, P’fessor—you slay me! Histr— but okay. For I was only tryin’ to inkle to you, in the absence of a spiked club by my side here, that the moment has come f’r you to do your stuff. Yeah, on the phone there. So call this Muriel Ordway, warbler, now, and pull your gag as you never pulled nothing before. Because on the success of how you put it over this sugar-throated dame in the high mazuma depends this hundred-grand snatch. All right, P’fessor—ring her up now—and do your stuff!”

Chapter VII

CALLING MR. BOYCE BARKSTONE!

BOYCE BARKSTONE, swinging open the hand-hammered bronze gate set in the low but modernistic wrought-iron fence facing green Van Cortlandt Park in Upper New York City, estimated that he must have made the distance from Carmine Jelelfe’s bungalow home on Knightsbridge Terrace in no more than n minutes flat! Afoot though he had been.

For his watch, its crystal seemingly trying to hurl the sun, nearly overhead, back into his very eyeballs denoted the time to be but 25 minutes after 11. He hoped devoutly that he wasn’t going to find the house back of that gate— his grandfather’s!—already full of executors, appraisers, and whatnot, coolly listing Carmine Jeleffe’s Uncle McDolphus’ precious book, The Way Out, as part of Balhatchet Bark- stone’s estate, and refusing to give it over for any reason whatso—

But now inside the gate, and stepping into the short entrance path, Boyce faced the odd one-story habitation itself, which his grandfather had constructed but 5 years before. A stone house it was, made entirely of artfully mismatched stones, all cemented together by brilliant green cement which looked exactly like moss; already countless offers had been made for that little house, ranging up to twice its original cost. Rather lucky, old Josiah, Boyce reflected a bit enviously, to have the entire exclusive use, as caretaker, of this cool little place for the summer—in-

deed, to be exact, for the entire year of probate to come. Now, facing the round-topped maple door, Boyce rang. And waited. Listening hard for sounds, from within, of appraisers! And executors. And—

Josiah himself, his kinky hair quite grey, answered the door. He was in his shirtsleeves—a brand new crisply- starched green-striped shirt it was, too. A towel was around his black neck, and a razor in his hand; and a dab of suds on his chin, which looked like a venerable goatee, showed he had been shaving. And proved, in a sense, that the house was executorless and appraiserless quite! Though Josiah’s ensuing words established that fact completely.

“W’y hullo dah, Mist’ Boyce,” he exclaimed. “Ah suah is glad dat you come ’round. Mah goo’ness—but it awful lonesome since I hatter lib heah alone.”

“Well, you don’t have to, Josiah,” said Boyce, stepping inside. “According to Grandfather’s will—and I understand Attorney Tydings has talked to you on the phone about it?—you have the privilege of staying here, which ought to save you a bit of rent. I suppose,” he added facetiously, as Josiah closed the hall door, “that you’ve already moved— bag and baggage—into the best room in the place, eh? The parlor?”

“De pahlah, Mist’ Boyce?” said Josiah, wide-eyed, for Josiah was one who never had a sense of humor. “Law’ sakes no! Whahfo’d Ah move mah tings into de pahlah? I des’ keepin’ mah li’l room whut I had—da’s plenty ’nough good fo’ ol’ me.”

“We-ell, Josiah, I’ll go on back there, if you don’t mind. So’s that if those inventoriers and appraisers barge in on us, I won’t be charged with loitering on odier people’s premises.”

“Ah don’ quite get whut yo’ mean, suh,” said Josiah, painfully helpless. “An’ who you mean by invento’iahs bargin’ in on us? An’ whut you mean by—but go ’haid. I’ll whop dis last whiskah off’n mah chin, wipe off mah face—den I’s done, and I’ll be j’inin’ you.”

So Boyce threaded his way back through the comfortable house to the little room off the kitchen. And it was, indeed, a very little room. The old mahogany four-poster bed which his grandfather had, in a manner of speaking, “given” to Josiah a couple of years back—but which was now officially Josiah’s, by actual bequest—standing in one corner away from the window, with, however, a vivid Negro quilt atop it, almost filled the room. The colorful rag rug which his grandfather had once had for a brief while in his sun parlor—and which Josiah had so admired —was on the floor. Josiah had always thought it to be just a cheap “niggah rug”—probably did today; but Boyce, who had been with his grandfather at Wanamaker’s when the latter had bought it, knew it to be made of bits of silks imported from Araby and woven together in France. It had moved quite naturally into Josiah’s realm, because, as Boyce also personally knew, Balhatchet Barkstone had deemed it too “confounded Ethiopian”; just as the mahogany four-poster had evidently moved in there because, as Balhatchet Barkstone had put it to his grandson: “The thing’s so big it swallows me at night like an amoeba swallowing a microbe!” A beautiful chiffonier, with glass handles, which—as Boyce remembered now so vhidly— his grandfather had discarded for a plain tier of mahogany drawers placed in front of a magnificent huge io-foot-high mirror, stood against one wall of Josiah’s small room— looking extremely lonely with only Josiah’s tinny alarm clock, thin 5-cent aluminum comb and io-cent-store brush atop it.

A small-sized kitchen table, with a stiff uncomfortablelooking kitchen chair in front of it, near the window, the table itself carrying an extension cradle phone, showed wherein Josiah had functioned as “secretary”—talking to those who called the house any time after Balhatchet Bark- stone had retired, and shut off the main phone—and a pad of gargantuan pink sheets on it, crossed by a huge pencil, revealed upon what Josiah used painfully to put down necessary names and telephone numbers. Sheets that now would never be used again!

After some consideration as to the hardness of that stiff chair, Boyce sat down in the one piece of furniture which Josiah had not received by either allotment, assignment, or bequest—the spring-rocker, made of gaudy striped awning cloth, which Josiah had brought - to Van Cortlandt Park with him; and within a surprisingly brief time Josiah was back, all cleanly shaven, tying a thick velvet tie, with yellow polka dots, under his striped green collar—seating himself, at the same time, on the side of the bed.

Boyce came straight to his point.

“What I specifically came here for, Josiah, is this: Inven- toriers and appraisers—that means men who list furniture and all items of every nature, and those who assign ’em a value—will be up here ’most any time—maybe in an hour —maybe within 24 hours—maybe even not yet for a week, since the value of everything here is only a modest proportion of Grandfather’s complete wealth. Anyway, they’ll list every item—no matter how insignificant—in this house —including, of course, each and every book on Grandfather’s open shelves, for some of those books are collector’s items, and worth §5 to $10 a copy. These men will come in here, too, of course, and list everything—including those books up on your shelf there, for some of those are Grandfather’s—I note his copy of ‘Huckleberry Finn.’ How come, Josiah, you have all those books? I thought you could scarcely read?”

“Well, Mist’ Boyce, Ah cain’t sca’cely, but I didn’ lak de shelf bein’ so empty, so yo’ grandfadah say Ah kin fill it out wid some ob dem friction books o’ his’n whut git displace’ off’n his shelves w’en he buy dat small privik lib’erry on Nachuh an’ Sci’nce what he buy in Westchestah. ‘Membah dat pu’chase? An’way, dem up dah is mos’ly his’n. Some has got his book-plate in—an’ some ain’t.” “Well, that’s just it. Those books show up, rather definitely, as a part of Grandfather’s personal property which is not furniture. Which—if any—do you claim as your own?”

“Oh—on’y des a book on dreams near de middle—de fat black one—and dat t’in purple book, on t’other end, whut tell how to win wid dices.”

“I see. At least I see the jet black one! Well, they’ll ask you first which are yours. Maybe make you sign a paper to that effect. Then they’ll ask you, sure as shooting, whether you’ve disposed of anything in this house—sold

it—given it away—or taken it away—since Grandfather died. Meaning, in short, whether you got off bright and early on any day to a second-hand store to unload a lot— for a nice bit of change! And unfortunately for that question, I see up there—still wrapped, and still tied as well— that book I put up there the night I stopped olf here to— well, the night I told you decorators would be in my room next morning, and I was going to stay with a friend. Now that book is a book on Chinese Wisdom which Carmine loaned me, and it wasn’t hers, and she wants it back, to return it to an uncle, even though its cost may have been but a dollar or so. Anyway, to make this brief, I want to ‘snake’ that book out o’ here—in the very face of the fact that I haven’t a legal right to remove a single item from this house. Are you willing for me to take it?”

“Why, sho’—sho’. ’Tain’t yo’ grandfathah’s book, an’ tain’t mine. So w’y shouldn’ you hab it?”

“ ‘Why’ is right! Only you see—but listen—didn’t those men give you some instructions, at the funeral?”

“On’y,” declared Josiah painfully, “dat Ah ’uz to gib ’eem yo’ grandfaddah’s key to dis house—which Ah done.” He shook his kinky head deploringly. “ ’Pon mah life, Mist’ Boyce, Ah cain’t see why yo grandfaddah p’inted coupla men whut th’ows de ’lectric chair switch at Sing- Sing to win’ up his ’state. Ah des cain’t—”

“Electric chair men—from Sing Si—”

“Why, dey tol’ me dey was Ex’cutionists—and showed me a papah said dat dey was p’inted.”

“Oh Josiah! Executors—not hangmen. That’s—that’s a legal term. Meaning they execute his will; later, they’ll be

Administrators—and administer his estate.”

“W-well, fo’ Ian’s sake. What a ou’rageous term: Ex-ex- cute-ors! Soun’s to me des lak hangin’. Ah don’ lak it. An’way, goin’ back to yo’ book, what dem Excutionists keer ’bout one little fool book, an’way?”

“Well, Josiah, those men, you know, get paid on a basis of a percentage of the personal property. Though the real point at issue is this: When they ask you, even casually, whether anything was removed from this house since Grandfather’s death, and you tell ’em I removed something, either wrapped or unwrapped—well, Josiah, there’ll be hell to pay. For you—for permitting it. For me—for doing it. And me particularly—of all persons, Josiah. For— for I’m a—er—bit in Dutch on—on certain matters. And it would take just this to put me in the dog-house. Not that I won’t be in a stone-walled dog-house anyway, but—” “Now lissen, Mist’ Boyce,” said Josiah, obviously not getting the full drift of matters. “Ah ain’ eben ebah made a reco’d ob what titles is up dah on mah shelf, fo’ w’en yo’ gran’faddah say I c’ld tek a a’mful, Ah des did, an’ put ’em up dah. So w’en you goes out ob heah today, I kin well say dat none ob dem tides is removed, so fas Ah \now. Howebbah, Ah won’ be heah to tell dem nuffin w’en dey comes an’ stahts invitoryin’—fo’ mah lil bag, undah mah bed heah, is packed wid a coupla shirts an’ b.v.d’s, an’ w’en ah puts in mah comb an’ bresh yandah, whut’s suttin’ly mine, Ah’m leabin’.”

“Leaving? With a change of clothes? Where ya goin’, Josiah?”

“Ah’s goin’ to Balt’mo’ fo’ couple days—on de one- thutty ’clock train—to see mah granny fo’ she dies.”

“Your granny? Good heavens, Josiah, don’t tell me you’ve got a grandmother?”

“Suah hab. She’s hun’ed and th’ee. An’ say she wan to see de baby bad. Da’s 7ne. Nebbah got chance to go befo’.” “Well, you’d better step on it. Oh, not to make the train —no—you’ve plenty of time on that. But to get there before your granny—whew!—a hundred and three—I’d say you’re racing neck and neck with time! Well, that sort of fixes everything okay, I guess. I’ll follow you out by 2 minutes, and lock up the house. And I guess you won’t know whether I had a book in my mitt or not.” He rose up and got down from the shelf the wrapped book.

He stripped olT its wrappings so that, at least, if any questions were asked of the neighbors by the inventoriers, the neighbors wouldn’t report that a man went out with a sealed valuable express package worth $50,000! With it in his hands, he dropped back into his chair. A bright red book it was. With its title, THE WAY OUT, stamped on its front cover in gold letters covering two lines in all— strange, Chinesey, brush-stroke-like letters they were, too— and, on its backbone, the same thing ever so smaller, but with the author’s last name supposedly below. Boyce opened the book, however, to its title page. Which proved to be unusually voluminous, so far as title pages went. And the very opening lines of which revealed it to present a somewhat self-assured, to say the least, description of its own contents—its own applicability to Life! Indeed, with ever-increasing skepticism, Boyce read:

THE WAY OUT

A Collection and Collation of All the Wisdom of Ancient China, so Classified and Sub-Classified as to be made Applicable to All sorts of Situations and Categories thereof, and to Prove that the Chinese Have Antedated All Knowledge of All Races of All Ages, and Possess—in the Totality of their Recorded Sayings—the Answers to Every Problem and Question: Moral, Enigmatic, Economic, Sociological, Physiological, Financial, etc., etc.

by

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ex-Resident of Shanghai, China.

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But here Boyce’s eyes dropped to the bottom of the page. To see who on earth were the entrepeneurs who had offered the Public this all-inclusive compendium of “solutions” to mankind’s modern woes! But the two lines there read merely:

VINNEDGE BROTHERS

Philadelphia

“Certainly never heard of them’,’ he commented to himself. “In the publishing racket. For racket it sure must be, if it offers ox-cart-days wisdom for modern day probl—” He said no more, but leafed the book through rapidly

from back to front, gazing dourly at the flow of quaint items embracing what purported to be the Answer for all the World’s woes! And reaching the end without having even read one through, he closed the book with a sharp clap, and deposited it on the bed within safe range of his eyes. “I suppose, Josiah,” he now queried, “you feel pretty happy—eh?—about Grandfather’s leaving you that 10 grand?”

“10 gran’? What dat?”

“10 thousand berries.”

“Oh—dollahs? Well, Ah naturally sho’ am glad to git a bunch o’ money lak dat ag’ine mah ol’ age—on’y Ah wish t’ God he wuz back. I gonna be lonesome as de debbil— spite ob de ten tousan’—what I ain’t git yit, you know. Lissen, Mist’ Boyce, atter dey git done ’ventoryin’ dis furn’- chure, could Ah tek some ob de better pieces, do you t’ink—sence it’s mine, on’way—and git me a flat wid it down in Hahlem, whah Ah won’ feel so out ob place?” Boyce shook his head. “No, Josiah, you can’t! You see, the Law figures that always theoretical debts could arise against Grandfather’s estate, which it would take all his estate, real and personal, to wipe olf, and hence the personal property has to stay where ’tis for a year—a year called ‘The Year of Probate.’ So you can’t take anything away, even if ’tis to be yours, till that year is over. All purely technical, of course, but that’s why it has to stay here, and you too—if, that is, you really want free rent, and free use of all that nice furniture in the whole house.” “Mah hebbin’s, Mist’ Boyce, Ah kain’t use all de furn’- chure whut dey is in dis house, Man kain’t comb his haih in front ob two bureaus—de one in heah and de contraption ob drawers and mirrah yo’ gran’faddah use’ £o’ a bu’eau; an’ man kain’t sleep in two beds, kin he? Yo’ gran’faddah’s lil single-width maple bed an’ mah big dock- wallapah of a mahog’ny bed is des one bed too many £o’ one man to sleep in.”

“Well, you might play a sort of a circuit. I note your fine distinctions, moreover—his bed—and your bed! Though in a sense you’re right, since the year of Probate isn’t over. And in a sense you’re wrong, since he didn’t give you this bed with an outright deed of gift, so you have to wait to get it as ‘yours’ by legal inheritance. Oh, no matter. You’re really a very lucky man, Josiah. Do you know what I inherited?”

“W’y, lawyah man didn’t tell me nuffin’ on de phone t’day ’bout de will, cept’n whut comes to me. But I ’spose you got all Mist’ Ba’kstone’s estate, didn’t you, ’cept mah share? ’Bout a hun’ed thousan’, mo’ or less, Ah guess? Fo’ yo’ gran’fathah wuz alwiz putty conf’denshal wid me, and I heahed him say, on’y few weeks back, dat he reckon he now wuth ’bout hun’ed an’ ten o’ fifteen thousan’ roun’ dollahs. Cose, Ah don’t know how much cash money he had.”

“Well, I know of five thousand cash that he—” Boyce broke off. And sudden hope sprang into his heart, about one complication in his affairs. “Say, Josiah, you speak of him as always being confidential with you, which I seem to remember that he was. Now did Grandfather, by any chance, tell you, during any of those days before he died, about getting five thousand cash from me? But without

a receipt?”

Josiah shook his kinky head gravely. “No, Mist’ Boyce, he didn’.”

“Hm? I’d half hoped that he—but didn’t he tell you that the Donnweil mortgage got paid off?”

“No.” And Josiah again shook his head. “On’y ting he ebbah said to me ’bout dat mo’gage was dat he wondahed ef dem Donnweilabers uz gonna take advantage ob de prepayment claw—sonce dey got money in dey own hands.”

“Hell fire!” Boyce groaned. Not a chance, as it appeared, to prove that his grandfather even knew of a sudden access of cash money into the business. And Balhatchet Barkstone hadn’t been in the office, either, when the mortgage was paid off, and Boyce had stamped the papers and notes and turned them over to the Donnweils. So he proceeded to tell Josiah the sad details of how much of that hundred thousand he had not got.

“Well, Josiah,” he said slowly, “Grandfather cut me entirely out of his will. Oh, he did leave me something— yes. A handful of assorted beans—all colors—all shapes—• all sizes! With some scornful instructions. Which same beans I have here in my vest pocket. Though I won’t even insult you by showing ’em to you and asking you what value they have.”

Josiah, mouth agape, so that a half toothless red cavern loomed forth, was leaning forward on the side of the bed.

“He—he lef’ you on’y some beans—not a penny?”

“Not a penny—no! It—all, that is, but what went to you— went to a bunch of long-haired orators down near the Village who he thought had something on the ball. They’re

already well-heeled, and don’t even need his mazuma.”

“W-well, fo’ Go’ sakes. Ah knowed yo gran’faddah had bought some asso’ted beans. Though Ah nebbah seed ’em, muhself. An’ Ah eben know de date he bought ’em, as well. An’ w’ich date wuz de day befo’ Ah wuz away all day long visitin’ mah sick brothah in Alb’ny. An’ w’ich, thah’fo’, wuz—but Ian’s sake, Mist’ Boyce, yo’ ain’ in- t’rusted in fool details if’n yo’ is cut off from yo’ gran’- faddah’s fo’tune. Yo—”

“I’m interested in all details. Particularly what he may have said about those damned beans, if he said anything at all. And—but anyway, what was the date he bought ’em, and anything else you have to tell me?”

“Wa-a-all, as Ah said, he bought ’em—dat Ah knows— de day befo’ Ah wuz ’way all day long visitin’ mah sick brothah in Alb’ny. And w’ich thahfo’—as Ah t’ink Ah’ve a’ready said, wuz—but now le’s see?—Ah wen’ away six ’clock in de mawnin’, an’ come home late at night—’leven ’clock of—of—w’y, ’kaze mah brothah he had dat ’spute ’bout his milk bill, it wuz June—well, de date Ah wen’ ’way, Mist’ Boyce, wuz June 2nd!—so, sence yo’ grand- faddah bought dem beans de day befo’ dat, den he bought ’em June 1st!”

“Do I know it! Everything hangs together beautifully. Just how you place his buying of ’em the day before you were away all day, I don’t know—it doesn’t matter particularly anyway—but the day before—or June 1st—was the same day I myself went away—and the same day, likewise, in the late afternoon of which he made his will. And left the damn beans he’d just bought to me."

“Oh—did he mek his will dat day? June 1st? Ah didn’t know, from whut de lawyah man tell me, whut de date wuz. But Ah do know, f’m mah own mobements an’ oddah t’ings, dat de day befo’ Ah wuz go to Alb’ny fo’ all day, yo’ gran’faddah he wuz go by de Seed’tehiah—”

“The Seedateria? That huge new place, you mean, on Sixth Avenue—occupying a whole 6-story building—where people go ’round—help themselves from the bins—get the printed planting instructions oil a spindle nearby—and—” “Da’s right! De place whah dey let you take so li’l as one ob an’t’ing, fo’ a growin’ trial, an’ pay 1 cent on de way out. Lessen, ob co’se, de ’tic’ler seed whut you take is impo’ted o’ somethin’—in w’ich case it mebbe a nickel o’ so. Ah ’tended de place wid yo’ gran’faddah on de openin’ day, th’ee weeks before. So ’twuz mo’ o’ less natchel, Ah ’spose, dat if’n he wanted ’so’ted beans, he’d go dah. W’ich, in fack, Ah happcn’s t’ know he did.”

“I still don’t know how you know it, of course. Outside of, perhaps and doubtlessly, his telling you. Though it doesn’t matter, so far as ultimate results went. My getting ’em, I mean! At least, he made a damned fine selection. Of beans! For he must have dipped into every confounded bean bin in the place. I guess he read the planting instructions above each bin well, too, so as to get beans from real diverse places, like the South Pole and the Equator! Well, I got ’em all, Josiah, with instructions to sow ’em in the right soil, and maybe grow myself somep’n. Meaning, of course, a civil tongue in my head. Or, possibly some horse sense with respect to courtesy for my elders.”

“Well, fo’ hebbin’s sake,” groaned Josiah. “Li’l did Ah dream dem beans whut he buyed ’uz t’ be yo’ ’hairtence— out’n his ’state. Fo’ Ah—but ’twuz dis way, Mist’ Boyce— ef’n you is still int’rusted. W’ich same you plenty much is, Ah reckon-” Josiah paused but a second. “De mawnin’ aftah Ah wuz by Alb’ny all day, Ah ’uz cleanin’ up de house, an’ in yo’ gran’faddah’s was’ebasket Ah fin’s a cash- registah slip wid de name ‘De Seed’tehiah’ on it and de wuhds: ‘16 ’So’ted Seeds, 31 cents.’ An’ aftah I has bu’n up de trash de way Ah alwuz did, Ah says to yo’ grandfaddah: ‘Wuz yo’ mebbe, sah, by de Seed’tehiah yistidday?’ An’ he say, kinda jokin’ lak, ‘Soun’ to me lak dey’s a Shylock Home aroun’ dis place—on’y he is a punk Shylock Home ’kaze he don’t obsarve nothin’. Now huccome, Shylock Home, Ah could go ’way downtown to Six’ Ab’noo yistidday, wid you traipsin’ all obah Alb’ny? Somebody hatter tek keah dis house, an’ get de th’ee ’potent tel’phone calls I ’uz ’spectin’, an’ dat somebody wuz me! W’y, Ah lak to have die wid bo’dom.’ Den ob co’se Ah say, stubbo’n lak—’kaze I ’uz puzzle ’bout dem 16 seeds— ‘Well, ’twuz day befo’ yistidday, den, dat you wuz to de Seed’tehiah, ’kaze Ah jes’ bu’ned up de checkslip.’ An’ he grunt an’ say: ‘Seem lak Ah cain’t call my own doin’s mah own in dis town!’ An’ he add: ‘Yassuh, Shylock Home, ’twuz day befo’ yistidday, an’ Ah picked up a crooked pin on Broadway an’ buyed mahse’f a malted milk on Fo’th Ab’noo— now you know ebberting ’bout my movements. Is you satisfied? If not, whut else mebbe you lak know?’ Well, Ah could alwuz be friendly lak wid yo’ grandfaddah, Mist’ Boyce, so Ah up and say: ‘Well, Ah also know dat you is bought some asso’ted flowah seeds, an’ sence Ah is de ’ficial gyardner ’round dis place, does you wan’ me to plant ’em fo’ you in de back yahd o’ in de fron’ yahd?’ Den he laflf and say: ‘Josiah, ef’n you ’uz to try to plant dcm flowah seeds what Ah bought at de Seed’tehiah in any kin’ ob a yahd—fron’ or back—to plant dem, dat is, raght, so dat dey’d ’ventually come up—you’d hab to hab a yahd so big, Josiah—one, dat is, wid pow’ful hot zones in it and wid pow’ful col’ zones, too, an’ wid plenty swamp, an’ plenty high Ian’s lak mountains—so big, Josiah, dat by de time you ’uz plantin’, an’ plantin’ proper lak, de las’ seed, you’d be a old grey-haided niggah stid ob de apple- cheek’ yo’ngstah whut you is. Fact is, Josiah,’ he den add, ‘dem seeds wuzn’ flowah seeds—dey ’uz bean-plant seeds— in sho’t, Josiah, beans!—an’ to plant dem, all proper lak, so as to grow mo’ beans, you’d hatter travel so many directions, no’th, south, eas’, an’ wes’, dat befo’ some ’uz planted, othah’s ’d be sproutin’ and gittin’ ha’vested. Fac’ is, Josiah,’ yo’ grandfaddah den added, ‘de one big “yahd” whah all dem seeds could grow would hab to be as big as Chiny—’d hab to be Chiny, in fac’—sence dat de bigges’ kentry on de globe, an’ wid de mos’ climates an’ soils in it.’ ”

“Fie knew his bean-sowing all right,” said Boyce bitterly. “Though reason enough, considering his own farm boy training. Added to which, he was able to peruse all those amplified growing instructions above those Seedateria bins.” He paused. “China is right! As the one country where all those beans he bought could have been sowed and harvested. As even I myself learned this morning, Josiah, from a specialist who, if he wasn’t strictly a professor of bean- ology, assuredly knew his beans. And—but here—I take it, cross-questioning Gran’ther as much as you did, you asked him why he’d bought beans. And only 16 of ’em, at that?”

“Co’se Ah did! An’ he say: ‘Well, Josiah, sence you has axed, Ah mought say dat all mah life Ah has wondahed whut de diff’ent beans dey taste lak w’en dey is cook up alone, an’ so, sence I ’uz goin’ to hab to stay heah all day lak a prisoner, an’ anssah de telephone, Ah ’cided to ’muse mahse’f by cookin’ up a mess ob ’so’ted beans—each kin’ sep’rate—roll it ’bout on mah tongue—chew it—tas’e it— and fin’ w’ich is de lusciousest. And den mebbe staht a supah-bean fact’ry.’ ”

“Super-bean factory is good,” Boyce commented dourly. “They were bought to leave with Tydings and Plenderleith —in a cotton bag—for yours truly! For those beans—exactly 16 in number—were the ones he left me, for my share in his estate. To plant in one spot—one soil. Except diat, as even Gran’ther told you—and a practical vegetable growing specialist told me—the 16 couldn’t possibly be grown in any spot, to grow simultaneously, except a spot that comprises half Asia and supports some 461,000,000 Chinks. Of course,” he added sardonically, “you asked him which bean had tasted the best?”

“Sho’ did, Mist’ Boyce. An’ he say dey all tas’ed fit fo’ hawgs, atter dey ’us b’iled up, ’cep’n one giddy trop’cal bean what costed him fi’ cents, an’ dat he guess he’ll hab to put dat ’un out in cans fo’ $2.50 a Can.”

“Some joker all right,” Boyce bit out. “I got that bean too—a peacock of a bean called the Tonqua—out of New

Guinea.”

Now he lapsed into dolorous silence.

“It hurts, Josiah. The thought back of his bequest, I mean. If only he’d left me something—anything—valuable. But a bequest worth 31 cents! That—that hurts. And even outside of such hurt as it contains in itself, it’s causing me more, further, and worse hur—”

“Mist’ Boyce! Yo’—yo’ don’ mean dat dat gal is gonna walkin’ out on yo’? W’y, dat gal—dat gal wouldn’t do that. Ef she’s walkin’ out, den huh pappy has put in his—”

“No, Josiah. No! She’s a hundred-percent true and steel blue. But I’m in a—a—what you used to call a ‘picklement,’ that will prevent her and me getting married. Only it’s I who won’t be able to marry her, for—”

“You? Mist’ Boyce, you isn’t embezzle’ some money, is you?”

“No, no, no,” Boyce said wearily. “Though some may claim I did. They may even say I—”

The telephone on the coarse kitchen table by the window rang raucously.

Josiah spoke.

“ ’Scuse me des a mi nut’, Mist’ Boyce. It’s mebbe dem Sing Sing men. Des wait.” Rising from the bed, he ambled over to the table, sank down into the kitchen chair, and raised the phone. “Dis is Josiah, Mist’ Barkstone-whut- wuz’s man, speakin’ . . .

“T’mohhaw, yo’ sez? An’ all day? Well, dat puffectly a’right wid me, kaze Ah won’ be heah. Fo’ Ah couldn’t do nuffin’ to he’p if Ah waz. You has got de key, so dat’s all you need. Oh—lunch? Well, de men’ll fin’ coffee in de

pantry, an’ a clean glass coffee pot on de stob’, an’ Ah’ll be glad to wash dey duhty dishes atter ’em w’en Ah gits home. Food? Oh, dey’ll fin’ plenty canned goods in de pantry, ’eludin’ beans, lak dat po’ Mist’ Boyce inhairted— “Mist’ Boyce? Oh, dat whut you rally callin’ up ’bout, you sez? Well, whut Ah know ’bout Mist’ Boyce’s comin’s an’ goin’s, Ah lak to know? Is he heah? W-w-well, w’y would he be? He—now who says Ah’s lyin’?— Ah gotta fin’ out, don’ Ah ? So—so hoi’ de wiah.”

Josiah cupped the transmitting end of the phone tightly with his black hand.

“ ’Tis, Mist’ Boyce! Dem Sing Sing men! Dey say dey men gonna invento’y an’ appy-raise all day t’mohhaw. On’y it seem lak somep’n mo’ impo’tent is on dey min’s raght now—seem dey wan’ed to speak wid you—if you is heah? Seem lak dey has b’en callin’ all ’bout town fo’ you.” “Well, you practically told ’em I was here, Josiah. So tell them I am. Though be sure to tell them I was but visiting you, on the fly, and in your room. And I’ll speak with them.”

Josiah had turned to the phone. “Yas, he heah. He des visitin’ me on de fly, but I had to axe him fus’ if he wuz heah, sence—now don’t go jumpin’ on me—Ah ain’ a suhvan’ man no mo’—Ah’s one of de hairs to dis estate an’ don’t hatter take imp’dencc f’um no Ex’cutioner men. Whut dat? Contemp’ o’ co’te. Who’s contemp’bl’ o’ co’tes? You mean Ah kin git 90 days fo’ obstructin’ de Ex’cut’nists? W’y, Ah—Ah ain’ obstructin’ nobody, on’y w’en you axes me ef’n a man is heah who Ah don’ know ef he wanna be heah, Ah is ’tween two fiahs, an’—but heah Mist’ Boyce

is now.”

Boyce, already at the chair, took it as Josiah relinquished it.

“This is Boyce Barkstone speaking,” he said quietly.

“This is Angus MacKinlock-k-k,” rasped a hard voice, with the burr of 20 Scotchmen rolled into it. “Bar-r-rkstoon, y’er assets on that real-estate business ar-r-e exactly §5000 shor-r-t. And—”

“Are they? Well, that’s natural enough. For I gave §5000 in cash to my grandfather a few days before his death.”

“Hov ye the receipt?”

“Unfortunately no. I turned the money over to him without a receipt.”

“In froont of a witness, perhaps?” j \ j

“No. No witness was present.”

“Ah-h-h, Bar-r-rkstoon, ye’re a domned liar, an’ this stor-ry is the only thing ye can seize on to account fer a short-tage. But ye can’t get away with it. Ye bring doon that money, Bar-rkstoon, and we’ll say nae more aboot it.”

“Bring it down is good! All I can say is: don’t wait up for it. For I won’t bring it down, because I can’t bring it down, because I haven’t it.”

“Th’ hoorse-r-ra-races, eh, in San Francisco? So ye can’t pr-roduce it?”

“No. Because Grandfather got it.”

“Bah! Five times has that kind of a stor-ry been gi’n us here, as Executor-rs. Well, Bar-rkstoon, I’m going to have to get out a police pick-up order on ye this after-rnoon. So ye’d better—”

“Better not stay where I am, eh? Well, I won’t! I’ll blow fast—if not faster. For I’ve one little job to do today, before die police-pick-up order catches up with me—a little job that ought to make news—a little job that—however, you’re welcome to race me—with the police order.”

He hung up.

“Mali goo’ness, Mist’ Boyce,” said Josiah, now back on the edge of the bed. “Ah heahed all—on bot’ en’s ob de wiah—an’ you bettah git out ob heah quick.”

“Be yourself, Josiah! Here is the last place in all New York, now that they’ve handed me the news the police will be wanting me, that they’ll ever come to look for me. So here I stay—providing, that is, I can get your permish. Till about one hour before evening newspaper deadline today, at which time I’ll be over east of here a ways, sowing beans in Woodl— Anyway, Josiah, now you know why I can’t marry Carmine. And why I—but here—I haven’t yet had your permish to hang about here. So may I loaf on the premises—rather, in your room?—or would you feel safer with a $5000 embezzler out of the place? Speak up, Josiah —I’m at your mercy.”

Chapter VIII

CALLING PROFESSOR ZACK

“OB CO'SE,” Josiah averred stoutly, “yo’ kin stay in heah. Ah—Ah ain’ no p’lice dog, dat Ah is ’bliged t’ keep out blood rel’tives ob Mist’ Ba’kstone-whut-wuz, o’ mah own frien’s. If dat’s contemp’ o’ co’te, let it be contemp’ o’ co’te. An’way, Ah ain’ ’sposed to know nuffin’ bout no missing ft’ thousums ob dollahs an’way. So you stay heah all day ef’n you wan’s to, an’ t’night too, e£ you laks—des bettah git out fo’ dem ’praisers come tomohhaw, da’s all.” Boyce was already sinking back into the spring chair, and Josiah now sighed dolorously.

“Ah do t’ink dis is awful, dough, Mist’ Boyce. Oh, not de fi’ thousum dollah what you cain’t he’p, but de mattah whut yo’ grandfaddah could he’p. Ah mean dat he leab you plumb out ob in de col’, an’ all fo’ some ob dem lun’tics what libs down in de Village, same whut you speak ’bout. Ah don’—Ah don’ unnahstan’ it. Hab you got any idea whut he wuz mad at?”

“Have I? I’ll say I have! It was because,” Boyce explained patiently, “he was in the back parlor, instead of you, that day you had just asked me what to say to that smart-alecky old Senegambian Don Juan, next time the old devil made a crack at you, and I called out, loud as hell, ‘Nuts to you, you old fool!’ And blew. But when I got upstreet a ways and looked back, I saw that it was Gran’ther who was in the back-parlor. And so, Josiah, just because of that ‘Nuts to you, you old fool!’ Grandfather considered himself mortally insulted, and cut me off with—”

“But, Mist’ Boyce,” Josiah interrupted, “he—he didn’ t’ink dat. He did t’ink at fus’ you mebbe was drunk o’ somep’n. Fac’ is, he axed me, raght aftah you’d b’en in an’ went again, ef’n you wuz drunk o’ somep’n w’en Ah’d seed you las’. An’ Ah said dat I had b’en raght up close to you an’ hadn’t smelled nary a drap o’ nothin’. An’ Ah axed him w’y he axed dat. An’ he sez, ‘Well, den Boyce mus’ sho’ hate de Fathah ob his kentry, ’kaze I des cotched him, by de reflection in de back-parlor do’ an’ suhtain t’ings Ah heahed, stickin’ he haid in de pahlo’ an’ shoutin’, at Gawge Wash’ton’s pikter dah above de fiahplace: ‘Nuts to you, you ol’ fool!’ So den I ups and tell yd grandfaddah whut happened, Mist’ Boyce. How I had axed you whut Ah should say to dat old niggah w’enebber he pull a fas’ one, an’ how you wuz des ’bout to tell me whut to say but went to de phone instid, sayin’ you’d be back in a minut an’ gib it to me—an’ how den he, yd grandfaddah, heave in by de back way whilst you ’uz talkin’ and sen’ me out to de back yahd to do somep’n— an’ how, da’fo, dat message wuz fo’ me. An’ we bof laff, ’cep’n he say, kinda hurt: ‘W’y de debbil, Josiah, don’ you come to a expuht, ’stid ob a kid lak Boyce, w’en you wan’s sassy ans’aws? Now mah ans’aw fo’ all dat old nigger’s cracks’d be: “Go button yd lips, befo’ some brains dribbles into yo’ haid.”

Boyce Barkstone was listening to all this with jaw falling ever and ever more open.

“Josiah, do you really mean to tell me that Gran’ther knew positively that I was just passing a hot-shot into the

parlor for your use on that old nig—er—Senegambian?”

“Co’se he did, Mist’ Boyce! Aftah all, he knowed dat yo’ couldn’ know dat he had come in de house de back way, meanw’ile. He des t’ought, as Ah’ve tol’ you, dat you ’uz poppin’ off ’g’inst Gawje Wash’nton. Till, dat is, Ah ’splained ebert’ing puffectly, as- Ah’ve tried to ’splain to yo’. Fac’ is—so fah as dem ’splanations ob mine wen’— Ah wuz eben able to show him dat oF niggah, whut yo’ dign’fies by callin’ a Senygamblin’-Man ’cep’n he nothin’ but a damned ol’ niggah—an’way, Ah shows yo’ gran’- faddah de ol’—ol’—ol’ bastahd, cornin’ down de st’eet. W’ich make yo’ gran’faddah say, ‘A-a-all raght! We’ll see w’ich ob dem two fancy wisecracks—mine, o’ Boyce’s— makes dat ol’ smaht-aleck slink off wid he tail ’tween he laigs. You han’ him fus’ Boyce’s, an’ den you han’ him mine. And we see!’

“So,” continued Josiah, “Ah ups wid de winder—yo’ grandfaddah stan’s bellin’ me to watch de show!—an’ den long comes de ol’—ol’—ol’—Ah swah, Mist’ Boyce, Ah gits so hot w’en Ah t’inks ’bout dat man Ah—Ah cain’t t’ink. Ah—an’way, he looks in at me, and he says: ‘Ah dere, an’ how is de noble knight whut defen’in’ de vihtue ob all de yaller gals in dis block?’ To w’ich Ah says, ‘Nuts to yo’, yo’ ol’ fool!’ But Ah’m sorry to say, Mist’ Boyce, it nebbah faze him. Fo’ he come back at me so fas’ it make mah haid swim. An’ he say: ‘So yo’s runnin’ ober ag’in, is yo’, lak a pitcher o’ beer whut’s all frof?’ Den yo’ gran’faddah he nudge me hahd, and whispah, ‘Try mine’—an’ so Ah ups and says to dis ol’—ol’ ol’ son-ob-a-bitch out dah, Ah sez: ‘Go button yo’ lips befo’ some brains dribbles into yo’

haid.’ An’, Mist’ Boyce, it—it knocks him fo’ a row. A fack! He scratch his haid, and muttahs, ‘Button mah— button mah lip befo’ some brains dribbles in—into— dribbles in?’ Den he say ‘Bah,’ and beat it down st’eet mumblin’ lak a whupped dawg. An’ yo’ gran’faddah he laff like de debbil an’ he say to me, ‘Well, dah you is, Josiah, see? Nex’ time yo’ wan’s wisecracks, don’ you go to a babe-in-ahms lak Boyce—yo’ come to a expuht lak me —a ol’ man whut know all de answahs.’ And so you see, Mist’ Boyce,” Josiah finished, “you hain’t ’suited him at all, an’ he knowed all ’bout whut dem wuhds ‘Nuts to yo’, yo’ old fool!’ was ’sposed to be fo’.”

Boyce Barkstone sat, utterly flabbergasted.

“But—but he must have been mad at me,” he expostulated. “For otherwise he wouldn’t have—”

“But Ah clah, Mist’ Boyce, he wuzn’ mad at yo’ dat mawnin’—an’ sence he nebbah seed you ’g’in, how could he git mad atterwahd ? On’y t’ing he say whut could cben be construe’ dat he wuz mad—on’y he wuzn’ mad—wuz dat him an’ you had a little argyment in de office a w’ile befo’ whut proved, he said, dat you ’uz gittin’ to be a bettah bus’ness man all de time bekaze, he said, somep’n lak de same situmation, w’en it corned up a few yahs back, wuz create’ by yo’ yo’se’f. Dis time, he say, yo’ had sense ’nough to at leas’ kick ’g’inst it. Nex’ time, he say, yo’d prob’ly hab sense ’nough to plant yo’ foot down hahd an’ keep it dah.” Boyce bit his lips. Suddenly a peculiar idea struck him. “But see here, Josiah,” he said hurriedly, “I came back that morning immediately I saw I’d pulled a boner, to explain it away. I rang the bell again and again, and

Grandfather not only wouldn’t open up for me, but I saw him back of the heavy lace curtains watching me. So he was mad, you see; and that proves—”

“But, Mist’ Boyce, he tol’ me ’bout dat secon’ cornin’ back ob you. He ’uz goin’, don’t fergit, by de same clock whut misleaded yo’. An’ he knowed dat ef he let you in, you’d—well, he said to me: ‘Ef’n Ah’d let Boyce in, he’d a frittahed ’way some mo’ time doin’ whut he ’purrently a’ready has, an’ woulda missed dat train suah as shootin’, so Ah des let him ring an’ pertended nobody wan’t heah.’ ” “You’re—you’re not lying to me, Josiah, just to make me feel better?”

“No, Mist’ Boyce, Ah ain’ lyin’ to you—not one bit. Eber’t’ing Ah tells today is de truf. An’ it prob’le, Ah t’ink, dat yo’ gran’faddah wuzn’ mad at you nohow, an’ wuzn’ ’suited ’bout nothin’, nor eben—eben puzzle’.”

Boyce Barkstone passed a hand helplessly over his forehead.

Well, good God, Josiah, it all means then that—that he didn’t cut me olT with a handful of beans out of revenge. For—for hurt feelings, that is. That he—oh, he cut me off, all right, with a handful of beans, but not—not out of anger or miff. But why in heaven’s earth did he do it? For outside of the incidents of that morning, which you’ve illuminated plentifully, everything else was tranquil between us; was—”

Boyce’s eyes, riveted unseeingly on that flamboyant Negro-like quilt covering the fourposter bed in front of him, were riveted also, at that moment—and equally as unseeingly!—upon the bright red book that he had deposited there a brief while before. But because it was bright red, that book—and the quilt was everything but—he had, perforce, to see the book, whether or no. “The Way Out”! Book of Chinese wisdom. Chinese! His eyes moved to the very slight protuberance in his vest pocket, made by that tiny bag of beans. Beans!

His eyes moved back to that book. All the wisdom of all China out of all time! And China—only country where any and all beans could be successfully planted! Why, the Chinese must know their beans; if so, they might even conceivab—

He shook his head dazedly, like a water spaniel ridding itself of water. The water being, in this case, strange hopeful ideas that surged about in his brain but which, after all, were quite hopeless. For how could—

But suddenly he spoke.

“Josiah! Have you a phone directory in here, with your extension phone? I want to call Uptown University.” “Uptown Un’vers’ty? Dat big flock ob buildin’s all kivvred wid ivory, ’bout twenn’y min’s walk f’um here?” “Yes, yes—but I don’t want to walk there; I only want to talJ{ there. Where’s the directory?”

“In de drawah, sah, in de kitchen table, dah.”

Boyce was back in the stiff chair again. Riffling over the huge Manhattan directory which had just about fitted that drawer. And found his number, Uptown A-59087.

He was ringing it a second later. And getting an answer in a woman’s voice:

“Uptown University—Registrar’s Office speaking.”

“Is there anybody there,” Boyce poured forth impulsively,

“who knows beans?”

“Sir! This is no phone connection on which to be facetious. I very much regret it, but I shall have to hang up on—” “No, wait! I wasn’t being facetious. I meant: is there anybody amongst your faculty who is up on beans?”

“Oh? Versed in legumes, you mean?”

“We-ell, yes—that is no—that is, I don’t know what kind of a specialist I want to get in touch with: but it’s one who knows beans—you know?—lima beans—kidney beans—”

“Yes,” she hastened to interrupt his beans enumeration. “Well, our Professor Zack—Professor Sealwell Zack—is, I think I can quite well say, the biggest authority in the entire world on legumes. Which comprise beans and peas. You would like to speak to him?”

“I’ll say. And thanks!”

Now he heard her voice saying: “Put this party onto Professor Zack’s quarters in Faculty Building—no, Professor Zack is recorded here as having no classes today. Yes, he’s checking yesterday’s examination papers—yes, that’s right.”

And now an exceedingly scholarly voice came on the wire. One could almost see a pair of round hornshell eyeglasses, affixed to a black ribbon, resting on its owner’s doubtlessly bearded face! At least, that was the way Boyce visualized the face from the kindly and scholarly tones of the voice.

“Professor Zack speaking,” it said.

“Professor, this is a young man who is up against a— well, my name, sir, is Barkstone—Boyce Barkstone—not

that it matters—but I’m up against a problem in—well—uh —well—uh—psychology. But wait, Professor—psychology relating, I can’t help but estimate, to—to beans. That is to say—well, y’ know I can’t say further, simply because I’m only floundering about myself. But all I really want to know—need to know, indeed—is whether the Chinese know anything about beans? And I’m not—not joking, really!”

“No, I can tell from your voice that you are not. Well the bean, Mr.—Barkstone I think you said the name was? —well, the bean, Mr. Barkstone, is an old, old item of diet in China. Indeed, a Chinese, Sun Soo, long ahead of Gregor Mendel, experimented with certain varieties of Chinese beans and arrived at Mendel’s very Laws of Heredity. That’s not generally known, of course. But as to your specific question, I would say that the Chinese probably know more about beans—their growing, that is, and their cooking, and their mythology, and so forth—than any race on earth. I should hardly say, however, that the Chinese are conversant with the science of beans. Which science deals with such problems as whether a thing is a bean or not; and whether one species of beans is but a variant on another; and many other problems. Of course there are beans that have probably never seen China—” Boyce’s face fell “—though that is not to say they could not be made to grow somewhere in that vast country. As the majority of known beans indubitably have. And—well, I feel I’ve answered your question. Anything else?”

“No, Professor, I guess not. At least just now. Maybe again today I might want to ask something concerning

beans; if I do, would I have the permission—to ring you?” “My dear Mr. Barkstone! If Universities are not at the command of the rank and file of the people, they have lost their function. You may call at any time; on the wire, or in person.”

“Thanks a million, Professor!”

And Boyce Barkstone hung up.

Abstractedly he returned to the spring chair he had vacated, and sank heavily, abstractedly, into it. Thoughtfully, from his breast pocket, he withdrew the tiny bag of beans that had represented his heritage, and regarded it helplessly. Then, frowning, he fixed his gaze on that bright red book lying practically within his reach on Josiah’s quilt. All the wisdom of all the Chinese of all times—embodied in the pages of that book. And somewhere, perhaps, in those many pages, filled with type, there might shine some tiny ray of light about beans—about beans, that is, left, in the 20th century, to a young New Yorker named—

“It’s all clear to me now,” he was now saying aloud, not particularly to Josiah, though Josiah was an amazed listener. “Grandfather, not having been insulted, left me these beans to plant in the only spot in the world where these many diverse beans could be planted: which, Josiah, was my own mind. My own mind, Josiah! That’s right! ‘Planting those beans in the right soil’ was taking ’em into the thinking apparatus of one Boyce Barkstone, and deriving, from the use of that thinking apparatus—deriving what? Nothing! For, Josiah, the soil apparently isn’t worth a damn. For I have planted those beans in it, so to speak, and nothing—nothing, Josiah, has come out. Nor ever will, because the soil’s no good! But, Josiah, if the Chinese know their beans—or such dozen or so or more beans as they may have over there—and I, in turn, can get hep to every jot and tittle of their Wisdom, past and present if not future, then, Josiah, I have administered some fertilizer— Chinese fertilizer, alas!—to that bum soil in my mind; and maybe then I can grow—Josiah, are you still willing that a proved $5000 embezzler use your room while you’re gone, not to hide from the police now—but to read—ponder— read some more—ponder some more—”

“Yo’ sho’ kin!” said Josiah, who had suddenly arisen, eyes popping out of head as they directed themselves to that tinny alarm clock. “Des as Ah said. Fo’ Ah’s goin’ to Baltimo’, des as Ah said—an’ belieb me-e-e, Mist’ Boyce, Ah’s goin’ raght now!”

Chapter IX

90 MINUTES TO GO!

GILBERT PARRADINE, owner of Parradine Block, New York City, filling one entire square of uptown Broadway, and including the Parradine Apartments, the Parradine Mod- erne Motion Picture Theatre, and Parradine Tower, did not dream, as he picked up the telephone in his office this sunny afternoon, that within less than 90 minutes from then he would be held for one hundred thousand dollars ransom, under one of the most diabolical and police-proof kidnap plots ever invented by gangsters!

And so, shoving slightly out of the way of his feet the packed green alligator bag which stood on the carpeted floor at the base of his swivel chair, which bag he was about to take with him to Chicago on the 4 P.M. plane, he proceeded once more to dial the instrument in front of him for the operator.

And receiving her response, in a voice now familiar to him, asked her immediately:

“Try again, will you please, to get me that party in Lower New York—222% West 22nd Street was the address. Strange that the automatic ringing system is out of kilter on that particular exchange, when I— Yes, this is Mr. Parradine speaking—and it’s Ochiltree Jark, of course, same as before, whom I want— Yes, I’ve got to leave for Chicago shortly. And I’d like to complete my call down- city there before I— Yes, I’ll wait.”

He hung up, and leaned back in his swivel chair, gazing

absently at himself in the reflecting glass surface of a gargantuan silver-framed photograph which stood on the huge hand-carved mahogany desk, prominent even amidst the gold-plated desk paraphernalia. A photograph whose glass, covering a dark background, and reflecting perfectly by the bright light pouring into the room from the high tower windows—at least in the direction where Parradine’s head now stood—showed a dignified, almost aristocratic- looking man of 44 or so, with kindly brown eyes and a touch of grey around the ears, and with a richly tailored brownish-plaid vest, carrying a heavy gold watch chain, peeping from between purplish, Bond-Street-made coat lapels.

But here an interruption took place.

A diffident—almost timorous—knock on the single door of his office. Which lay completely across the room from, and in back of where Parradine sat. And to which he called, loudly: “Come in!” and revolved briskly clear about, causing the richly plum-carpeted room, with mahogany hand-carved funishings, and rich leather couch, to swing dizzily past his gaze.

The man who came in, revealing as he did so a passing glimpse of an outside marble-tessellated hallway, and the corner of an elevator shaft, was about 35, and exceedingly dark of skin, though by no manner of means a Negro; indeed, his blue-black hair was as straight as hair could be; his jet eyes were a cold black, and there was a scar on one cheek. Dressed in green-striped trousers of almost dandified cut, he was in his shirtsleeves, which, patterned with pink stripes and interlocked green flowers, were the final touch

that proclaimed plainly his Sicilian blood. He held in his free hand a wire-cutters and what appeared to be a green insulated coil out of some piece of automatic electrical machinery; and reason enough!—since he was head electrician for Parradine Tower and Parradine Moderne Motion Picture Theatre down the block.

He spoke. Very deferentially, blinking at the light from the windows as though it were causing him extreme pain.

“Mr. Parradine,” he said—and there was, in the outwardly Sicilian speaker’s words so slight an accent, if any, that it was plain he was one born in New York of Sicilian parents only, and never in Sicily itself, “I hope you ain’t going to overlook running upstairs before you pull out? For I’ve set up the min’ture model of that new lighting system I’ve devised for Parradine Block. All ready to be hooked in and all. And I—”

“Of course, Rocco!” Parradine assured him pleasantly. “Of course. And by no means have I forgotten. Just as I told you, I am to run up before pulling out for the airfield.” “What airfield will you be leaving from, Mr. Parradine?” “The new uptown one—Arrow Airfield—6 blocks from here. Just a 2-minute hop for me in a taxi. My passage is on the 4 o’clock Chicago Rocket. So I can dally a whole hour with you—and on you—if needs be.”

“Good. For I’ve lots of details to show you that won’t be ev’dent at first glance in the model. Nor—but how long will you be gone, do you estimate, Mr. Parradine?” “Why, a week at outermost, Rocco. Why? For by dint of stepping on things while I’m there, I ought to be able to catch all 20 of those nightclub acts that I’m figuring to put

on at the theatre. When, that is, they come East here. Probably they’ll all be good, as guaranteed by the ratings I have on them. Still, I want to be sure.”

“Yeah, that’s the way to be, Mr. Parradine. The way I always am—sure. We-ell, I guess that’s all, then; so I’ll be— But wait!—and in case I forget to ask you later—now, if anything comes up while you are gone, where in Chicago will I be able to get in touch with—”

“Now, Rocco! Are you trying to kid me? You know— or at least you ought to know, since you’ve been with me for all of three years—that I’ve stopped for years at the Palmer House there, and would stop nowhere else. Why, they all know me there—from elevator men to desk clerks.” “Well,” laughed the Sicilian, uneasily, “I thought you might have hankered for a change.”

“By no means. No. I’ve reserved accommodations there by phone this morning. Suite noo-B, however—if you do want to make mental note of it—all in case some new kind of Cosmic Rays bring New York’s electrical service to an end, and you have to wire me, while you install a coon- shouter atop our theatre marquee to shout our histrionic wares!”

Rocco laughed at the quaint conception. “That’d be an idea at that, Mr. Parradine, for a theatre. A low-brow theatre, like a burleycue. A whole row of coon-shouters along the marquee. All yelling about—except,” he broke off, more seriously, “cosmic rays don’t interfere with elec— However,” he broke off again, “your suite won’t be hard to remember, if something does go wrong. IIOO-B.” “IIOO-B is right,” confirmed Parradine. “Unless, of

course, after I’ve registered in tonight, they have to shift me because of somebody now in noo-B not vacating. However, the Suite number’s of no importance, anyway. Palmer House is all you need to keep on mental file.”

Rosso tucked his wire-cutters in a hip pocket, but appeared reluctant to go.

“Is it true,” he inquired almost plaintively, “that they have the barroom of that Palmer House paved with silver dollars?”

“Good heavens, no,” laughed Parradine. “That was a feature of one of the old Palmer Houses, before even my time. You see, there’ve been about a half dozen or so Palmer Houses, on the same site. The one you spoke of was the one built after the Chicago Fire.”

“I see. Well, I’ll be dam—uh—that’s the first I knew of that. You see, I’ve never been to Chi myself. Nor—but I’ll run on then, Mr. Parradine. And will have everything ready to show you—at least ready to light up.”

“Good! That’s the way I want to clap eyes on it first. I’ll be up, bag and all, as soon as I get a down-city phone connection I’m trying to complete, and ask a—a—a $64 question of the man I’m trying hard to get in connection with.” “Okay, Mr. Parradine.” And Rocco, with a subservient nod of his head, withdrew.

And now Parradine was alone again, waiting his connection with one Ochiltree Jark. With whom he, Parradine, had not the slightest acquaintance in the world. Ochiltree Jark who, if certain facts were correct—

Gilbert Parradine rose, and strolled over to the nearest window. And, hands clasped behind himself, gazed contentedly from his perfect 12th floor tower-room vantage point, down upon and over his great uptown real-estate holding. Comprising the entire square called Parradine Block, bounded by four streets on three of which, neatly landscaped at the expense of Parradine Block’s own builder, were the many entrances to the trim, 3-story, ornately- corniced and red-tile-roofed building constituting the Parradine Apartments, and on the fourth of which— famous Broadway itself!—back of an enormously broad sidewalk created by donating valuable frontage to the city, lay the fronts of countless stores and neat shops; this real- estate holding so vast as to include, as its upper Broadway end, no less than a 7-story office building, bearing atop its own outer corner the slender many-storied tower in which the owner of it all now stood, and containing, at its lower Broadway end, that great de luxe first-run motion-picture theatre whose giant marquee, at this distance, seemed like but an arm completely overhanging a gleaming ribbon of pavement, and where the people, threading in even now for the matinee, seemed to be but fleas. A holding so vast that—

But here the phone on the desk behind Gilbert Parradine rang. He turned instantly and swept across the room. Dropped into his swivel chair. And put the instrument to his ear.

It proved to be, as he had just about expected, the telephone operator he had been talking with less than 5 minutes before.

“I have that down-city connection, Mr. Parradine,” she announced pleasantly. "And your very party. Mr.—ah—

Ochiltree Jark.” The faintest ripple, a mere tinkle, no more, of a laugh escaped the girl. She was plainly highly amused by this quaint name, but immediately became all business again. “Now are you ready to come on?”

“Quite,” Parradine told her, a bit amused himself at her amusement.

“Very well, sir. I’ll throw you in, now.”

There was a clicking. Then a man’s voice came on die circuit. It was an agreeable voice, but a fogyish one— indeed, almost a fusty one—the voice of a man who lived in some strange little peculiar world of his own. “Ochiltree Jark speaking,” he said with dignity.

Chapter X

CONCERNING ONE “STINKAROO, THE KING OF

THE STINKERS!”

“OH YES, Mr. Jark,” Parradine replied pleasantly. “So glad I got hold of you okay. I—but my name is Parradine— Gilbert Parradine—and of New York, of course.”

“Parra—not, by any chance, the owner of of the Parradine Moderne Motion Picture Theatre ’way uptown?” “That’s right,” nodded Parradine. “Don’t tell me that you folks ’way down around—ah—22nd Street—ever come ’way up to my showplace?”

“Well, probably most don’t, no, Mr. Parradine. But you see I managed, just night before last, to catch, at your theatre uptown there, the first run of a picture I very much wanted to see. And to study some of your next billings, which all appear to be first runs. Why—the one I saw hadn’t even come yet to the downtown showplaces.” “Well,” laughed Parradine, “I feel that the uptowners here have some priority rights of their own, on entertainment and film fare. Indeed, we’ll be the first screen theatre in New York City—if not perhaps all America!—to show this new English comic, Broom Sherwood, who they say actually put the cameramen and soundmen in stitches during the filming of this, his first film; and if that fight in Brooklyn between Casey O’Kelly and that fellow Napoleoni, or whatever he now calls himself, comes off on schedule—we’ll be having the first films on it. Same time, in fact, as the Sherwood film. And—but here!—1 seem to

be trying to sell something. And I’m—”

“That’s quite all right,” said the man on the other end of the wire. “In fact, I noted the forecast and dating of that identical hook-up of first runs in your lobby when I was up there.”

Now a silence fell, a polite silence. And then Ochiltree Jark added courteously:

“What—what can I do for you, Mr. Parradine?” “We-ell,” responded the latter, “I’ll make it very brief. I’m a collector, Mr. Jark—though in a small and modest way—of Chinese objects. Everything from jade seals to— well, anything. Oh, no sinologist, me—heavens no! I pluck what appeals to me. And hardly know the meaning or history of most of the things I have. Nor—but anyway, a friend of mine, by the name of Vanzwell Cooperider, who sort of keeps his eye open for my—ah—weakness, called me up around noontime today, and told me that in a little catalogue or leaflet put out by you there on 22nd Street, you—but you’re in the book business, are you not?” “That’s right, Mr. Parradine. I do a sort of specialized shop trade in second-hand books, specially bound stuff and —and sets, you know; and a catalogue trade with respect to odd and somewhat rare items.”

“Well, it’s about one of those rarer items,” Gilbert Parradine said, “one of those catalogue items, that I’m calling up now. My friend says you have, listed in your latest catalogue, a book called The Way Out. Allegedly containing all the wisdom of old China, collated and all, and—”

“That’s right, Mr. Parradine. And I even recognize your

friend’s name. For I have a mailing list, you see, of only a couple hundred copies. Vanzwell Cooperider, yes, of Long Island. Interested, if I’m not mistaken, in old Shakespearean items. However, your friend apparently did not notice the code-letter extension ‘o-o’ on that entry. Which means—or at least signified—that I had listed, for sale, i copy only of that work The Way Out.”

“Oh yes—i copy only, eh? Well, I have sort of taken a notion that a good thorough compilation of the Chinese people’s wisdom might well go with my weird assemblage of objects. And so-o-o if you’ve a copy, I suppose I’d have no trouble in getting hold of it? So how much is it?”

There was a long pause. It seemed to radiate regret, apology, even self-recrimination. “I hardly know what to say, Mr. Parradine,” the odd-books dealer replied “At the realization, I mean, that that entry has put you to the trouble of calling up and all, when you’re probably a busy man, with your theatre and all. But you see, this catalogue which your friend has seen is not newly mailed out—it’s been out—oh, all of a little more than 3 weeks—and the copy The Way Out which I had, is sold. And I only wish to heaven I had it back! For it prossesses now a real value. Instead of—of the paltry $3.50 I sold it for. Yes, sir! A real value!”

“Real value? What—what do you mean, Mr. Jark?”

“I mean simply, sir, that it is almost certainly the only copy existent of the particular literary work which it represents.”

“The only copy? We-e-ell—if it is—or at least assuming it is—and you had it—what would you be charging for it?”

“Well, under the odd and curious circumstances in which its valuation, as being the probably sole existent copy, has been beautifully worked out, the price would necessarily and—ah—automatically be $250. Only §250, yes, since it’s not a specimen of incunabula. It’s a quite modern book, yes, but quite irreplaceable, both now and forever in the future, via either publisher or author. Yes, $250 would be its market value.”

“Two hundred fifty, eh? Um? Two hundred—and fifty? Well, that wouldn’t be overpriced, I’d say, for a book so rare. ’Specially one with such an angle as to fit a collection of Chinese obj— But here!— I’m introducing myself in the picture, am I not? And regardless of me, the situation is as is. But do you mind telling me, Mr. Jark, how on earth it comes that there is only 1 copy of this work? And that you, a bookman, let yours go for a song? If, that is, you don’t mind?”

“Not at all, Mr. Parradine—not at all—so long as you don’t object to giving your own time on the phone. We in bookstores, you know, have more time than we have—” The bookseller broke off. Paused the barest moment. Went on. “Well, the work in question was created by a chap named Gordon Highsmith. Brought up in China. And was published in both England and America, though by two different sets of publishers, quite naturally. The British edition, however, is as non est as is the American. Yes, the great blitz in the British publishing district, during the late war. Only two copies of that edition are known— so-called author check-copies—printed, as such are, on green paper—and both today in the hands of known collectors. As for the American edition, of which we’re now speaking, the work was issued by a firm in Philadelphia known as the Vinnedge Brothers. The Vinnedge Brothers are out of the publishing business, and, so far as anybody seems to know, dead. Which may be just as well, since one of the brothers had a weird flair for—but—er—I won’t go into that! The author of the work, however—yes, High- smith—has not been heard of for some years; he is presumed to have died in the North African Tunisian campaign, from a bursting German shell. So-o-o the book, you’ll understand, can’t be reproduced—at least certainly not in American edition, anyway—since the author, missing, owns the copyright, and the Vinnedge Brothers firm, dissolved and all, owned the American publication rights. And—but is this clear?”

“So clear,” nodded Parradine, “that I’ll call it doublecheck—on reproduction! Go ahead, Mr. Jark.”

“Yes, I will. Well, there was, here in America—at least, up to some time back—an erratic multi-millionaire who seems to have had an idea that he was sent here to Earth by Heaven itself to do certain things with his money— certain things, that is, calculated to correct certain evils in the world. In fact, it’s acknowledged today that the man was not erratic, but was insane. Anyway, his name was Bogardus Sandsteel. Of—”

“Oh? Bogardus Sandsteel of Utica? Who died—about 3 weeks ago? On his farm outside of that city? He—now let me see?—yes, he had an anti-Chinese complex, didn’t he? —spent thousands of dollars buying up property in big cities where Chinese had chop-suey restaurants, and then

cancelling the poor devils’ leases. Thinking, I suppose, they would go oil and blow their brains out, or something. The—the idiot! For, dispossessed, they only opened up elsewhere; and— But Bogardus Sandsteel then, is connected in some way with this book, The Way Out? Or—the copy thereof?”

“Right, Mr. Parradine.”

“I see. That is—I don’t see at all! For not much about the man really ever reached the papers. Even his death, I recall, was some days getting out. And very little beyond. Indeed, all I recall, outside of the matter of who his heir was, and his anti-Chinese complex, and his war of extermination on Chinese restaurants, was that the day after he died, his servants loosed a couple of bulls onto the reporters from Utica, trying to get the full story on the old man.”

“That’s him,” replied the bookdealer vehemently. “A stinker in death as well as in life. So much so that he even left his fortune to a—a bigger stinker. A nephew named Jeronymo Ashpital. A—a—a man—” the bookdealer was actually sputtering now over the wire—“so low that—”

“Yes, I know,” said Parradine soothingly. “I mean that a friend of mine—no, not Vanzwell Cooperider—another friend—went through both high school and college with this Jeronymo Ashpital. And told me, when the matter of Sandsteel’s death came up in our conversation, that Ashpital was known as ‘Stinkaroo’ in high-school, and in college as ‘King of the Stinkers!”’

“That’s him!” cried the bookdealer fiercely. “He’s the cause of my losing—but I’ll go on.” He seemed to collect

himself. “Well,” he continued, more calmly, “it appears, Mr. Parradine, that about a year ago, Bogardus Sandsteel came upon a copy of this The Way Out which, claiming —nay, practically proving—that die wisdom of the Chinese people encompasses all the wisdom of all races, times, ages and what not, virtually apotheosizes the Chinese race; and so he at once conceived the idea of—”

“Oh-oh! I get it. He’s been buying up the work, I take it, to get it out of circulation?”

“Exactly that, Mr. Parradine. With a view—as I now happen to know—to some day, when he had gotten ’em all in—except that he never lived to see this particular colorful high spot in his career—burn ’em all, publicly, with great ceremonies, with a band, and a barbecue feast, and all. Oh, I fancy that did a man ever stand trial for his sanity, under such a charge, he’d be almost certainly certified to an asylum.” The bookdealer could here be heard to sigh helplessly. “But people like Bogardus Sandsteel, possessed of 25,000,000 dollars, never stand trial for their—but I’ll hurry on with the facts. Which are merely that for practically a year he’s had a standing ad in The Publishers’ Weekly ‘Books-wanted Department,’ the Retail Bookseller, the sheet known as The Boo/(searcher, and the weekly leaflet called The Library Hunter. The ad, in addition to making offer for copies of The Way Out', carried a blind address, for communication, and a Utica phone number. I myself never learned who the advertiser was till the day after his death. And I doubt whether anybody else ever did! Since—but anyway, the price first offered was 39 cents a copy—the standard retail ‘remainder price,’ you see—to draw out standing wholesale stocks. Then it went up. Shortly it was $3.50, the net retail. As time went on, the price offer went up, up, up. Eventually he was offering $50 the copy. Which—”

“Pardon me,” queried Parradine puzzledly, “but what on earth reason did the ad give for paying such fancy prices?”

“Oh, the reason given, after the price got pretty well upped, was one at least never heard of before in the book trade; perhaps that’s why it ‘sat’ so perfectly! For the story in the ad was that the advertiser was agent for the author, who desired to delete some of the items in his book, as errors, and to add some new material, but could not republish the book because of legal restrictions. Was, therefore, going to collate the copies of the whole edition, strip the bindings, alter, and re-bind. The trade knows that authors are frightfully sensitive about the authenticity of their works, and since nobody knew whether this High- smith was poor, rich, or what—well, the explanation ‘sat,’ since, indeed, in the case of authors, Mr. Parradine, we expect anything, you know! And—”

“I never knew an author,” admitted Parradine. “Nor ever exp—but please proceed. You are intriguing me.” “Yes? Well, as I said, eventually Bogardus Sandsteel was offering $50 the copy for The Way Out. Which you can readily surmise drew copies right out of Public Libraries; for Public Libraries, you see, are always hard up; they can always use $50 to buy many books for their shelves in place of one seldom read, or consulted, like The Way Out. Why, I know of two libraries alone, in this part of the country, that parted with their respective copies immediately on the day the price jumped from $40 to $50. Since— anyway, Mr. Parradine, the price continued climbing. On up to $100, which, as I now happen to know, brought in 11 copies. On up to $150, which I also now happen to know drew 4 copies, out of die hands of collectors of highly specialized informative stuff, such as Chinese wisdom would be. On the price went, to $200, which drew 2 copies out of hiding—the two being none other, Mr. Parradine, than two filched by some clerk from the United States Bureau of Copyrights—yes, the two originally deposited for copyright! And finally the price became, during the last month, $250 the copy. None, as I alone happen to know, came in on that $250 offer. So it’s assumable, I believe, Mr. Parradine, that $250 represents the definite valuation point for all copies existent. Since it is the price—the definitely offered price—where the book became no longer in the market for purchase or sale. Or—”

“Fair reasoning,” granted Parradine amiably. “And I take no issue with it. Go ahead.”

“Well, it was, as you say, roughly 3 weeks ago that Sandsteel died. After his $250 acl had been running for months in the trade publications. And drawing no copies whatsoever.”

“Yes, go on. Proving pretty conclusively, I’d say, that he’d drained ’em all in, bar none. But his death—well, you say he never got to have his great ceremonial book burning, and barbecue feast! Well, how comes it then, that by his death the copies aren’t pouring back into circulation?”

“That’s easily answered,” returned the bookseller, down

right lugubriously. “For one of the last things he did, when he sensed he wasn’t going to live—and which he did the night before he died—was to go out and set fire to the particular barn which housed all the painfully acquired copies of The Way Out. Yes, a fact, Mr. Parradine. And the barn and all its contents went up in smoke, leaving not a brick! And so he died happy, I guess, thinking he’d killed off the work complete. Its British publishers being non est., and its American publishers being gone. And its author dead, and all. Only—”

“Only you—you had a copy of the work? How on earth did that come abou—”

“Very easily explained, Mr. Parradine,” said the book- dealer glumly. “You see, the day before Sandsteel’s death, I acquired, by purchase, from the executors of the estate of an old bookseller, by name Eliphalet Skillanville, in White Plains, New York, the latter’s tiny stock. Eliphalet Skillanville was a man who had no relatives whatever, and he had not even operated for a year, you see. For he’d been lying paralyzed in a hospital, and in a coma, from a paralytic stroke. And so had known nothing, you see, about all these matters appertaining to The Way Out. Such as the calls for copies, and all.” The bookdealer sighed audibly over die wire. “Well, amongst the stuff I acquired, sight unseen, was 1 copy of The Way Out. My Lord! I won’t say I wasn’t elated. For I was. I—I was exultant. In view of that $250 call for copies running in the P.W., the R.B., and all. I called up that Utica number pronto. And when I got in connection with some man who it seems was die only man officially able to discuss the matter with me, I told him that I had a copy of the work, and would like to arrange to exchange it immediately for the $250 offered. Well, I was in conversation with—”

The bookdealer at the other end could be heard, at this juncture, to give vent to a bitter ejaculation of some sort.

“—with,” he continued dourly, “though I knew it not at the moment, this Jeronymo Ashpital we’ve been talking about. For you see he was, in addition to being Sandsteel’s heir, the executor of the latter’s will. Well, he told me, quite dryly, that Sandsteel had died the night before, and that I would read about it in the papers next day. And added that he was executor, and all. And when I then proceeded to ask him if the offer was off, so as to find out whether, as I explained it to him, I could at least offer my copy as a rare and scarce book, he said to me—he—well, do you know what he said to me, Mr. Parradine?”

“We-ell,” Parradine endeavored to sympathize, “I can only surmise that if he lived up to his high-school nickname of ‘stinkaroo’ and his college name of ‘King of the Stinkers,’ he said something to you to the effect that—sa-a-a-y, you don’t mean to tell me he coldbloodedly tricked you, Mr. Jark, into letting go of a now-highly valuable copy of a book?”

“Ex-actly!” said the bookdealer vehemently. “For he said to me—well, these are his exact words: ‘Buy your copy? Why, hell-fire, you musty-brained dope, do you want to buy some of the copies of the book we have here? In quantities of anything from a dozen to 2000? For we had over 4000 here last night. 2000 went back into trade already this morning. An even thousand to the American News

Company—’ Here,” explained the bookseller to Parradine, “I’m naming the big jobbers now, of so-called remaindered- edition books— ‘—and a thousand to Baker and Taylor. But we’ve still over 2000 here. So-o-o—if you want ’em at the same rate that A N and B and T got them—39 cents per copy—you can have a thousand. Or, in hundreds, at 50 cents apiece. Or, in dozens, 75 cents apiece.’ ”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” helplessly commented Parradine, to whom all depths of meanness were unknown and unknowable. “And so you were left believing, because of supposedly ‘authoritative’ information, that you had a copy of virtually no value?”

“Exactly, Mr. Parradine! And so, since I was just about to go on press with my own little monthly leaflet of odd items, I got an entry in it of my copy, at the outrageous price of $3.50, and ran my leaflet off. Mailed it out next day. And shortly orders—a few—commenced to come in for my copy. More than I could supply, indeed, so far as that went. For I sold my copy off, to a party. But having those extra additional orders on hand, that I’d been unable to supply, and being near Utica yesterday because of my mother-in-law’s funeral there, I ran out to the Sandsteel farm to see whether I could pick up a dozen more copies, and incidentally to find out when the sold ones were going to hit the market. And lo—this time I got hold of a decent white man—a former New Yorker, incidentally—a lawyer named Isdale Archdeacon, who—”

“Isdale Archdeacon?” interrupted Parradine, nodding. “No more upright man in the whole legal profession. No, I don’t know him, but know of him as when he practised

here in New York; and he was actually called ‘White Man’ Archdeacon. Since—but go ahead.”

“Yes, I will. Well, Archdeacon, it seems, was now helping to execute Sandsteel’s will, instead of this—this King of the Stinkers, Jeronymo Ashpital. Who’d been deposed as executor, for highhandedness. And Archdeacon gave me the facts. The real low-down. Showed me how I had been lied to. By one of the biggest, and meanest, liars in creation. Told me how the barn containing Sandsteel’s copies of The Way Out had been burned down by the old man the night before he died. Even took me out and showed it to me. I even picked up a corner of one book cover! So you see, Mr. Parradine, I had sold a highly rare book worth all of $250 for $3.50. And that’s—that’s the whole story, Mr. Parradine.”

“Well, I’ll be darned!” was all Parradine could say. “Your story, Mr. Jark, gilds an already interesting enough work with even further drama. Mayhap some day some author will write up this work and—but anyway, maybe this is where 7 come into the picture! With a—a now slightly heightened yen for this book—and with some money—more than $3.50, anyway!—to spend. So-o-o do you mind telling me to whom you sold this precious copy?”

Chapter XI

THE BROWSER

THE Lower New York bookdealer proved quite willing to detail exactly where his flown bird had gone! And for the simple reason, as became manifest from his immediate reply, that it appeared to be now quite and completely impossible that the bird in question would, or ever could, return to its Next to the Six Deuces—or 222% West 22nd Street, as that latter site might less figuratively be described. For in the case of that copy of The Way Out, it now appeared that—

“The copy,” retorted the bookdealer dryly. “Didn’t even get sold through my sheet. It was sold to a man who comes to my shop occasionally to get certain back copies of certain trade journals—he picked it off the shelves while merely browsing, and—”

“Browsing right in your—somebody here in New York, eh? Well then,” Gilbert Parradine added triumphantly, “there’s somebody right here in New York then, that I can maybe do business with. For a little Chinese collection oddity. Providing nobody—ah—tips him off that—”

He stopped, as he heard, over the wire, a rueful chuckle.

“Not this man, Mr. Parradine,” the bookdealer retorted. “Not this man—no! For this man is about the most stubborn, micro-brained human in all— You see, I tried myself today, via phone, to buy that copy back for—oh, anything in reason—and was politely told that it wasn’t for sale at any price, nor—”

“He knew, eh?” nodded Parradinc, intrigued, “about its being the only copy of itself in existence?”

“Not in the least, apparently,” said the bookdealer, his own voice now radiating profound mystification. “For when I—but ’twas this way. This man is a dealer in hides— yes, stinking unesthetic hides—and he has an office down on the East River front—and he doesn’t, I tell you, know the difference between a book and a—a cabbage—a fact! He certainly didn’t want this particular book because of any strange leather binding it had, for the simple reason that it didn’t have a leather binding—it was bound in cloth; nor, evidently, did he even want the book for his own instruction or edification, for he never even looked into it when he bought it—just plucked it down off the shelf, had me wrap it up, and only when he had it in his hand asked what the price was—and paid the price without the shadow of an argument.”

The bookdealer paused but the infinitesimal part of a second; then went right on with his castigation of the East River front hides-dealer.

“Which was an odd thing for him—I mean, that he paid my price without any argument whatsoever—for he’ll argue all day about a mere extra nickel or so cost on a back-number magazine of his particular trade. Oh, in his own business he’s as shrewd as they make ’em, so I understand—can actually make a penny squeal—stubborn as—as 20 mules rolled into one, and— However, Mr. Parradine, to put your mind immediately to rest on buying that copy of The Way Out from him, I called him up today and asked him first, casually, whether he’d enjoyed the

book he bought; not altogether to my surprise, he calmly said he hadn’t read it, and almost certainly wouldn’t; so then, when I asked him whether he’d care to sell it back to me for a profit, he snapped: ‘Not for sale, Jark, at any price.’ ”

“Oh well,” Parradine returned philosophically, “that’s purely a relative thing, you know. Price and prices—” “Yes? Well, when I said to him, ‘That book, as I now find, is a first edition, and has a single typographical error in it that gives it a value of—well, I’d pay $100’—he snapped—”

“Yes? What?”

“He snapped: ‘Don’t be a damned idiot, man, paying $100 for any book that things ain’t spelled right in—much less this one. Or any of its many dooplycates, when you run on to ’em. Though mine ain’t for sale, as I told you, at any price. Get that now! Not at any price—now—or in the future. Nor—’scuse me, now—a man’s come in here with a carload of hides to sell. Goo’bye.’ And,” finished the bookdealer morosely, “he hung right up on me.”

“I see,” said Parradine helplessly. “We-ell, since he anticipates your running onto duplicates of the work, he obviously doesn’t even remotely dream it’s the only one of its kind—owoo! If he won’t sell it now, I wonder what on earth he’d do if he knew ’twas the only one of its kind in the—well—” He made a gesture of futility at the phone. “It’s obvious now, isn’t it, that no mere ten-spot—or pair of ten-spots, from me—would ever crack his leathery hide— more leathery, probably, than the skins he sells! Nor would

Parradine stopped.

For from the door across the room in back of him came a loud knock, thrice repeated.

“Just hold the wire, will you, Mr. Jark?” he requested quickly. “My electrician here, I think, wants to know someth—now don’t go, will you?”

“It’s you, Mr. Parradine,” said the bookdealer, “who will be paying the extra time charge on this connection—not me.”

“Right! So stick around. For in spite of all you tell me about this hides-dealing pepperpot, I’m wondering, at that, whether maybe I— You see, Mr. Jark, you’ve sort of roused my bump of cupidity by telling me that a—a stodgy, and apparently half-illiterate dealer in beef—and cow-skins possesses something that I can at least appreciate and really would like to own! In short, I want to discuss with you whether you think I might get somewhere with the fellow if, say, I ran down there to his office-this afternoon before loping offi to Chicago—yes, took a later plane today instead of the one I’m going on—and tried my luck at wangling, hornswoggling, or what-have-you, that book out of him for a modest price. Oh, if I did, I’d naturally pay you a commission for the inside info you’ve given me as to his possessing it; on the other hand, Mr. Jark, it might be possible that if I called him up from Chicago tonight and put on a sort of—of long-distance high-pressure act, that— Anyway, just stick around, will you? And I’ll be right back.”

And Parradine lay the telephone instrument down. Just as, again, a knock was sounding on the door back of him.

“Come in,” he called loudly, and swung around in his swivel chair.

The door now opened, revealing, as it did so, a strange figure—a half-man, no less, seated on a “rollerskate” cart! —framed against the bit of outer hallway. But no ordinary half-man this, for he was a Chinaman; quite legless, indeed, so far as the presence of even upper leg stumps went; but amply provided with locomotion, of the gliding kind, anyway, in die matter of the unusually generous rubber- tired wheels under the platform cart. Suspended from his neck was a tray containing shoestrings, pencils, safety-razor blades, what not. In age he was about 44—the same as Parradine, the years being revealed more by the touch of grey at his ears than by his impassive and somewhat thin, dignified face: his oblique eyes would have been declared, by an expert on Chinese faciology, to have been the obliquest in all New Yorl^-and his skin the yellowest of all his race living between the Atlantic and the Pacific! His torso, the only part of him visible, was encased in a black Chinese jacket, heavily embroidered in colored silks with fanciful flowers and birds. Matching, in colorfulness, a small round black hat on his head, sewn with brilliantly hued beads.

“Gleetings, Mistel Palladine,” he called, smiling blandly across the room. “I makee big mis-took las’ ni’te, w’en I sellee you sholt shoestlings, ’stead of long shoestling like you wan’. But I no likee bothel you this molnin’ fo’ to le’ me extsange—you plob’ly lots busy in molnin’s, yes, no?— but allee lite!—comee I now, aftel you’ lunch, to makee extsange.”

Parradine frowned amiably.

“Last night?” he queried puzzledly. “I didn’t purchase any—but come in, John Hoi. And don’t hand me any more of that chop-suey talk and pidgin English! For I know who you are, at last. You’re Jonathan G. Wing, ex-San Francisco attorney—admitted to the bar in California, and still legally able to practise there—specialist on criminal law—graduate, magna cum laude, of San Bernardino University—and now selling shoestrings on the streets of New York. Entrez, John Hoi, and tell me what’s on your mind?”

Chapter XII

JOHN HOI

A HOPELESSLY helpless look swept across the yellow face of the Chinese half-man framed in the half-opened doorway. He shook his head frustratedly, but spoke.

“Good heavens!” was all he said. “Don’t tell me, Mr. Parradine, that the Truth is out over all New York?” Parradine shook his own head. “By no means, Hoi. Nor will it be, so far as I’m concerned. But here—come in.”

The Chinaman, seizing from each side of himself, where both had been resting quite unobtrusively on the platform cart, a curious several-inch-deep wooden block provided with a metal handle, now proceeded to propel his strange vehicle inward, by a sort of rowing motion wherein his arms were paddles, and the blocks, pressed in contact with floor, were water-encased paddle-blades! Inward sufficiently, he rotated his platform cart enough to reach up deftly and shut the door, and then, seizing the momentarily relinquished block, rotated the cart back again, and was even now gliding over the carpet on what must, indeed, have been ball-bearing rollers.

And now, down in front of Parradine, his blocks placed carefully back at his sides, he was taking from his tray a package of shoestrings. And with it in hand, looking grotesquely up.

“How on earth, Mr. Parradine,” he asked pointedly, “did you discover that I was Jonathan G. Wing?”

“Very simply,” was Parradine’s honest reply. “A friend

of mine happens to have known you from days back before you—ah—lost your—limbs, just however that may have happened, and—in short, Hoi, he went to college with you there in California. He was visiting me yesterday, on his way to England, and recognized you; oh, you could never have recognized him, because he’s been badly burned in a hotel fire in Pasadena, poor dev— However, he told me on the q. t. what he had discovered; and thus I found diat the humble Chinese I have allowed to sit downstairs in front of Parradine Block is an educated, trained expert.”

“Educated, trained—and broke, Mr. Parradine. For I couldn’t make a living as a lawyer. Nobody would hire a—but do you mind telling me which one of my classmates it was who was shrewd enough to recognize me? For I had my nose changed a bit at time of my—er—surgery—” The Chinese swept a hand meaningfully over the place where his legs should have been. “—My eyebrows narrowed—my— Do you mind telling me?”

“Not at all. Miclau Endliss.”

“The devil—you say? Poor Endliss! The most handsome man of the class. Yes, a fact. It’s all of 20 years since we graduated, yet I remember Endliss as well as though it were all yesterday. The most handsome man, beyond any doubt, in the class. And now—disfigured!” The Chinese shook his head. Then pulled himself together, went on with his words.

“But you’ve asked a salient question, and I’m endeavoring to answer it. As I say, I couldn’t make the slightest shadow of a living as a lawyer. Why, nobody would hire me. Certainly not the criminals, whose putative rights I

had thought to protect if, Budda help me, such possess any. Not even the Chinese would hire me. For they all thought alike, that white juries would be prejudiced hopelessly against a yellow lawyer. Perhaps they were right on that, by Jove; yes, I believe today they were. Why, I couldn’t even get a job as a case-preparer in a lawyer’s office, because of the fact that when it would get out, the firm would be thought to be doing tong-killer defense stuff, or acting surreptitiously as middlemen between opium-den proprietors, or fan-tan game proprietors, and the police— or what not. I—I was poison, I tell you!”

A shadow passed over the Chinaman’s face—he sighed— the shadow lingered a second, then passed; his face again became the face of a philosopher.

“For myself,” he went on, looking up at Parradine, “it didn’t matter. We Chinese are used to taking it! But my whole education had been provided for by my only living relative—my grandfather, Wing Ku, a small merchant of Ffohsien, a village about a hundred miles back of Canton. Ffe died so broke that—well, I found, on some investigation, that his remains were in the pauper section of the town’s cemetery, with only a rotten plank above his grave. All as a result—of sending me to school. And so—so—” The Chinese took a deep breath.

“—When my legs got crushed in the wreck of the Olympia Express, en route from San Francisco to Seattle, where I was going to look for a berth, and I was offered a $5000 cash settlement over and above my hospitalizadon, I had to figure then and there whether to try to carry on as a lawyer, or become a beggar. And so-o-o, when the

settlement came, I sent it to the Nanshing Trust Company of Shanghai—at least all but fare to New York, and the price of this cart—and had my grandfather’s remains put into a line vault in the cemetery—the most beautiful thing in Hohahien Cemetery—I have pictures of it—and I—well, I took up begging. You may call it smalle-scale merchandizing, Mr. Parradine, but I call it professional mendicancy. And that’s—that’s my story.”

“Good heavens,” was all Parradine could say. “What a sto— but how do you make out?”

The Chinaman looked quizzically pained.

“It won’t cost me my position along your block?” “Heavens, no, Hoi. No! You give my block a real highlight—a touch of real color. I'm glad and honored to have you.”

“Well, I’ll be frank then. I at least pay income-tax on my takings. A thing which, as a lawyer, I never came within a million miles of doing. In fact, as a lawyer, I had to bunk in the back of a Chinese laundry—at 75 cents a week!—with n chop suey restaurant waiters and laun- drymen, some smoking opium, and had to live, at times, on nothing but boiled rice and tea. Meaning—I earned nothing!”

Parradine shook his head. “A hell of a commentary on our civilization. That’s about all I can say. To allow a human mind and soul to be buried ali—”

“Ah, Mr. Parradine, there’s where you’re quite wrong. I know today that there was, and is, nothing—in the life I would have lived. Routine, rut, and—and spiritual destruction. As I live today, I meet thousands of interesting

people who chat with me, and tell me of their lives; instead of rotting away in a dusty law-firm’s anteroom, surrounded by heavy, wearisome, mind-fogging legal tomes, I am posted, literally, on the banks of a human river where I can see life actually flow past me, hour after hour; I owe no man anything today, in the matter of favors or obligations—and none owe me; why—the life I live today is a thousand times richer than the one I would have lived. For that latter life was, basically, false and empty, colorless and—

“Indeed,” the Chinaman broke off, almost quizzically, “we Chinese have a little verse, or couplet, that describes precisely what I’m trying to convey. The only standard verse in the whole Chinese language which, when translated, comes out in rhyme. Isn’t that odd? For—but to the verse itself. Which goes—”

And in a curious singsong voice, wherein, as even Parra- dine knew, pitch and inflection served to create certain differences of meaning, the Chinese repeated:

" ‘Hua shui wu yu fang tso lang,

‘Hsiu hun sui hao pu wen hsiang

“Which in English,” the Chinaman went on, without even a pause, but smiling, says:

“ ‘In the mock waves of painted water, no fishes dwell;

‘In your embroidered flowers, though fine, there is no smell.”

He paused but a second.

“And that is a picture of the life I would have led: painted water—without fishes; embroidered flowers—without smell!”

He made a philosophic gesture with his lean yellow hands.

“I’m glad,” was all Parradine could say, “that you’re satisfied! For it seems to me—” He said no more to this wreck of a human being. “But tell me something, will you, John Hoi?” he broke off.

“Are you retaining me?” asked the Chinaman, grinning. “The famous retort, you know, of a lawyer, when asked a question!”

“Sure I’m retaining you! And without discussion even as to fee. So here’s the question: I’ve a chance, of sorts, to obtain a rare copy of a book contain—that is, John Hoi, I believe I have the chance, for I can’t for the life of me see how there can be anything in life that’s not for sale at any price, nor—” Parradine shook his head perplexedly. “A thing without price? That’s utterly ridicu— However,” he broke off, “I feel I’ve a chance to obtain this book. Perhaps by some artful negotiating—perhaps by the use of money only. But whether or no, the book contains, John Hoi, all the collated wisdom of your race. Classified and all, so as to apply to everything, bar nothing. So is it worth paying an—er—stiff price for?”

“Meaning—because of its rarity—or because was—our race wise?”

“We-ell, yes—the latter?”

“Well, Mr. Parradine, alcohol, when thrice distilled, becomes the finest beverage—worthy even of Gordon’s Gin! Wisdom that becomes distilled through passing through the tongues of scores of generations, and filtered by application to thousands of situations, becomes the very crystallization of Wisdom. In short, to hell with the rarity of the book. If somebody really has done the backbreaking labor of collating all our wisdom—and classifying it, to boot—get the book. Live by it. For it can be your beacon light, in everything you do.”

“Old wisdom?” chided Parradine. “Thousands of years old?”

“Certainly,” nodded the half-man. “Wisdom is fundamental, intrinsic, you see.”

“Yes? Well, how would one of your ancient pundits express the answer, solution, or illumination to a problem dealing with, say, gangsters?”

“Like that house electrician of yours?” the Chinese replied promptly. He looked, for the first time, hurt. “Who calls me Half-a-Chink and, when he’s more loquacious, ‘King of the Roller-Skating Rink’?”

A shadow passed over Parradine’s face. “The devil you say? I’ll certainly speak to him about that. For that’s not agreeable to me at all. I’ll—”

“Don’t do it—if you don’t mind! I like not to get New York gangsters on my wrong side.”

Parradine shook his head. “He’s no gangster, John Hoi. Merely a chap who grew up in a territory that has spawned gangsters, but who has succeeded in making something of himself. You have to distinguish, you know. For—but all

right—how would your Chinese pundit refer to our gangsters?”

“Oh,” laughed the other, “there were gangs galore in ancient China. Bandits, they called them. Why—the Capone of 500 A.D. was Lu Wong.”

“We-ell—okay, then. Well how would one of your old pundits express himself upon what was, some time back, the greatest problem our world ever had ? Meaning Hitler. Who I see, only today, is estimated to have caused practically directly the death of 5,000,000 persons.”

“Why, we Chinese had our Hitlers in the ancient days. Specifically, however, Ghenghis Khan, who conquered North China, Tartary and Persia. And caused the death of—well, guess how many persons?”

“Not 5 million also?”

“Precisely.”

“Well, I’ll be!” Parradine shook his head, came back to the subject. “Then the book in question will be applicable to everything from cock-fighting to—to relativity, eh? Well—but see here, John Hoi, has the wisdom of your race given you any solution—to—ah—”

“—To my legless condition?” the Chinese helped out. He shook his head, but deprecatingly. “Mr. Parradine, I think I can with safety say that not less than 500 of the sayings of my people teach implacably that a man’s position in life is absolutely that of a prince, compared to what it would be in some less desirable position. Even to be a Chinese, Mr. Parradine, is to be saturated with that thesis. For instance, I have no cancer, and no chance of inheriting same; I can read English and Chinese classics both, instead of being unable to read eidier; I’m not on trial for my life for some murder I didn’t commit; I haven’t a missing daughter who may have gone wrong, and whose absence makes my nights a living nightmare; I haven’t a wife living in an iron lung, and wondering how in Buddha’s name I shall be able to keep her there for some years yet; I—why—I’m a wealthy man, Mr. Parradine, compared to what I might be.”

“A most remarkable man, too,” nodded Parradine. “And —but you say, John Hoi, that I should acquire this book at any cost?”

“I say yes,” affirmed the other. “Since it’s actually in English. And I guarantee you that there is no situation in life, yours or anybody else’s, no matter how desperate, that it cannot be applied to.”

“No situation in life?” echoed Parradine, almost chidingly.

“No situation in life,” affirmed the Chinese stubbornly. “I guarantee it.”

Parradine pursed his lips. “A big ticket—that ‘guarantee’ of yours,” was all he said. “But I’m a fall-guy, John Hoi, when it comes to the opinions of experts. Always was. And always will be! And so—” He allowed the rest of his words to go unsaid.

But the Chinaman’s gaze was resting troubledly, alarmedly, on the telephone.

“Good heavens, Mr. Parradine, you’re actually talking to somebody on the wire. Strange that I didn’t note that instrument was off its cradle. So I’ll be vamoosing out of here pronto! I—” Pie held forth the package of shoestrings he had extracted from his tray on his first advent in here. “That package of laces I sold you last night were shorties, as I found when I discovered only this morning that my last consignment of laces has been accidentally misbranded by the makers. Shorties instead of longies! So I desire herewith and hereupon to make commercial restitution!”

Parradine could only look at the other helplessly.

“But I got no—” he began.

“Oh-oh!” The Chinaman, looking painedly at the phone, lowered his voice to no more than a whisper. “I clumsily disturb some ‘alibi’ with some lady fair—about having been ‘out of town’? By placing you here in New York last night, when—” He said no more.

“No, oh no,” was all Parradine said. “No—nothing like that. It’s just that—you sure, John Hoi, that—what time did this happen?”

The Chinese gazed in utter bewilderment at Parradine.

“I don’t just know,” he said slowly, “whether you’re ribbing me a bit, Mr. Parradine, or—or whether you’re indulging in a little experiment to test the observation of an Oriental. But me—I’ll play the game! Sure. Well, it was after the building had closed down, and all. About 15 minutes after midnight, I figure. I—I had fallen asleep there, against the wall; fortunately, I’d blocked the cart rollers with pencils—hence, had no accident as a result of sleeping. Nor—but I woke up suddenly. To see you passing me, and turning into the building here. You were quite brightly illumined, momentarily, by the generous night lobby lights pouring out onto the sidewalk there. And to be even further exact, I’ll say that you were wearing a suit I’ve never seen you in before. Right? Or wrong?

Anyway, I greeted you, and asked you how you were fixed on laces, figuring to give you a pair. And you took a shorty, but you insisted on paying for it. And that was about all. Except, of course, my asking you how you were going to get upstairs with no elevators running. And you said—”

“What?” Parradine frowned.

“We-e-ell, you asid—you said: ‘Mr. Rocco’s just gone in ahead of me, and will run me up in the tower elevator.’ ” The Chinaman made a curious gesture with his two hands which plainly said: “I have played the game—whatever it is!”

As for Parradine, he bit his lip painedly. Understanding too well the tragedy of what he had just listened to. Senility! Or rather, to be exact, pre-senility, a thing almost as bad. That condition, setting in at many different ages, but always with the same standard symptoms: the hopeless mixing up, on the part of its victim, of dreams with reality. Indeed, Parradine had had desperate experience with this identical phenomenon in the case of his own father, who, in his latter years, had led a hopelessly confused life, utterly unable to distinguish between his dreams and the events of his waking life. Till, at last—

But Parradine made no comment, except to himself. And which inward comment sadly ran:

“Poor devil! Locked to a rollerskate cart, without proper physical and social activity and all, his cerebral arteries are hardening—he’s becoming—” He half shook his head, continued his purely inward reflections. “And if I tell him he dreamed it all, he’ll think—no, with his legal training, he’ll know—he’s slipping. He’ll realize himself that it’s

unequivocal senility. He’ll—no—no, confound it if I’ll tell him.”

He smiled, forcibly. Reached out his hand.

“Thanks, John Hoi. And I was neither ribbing you, nor making any tests, either. Other perhaps than on myself. For I just had a—a curious brain-slip, that’s all. As to the date of that occurrence. And wanted to see if / was goofy or what. For I was certain as all get-out that all that happened—oh, die night before—wanted to see you put me conclusively in the wrong, so I—I could jack my own wits up a bit. You see,” he broke ofl: clumsily, “I’m having lots of worries these days. And—”

“I don’t doubt it,” said the Chinese, “with a huge property like this block. And besides—Time is a most illusory thing. Well, here’s the laces, anyway.” He held them smilingly out.

Parradine took them.

“I’ll return the other pair in due course,” was all he said. “When—no, I’ll keep it—for a certain pair of high shoes I have. So now to pay my—” He was reaching to his pocket.

“Not so!” the Chinese shook his head firmly. “For you said, as now of course you’ll recall, for me to keep the change from that quarter against the next pair you’d buy. You remember that, do you not?”

Parradine winced. “Too courteous to remember,” he said clumsily. “Hoping you wouldn’t!”

The Chinese adjusted his tray.

“Well, I’ll be going now. Good day, Mr. Parradine, and goodbye.”

He nodded, took up his handle-provided blocks, revolved

his cart deftly, and propelled himself across the room. Expertly turned the door handle over his head, drew the door open, enough to roll into the opening, and revolved his cart.

“Au revoir!” he said. And, block in hand, made an odd salute.

Then rolled back outward, reaching up and drawing the door tightly to as he did so.

And Parradine, left completely alone, shook his head.

“To bad—too damned bad,” he said. “That a fine mind like diat should have to go the senility road, when some minds continue clear and unimpaired into the nineties, with nary a symptom. Clear into the nineties—and he no more than—” He stopped, frowned. “It—it does sound kind of fantastic at that—a man going senile at 44. I wonder what the medical textbooks would say on that! I’ll have to look into that tome I’ve got at home, when I get back from Chicago and get the lowdown on it. Yes, I will.” He had revolved about in his swivel chair as he ruminated, and now was facing his phone.

“Oh-oh!” he ejaculated. “And\* I forgot completely again that I was talking to the one and only lead I possess to the collated wisdom of John Hoi’s ancestors. The book that John himself says I must beg, borrow, steal, or buy at any price. The book that— So here goes—to find out exactly ivho is this tough nut of a hides-dealer—this—this ‘most stubborn, micro-brained human in all New York’—who has my copy—my copy, by George!—of The Way Out from every catastrophe, problem, and enigma that man is heir to. Yup—here goes!”

Chapter XIII

PROPOSITION

QUICKLY Parradine took up the telephone which had been lying idle.

“Are you there yet, Mr. Jark?” he asked troubledly.

“Right here, Mr. Parradine,” came a prompt and patient answer.

“Awfully sorry I was off the wire so long. I—”

“The expense is all yours,” the lower New York book- dealer replied pointedly.

“True enough,” admitted Parradine, unperturbed. “Well, I’m far more interested now than I was just before I went off the wire about that Chinese wisdom book we were discussing. Even though I am not wallowing just now in any specific situation where I seek—well—a Way Out! And just as we were interrupted, you were evidencing that you had no particular objection toward telling me who the browser was who plucked that copy off your shelves—the hides-dealer down on the East River front—the ‘stubborn micro-brained hu—’ ”

“That’s right,” returned the bookdealer promptly. “Elis name is McDolphus—Hutchcock McDolphus.”

“Hutchcock McDolphus?” echoed Parradine, a broad grin suffusing his features. “Does he look like his name?”

The bookdealer at the other end of the wire actually smiled audibly. “He does! Quite. Depending, that is, on how you objectify names.”

“I see,” laughed Parradine. His laugh faded. “Hutchcock

McDolphus, eh? Well if there’s anything in a name, all heaven or hell, I’d say, couldn’t budge him if he took a stand on anything. Nor—however, any leads into his better—his more esthetic—his more human and sympathetic self?”

“None that I know of. He did ask in my shop one day where my phone was, so that he could call up his niece. And then dialed some number. And asked for ‘Carmine.’ Though she wasn’t there.”

“Carmine, eh? Carmine!” Parradine shook his head approvingly. “There, by George, is one beautiful name.” He added sagely: “Somebody in his tribe evidently has a flair for pure poetry!” He was momentarily silent. Then added, a bit sardonically: “However, so far as either one of us, say, reaching him through and via Miss Carmine—there are only about 6,000,000 people in New York, aren’t there?”

“Quite right, Mr. Parradine. Even though there be only one Carmine.”

Parradine was thoughtful. Then spoke. “Well, since this fellow’s name is McDolphus, I would only waste my time in calling him up and trying to wangle that book out of him for a price. For any price. For a man named McDolphus wouldn’t sell a 5-cent item for a million dollars, if somebody was bent on paying him the million. And a man who deals in hides would be shrewd enough to know that anybody trying to get a valueless book from him was trying to get something worth a million dollars. Not so? But now you, Mr. Jark—you’re a bookseller—somebody a hides-dealer named McDolphus would never understand —a man who might part with a valueless tome one day, and then develope an inordinate desire to possess it again the next, so-o-o— I’ve a proposition to make to you. A sporting proposition. A proposition not particularly based at all on my interest in possessing an item that’s the only one of its kind, nor even to add to my collection of things Chinese, but because a man of the Chinese race has just sold me on the efficacy of this—this passport to success and solution of all problems. But would you care to listen to an odd and possibly lucrative proposition, concerning that book?”

The bookdealer was quick to answer.

“If there’s the slightest chance,” he replied, “for me to make a little—by all means,” he broke off. “For I—but go ahead, Mr. Parradine. What is your proposition?”

CHAPTER XVI

AG AIN-THREE VOICES!

Louis ROCCO, once more lying on his back on his couch- bed, in his bizarre and flamboyant living quarters in Parra- dine Tower, a folded handkerchief only now across his eyes—for his migraine was rapidly fading!—took up conversation with the 3 disembodied spirits about him—at least as they felt to him with his vision cut thus completely off.

Smoothing the folded handkerchief tighter down over his eyes, he spoke in a low voice.

“So his line still gives out the busy signal, eh? Well, that’s all the more reason than before ’at we should go on keeping silent in here, for the longer he chews the rag, the more cert he’s nearly and about ready to hang up. And before we re’lize it, we’ll hear him cornin’ through that stairway door outside. And—however, since you lugs have been havin’ to keep your traps shut all day—or the most of it—’count of the contin’al danger of him gumshoeing up here and tapping on the door, and me not figuring till 5 minutes ago how to fix that stairway door outside so she gives that warning rattle—well then, your tongues are all hanging out, no doubt, to ask some final questions. Okay! Ask ’em, then—one question each—and one only— and in a low voice—because any minute now he’ll be up on this level. And I don’t want nobody’s bazooing to drown out his approach. For I want him safe in here— beyond all three doors and beyond yonder bolt—so’s I can

be putting that rod on his spine and letting him know it’s a snatch.”

“After which,” Rocco went on, businesslike, with scarcely a pause, “we gotta work fast. Get that now, each of you. Fast! To get the John Hancock on the card—to get the—”

And now, out of the black void caused by the tight compress on Rocco’s eyes, came a voice from one of the disembodied spirits!

“Bod afder dot, Roggo, vy nod we boomp him off ride avay? Unt schnake his potty oud-d-d-d tonide bevore—”

“Why, you Heine fool,” snapped Rocco, toward the thick voice, “because we gotta be able to have proof—clear up to the minute o’ the ransom payment—that he’s alive— something like his sig across the top of some current newspaper—or what. That’s why we gotta hold him fast and tight in that perfec’ hideout we got—give him reading matter what he wants—or at least such as don’t give him no naughty ideas or nothing—keep him cheerful and calmlike like he’s going to be freed when the ransom is paid, and—”

Now a new voice broke in—that voice which was in so many ways an educated and finished voice—and completely minus any trace of any kind of an accent.

“Pardon me, Mr. Rocco, for interpolating a comment— but just how, may I ask, could any reading matter—ah— give Parradine ‘naughty ideas’?”

“Oh keerist!” bit out Rocco irritably. “Skip it. A guy’s every word around here is weighed like it was gold. Per- tend, P’fessor—pertend I never said it. See? Pertend I said nothing but that we’d give the son-of-a-bitch reading mat

ter what he wants. Got it? Okay then. So we hold him in that hideout, healthy and happy, till the mazuma is paid.”

Now came the third voice. Plaintively, and with some apprehension in it.

“Bot wance we catch thoz’ ransome monee, Loo—ee—you no mebbe gonna try order us for to mak’ beeg scatter— weeth heem knowin’ ’oo—”

Rocco, horizontal though he was, raised both hands in a mock helpless gesture, and directed scornful words in the direction of that third voice.

“Why, you dago halfwit!—d’ya think I’m nuts? With him then able to de-scribe at least 4 of us? And the F.B.I. able easy to locate 4 lugs marked like us—an’where in the U.S.A.—if we take it on the lam? And the Rock—out there in Alcytraz Bay off San Fran—yawning for us? Keerist no—on any scatter! For once the ransom dough is passed—once, that is, ’at we get the highball from Silk and Chopper that it is passed—Parr’dine’s a dead cuckoo. A cuckoo who’ll never ident’fy nobody. Even if, by Christ, he ever gets ident’fied himself! After what we’ll do to his dead puss and his fingerti—no, I’ll do the bump-olf myself, when the time comes—and inside the hideout where a 2-foot cannon-cracker couldn’t be heard, let alone his yell when he sees curts coming—and where his chances of dodgin’ the slugg’ll be e-zackly zero, because there won’t be nothing for him to hide behind!—and for grabbin’ the gat’ll be less’n minuz zero, for th’ sweet reason ’at he won’t even be able to get at it or at yours trul— But all right now—chop the gab—all 0’ you—in fact, get into your positions. For he’ll be swingin’ through that outer door any

minute. And I want it quiet around here—quiet as the grave—when he does. Sat’sfied now, Blinky? If so—”

“Su’ I sat’sfied, Loo—ee,” came the last speaking voice, its possessor now much reassured, obviously, about the absence of any necessity for mad flight across the country after this “job” was successfully over! “So I ask joos’ wan mo’ question—seence no soun’ of door outside, yet—an’ then I queet. W’at—w’at you theenk, Loo—ee, Par’dine he say w’en he learn he eez snatch’—an—that snatch sheez wan-honder’-p’cent p’lice proof? W’at you theenk he say, heh?”

“Well, stick around, Blinky,” retorted Rocco derisively, “and we’ll all find out. For whatever ’tis—it oughta be

CHAPTER XV

CONSPIRACY AGAINST A HIDES-DEALER!

GILBERT PARRADINE, seated at his desk, his telephone instrument to his lips, tapped thoughtfully on that desk as the Lower New York City bookdealer asked the single significant question: “What is your proposition?”

And now Parradine answered.

“Well, the proposition, Mr. Jark,” he said slowly, “is this: Suppose I mail you today a check—or Parradine Properties pay-order, as you’d prefer—for $250—”

“I beg your pardon,” was Mr. Ochiltree Jark’s frankly puzzled reply. “Before you go ahead—Parradine Properties pay order? I don’t just—”

“Oh,” apologized Parradine, “I should have explained that. My properties—estate—call it what you want—are fixed in such a way that their many affairs go on whether I am alive or dead—non est or—or est! And I can pay out money—raise money on all or part—anything—if and when I so please, by giving certain named trustees a signed order to do so or thus. You wouldn’t have known about that, so forgive my referring to it, please. I have a few pennies in bank, so in your case it can be a check. And will be. So here’s the exact proposition: Suppose I send you a check today, by mail, for $250!—the exact putative top value of that The Way Out book. Which top price probably couldn’t be obtained in the market for some time yet. At least until somebody wants it—and badly. And as for the book’s valuation right now, to a certain Mr. Hutchcock McDol-

phus, it must be intrinsically worth no less than $3.50— what he paid for it—and no more than the ‘beyond-all- price’ figure for which he apparently holds it. Strange? So awfully strange! I can’t understand it—except on the hypothesis that, like myself, he’s all hipped up on the validity of the ancient Chinese wisdom of oxcart days! And that—

“But,” broke off Parradine, “to the proposition. Which is that I send you this check I speak of—I trust you entirely, you see, as one business man to another—I’ve always been safe in such things—and that you, bolstered by the fact of a cash customer—a cash-in-advance customer, so to speak— see this Hutchcock McDolphus in person and try your expert book-buyer’s hand in acquiring that book back from him. For he probably hasn’t an iota of appreciation of rare volumes. Even though he may, right now, be all enthused about the worth of Chinese wisdom in the—the hides business—or something! Oh, he may prove stubborn—sure— and what not else. But you’re probably something of a negotiator yourself, I take it, when it comes to— Anyway, you play to get your property back—for it is, in a certain sense, your property, Mr. Jark, since you sold it under false apprehensions—to get it back on any pretext, via any stunt, scheme, or what-have-you. With the understanding that when you have done so, the book, in view of my advance payment on it, is mine. But that whatever is the difference between the cost of your acquisition of it—and my check—is all yours?”

“Even up to,” asked the dealer almost amusedly, “$246.50?”

“Yes,” nodded Parradine. “Even though you get it back

for the original cost.”

The other man, however, could be actually heard shaking his head. “That would be quite ‘out,’ I’d say. Since on the phone McDolphus wouldn’t even discuss selling it back to me at any price. Nor—however—hm?” Ochiltree Jark was silent. Then spoke. “Well, that sure is a proposition, Mr. Parradine. Cash on the nail in advance and all. And I to catch the difference, if I can persuade him—”

“Yes, or—or hornswoggle him, or browbeat him—yes.” “No chance for that,” was the bookdealer’s frank rejoinder. “For it would have to be a hornswoggling proposition such as never took place on land nor sea—a matching of wits between a musty stick-in-the-mud bookdealer, and a—a—a—but yes, I’ll play ball with you, Mr. Parradine. For I need money. So it’s a deal. Expect nothing, however. For this McDolphus, I tell you, is so stubborn he’d refuse to sign his own pardon if he were being executed. A fact I And he—but I have some angles though. Yes, some angles.” Ochiltree Jark chuckled a bit. “I only regret, though—” and he chuckled even more, “that you can’t sit in on this piece of—of bibliographic hijacking. For this—■ this ought to be good! The Irresistible Force against the Immovable—”

“—McDolphus!” nodded Parradine. “Well, I’d like to sit in. As—well—your bookshop assistant or something. Only I go to Chicago in about an hour and a half, to be absent some days, and—”

“Chicago? Well then, if by some miracle I acquire that book from Hutchcock McDolphus—by hook, crook, horn- swoggle or—or hijack!—where in Chicago would I express

it to you?”

“Oh,” said Parradine, “deliver it right here in New York. Either by express, insured, or in person, to—well—my fiancee—Muriel Ordway, at the Renoir-Carlton. I’ll call her up about its possible arrival.”

The bookdealer could be. heard putting diis information down. For he was repeating it slowly. “Muriel? Ordway? Renoir-Carlton Hotel? Yes. Now that wouldn’t be,” he asked, half quizzically, “Miss Ordway, the European opera singer?”

“Why not?” queried Parradine. Then realized his answer was somewhat senseless, and changed it. “Yes, ’tis. Why?”

“Why, I heard her, in Boston, about a year ago. I think she is the most remarkable singer I ever—well, she has a voice of—of cool, molten gold.”

“Cool molt—thank you. I will convey that specific metaphor to her. She will be pleased.”

There was momentary silence. The bookman broke it.

“Very well then, Mr. Parradine. I have everything clear in my mind. I’ll do my best to hornswoggle or otherwise— and I do have some angles of my own—that book back from Hutchcock McDolphus. But I suggest that you expect nothing—except perhaps the return of your check. Expect nothing!”

“Which,” pointed out Parradine, “is often one way to be pleasurably surprised. Anyway, I’ll hope you get the book.”

“I’ll try,” said the other, with a sudden fierce burst of determination in his voice.

“Good. Then I’ll say goodbye, Mr. Jark.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Parradine.”

And the two men hung up practically together. And Parradine, casting his eyes sidewise to the rack that held his hat, and then floorward to where his alligator bag stood packed for his going, prepared to go upstairs and see the lighting exhibit that Rocco even now must have ready and waiting.

Chapter XVI

“MADAME ORDWAY!

BUT, about to rise from his chair, Gilbert Parradine settled quickly down into it again. Drew out the top drawer of his desk, and from a stack of government-stamped envelopes, extracted one. Upon which, after shoving the drawer back in, and taking from a gold-cornered cubical black onyx fountain pen holder the gold-banded onyx fountain pen it contained, he wrote, in a flowing hand, the address of the bookdealer with whom he had just talked. And then, as the address dried, and pen still in hand, he wrote out, on the topmost salmon-colored leaf of a tiny gold-cover-encased checkbook lying close at hand, a check for $250, payable to the man whose name was now on the envelope. Which check, after he had blotted it carefully with a tiny blotter lying in the book, he inserted in the envelope without any additional writing whatsoever, and sealed the latter.

And now rising, he crossed the carpeted room, went out into the tiny hallway permitted by the slender tower, and in the mail slot at the side of the one and single shaft allowing a single elevator to ascend to this height of the tower, he dropped his envelope.

Then went back into his office, quickly closing the door after himself.

But now, back at his desk, he did not seat himself in his swivel chair again; instead, he took up the phone and, standing, prepared to make a telephone call.

Which he did by first dialing the instrument carefully

for Manhattan 1-0001.

A girl responded, so mechanically that she seemed like a phonograph.

“Renoir-Carlton Hotel.”

“Miss Muriel Ordway, please,” he asked. “Suite 952.”

No longer, however, was there a phonograph on the end of the wire. There was, instead, a telephone operator who loved music, and who insisted on a great artiste having her due.

“Madame Ordway—do you wish?” were the chiding words. To which he smiled.

“Madame Ordway—yes,” was all he said.

And now, standing waiting, he was, thanks to his altered position with respect to that gargantuan silver-framed and glassed photograph on his desk, looking down at none other than the party he was calling. A most beautiful woman, to say the least, about 35 years of age, dark of hair and equally dark, though luminously so, of eye. A woman manifestly of perfect poise, yet one of tenderness and understanding; a woman of undoubted high intelligence, yet one of the world of footlights and song. From her dainty ears hung great silver eardrops, and on her head was a chic but distinctive Russian hat. Her lips were parted in a kindly, tolerant smile—the smile of a woman who had been everywhere, and tasted all honors. And found them to be not so all-important in the scheme of things, after all. A woman who—

But now the very subject of the photograph was herself on the wire. As evidenced by the rich voice that answered— the voice of a trained and professional singer.

“Hello?”

“Muriel,” Parradine said instantly, “this is Gilbert.”

“Why—hello, Gilbert? Hello?”

“I won’t talk but a minute now, darling. In view of the fact that you’ll probably be seeing me off. Yes, I leave same hour as originally scheduled—same plane—same airfield. But important things get left so unsaid during these see-offs, that I thought I’d better get this, that I’m trying to say now, cleared off.”

“You, Gilbert. And I’m so glad you called me, for I was just about to call you.”

“Were you?” Pie was puzzled. But knew that would be cleared up soon. “Well, this is what I want to get said, darling, while things are sort of peaceful and quietlike, and plane-callers not yelling and planes landing and taxiing all about. This is it: I’ve just purchased a book, darling, that I want ever so badly for my Chinese collection; purchased it, from and by way of a dealer in lower New York, who will have to obtain it himself first from—oh, it’s somewhat complicated, but if he gets it, he’s to deliver it to you, and I’ll want you to hold it for me, safe and sound, till I get back from Chicago.”

“Oh-oh!” Muriel Ordway laughed. “I mil say, Gilbert, that that will be a bit complicated!”

“Why, darling?”

“Because, Gilbert, I just received a cable from Dunaway and Kinsolving, London, offering me two weeks at the Coliseum—same fees as that last engagement at the French Opera House, New Orleans, but with Clipper fare over and back included.”

“Well, well!” he said enthusiastically. “That’s making ’em reach out for an attraction! And—but when would you be leaving?”

“Well,” she said, almost regretfully, “I’d be leaving, Gilbert, day after tomorrow. Presuming my cable of acceptance, just now filed, gets in turn accepted on the other end!”

“There would be no doubt about thathe acknowledged frankly. “Well, I’m glad. To see you have a London triumph before you go and—and toss this all over your shoulders as you insist you must, to marry me and—but all right. Then about the book, which now is not so important, if it reaches you before you leave, perhaps you’ll be willing to— But say, will you still be up here tomorrow night, just the same, to catch the act of that young negress, Rosa Moggs?”

“Oh my yes, Gilbert. Yes, indeed. That girl is going to be the world’s greatest singer, some day in the not far distant future. I want to watch, and enjoy, her whole act.”

“Okay. Then, if the book—the name of which, by the way, is The Way Out—has by any chance reached you by tomorrow night, you might, if you don’t mind, turn it over to a certain one of my employes up here. A chap who, though he has a complete absence of interest in literature or books himself, is at least a very careful man about taking good care of anything vital. Or about following instructions, such as I’ll be giving him now. Louis Rocco is his name. You know who I mean? The theatre electrician? The sallow fellow with the—”

“Oh—Gilbert! To think that an actress wouldn’t know

well who is the one man who can make or break her act— by arranging the wrong lighting? I have already seen to it, while up there, that I put myself into the complete good graces of this important czar. Since my farewell to the American Public is to be in Parradine Moderne. Yes, I’ve ingratiated myself with your Rocco. Or at least so I hope!” “Oh, he’s all right, darling. He wouldn’t sabotage an act; in fact, leaves stage lighting strictly up to the special chap who handles that. Well, all right, then. I’ll speak to him in but a few minutes now about the book’s possibly getting into final safekeeping with him. And so if you’ll pass it to him—if, that is, you get it, the which there’s quite no telling—then he can turn it over to me when I get back. And you’re singing away there in far-oiT London. All clear?”

“Completely so, Gilbert. And now, darling, I want to ask you a very small favor.”

“Of course. Of course! Ask away.”

“It’s that I don’t see you off today at the airfield.” “Why, of course not, if you’re busy. You don’t need to—”

“Oh, I’m not busy at all, Gilbert. But this is the exact reason. You see—”

“Now—now—don’t explain. It’s not necessary at all— foolish even to come ’way up there so far north as—” “But I want to explain, Gilbert. I want to! And here are the facts: I was going to see you off, you know, if only to kiss you goodbye. But you see, I got a call on the phone a short while ago, from someone representing, or speaking for, one of my oldest and dearest friends. A friend who is

passing through New York for no more than 30 minutes, on his way from France to the Orient, and who wants to surprise me to death—by a visit.”

“I see. Who is—but diat’s a foolish question, isn’t it? For if he aims to surprise you, then you don’t know who it is.” “That’s it! I’m given to know only that he’s an old and dear friend. But my goodness, Gilbert, when I think of all the people, all over the world, diat have been friends to me, and even dear to me, I—”

“I get it!” he smiled. “A case of wondering which needle, in a haystack prickling with needles, you’re supposed to look for, eh?” Now he even laughed out loud, amusedly. “Well, a woman’s curiosity would hardly have been able to surmount that one! I mean, the tantalizer your old friend has handed you. So-o—” And he gave a philosophically resigned and tolerant inclination of his head toward the instrument in his hand.

“Well,” she admitted quite frankly, “woman’s curiosity— mine included—is an awful thing; but on the other hand, Gilbert, an old and dear friend whom I may never see again in this world, because bound for the Orient—well, I just felt a strange compulsion not to say him nay. So I told him—or rather the party who was speaking for him— that I would be right on tap for the next hours. Now you won’t feel—”

“Come—come!” he chided her. “That’s every bit of all right. After all, we had a goodbye. And a swell one! Now don’t worry about it further. Send me then, by trans- Atlantic airmail, to the Palmer House, Chicago, the reviews of your opening there in London, and a program, if you

will. Will you?”

“That I most certainly will, Gilbert. In fact, those reviews will be about the last, I guess, on Muriel Ordway! For after I return, and give my week to Parradine Moderne, and we’re married, there—there won’t be any more appearances. Just the making of a home for you and me.”

“And with one great appreciator of your talent left high and dry—I refer to that certain bookdealer who is doing something for me. Trying to, anyway. For he said, less than 10 minutes ago, that you had a voice of—now get this—‘cool molten gold’!”

“Oh—how nice of him! Cool molten gold? That’s a real review. Even if unpublished.”

There was a pause.

“Well, darling,” Parradine now said, “I’ll be getting on out of here. For I’ve some’at to do before going to the airfield. So I’ll say goodbye. Let me know who the friend was, won’t you? And good trip across the briny—good ever’thing—and will expect to hear from you soon. ’Bye!”

“ ’Bye, my own,” she said.

They hung up together. And he turned from the phone, thinking satisfiedly and tenderly of this wonderful woman he loved so well and so deeply; and who plainly loved him.

And now reaching out to the vertical mahogany hatrack at his elbow, he abstracted the broad-brimmed purple velour hat which hung on the topmost arm, and placed it on his head; he felt for his airplane transportation in his breast pocket, felt also to make sure that his money was in his trousers pocket; then he reached down and picked up the green alligator travelling bag.

And taking one last and final careful look around, to make sure that nothing was forgotten, nor overlooked, he prepared to leave. Was, in fact, but 3 seconds later, crossing the floor, opening the door and letting himself out, and drawing the door to, till its very latch clicked sharply.

And now, suddenly and for the first time, he felt curiously lonely, forlorn, isolated in a great world of people.

“Too bad,” he said a bit regretfully, “that Muriel won’t be seeing me off. However—” he made a quizzical grimace towards the door, “—an old, old friend, skipping across the world, and with but 30 minutes to spend in New York— well, that is a real complication. The complication of all complications, all right, all right.” He frowned, however, as he turned toward the elevator shaft. “Odd that he wants to surprise her, and won’t reveal his name.”

Though not so odd at that, had Gilbert Parradine but known it. Since the one essential of what was to be one of the most famous kidnap cases in all history was that Muriel Ordway be not at Arrow Field when Gilbert Parra- dine’s plane took off!

Chapter XVII

THE SNATCH

As GILBERT PARRADINE, traversing the scant bit of marble- tessellated floor permitted at any of the tower levels, including this one, in view of the space available for tower room, single elevator shaft, and stairway beyond, reached that single elevator shaft, the elevator itself, on its upward run, came to a stop, a few feet under its complicated hoisting mechanism built in the shaft at about ceiling level. The operator, plainly catching from inside some vision of the outside, flung the doors open. He was a pleasant red- haired chap with freckles.

“Caught you, eh, Mr. Parradine, just before you rang?” Parradine, in the act of continuing past the elevator to the stairway, stopped and turned. “Oh, I wasn’t going to ring, Red. I’m running upstairs first to see Rocco about some lighting stuff. But I will be going down with you in about 15 minutes or so.”

“Okay, Mr. Parradine. Just ring.”

The doors closed, the elevator went down. And Parradine continued on beyond it to where the single heavy door, with powerful compressed-air check, bore the white-painted words: STAIRWAY.

With some effort, for Parradine was not an athletic man, he drew the massive thing open, and stepped past it, hearing it close ponderously and tightly in back of him. And now he was on the iron stairway which was the only means of further traversal up to Rocco’s quarters.

He was up to the next level in short order, and opening a similar heavy door, the door check of which, unlike the one on the floor below, gave forth this afternoon, for some unaccountable reason, an unearthly vibratory machine-gunlike rattle over the course of every inch of the door’s opening; but which, nevertheless, once he had passed the threshold of the partial opening, drew the heavy door silently, and ponderously, and snugly shut after him. He was even now crossing the quite elevatorless hallway lighted with only a hanging electric bulb, and merely wood-floored here, though the floor was a bit larger than the hall-floor below, thanks to the fact that that elevator shaft had never been extended up this far. And reason enough—since Parradine Tower’s proud builder, after construction was practically finished, had decreed that his beautiful and artistic tower should be a full one-story higher than that blatant, gaudy monstrosity of a tower down at 157th Street, which called itself—

Now, bag in hand, he stood in front of the single door that presented itself in a position identical with his own, on the floor below.

Knocked amiably on it—a sort of facetious rat-a-tat-tat!

It opened with such celerity that he was startled. But Louis Rocco, standing there in rolled-up shirtsleeves, and with a wire-cutters in one hand, was smiling welcome.

“Ah, come in, Mr. Parradine.”

Parradine did so, as Rocco closed the door behind him and shot the heavy, clumsy bolt on the door. A thing he never failed to do, as Parradine well remembered: an action betraying the true Sicilian love of complete secrecy in everything—or else the Sicilian fear of enemies. Which it was, Parradine knew not, and cared less.

The 13th floor room, in which llocco lived, so as best to superintend the theatre lighting down the street, and be immediately' close to the electrical-materials room above, was furnished with Rocco’s own furniture. Wicker stuff, all of it, suitable for summer or winter. The rug was gaudy and highly flowered, in colors that pained the eye. An amorous-looking couch-bed along one wall was carelessly shrouded with a cover that seemed literally as though made from a dozen gypsy dresses. Brilliant crimson drapes were at the sides of the windows, all of which latter, at this particular high level, gazed blankly, completely minus skylines or silhouettes, against a blue sky with idly drifting clouds; those crimson drapes moreover were tied, all of them, with equally brilliant and voluminous green tiepieces. Highly Italian—highly Sicilian, indeed—was the whole ensemble. Even to the tall black folding screen standing in the corner opposite, embroidered with birds and flowers in every color and kind of silk.

In the other corner off from the doorway—the one not occupied by the screen—was the one-time-black iron stairway providing the only access to that once inutile, but today used as the so-called materials room above. Now, under Rocco’s occupancy, the stairway was painted a vivid ochre, with zigzag green stripes! A cabinet above a washbowl in the third corner showed a gleaming silver coffee percolator. Completing a room that, while bedroom at night, and kitchen at breakfast, could yet be one for ladies to visit. Sicilian ladies, with hanging gold earrings, and

strident laughter. For Parradine had viewed some of them, oft and again. And—

But Rocco was speaking.

“Sit down right there, Mr. Parradine—yes, the big chair facing yonder screen. I’ve the exhibit all ready in back of the screen. But I want to hook in this plug first.”

True enough, as Parradine could now note, a long flexible cable ran about the edge of the room, and back of the screen. Evidencing the exhibit was to be revealed to him for the first time, under full lights.

So, moving slightly to the left, he did sink into the big flat-handled wicker chair that stood conveniently facing that embroidered screen. Setting his alligator bag off to one side on the floor, and his purple velour hat carefully atop it. He could hear Rocco fiddling away in back of him, at the wall-socket, with a tool.

So Parradine craned his head about, and talked to the other, who was kneeling.

“By the way, Rocco,” he instructed, “while I’m gone, Miss Ordway will probably—so I hope—be turning over to your care a book of Chinese wisdom which I’m getting hold of through a bookdealer—again, so I hope! For she’s leaving the city, you see. So will you take the very best of care of that book, till I get back?”

“Sure—sure, Mr. Parradine.” Rocco spoke virtually back of himself, busy as he was tightening a loose screew in the socket base.

“Okay. But this book, now, isn’t just altogether another item in my collection of things Chinese, remember. It’s— it’s—well, it’s a first edition as well. If you know what

that means? It means a copy with some misprints in it, see ? And therefore valuable. And so, for Lord’s sake, don’t let any of your—er—lady friends of the black eyes and long gold eardrops carry it off, now will you? Since I can’t replace it.”

Rocco, throwing his weight against his screwdriver, laughed understandingly.

“Those little bitches—er—gals, Mr. Parradine, are plenty light-fingered, at that. No, I lock everything up tight against the gals of my race—and your book’ll be doubly so.”

“Fine!” And Parradine swung his gaze around frontward, to relieve his twisted position, and sat back waiting.

But at this juncture one of two telephones on the wall next to the door shrilled. Whether it was the outside phone, or the inter-building phone, even Parradine didn’t know. But evidently Rocco did, for with a grunt, and coming around in front of Parradine, he unerringly took up the right one. The outside one—as evidenced by his later words.

“Lou Rocco speaking.

“Who?

“Oh—the bulbs-supply comp’ny?

“No, I can’t take d’livery just now—I’ll be tied up this afternoon—but any time t’morrow.

“Yeah, at any time all day. If I ain’t in my quarters, I’ll be downstreet around the theatre. All ri—say—wait a minute. Do you understand d’livery is to be to our materials room? And not on the top landing of the elevator shaft?

“ ’At’s what I said! Mr. Parradine specified that. He— he told me he did. You’ll have to trot ’em by foot the

extra story, from the top elevator landing. Then across my quarters, and then one more flight up to our materials room.

“Yeah? Well, 1 didn’t build Parradine Block—Mr. Parra- dine did—and he specified, moreover, when he signed that contract with you, that—what’s that?”

“Is there plenty o’ room? Hell, the room is empty as a grandmother’s mouth, waiting for them 5000 bulbs. You let me know when you get here, I’ll throw her open, and all you need to do is to stack the cases anywhere in it you want, except around the doorway, and give me back the key when you’re done.

“Okay. T’morrow then—any time.”

Rocco hung up, and turned from the phone.

“Those babies sure like to get out o’ work, Mr. Parradine. They were all set to lay about 5000 bulbs right outside the elevator downstairs, and call it ‘d’livery.’ After you tellin’ ’em exactly what was involved.”

“Good thing I did,” nodded Parradine. Then asked curiously: “How long will it take ’em to trot the bulbs up the last flight here, through here, and upstairs?”

“Oh, a couple hours or so, Mr. Parradine, since they’s no stalling to be done. The room is prat’cally empty, y’ see. Well, back to my wall job again!”

And again Rocco disappeared in back of Paradine, and again came the sound of a tool evidently tightening a loose wall plug.

The while Parradine continued to wait. Tapping the toe of one foot idly on the rug, wondering, with the intensest of interest, just how that exhibit back of that screen would really look when revealed—all lighted up, by that feed-cable Rocco was endeavoring to insert. Wondering whether—

But of a sudden—and almost automatically—Parradine rose to his feet. Startled. Even gasping. As three men, clattering forth from both sides of the screen, and plainly at some signal from behind Parradine, advanced menacingly, grimly, unsmilingly toward him. Fanning out side- wise from each other, as they did so. And all looking sinisterly intent. No—no birthday surprise party this, Parradine realized! One man, fully as sallow as Rocco himself, fully as Sicilian-looking, had but one eye, and die socket of the missing eye, in his shaven olive-shaped head, looked like a black crater. While another of the trio, red of face and broad of head, with cold blue eyes surmounted by a short grey pompadour, with long powerful arms like those of a gorilla, and with bulbous pockmarked nose, was plainly a German!

But it was at the third man, who now stood almost embarrassedly off in front of Parradine, the while the other two took swift positions at Gilbert’s either side, which caused Parradine’s mouth to fall open, almost ludicrously. For that third man was—himself! In all, that is, but clothing—since the man was poorly dressed in a cheap grey cottonlike suit. But in facial features, hair, build, even general age, he was Parradine himself!

And now, realizing for the first time that he was to be beaten—beaten probably within an inch of his life—though for reasons as yet utterly unknown to himself—bitterness

flooded through Parradine’s soul. He felt no fear—only bitterness. Bitterness mixed with mystification. To think that amongst these people who were now about to pay back somebody’s grudge—Rocco’s, evidently—was one whom he, Parradine, had once befriended. At least to the extent of— “You!” he cried accusingly to the man in question. “Albert Magwire! Of Webb Crossing, Vermont. What— what are you doing here, in this private vendetta or—or whatever in God’s name it is? What are you—”

But at this juncture Parradine felt—or else was conscious of for the first time—something pressing in the small of his back. Something small but very hard! And suggesting that it was being thrust over the top of the back of the very chair he had been occupying—except, alas, Parradine was to learn, in but a few more seconds, that that chair had been quietly withdrawn during the excitement, and that now close behind him stood—

“Take it easy, Parradine,” now came warning words, sounding at the very back of Parradine’s ears, and in Rocco’s voice. “Don’t make a move!”

Parradine had started automatically to twist his head about at the words. But he stopped short, as the significance of the order penetrated his brain. But nevertheless replied to the words.

“What the hell is this, Rocco ? A beating-up ? If so, what on earth have I ever done to—”

“This,” interrupted the Sicilian in back of him coolly, and drilling even harder into Parradine’s spine with that small hard object,” is a snatch, Parradine. No beat up, but a snatch. A hundred-grand snatch! And don’t bother to set up any yodelling, because you know as well as me that there’s two heavy doors—no, three—shutting this room off from even the floor where the elevator stops. Yeah, Parra- dine, it’s a hundred-grand snatch, and with 6 people in it. So you see we mean business! All 6 of us. Just how that hundred grand is to be cut up ain’t none of your concern. Excepting perhaps that it’s your estate who’s gonna kick in with it.”

The three men ringed in front of Parradine all drew a bit closer to him. As an indication, perhaps, that he had best make no move whatsoever. Which he did not—with the single door of the room some distance off, and bolted as well—and with that gun pressing in his back. But he was answering, and scornfully.

“A—a snatch?” he said. “Why, you poor idiot—why, you can’t get away with that, Rocco. All New York will be combed for me, when I vanish. Where—where in 7 hells do you think you can hide me—in New York?”

“You’d be s’rprised!” retorted Rocco cryptically, though ever so assuredly. Then added, almost defiantly: “In fact, we’re gonna snake you right out o’ here to—”

“You mean,” corrected Parradine, with supreme dignity, but making not the slightest overt move, realizing that nothing but logic—the cold logic of inescapable facts— could abort what was happening, “you mean you’re going to hold me in here, tied and gagged, till midnight, and the last elevator has stopped running—and the building has all cleared out. Yes, of course. But once you have gotten me out, Rocco, and your helpers here as well, so that— that those bulbs can be brought through here tomorrow and upstairs, and the police, making inquiries of you, as probably the last man who saw me before I—I vanished, can come up here, too—well, where in 7 hells, I ask you again, do you think you can hide me—in New York City? Where somebody—somebody won’t cross you up for the huge rewards that are sure to be offered? Come, Rocco, you can’t get away with all thi—”

“All that you say, Parradine,” admitted Rocco coolly, but pressing even a little harder with his gun tip, “is the McCoy. About, I mean, holding you here tied and gagged till midnight. And the last eleva— But as t’ where we can hide you, in all N’York? Well, you will be s’rprised! In fact,” he added, as a man about to give vent to a surprising bit of confidence, “they ain’t ever even gonna search for you here in N’York. Even though the cops do maybe stroll up here to ask a question or two. For your snatch, Parradine, is gonna be staged in Chi—cago! T’morrow night! And prat’cally before the eyes of the Chi—cago cops. Since it’ll be staged right in the Palmer House, where you’re known so well, and where you’ll be registered in, less’n 24 hours before, by means of some certain little presby- digytatin’ to be done this evening with a certain little signed Palmer House reg’stration card that you’re gonna sign right here in this room—or get your goddam’ feet burned off with a hot iron. And all of which is poss’ble thanks to our muchual friend, A1 Magwire here—am’chure magician, and spittin’ image of yourself. Who you dug up, don’t forget!—and not us. Magwire, plus, o’ course, the two buddy-boys what’re already in Chi now, waiting.” Rocco paused as though to let all this sink fully into his

hearer’s brain, then went implacably on.

“And so it’s Chi, y’ see, Parradine, what’ll be combed, from rooftops to sewers. And not—N’York. Nor—all right, Heinz. Wind them gorilla wings of yours around his stems, till Blinky can strip his clothes off, from belly up; then do the same with his wings, till Blinky can get his kicks and pants off. And you, Magwire, start peeling off your duds, and slithering into his as they come off; and see to it, as you do, that his plane ticket, ident’f’cation stuff, mazuma, and all, are right where you can set your mitts on ’em. For that plane leaves in about 1 hour now, and when it does, you gotta be on it. And—but all right, boys, get going—all three of you! And let’s see you a-a-all do your stuff—in the Perfec’ Snatch!”

Chapter XVIII

HOW SOME BEANS WERE PLANTED-

THE sun was setting low in New York’s West as Boyce Barkstone, inheritor of 16 beans, for the second time that day strode through the door of Oliver Tydings’ office. The attorney, his white mustache drooping a bit as from a hard day’s work, his round tortoise-shell eyeglasses tipped forward almost wearily on his nose, but with gloves on hands, and derby hat on head, was just taking up his cane. He gazed in surprise through the now vacated anteroom, visible from the open door, through which Boyce had passed unhampered—then at Boyce.

“Well, well, Boyce, did you plant your beans on your grandfather’s grave, where you said you were going to?”

“No, Mr. Tydings,” returned the younger man, calmly, shoving away the lock of brown hair that seemed to try to fall over one of his steel-grey eyes. “I planted ’em where Grandfather had expected—at least hoped—for me to plant ’em: which was in my Barkstonian mind, such as it was! For I got information after I left you today—yes, from no other than black Josiah—that I hadn’t insulted Grandfather at all, that famous day of June first when I saw him last; that he’d understood the whole incident—the incident about the ‘Nuts to you,’ et cetera; and at once everything became clear. He wasn’t, in his bequest, condemning me, nor chiding me, nor ribbing me. And the soil he was referring to, in his will, where all those beans could grow ‘simultaneously,’ was my mind. That was the right soil—yes; but—”

He dropped down into a chair, placing, upon the halfopen slide of the lawyer’s desk, a scarlet-bound book he carried, as Tydings curiously set aside his stick, doffed his own hat, and sat down, withdrawing one glove, anyway. “But,” Boyce went on, with a grimace, “I—I had to use Chinese wisdom and very ancient Chinese wisdom, to boot, to fertilize and irrigate that soil; for, to be frank, it wasn’t half as good soil as Grandfather considered it to be.”

Tydings was plainly hopelessly bewildered. “Well, when it comes to that, his estimate of the Barkstonian mind would, of course, be based on his knowledge of his own, and it has to be kept in mind that each generation dilutes the—the quality of a mind by one half. Now don’t get me wrong, Boyce; I mean that any particular qualities of mind that might be under consideration by a grandparent would —would be plenty much diluted by the dme it got to a grandchi—but damned if I know what you have reference to, Boyce.”

“No, of course not. But you will now.” Boyce paused. “Mr. Tydings, did it ever occur to you that—but of course it didn’t—and, frankly, it didn’t to me—I had to find a scientific specialist in beans, rather than that practical horticulturist you put me in connection with today—I had to find a beanology professor—a man named Zack—Professor Seal well Zink, M. A., M. S., and a lot of other degrees— to aid me to clarify for myself, with absolute accuracy, the problem really lying in, and back of, Grandfather’s bequest, though ’twas the Chinese who put me smack onto what the problem itself must be. After that, of course, the whole thing resolves itself into a mere matter of trial and err— But whoa, tilley!—I’m running ’way off the track of what I started out to try to say a hundred words or so back, which was: Did it occur to you, at any time, ever so remotely, that there might be as many varieties of bean as there are—but here—if you don’t mind Josiah’s garishly pink paper of which I used up a hell of a lot today—here are all the varieties of beans, as set forth, not alphabetically, but in logical groups and families, in the new Encyclopedia Universalia—”

“The last word, that encyclopedia,” put in Tydings, with almost enthusiastic vehemence, “on everything in the world. At least so your grandfather told me after he bought his.”

“Well, it contains the last word, at least on beans,” agreed Boyce. “For the article on that subject in it was written by a world authority—one Sealwell Zack! Yes, Grandfather had a set all right. And—but here—lamp this last, latest, most ultimate, most official, and most final fusion of the many listings of beans that have existed, which I obtained today after calling up Uptown U for a second time, asking for Professor Zack, and learning, thereby, that if I had access to an Encyclopedia Universalia, Volume II—which I did have—by crawling on hands and kneees past a flock of side windows, and—”

“Boyce! For God’s sake, what is all this: a riddle or a charade or what?”

“Neither,” laughed Boyce. “But here—lamp this listing of all the beans what thar is, by gum!”

And in front of Tydings he deposited, from a sheaf of pink sheets he took from his breast pocket, that one on

which he had listed all the known beans.

He was smilingly regarding his own listing as Tydings, too, regarded it. Which listing ran:

Yellow-Eye

Fat White Kidney

Ordinary Red Kidney

Western Red Kidney

Haricot

Black-Eye

Great Northern

Indian

Undersized White [misguidedly and erroneously called “navy”]

Zonate

Cranberry

Adsuki

Kwang-Si of China Pea

“X-tra Larj” White (trade-created name for an anomalous species)

Vulgaris English Dwarf Lima

Narrow White Kidney

Tonqua

Swedish

Dark Red Kidney Mexican Pinto Red Bean

Quarter-red California

“My goodness,” ejaculated Tydings, “but there sure are a lot of kinds. Probably a dozen and half?”

“Plenty more than even that! More than two dozen, even. 25, to be exact. And if you add this fellow—who is not a bean at all—and specifically stated, in that article, not to be—yes—this fellow—”

A.nd Boyce wrote at the bottom of the column: Jumping (bean)

“—You then have,” he continued, “26 different ‘beans.’ Now doesn’t that suggest somep’n?”

“Oh,” said Tydings deprecatingly, “I know that 26 is the number of letters in the alphabet, but of course—” “Yeah—of course—what? Find, if you can, any one of those beans there that begins with the same letter as any other?”

Tydings leaned over. Stared. “Why, Boyce, that’s—that’s so—only it’s a coincidental impossibility.”

“Like the giraffe the farmer saw for the first time! There wasn’t, he said, ‘no sich animile’! Well, as Professor Zack explained today, in person, when I asked him about that amazing fact, the first man ever to officially classify beans was a horticulturist named Jonathan Lydge who declared— and this, you understand, long before Burbank was ever born—that if every bean that would eventually exist, in the world, due to both crossing and discovery, were given a name beginning with a new letter, there wouldn’t be enough alphabets in the English, Latin and Greek languages to take care of ’em. And bean-crossers, bean-discoverers—in short, bean-namers—have, ever since, honored Lydge’s memory—his work on the earlier known beans— by naming each bean so that it would, so to speak, eat up at least one alphabet, though thus far they haven’t quite consumed the English one. Thus, Mr. Tydings, see Old Mr. Coincidence turns out to be none other than Old Mr. Predestination!”

“All right,” agreed Tydings, “then in view of the coincid—my mistake—the predestined fact that every newly-listed bean caught a new initial, therefore every letter in the alphabet can be represented by a bean.” “Every one but J,” asseverated Boyce solemnly. “But that’s a mere technicality. Go on.”

“Well, it means,” Tydings went on, “that that bag of beans your grandfather left you could represent a jumble of letters—a jumble that might conceivably make up a message—”

“An even I today, after I was about two-thirds through a book of Chinese wisdom, deemed possible!”

“Deemed possible, from a bit of Chinese wis— Well, I don’t get it, of course, since the Chinese certainly never had a strangle-hold on all the beans in history—and besides, damn it, they don’t even know alphabetical letters— they use picture wri— Anyway, Boyce, you received—let’s see—how many beans?”

“16. Including some duplicates.”

“Well, good God, Boyce, you know, don’t you, or perhaps you don’t, the old scientific fact about the 15 playing cards laid out in a horizontal row? The fact that if you made but one change in the order of that row every minute, it would take you, in order to rearrange it into every horizontal form possible for it, 2,487,996 years? A fact! The number’s written there on my calendar, so I can quote it, as I have just now. So how—how in hell’s bells, Boyce, would you ever be able to figure which, of all the possible orders of those beans—or letters, if they are letters —your grandfather had in mind?”

“Maybe,” said Boyce musingly, "that was where the quality of the Barkstonian mind was supposed to enter in at that! Maybe yes, maybe. Hm?”

He was lost a minute, really pondering over his own comment. Then he came to, catching sight of Tydings’ perplexed face.

“Whether or no,” the younger man now said, “it would be about here, I think, that even you, with your hopeless pessimism concerning the fifty quintillion combinations of 15 playing cards, would at least have essayed to find out what letters those 16 beans could—possibly did—stand for. And which I did. For I hied me straight over hill and dale to Uptown U, saw Professor Zack, and got each bean that Grandfather left me identified under its real, correct, and accredited name. As follows:”

He withdrew another pink sheet, and shoved it over, reflectively reading it over Tydings’ shoulder. With its additional listing of how many beans of like kind there had been, in that particular collocation of beans—plus a remark or two, here or there—it ran, of course:

Fat White Kidney (1)

Dark Red Kidney (1)

Swedish (3)

Tonqua (1)

English Dwarf (i)

Jumping [which is NOT a bean at all!] (i)

Pea (meaning pea-bean and not pea!) (i)

Ordinary Red Kidney (2)

Haricot (1)

Lima (1)

Adsuki (1)

Black-Eye (1)

Indian (1)

“Of course,” admitted Boyce, “it’s an even worse problem than your 15-cards-laid-out, for there’s 16 of those beans, and when you lay out their initials in a horizontal row, as listed vertically down there, you do get—” And he laid the next sheet of paper down, which was but a half-sheet. And which read:

FDSSSTEJPOOHLABI

“And now,” said Tydings dryly, “I presume we start in on our 2,487,996-year task? Oh, it won’t take quite that many years, for we may strike it midway, in which case—” “—it’ll take only 1,243,998 years,” laughed Boyce, and became quickly grave again.

As did also the lawyer, who spoke.

“Well, I can’t see that hitting the jackpot the way you did—discovering, I mean, that beans can stand for alphabetical letters—has gotten you very far—if those beans are a message, and you’re only 1 and a quarter million years from being able to juggle ’em into their right order. But since we are at an impasse, then do you mind telling me just exactly what on earth ever tipped you off that beans might stand for letters? And drove you to call up this Professor Zack and find out how many varieties of beans there were, and all that?”

Boyce was reflectively silent a moment, then spoke. “Well, what tipped me off is, strange to say, the very thing which has given me a—a sort of procedure to be followed with that jumble of beans. Or, as it now is, letters. The very unscrambling angle to follow to—”

“Both things, eh?” returned the lawyer, almost visibly pricking up his ears. “Both—well, darned if I can see how the Chin—but I pass! What was it?”

“Well,” was Boyce’s sober reply, “it was a fable, no less, out of old China, and of around 500 years before Christ. When oxcarts plodded along die roads, instead of glider freight-planes zooming along overhead, as they do today. And when—but here—” He reached forth suddenly, and from the half-opened desk slide where he’d deposited it, took up the scarlet-bound book. Opened it to a page with a downturned corner. Went on speaking. “And when it comes to situations in life, there certainly is nothing new under the sun! As now I know. For—but here ’tis—the fable written by an author whose name is given at the end of it as—but here—the poor author is dead, and the fable not—and so here is the fable itself. And which appears to be none too plentiful amongst the laconically speaking Chinese.”

The lawyer, plainly perceiving from the way in which Boyce cleared his throat that the younger man was going to read the narrative aloud, actually turned one ear—probably the better of the two Tydingsonian ears—toward Boyce and his book. While Boyce, in turn, seeing that all was waiting on him, now proceeded to read off, aloud, the old fable in question, even to its heading and the explanatory sub-head its compiler had included, which sub-head indicated quite clearly that the quaint narrative was the earliest instance of the modern detective story.

Chapter XIX

' THE MURDER OF CHUNG PO:

THE FIRST DETECTIVE STORY

THE FABLE

of

THE MURDERED HERMIT,

THE ASSORTMENT OF VARIEGATED EGGS,

THE 3 SUPERFICIALLY-THINKING WISEMEN,

AND

THE COGITATING MAGISTRATE

[This fable, to which students of this work, The Way Out, are specifically referred in Section Il-b, dealing with “Thoroughness in Thought,” Sub-Section XXI-c-3 dealing with “Systems,” the small Section XL dealing with the “Enigmatic,” and Sections IV, XI, LIII, and LXI, covering particular phases of human problems, is beyond any doubt the earliest instance of the modern detective story utilizing pure deduction. Particularly since the fable, written in about 500 B.C. as per its author, was penned in a day before China was even an Empire; when, indeed, she was yet but a set of feudal kingdoms. And just as there are today two schools of detective-story writing—that which lays its story in purely theoretical places, and that which lays it in actual places, naming actual streets and buildings—and any narrative must belong to one or the other—this tale belongs

definitely to the latter field, since all the towns and places mentioned in it are known to have existed in that old China of many kingdoms then known collectively as “The Flowery Kingdom.” As for the applicable wisdom of the fable, it lies for the most part, perhaps, in the veritable wealth of colorful bits of Chinese sapience brought out in its telling, though this is not to say that its moral is not indeed the most valuable of all precepts for any man to guide his life by!]

A King, one Huang-Sun, ruling over the Province of Wei, set his 3 court wisemen, Ting, Tang, and Tung, to finding the explanation of a strange murder which had occurred on the far outskirts of a village called Shu, near the King’s Palace at Yang-Yang.

The murdered man, a ragged hermit named Chung Po, had been slain by a blow which had crushed in the back of his skull, and was so found in his lonely, isolated, wretched, poverty-striken hut. Chung Po had come but recently to Shu, or rather to its outskirts, and no one knew anything whatsoever about him. Only an open bamboo box of variegated eggs was found on the dirt floor near his body; but, along a crude shelf above his body, were a row of 3 and 30 also variegated eggs laid out in a line. Which latter eggs, carefully gathered up and transferred to a woven reed basket by the finders of Chung Po’s body, and brought, together with the bamboo box containing the others, to the King himself, had been the real cause of the King’s seeking enlightenment. And causing him to call in his Wisemen.

The 3 Wisemen, presented the facts of the affair, and regarding in turn both the eggs in the bamboo box and those in the woven basket, did give forth immediately their respective opinions, after the manner of the Times in which the more instantaneous the opinion, and the more facilely arrived at, the wiser was its giver. Their unanimous verdict, based on the poverty-strickenness of the victim, was that he was slain by an enemy; and since, as was known, he communed with no one in Shu, then that Enemy must have been one from out of his past—from, in short, such village just beyond Shu from whence he had come to Shu. But the differing verdicts of Ting, Tang and Tung, based upon the eggs, ran:

TING: “The man was crazy.”

TANG: “The man was a miser in eggs, instead of money.”

TUNG: “The man had become, from advancing age, like a child, and played with eggs as does a child with dolls.”

But the King of Wei, not satisfied, because these verdicts led to no practical conclusions such as who did the crime, or why—in short, what village Chung Po may have come from, so that to it an expedition of soldiers might be sent— did proceed to call into the affair a magistrate, one Hu Fong, of a neighboring village, who was said to have solved many crimes occurring in his village through a process of laborious and detailed study, coupled with investigation of quite unimportant elements, plus elaborate thought and reasoning in which ideas were moved about exactly like

chessmen, and the time consumed in reaching judgment was utterly ignored.

Hu Fong, after having rendered profound thanks to the King for permitting him to direct his mean and ignoble faculties toward a riddle so tremendously disturbing to the King’s tranquillity of mind, did then leave Yang-Yang and proceed to Shu, and did there proceed, for one full day, to study, by the aid of a huge burning candle of shark’s-fat, every square li of the wretched hut where the crime had been committed, as well as the dead man’s body, both clothed in his rags and unclothed. This done, Hu Fong did then return to Yang-Yang, and did for the first time examine the woven-backetful of eggs taken from the shelf above the dead man, and then the bamboo-boxful of eggs found upon the floor. Not yet, however, did he vouchsafe any opinions, but did make announcement that he was now about to set out, afoot, to a village lying west of Yang-Yang, by 3 full suns’ travel, and to which, he declared, he could not be transported by oxcart, either provided by the King or otherwise, since 3 broad streams must be swum. And did indeed depart. And did return only after 6 suns had passed.

But even yet did Hu Fong render no opinion, stating that he must now rest for 24 hours, after which time must he set out upon another journey, opposite to the first, and even more difficult. And did then so rest. And during this 24 hours’ rest, the Wisemen, Ting, Tang and Tung, did stoutly adjure the king: “We urge thee, Most High One, to dismiss this man before he create from a simple nothing an affair which shall go down in the annals of our Flowery Kingdom as the ‘Thousand Years’ Investigation,’ being carried, as it will be, to the 9 and 90th descendant of this Snail of Snails.” To which the King did reply, though troubledly, for he himself was now beginning to believe he had indeed acquired the dubious services of a futile chaser of geese and lasher of waves: “I have brought him in upon the affair, and so shall go through with it.” Adding, to bolster up his position: “For did not the Sage Nung Fu say: ‘If you have taken poison, lick even the plate’? So calm thyselves, Ting, Tang and Tung.”

And now Hu Fong, having rested from his arduous 6 suns’ journey, did announce that he was now departing for another village, in exactly the opposite direction from Yang-Yang, and again afoot, since a great quicksand must be adroitly traversed, as well as the Plain of Woo-Ten, whereon the herbs were fatally poisonous to oxen. And he was this time gone for 8 long suns. And now, at last returning, did enter, for 24 hours, a temple wherein, in the peace and quietness thereof, he did contemplate deeply. And only then at last did come before the King as evidence that he had elicited at last something further—something not ascertained by Ting, Tang and Tung.

The King, who on hearing that Hu Fong would have audience, and not knowing in the least whether failure was to be confessed, or success of some sorts, had nevertheless immediately—as a courtesy to Hu Fong—brought forth the basket of eggs taken from the shelf in Chung Po’s hut, and which the King had been zealously guarding within his own bedchamber so that, in case of failure, a greater Wiseman might some day arise to cast light upon them. And from the bedroom of his favorite concubine, the beautiful Ah Lee, he had brought forth die bamboo-boxful.

And now, framed on both sides with eggs, did Huang- Sun, King of Wei, speak to Hu Fong first. Using the tsou —or formal form of address which was not permitted one such as Hu Fong himself to use.

“Hu Fong, I did select thee to cast thy alleged talents in this problem because thou wert said to utilize a new form of judgment. In which laborious investigation, and involved reasoning, take the place of quick utterance, as would perhaps a tortoise escape from the great carven jade Maze of the King of Chu. Thou hast toiled, I do hear, for many days, with candle of shark’s-skin fat and without, examining the dead man’s premises, himself as well, and even such things as the uneaten rice within his earthen bowl; and going hither and thither across our land till thy very sandles, as I observe, are in rags; and even contemplating deeply, within the peace and quiet of the Temple. Presuming then that thou hast followed thy own laborious and slow methods successfully, why then was this strangest of all strange circumstances: a man murdered, but with eggs at his feet—and eggs above his head ? Poverty-stricken, and therefore not worth the murdering; consequently, murdered by an enemy? In short, to what village beyond Shu, if I deem myself to be a ruler worthy of keeping order, must I send soldiers to try to ascertain who therein may have hated Chung Po? Do I ever even ascertain the hidden and undoubtedly strange events from which such hate did spring?”

And Flu Fong troubledly spoke.

“Most High One, this Lowest of all Low Ones does know why Chung Po was murdered. Though, to reach his village, would your soldiers have to travel for 7 and 70 days, from

our noble country here around the Yellow River, into a land where few penetrate.”

“Which is where?” asked the King, at first taken aback, and then not convinced he had heard truth.

“The far upper reaches of that little-known river, called the Yang-Tse.”

“How knowest thou that?” demanded the King. “Not that I could even spare soldiers for a journey such as that.”

“I know from whence he came, Most High One, because his box is built of a bamboo which grows not at all in the northern latitudes where flows our Yellow River here; but, since it is bamboo, must grow along a river of some sort. And south of us. In short, the Yang-Tse itself. For I did travel, with a piece broken from the bamboo box, to the village of Pau, 3 suns’ distant, to none less than the noble Mandarin Koo Loo who has traveled much, and has discoursed much with travelers, and who has specimens of grasses, leaves, and shrubs from all over our Flowery Kingdom. He declares the piece of bamboo I showed him to be Yang-Tse River bamboo.”

“So far so good,” nodded the King. “And even do I now note—though for the first time to be sure—that it is slighdy thinner, and slightly whiter, than that bamboo which we find in Wei. But how knowest thou that Chung Po came from the far upper reaches of that river?”

“Because, Most High, amongst the eggs in his bamboo box are 5 not native to our river. The pink, elongated ones! And noting which, did I, in the course of my gentle handling of the same, quietly abstract one, and did take it, over 4 long suns’ distance, to the village of Wan, in the Province of Han, where dwells a noble mandarin, one Hai

Jai, who has for 40 years collated eggs from all over our Land. This strange egg, he says, is that of a fowl called the &-«-hen—or crested red hen—which, though it may live upon any river, never leaves the mouth of same.”

“By the yew tree that groweth over the grave of my revered grandfather,” declared the King admiringly, “but thou dost indeed, Hu Fong, play actual chess—with ideas. For thou hast done no less just now than to cross two idea^ —two pieces of knowledge—to obtain a third more exact than either. And—but if Chung Po’s village lieth 7 and 70 suns away, does it mean his enemy came from such vast distance afar?”

“No, Most High One. For Chung Po was not even murdered for enmity.”

“But he was poverty-stricken,” argued the King. “And if not murdered for enmity, why was he slain? And by whom?”

“Well,” Hu Fong declared troubledly, “Chung Po, Most High One, was a secret musician—most probably, I surmise, upon the hzien-ch’in, or stringed great-guitar. And since said guitar was not found within his hut, it must have been for it he was bludgeoned. For ’tis more than possible that there was one who, not fearful of the witchcraft that surrounds a hermit, did peep some dark night through the cracks of Chung Po’s hut and see this hzien- ch’in. And—but the point is, Most High One, that the non-presence of the hzien-ch’in, which we may be said to know did exist, proves Chung Po was bludgeoned for it. And if bludgeoned for it, then it must have been a very fine hzien-ch’in, inlaid with jewels and bound with gold, such as a true musician would wish to own, despite all his poverty. The hzien-ch’in will be found in the village of Shu in the home of such a man as, because possessed of devils, always becomes poisoned on eggs—for he stole not the eggs at all.”

The King did strike a gong, and immediately soldiers appeared, and he did order an investigation in the village of Shu as to who there might be who, because possessed of devils, could not eat eggs. And Li Win, a man who because of devils had never been able to eat eggs, even when old and luscious, without becoming violently ill, was taken immediately up, and brought to the palace, where he was flogged upon the bare souls of his feet with hot copper thongs till he confessed all. And told where the stolen hzien-ch’in was. It was found exactly where he stated it to be, and was, indeed, jewel-studded and gold-adorned.

But the King was not yet satisfied. Even after Li Win had been led off, to be beheaded at sunrise the following morn. For the King spoke as follows:

“Thy work, Hu Fong,” he told the magistrate, “was splendid. For it obtained results. Confirming in full a thing which my own honorable grandfather, Huang-Fen, did often say: ‘Patience and the mulberry leaf become a silk gown.’ For now we have the silk gown—the complete clearing up of this enigmatic mystery. And thou, Hu Fong, I shall reward handsomely, if for none other reason than thou hast, as I hear, 20 offspring to feed and worry about.”

“I thank you, Most High One,” said Hu Fong modestly. “But as for my allegedly sad fertility, that is to me but a satisfying thing. For my own grandfather, Hu Ai, did always say: ‘If we have none to wet the bed, we shall have none to burn paper at our graves.’ ”

The King studied deeply upon this sapient utterance, for all of a minute. Then nodded hearty approbation at its profundity.

“For thy honorable grandfather’s utterance,” he declared, “I shall have his name inscribed as one of the Sages of our Land of the Yellow River. And shall myself, in humility, burn 9 and 90 pieces of gum-gnun-yee-chee paper at his grave. But now reverting again to thy results in the murder of Chung Po, absolutely nothing do we know of how thou reached them—other than perhaps thy long laborious trips afoot, in 2 directions, to those noble mandarins who could render verdicts upon bamboo and x«r-hen eggs alike! Wilt thou deign to explain thy wise ratiocinations?”

At this juncture Ting, Tang, and Tung, given places of honor at the hearing, but sitting nevertheless with extremely long and dour faces, and apparently no longer able to contain themselves, started to expostulate. Crying aloud, practically all in unison: “This man, Most High One, has used up so much time that no longer can it even be said his work was wise.”

“Silence!” said the King. “Rightly indeed did the Sage Weng Lo say: ‘Those who have free seats at the play hiss first!’ ” He turned to Flu Fong. “Now proceed, Hu Fong. Recount thy detailed and no doubt laborious mental workings.”

“Most gladly, Most High One,” returned Hu Fong. He was reflective a second, then spoke. “Well, since there were but 5 varieties of eggs being utilized by Chung Po, out of a possible hundred kinds, to presumably create a simple line of such atop a shelf—which line itself, incidentally, includes but 4 of the 5 kinds—and since there are, in our

musical scale, 5 notes—and 5 exactly—then the dead man must have been illiterate—unable to write—to write even music—and had lain out the eggs in the process of recording a beautiful musical composition he had composed. Setting the piece meticulously down egg by egg, as he no doubt painstakingly composed it, note by note. And being in this wise ever in position to re-play its earlier parts over, as he built it up. And to hold it unimpaired and unchanged within memory during those intervals when, asleep upon his miserable pallet of rushes, his mind communed with happier events. Thus, by analogy of the 5’s in the case— and naught else—did I ascertain undoubted possession of a musical instrument—presumably the hizen-ch’in with its 5 strings—and thus the cause of the crime. And, by the unstolen eggs in turn, though regardless of whether such had been 5 kind or 500 kind, the identity of the murderer.” “Very excellent so far,” pronounced the King. “And a great tribute to this new form of investigation, in which swiftness gives way to painstaking slowness, and quick verdict to laborious examination and toil. But now / am intrigued! Having learned thy reasoning. For in connection therewith was I like the humble creature of whom the Sage Ni Fing, in rendering his lone but famous utterance, did say: The frog in the well knows nothing of the high seas.’ But now, having established the motive for this crime both through proving Chung Po to have come from too afar for enemies to follow, and through his possession of a certain object—having, indeed, captured the very thief and murderer himself—and possessing, moreover, the very eggs Chung Po had painstakingly laid out, though, alas, all

jumbled together in yon basket by those witlings who did gather them up and bring them thither—how may we extract Chung Po’s undoubtedly melodious composition, and thus, in turn, have attained the true and complete clearance of this riddle?”

“That,” pronounced Hu Fong unperturbedly, “is where we will commence to examine the mind of the dead man as well as his workmanship. Yea, the line of eggs.” He did pause for the most fleeting of seconds. “But in the so doing,” he explained—“the following of the mind of the dead man —we must perforce realize that whatever he would have composed would adhere most rigorously to the tenets of our musical composition, departing therefrom only to the degree in which it excelled all ordinary compositions. For he did possess, as I did note in examining his body, the long tapering fingers denoting the true artist, and thin nostril walls, betokening one to whom a violation of musical precepts would have been tantamount to cutting the queue from the head of his own grandmother. Thus, in following the dead man’s mind, we may most rigorously follow the precepts of our classical music, and not some monstrous non-existent aberration of such which may some day exist, amidst paler or darker races than we, and be erroneously termed ‘music.’ ”

With which dissertation upon the subject of pure and correct music, Hu Fong gazed challengingly around, and since none did dispute his words, did then proceed.

“So as I have stated,” he repeated, “it is here where we will commence to examine the mind of the dead man as well as his workmanship—his line of eggs.” He paused again, thoughtfully, then went on. “Now since there happen

to have been an even number of speckled pheasant eggs within the row, and an odd number of all other kinds, and since a musical piece, to possess equilibrium, must always end upon its opening note—must indeed, for every time it renders within itself that note, return once, but once only, to that note—then Chung Po’s piece did obviously, and beyond any doubts whatsoever, begin and end upon a speckled pheasant’s egg. Or, to be precise, upon the note that egg does stand for.” With which classical dictum, Hu Fong, extracting from the woven basket all the speckled pheasant eggs it did contain, which proved to be 8 in number, did lay two of such, far apart from each other, at the King’s feet, setting off the undisposed of 6 to one side. “But since, moreover,” Hu Fong now went on, “the opening note in a melody must always be immediately followed by the highest note in that melody, if the piece of music be a cheerful piece of music—or by the lowest, if the piece of music be a sad piece—and since that highest or lowest note must thereafter, whenever sounded, be sounded no less than thrice, then obviously one of the round blue robin’s eggs to be found here represent the note which was second in Chung Po’s piece. For—”

“I do no more perceive thy reasoning,” commented the King quite helplessly, “than can a pair of greased lips utter sweet words.”

“Oh,” Hu Fong hastened to apologize, “that is because, Most High One, the robin’s eggs are 7 in number, and no other kind of eggs there permit themselves to be divided into 3’s, and still leave exactly 1.” With which explanation Hu Fong extracted from the woven basket the 7 blue round eggs, setting off 6 in a pile, and laying i to the right of the first speckled pheasant’s egg, but in contact with it.

He now stood erect.

“But is that robin’s egg,” he queried, though to none in particular, “the highest note in the piece, or is it the lowest? For here indeed lies our clue to Chung Po’s system of recording notes.” He paused. “We may, however, answer this with full certainty. Thanks, again, to careful examination of Chung Po’s corpse. For since Chung Po bore not the downturned corners at his mouth betokening a sad and dour man—since he even bore, at the outer corners of his eyes, tiny wrinkles betokening one who laughed much and jovially to himself—then his piece is a most cheerful piece, and hence the blue robin’s egg the highest note in it! And thus we immediately know the System he employed: wherein the smaller the eggs, the higher the notes—the larger the eggs, the lower. Thus—” reaching into the woven basket, he withdrew a large cumbersome dark egg—“this ordinary duck’s egg here is no less than the lowest note. But how low, and where rightfully should it first be placed?” And thus interpreting, as he went along, the mind of the dead man, the laws of music, and the eggs, he lay the latter, one by one, into a line.

The eggs were played. Upon a huge mzien-ch’in.

And they made music! Quaint, but beautiful. And thereby completed the proof of the efficacy of Hu Fong’s elaborate and time-consuming methods. And confirmed completely that correct objectives are never reached by snap judgments. Or, as even the Sage Wong Hsi has put it:

MORAL: “Birds ready cooked do not fly into the mouth.”

Chapter XX

BEAN CHESS

BOYCE BARKSTONE, reaching the end of the old Chinese fable, closed the book in his hands with a sharp snap.

And looked up, to see the lawyer grinning broadly, almost from ear to ear.

“Birds ready cooked,” the latter was repeating, “don’t fly into the—boy,” he broke off, “I’ll say they never fly into the mouth! Not in the legal profession, certainly. Nor—” But now Oliver Tydings’ grim smile faded. “Well, I’ll be damned!” he now commented. “The 5 Chinese musical notes—for it is 5 of course, isn’t it, against our 8 ?—or rather our 13, if we include our half-notes—the 26 American alphabetical letters—the 5 kinds of Chinese eggs used—the 26 types of beans—well, the whole thing certainly is a beautiful analogy. Except—where do we go from here?” “Here,” declared Boyce firmly, “is where we have to begin to follow Hu Fong’s edict. To—well, to study the mind of the ‘dead man,’ my grandfather—the ‘laws of music’—in this case, the rules of spelling and what not— and the ‘workmanship’—in this case the beans.”

He was thoughtfully silent a moment. Then spoke.

“As you might gather, though, I’ve done some work along that line before I came over here.”

The lawyer looked more than astonished.

“Why, you entrepreneur, you, so you’ve been holding out on me? We-e-ell—how far did you get? Go ahead. Spill.” “Gladly,” assented the younger man. “Well, in the first

place we might say we have a short cut to both the unscrambling and the decoding of the beans. Just as Hu Fong had to whether that undeniably second note was the highest or the lowest. And—but the short cut to me, Mr. Tydings, lies in the fact that Mr. Jumping Bean is involved in Grandfather’s message! For the Jumping Bean isn’t a bean —even the Seedateria, whom I called up once today, and from whom Grandfather undoubtedly garnered the beans he needed, told me on the phone that a sign above the Jumping Bean case specifically points out that it’s not a bean; yet nevertheless Grandfather, a most accurate and punctilious man in whatever he did, included it in a message based on beans, and so—well, do you know what that signifies to me?”

“Not having the Barkstonian mind,” said the lawyer dryly, “I confess I don’t.”

“Well, it simply signifies this—as I look at it: Grandfather could say most anything he wished with 25 beans— with 25 letters of the alphabet, that is—for in the case of the actual situation, where there is no bean beginning with J—hence no ‘J’ showable by beans—had he wanted to express a word such as, for rough instance, JEW, he could have put it in as ISRAELITE; or JOY he could have put in as DELIGHT or HAPPINESS. But the fact that Grandfather had to drag in a bean that was no bean, to get a J, signifies to me that he had to include in his message a word, containing a J, for which there was no synonym whatsoever. And what possible word could there be that there could be no synonym for?”

“Why, a—a person’s name, of course?”

“Even the mind Barkstonian figured that way,” Boyce laughed. “Well, what name, might I ask, is the most logical name for Grandfather to have used in some message—any message?”

“We-ell—let’s see? Your own—however, you’ve no J in yours. Not mine, for—”

“It strikes me it could be that of his own black servant ‘Josiah,’ ” said Boyce mildly.

“Hrmph?” returned the lawyer. “It may strike you so, but you can’t prove it.”

“Well, the fact that the letters that make up the word ‘Josiah’ are there in that string—” and Boyce pointed to the sheet of pink paper lying on the lawyer’s desk reading

FDSSSTEJPOOHLABI

“—at least half proves it. And nobody can prevent me from plucking ’em out of the string, and putting ’em all up in front of it, in a group J-O-S-I-A-H.” And Boyce, withdrawing from his breast pocket another pink halfsheet, laid it down. Since it read:

JOSIAHFDSSTEPOLB

“And,” said Tydings, “where d’we go from here? The number of permutations of that muddle of letters following your ‘J-O-S-I-A-H’ is—”

“—thousands fewer in number if the entire muddle, as you rightfully term it, can be diminished by 1 letter! In short, even after using up an S in Josiah, there’s still a

superfluity of S’s in the unintelligible section of that string and, after all, one doesn’t refer to a Josiah nearly as much as something of or belonging to a Josiah—in short, ‘Josiah’s’, in the possessive case—”

“O—kay,” said Tydings grimly. “Move up an ‘S’ for a

possessive case.”

Which Boyce had already virtually done on the next half-sheet he now laid in front of the lawyer. Which read:

JOSIAH’SFDSTEPOLE

“And now?” queried Tydings, who obviously surmised

from Boyce’s outturned breast pocket that Boyce was at

the end of his decryptification exhibits.

“Well,” said Boyce, “if we are going out on a limb of possession—of one, Josiah—then we have a pretty good clue, haven’t we, in the matter of the things that Josiah possesses? Which are mighty few. For what they are, they are in his room. A couple of books he owns. A Negro quilt. A mahogany bed that Grandfather virtually gave him; a—”

“Oh-ho!” said the lawyer, getting markedly interested. “I see that a bed—that is, the letters B-E-D can be plucked from that jamboree on the end.”

Upon which, he himself, uncorking his fountain pen hastily, re-lettered beneath the string a revised order, which ran:

JOSIAH’S BEDFSTPOL

“That,” announced Boyce, “permits me to do away with one pink half-sheet!” And, from two he was just withdrawing from a right-hand side pocket, he tossed one into the lawyer’s wastebasket.

“But Josiah’s bed—Josiah’s bed?” said the lawyer. “The only next word / can get is F-L-O-P—Josiah’s bed; flop!— Josiah’s bed; flop! Well what might happen if we flopped on Josiah’s bed I don’t know—and besides, that leaves a T and an S, over—”

“Well, I’ll tell you,” Boyce hastened to extricate the other. “Having gone out on a ‘Josiah’ limb to Josiah’s bed—I now went out on the ‘bed’ limb to—what has a bed got? Castor? A back? A spring? A mattress? Well, Josiah’s bed has 4 very ornate bedposts, and—”

“For—for God’s sake, Boyce!” put in the lawyer. “It—”

“Yes,” nodded Boyce, and laid the last half-sheet down, which, with a pencilled comma, in addition to a pencilled apostrophe, and also a couple of pencilled periods, read:

JOSIAH’S BEDPOST, L. F.

“That L. F.-what—”

“Left front, do you suppose?” queried Boyce. “Why not? There’s only four. Left and right, back; left and right, front? So—”

“Josiah’s bedpost, the left front one?” the lawyer was saying. “We-e-ell, that’s a plenty enough logical arrangement of those beans, or their initials, for yours truly, Boyce! For if that isn’t the message they contain, then the moon is made of Roquefort cheese instead of the green cheese we all know it be made of!” He thrust his hat on his head, and grabbed his gloves. “I don’t know where you’re bound for now, Boyce, but I know mighty well where I, as lawyer for your grandfather, when he was alive, am bound for. It’s to flag a cab downstairs on 47th Street—I didn’t come downtown in my car today, pick up a couple of official legal witnesses on the way, and hie me all the long, long, long way uptown to Van Cortlandt Park, get Josiah to let us in, and see what in the devil your grandfather could have meant by ‘Josiah’s bedpost, left front.’ Are you coming?”

“I’m afraid I’m not,” said Boyce Barkstone. “Because I’ve already come from there, and I’ve already been inside that bedpost!”

Chapter XXI

—AND WHAT CAME FORTH

“YOU’VE already been in it?” Tydings ejaculated. “W-e-ell —in that case—”

And he sank back into his chair.

“Well,” he now questioned tensely, “was there anything at all there?”

“Yes, there was,” Boyce assented. “In that left front one. All the bedposts, quite plainly, are hollow. But die knob of that left front one had been sawed smoothly off at the base of the nubbin from which it rises, doubtlessly with a fine hacksaw. A huge demijohn cork had been lowered way down in—perhaps with the aid of Grandfather’s 14-inch shears—to where the hollow section narrowed markedly, and the cork had been then shoved in— perhaps with Grandfather’s yardstick! To make a stop, of course, that would keep anything deposited there from falling to the bottom of the post! The knob and nubbin had been glued on again. Neatly. Though evidently with a most powerful glue. ‘Iron glue,’ as I called it when I was a boy. The kind you have to heat up yourself! A very neat job, too. For you couldn’t tell the knob had even been tampered with. ’Twas all done, quite plainly, the day that Josiah went to Albany all day. Though, come to think of it, you wouldn’t know about that. Well, it was the day after Grandfather drew that will down here. And a day when he was alone in the house all day.”

Tydings scratched his chin.

“But, Boyce, you—really, you ought not to have gone in that space without legal witnesses.”

“Yeah, I know—I know! But did you ever work out a cryptogram based on beans, thanks to the help of a bit of old Chinese wisdom that had nothing whatsoever to do with beans, yet was quite apro—well, anyway, did you ever work out such a cryptogram, right on the very spot where the cryptogram revealed something might be, and then delay the final step of your solution by going 200 streets or so downtown, then digging up lawyers and witnesses and what not, then going 200 streets back and—” “Heavens no! Not in all my legal practise. Nor has any of my clients. All right! I guess I do concede that, in your position, I might have ripped a half dozen beds apart.” “Well, I ripped apart only the post of one, and didn’t damage that beyond all repair. And fortunately there won’t need to be any official witnesses to my finding. For I had sense enough, after I got that far—to finding it, I mean—to call an immediate halt and—”

Now he was reaching toward his left back pocket.

“I found,” he said, a bit undecidedly, “a—a document of sorts. A somewhat curious document. For it—”

“A document?” Tydings was now echoing, surprised. “Well, I was certain you were going to tell me you found a family heirloom. Well, what sort of document was it?” “It was a somewhat curious document, as I said. For it bequeaths a few things to a few people. And in mighty, mighty few words, so it seems to me. It devotes more words, by far, to something else than it does to its bequcathals. It—”

“Well,” declared die lawyer with an emphatic gesture of both hands, “if it bequeadis anydiing to anybody, it’s a will, no matter how curious a diing it may be otherwise. Was it witnessed?”

“I’m sorry to say, no,” Boyce said, frowning, and scratched a rib on his way to that left hip pocket. “It was handwritten from beginning to end. And—”

“Ah—good! Holographic. Doesn’t require witnesses. Then—but here—the date on it—what date was on it?” “The date it was put in that bedpost! The date Josiah went away. The date of the day after the will Grandfather drew down here.”

“The devil you say! And definitely not some old, old one, then? Well, well, then diat will he drew down here is finis. But the new one—what—”

But now Boyce Barkstone had scratched that rib to his complete satisfaction, and had gone on the rest of the way —had, in fact, produced what he had been reaching for. Which was a tight roll of apparently double cloth—a roll, moreover, which exhibited a marked tendency to stay stubbornly curled into a roll—showing at least that it had rested thus for some days. As Boyce uncurled it, it proved itself to be in actuality a huge cloth envelope, about 6 inches wide by 8 inches deep in dimensions, its square top flap, some 3 inches deep alone, pasted down tight as well as sealed in addition with a generous gob of red wax. The flap,-as well as the entire face, was covered with a fine, almost microscopic penwriting; and that it was the flap writing with which the document—as document it was—opened, was emphasized by the fact that that writing thereon was preceded by the date of June 2nd, that year. Curiously, again, Boyce scanned the words with which the writing covering that flap opened:

Being of sound mind and memory, I declare this to be my last will and testament, and I hereby revoke all previous wills made by me. I direct that after the payment of my just debts and funeral expenses, the sum of $10,000 be paid to—

Boyce turned the big envelope over. And glanced, again, at that continuation covering its entire back which, he knew, when this envelope were opened out at all its junctions, would no longer be a “second page” or “second section” to the writing on the flap, but would be one with it—the two parts but one document. And gazing again at that continuation, he assured himself for perhaps the hundredth time that that quaint signature

Balhatchet Baritone

at the bottom of it was in the same writing as the rest— was, indeed, in his grandfather’s own indisputable handwriting. With which—and a relieved sigh—he shoved the sealed envelope, flap uppermost, over to Tydings, whose fingers were curled, eagerly, lawyerlike, towards it.

And now Tydings, hat tilted on back of head, leaned back in his swivel chair and read it avidly—at least the writing uppermost and on the flap—once or twice mouthing silently a word or a phrase as in admiration of some

precise lawyerlike way of putting something.

He looked up finally, at the bottom of the flap.

“Why, Boyce, it leaves his entire estate to you—except for §10,000, the use of the house for a year, and the furniture to Josiah. And that bunch of crackpots down in Washington Square are out without a farthing! Whoops! I congrat—but here—here—what the devil did he tangle this thing all up in a mess of beans for?” “That,” said Boyce, “is explained in the final paragraph. Which covers the entire reverse side. The true face of the envelope, in fact. And d’ya mind,” he added plaintively, “reading it aloud when you do read it?”

“Not—not at all,” said Tydings, hastily turning the envelope over. And clearing his throat as though he were in a courtroom, he read aloud:

And the reason I left Boyce Barkstone, in a certain previous will, a certain cryptogram to solve—and which, if this will is ever filed for Probate, he has solved! (though he can do as he likes about giving the Press any of the details) is that I myself, back in 1879, unearthed my own grandfather’s right and correct will thanks to being able to recognize the significance of—and to solve— a puzzle that he gave me before he died. He had heard— and heard correctly, too—for I was a young man at the time, and rash of tongue and judgment—he had heard about my having told someone that he was partly senile, to such extent that he probably could not construct a simple word-square, as a certain type of puzzle was known in those days. And the “word-square” he handed.

to me before he died was a word-square with a vengeance —for it was undoubtedly the first crossword puzzle; the first “word-square” ever built to a gigantic scale; a crossword puzzle one of whose horizontals was defined merely as “where Balhatchet Barkstone might poke about a bit.” I finally solved that horizontal as DUCKPOND; and, poking about, in a boat, with a steel rod, in the bottom of the duckpond on our farm, I came on a sealed copper canister containing his will. Rewarding me most generously. With it was an explanatory note telling me how hurt he had been by what I had said about him, but telling me also that, back in 1845, in England, he himself got his father’s correct will—generously remembering him —by recognizing and solving an unusual cryptogram left him by his father. Left him, as a matter of fact, not long after a tiff in which he had told the old man, face to face, that the latter could not even make up a 3-word rebus. (As certain types of pictorial puzzles were known in that day.) Neither my grandfather nor I, however, ever divulged to the Press of our own respective days how we came upon the right wills. Because, however, I believe firmly—as may have been evident from some of my talks and writings—that if talent and proclivities don’t go down through a family, then the family has died— and right of inheritance has stopped—has ceased. I’m seeing to it that my grandson prove himself able to do at least in part what I did—and what his great-great-grandfather did. For our cryptograms were tough! And how! For one thing I had never seen a word-square elaborated to such huge dimensions and into such a wild shape as the one I received—I did not even know what the thing was—I thought it was a design in senile geometry! And when I did finally suspect, I had to search for the definitions for its horizontals and verticals. And when I found them, on a narrow roll of paper secreted in my grandfather’s pet corncob pipe, I was further away than ever from solving it. For the definitions for the horizontals and verticals, which should have led to DUCKPOND, were hopelessly, hopelessly vague. Indeed, I had to make thousands and thousands of trials with Grandfather’s horrible definitions. The puzzle he received from his father, however, must have been worse—very much worse. For he received but three crude crayon etchings. It turned out finally that they represented a sort of charade—or rebus, the very thing about which he had taunted his own father —but it was a rebus involving puns in 3 languages! And which, when solved, led him to the hiding place. But he had to learn 6 languages perfectly and comprehensively before he could decipher that rebus! Now I’ve allowed for plenty, plenty of dilution of the true Barkstonian blood by giving Boyce a whole handful of hints as to his cryptogram being a cryptogram, and the rest should be easy if his mind is a true Barkstone mind. If, however, Boyce hasn’t it in him to recognize and solve the simple cryptogram I’ve left him, then the Barkstone family—so far as I’m concerned—has died—somewhere beyond myself and ahead of my grandson. It then has no living descendant; in which case, this will will remain ever unfound; and, if found by accident, by some rascally second-hand furniture dealer, or other person, it will be promptly destroyed in order that the latter may retain the contents of this envelope on which it was written.

Balhatchet Barkstone.

The lawyer looked up from his long reading. “Well, Boyce,” he said, “in case there is any question in your mind, I can tell you that the explanation we’ve just heard of why your grandfather did what he did doesn’t invalidate this thing as a will in any way; wills may go into any sort of fantastic by-paths, just so long as they bequeath something to somebody! And st>, as you’ve guessed, the estate is yours all right, all right. The language in the actual bequeathal on the flap here is correct—the will, though unwitnessed, is holographic—which makes it legally self-sufficient—its date is one day later than that other will, so disastrous to you—when opened out, this envelope becomes one sheet, one document— quite everything is okay—and you win, hands down! And—but here—here—we haven’t opened the envelope. What can be in it, I wonder?”

He held it up to the light, but it was plain, from the squinting of his eyes, that the thick paper frustrated him from seeing anything.

“I’m almost certain I know,” said Boyce quietly, “though I’m not 100-percent sure. Whether or no, I didn’t open it, because I didn’t feel I had quite the legal right.” “We-e-ell,” laughed the lawyer, “since one who inherits all the estate but a fixed sum, is here, we have legal representation, so here goes—”

He laid the envelope flat, and face down, on his glass-

topped desk, and insinuated a thin slender silver paper- knife between the narrow bottom flap and the paper to which it adhered. With a deft slicing motion, he was already dissecting it neatly away.

“My guess,” Boyce put in, “is that it contains a certain $5000—perhaps in odd bills, perhaps now not—which sum Grandfather took from me a week ago widiout a receipt. He probably intended to file a receipt for it later —I give him credit for that. Only Old Man Death foreclosed a mortgage on him before he did. Anyway, I happen to know from things that occurred today that I was scheduled to go to prison for that five thousand, and would have, if I hadnYheen lucky enough to be named heir—”

“Money is right!” gasped the lawyer, peering into the now nearly open envelope. He pursed together die envelope, and shook out the contents. Which fluttered to the glass-topped table—crisp yellow oblongs of paper—one— two—three—four—five. “Thousand dollar bills!” He looked up. “And you mean to tell me, Boyce, you were on a spot all the time and said nothing? Why—but I guess I understand. Well—you’re not on any spot now. For—” He was gazing at the five crisp bills, and shaking his head. “What do you know about that! Your grandfather actually insured this will being destroyed in case its own heir wasn’t smart enough to find it. For of course any other finder would have had to destroy it in order to keep this money.” He shook his head wonderingly. “He surely believed in his own theories!” And again shook his head wonderingly.

He looked up at the younger man suddenly and briskly. “Well, fortunately we now have in New York a night Probate Court clerk, thanks to the fact that people do die at night, and other people have to file hastily for executorships ahead of rascally others—and this fellow will be coming on duty in 15 minutes. So the very first place we go—yes, you and I—is over to the Courthouse and file this will; and I’ll see that it’s kept out of the newspapers just as the bean-will was. And again, Boyce, I congratulate you on winning this estate.”

“Oh, that fool estate? To hell with it. Not that I perhaps can’t use a bit of wealth. Who can’t? But I’ll take it gladly, because it irons out my five thousand deficiency on those books, and makes it possible for me to marry a swell and wonderful girl. To whom, incidentally, I’ve told ever’thing, in a long, long phone conversation before I came down here to tell you. A conversation in which, by gosh, we even set the date of our marriage for next week.”

“Referring, of course, to Carmine,” the lawyer nodded. “A charming girl, all right, all right. And so for that, then, I’ll congratulate you.” He rose and took up his stick, preparatory no doubt to leading the way straight to the Night Probate Clerk’s office. But paused, hand on back of chair. “And I suppose,” he added dryly, “that you and Carmine will be naming your first boy after the author of that fable you read me back there—whoever the author may have been?”

“Our first child, don’t you mean?” corrected Boyce, though somewhat cryptically. “Whether boy or girl? Oh yes, Carmine and I’ve already agreed we should do that—

agreed by phone a while ago. It’s to be called Cornelius if a boy; Constance if a girl; for—”

“But Cornelius? Constance? How? Why?”

“The nickname for either one,” explained Boyce Bark- stone patiently, “is Con. And the author of that fable I read you was the greatest Con who ever lived. Yes— Con-Fu-Tse, more commonly known as Confucius.”

Chapter XXII KIDNAPPED

GILBERT PARRADINE, lying in the jet black impenetrable darkness of the hideout where he was being held, and atop only the pair of thin cotton blankets spread upon the hard floor, realized full well that whether the $100,000 ransom was ultimately and eventually paid for him or not, he himself was due to be murdered.

For he knew that Louis Rocco, his own electrician for Parradine Tower and Parradine Moderne Motion Picture Theatre, was head of the gang that had accomplished this crime; and Parradine had seen, and could completely describe, no less than 3 others of the gang—all highly individual in appearance, to say the least. He could even establish the actual identity of the one who so uncannily resembled him; could furnish at least the “monickers” of the other two who had helped. Moreover, Parradine could prove, if ever liberated, no matter just where he might be freed, exactly where he had been held! And since he was in a position to give not less than 4 men life on The Rock in San Francisco Bay, he well knew that he was never going to live to see that they got it!

One other thing he knew, too: that rescue of him would be impossible, in view of the location of this more-than- unusual hideout, plus the fact that Rocco had created an ingenious scheme to make it appear, beyond all shadow of a doubt, that Parradine had been seized in Chicago— and, moreover, held in Chicago.

No, Gilbert Parradine knew that he would be permitted to remain alive only so that vital samples of his handwriting could be obtained—if necessary. Samples like, for instance, the Palmer House registry card he had signed hours ago, when the hot iron was brought agonizingly close to his bare foot. Or even that other damning slip of paper which he had written only when that iron had been applied to his foot. Or, in turn, the pay-off order itself, against whose writing he had no longer even struggled. No, he knew he would be permitted to remain alive only so that other such vital samples of his writing could, if necessary, be furnished in the ransom negotiations atop current newspaper heads, to prove that the ransom was not being paid for a dead man. So-o—until the spurious kidnapping had technically been performed in Chicago, tomorrow night—so long, indeed, as there might be need for samples of his writing, or of data from him as to possible go-betweens in the negotiations—so long, in fact, as the ransom, if in line to be paid, yet remained unpaid—he was 100-percent safe. A $100,000 property, no less. But once that $100,000 was paid, he would be killed. For the specious assurances of these rats, through their chief rat, that, once paid off, they intended to flee for parts unknown, were but to keep him calm, he knew; he knew that in the face of the inescapable net that the F.B.I., could throw for kidnappers over the whole breadth and length of the land, their lives would not be worth tissue-paper nickels: and he knew that they knew it. No, God help him, once that ransom was paid, he would be—

He drew a brief, almost choking breath. Not so much from terror as because die single electric bulb that had been serving to light up this strange hideout had gone out an hour ago—had been extinguished from without— and now the utter and impenetrable darkness of the place seemed to press him in, actually to smother him, to— How long, he wondered dully, would it be—in days, before the trustees, following that signed order, succeeded in making contact with the Chicago members of the gang? How long before—

He jerked himself away, by a powerful effort, from these maddening but hopeless thoughts. Tried to distract himself by thinking of something else. But of what? Well —well, how long had he been here now? Six—seven— eight hours? Yes, about eight—yes. So it must be now about 2 in the morning. But it seemed literally ages since yesterday afternoon, when he had been blithely talking with so many persons. And with all about the same thing —at least for the most part. A book! A book of Chinese wisdom. How futile and inutile it all seemed now—his quest of a book—in the face of this—this thing which was so grave. This thing that meant—

And thus his mind, like a rubber ball on a rubber band, came straight and true and unerringly back to the very thing he’d tried to draw it away from—his present status. Kidnapped! Held in a hopelessly unfindable and unreachable hideout—as he well knew, even if nobody else did! And with the police destined to search for him, if at all, a thousand miles away. And at the end of it all— Fiercely, he tore his mind away, flung it back to the one thing that had served, if only for a few fleeting seconds, to distract it. The book! The book of Chinese wisdom. The book called—

The Way Out!

Ironic thing! That title. The Way Out! For it stated, in three tiny 3-letter words, that one thing which Gilbert Parradine most needed in the entire world right now— most wanted.

The Way Out! From certain and sure death—the actual facts of which would never, never be traced or even known. The Way Out. The Way—and now Parradine groaned aloud. For from this hopeless setup—his own double being “kidnapped” in Chicago—from this unfind- able, unreachable spot in New York City where not even an explosion could be heard—where now he himself was lying in Stygian darkness—there was no way out, any more than there was even the printed work The Way Out itself, its only existent copy lying in the hands of a queer stubborn individual on the East River front who, for utterly unfathomable reasons, apparently would not sell it for love nor for money. Would not even consider discussing its sale to—

And now Gilbert Parradine, clinging desperately to this one titillating idea which served, in slight measure, to distract him from far more terrifying ones, tossed it about in his mind, back and forth, like a feathery, elusive, celluloid pingpong ball. Till suddenly, worn to utter exhaustion, he fell into blessed sleep. A sleep in which, brief though it was destined to be, he dreamed he was walking—a completely free and happy man—clown

Broadway. In company with another man. A man who, strangely, was dressed from toes to pointed cap in garments made of coarsely sewn cowhide. And who answered —strangely or not strangely, as the case might be—to the name of Hutchcock McDolphus!

Chapter XXIII

PRICELESS VOLUME!

HUTCIICOCK MCDOLPI-IUS, dealer in hides, shook his bald head stubbornly, pugnaciously, angrily, at the phone in front of him.

“I—I tell you, Jark,” he shouted, “that the book isn’t for sale at any price. And ‘any’, by Godfrey, means Any —A—N—Y—any! Is that plain?”

The retort from the other end of the wire was but a sigh. However, the man at the other end did now speak.

“I guess it is—yes. But since, Mr. McDolphus, I’m the cause, in a manner of speaking, of your acquiring this— this now quite priceless volume, do you mind if I run over? I’m next door now, in a tallow jobber’s shop— thought I’d find out first if you were in, and—but may I at least have the courtesy of a minute’s talk?”

“Oh, I suppose so,” retorted Hutchcock McDolphus, but with a highly resigned sigh of his own. “Run up, then. I’ll be waiting. Upstairs, you know—over the sidewalk-level stockroom.”

He hung up petulantly. And spun ’round, in his creaking, whining, rusty-springed swivel chair, from sight of his old-fashioned rolltop desk to where he faced the prosaic office itself. A curious little man he was, with not a single hair on the whole of his billiard-ball-like head, with eyes so colorless they were gelid, and with a sharply pointed chin that stuck ’way out like a bartender’s paunch: a sharply pointed chin that bespoke no less than

ioi-percent obduracy in any situation. He was in green- striped shirtsleeves and vest.

And now, facing the softwood-floored room, with its old-fashioned drawer filing cabinet, and its tall flyspecked and multi-paned windows letting in the mid-afternoon sunlight and gazing at the same time out and down, from South Street, on the East River itself, its air full of a stench that Hutchcock McDolphus himself could not even discern, working in it all day as he did, he rocked back and forth, sulkily reflecting on the problem of why in Hell and Hades, by Godfrey, a man, having purchased a simple innocent article, couldn’t be left in peace to—to possess it. Why, if every sales transaction in the world were to undergo reconsideration by seller and buyer, what—in Hell and Hades would become of profit? What would become of—

And thus he was still sitting dourly, and sourly reflecting, when an undoubtedly timorous knock at the door apprised him that the bookdealer he had been talking to on the telephone had arrived.

“Ah!” he said triumphantly. “Now, by Godfrey, I’ll hand him some facts—and true ones, too, from A to Izzard—facts that’ll make an argument he won’t find a-a-any answer whatsoever for. Not by a—a jugful, by Godfrey. Not by—”

“Come in!” he barked impatiently. “Come in!”

The door opened almost gingerly. Revealing a tall man, in shiny black clothing, with a long nose, and silver spectacles that hung far down it. He wore an old- fashioned batwing collar that seemed in perfect keeping

with his high, intellectual forehead.

“I hope—” he ventured.

“Come on, come on,” ordered Hutchcock McDolphus impatiently. “I’m waiting.”

Ochiltree Jark advanced dubiously, closed the door, and came over to the rolltop desk. Dropping into the single stiff kitchenlike visitor’s chair at the side of the desk only at the hides-dealer’s brusque nod towards it.

And Jark now spoke.

“What seems to me so odd, Mr. McDolphus,” he essayed, “is that you won’t consider selling that book at any price when no price has as yet been broached. Since there really is no such thing in the universe as an article without price.”

“Well, there is in this case,” grunted McDolphus. “And it’s that book.” He thrust his pointed jaw out firmly, sulked a second, then spoke.

“But here—we’ll dispose of this fool matter for all time to come.” He faced the bookdealer almost belligerently. “Jark, I’m a practical man—completely minus nonsense and flapdoodle and—and screwball thinking. I’m a man who—well, who likes comedies on the screen, and prize fights—” He stopped, wondering whether he had built up a firm foundation of good common sense, for what he was about to reveal.

Indeed, he stopped so long that the bookdealer seemed to feel he must make some sort of comment.

“Then,” he ventured, “you’ll probably be wanting to take in a certain show, in a few days more or less, at the Parradine Moderne ’way uptown. First showing of an

absolutely unshown new British comic, and first showing of a—a fight not yet even come off.”

The hides-dealer hastily whipped from his outer upper vest pocket a slender black notebook with pencil stuck in its binding and, withdrawing the pencil, opened the notebook to one of its pages.

“Parradine Moderne, you say?” He set that down. “Yes, I’ve heard of it. Though chiefly in the matter that it’s got the hugest theaytre marquee in New York, and maybe in the world. For—like to know the inside of that? Or is books your only meat?”

The bookdealer hastily shook his head. “For reasons of my own,” he said, “I would very much like to hear anything or of concerning Parradine—ah—Parradine Moderne Theatre,” he corrected.

“Well,” recounted McDolphus almost derisively, “there’s an inside story of how this damfool who built the theayter, and some huge block up there too, got stuck with the biggest marquee in the world. I got it all straight from an alderman on the City Council. But I won’t mention any names, see?” He shook his head helplessly. “Seems that this damfool—Parradine is his name—and Parradine Block is the real-estate development in question —this damfool added 12 feet of his own valuable Broadway frontage—12 feet back, y’ understand, of his official building line, for a whole block—added that 12 feet to the city’s 20-foot sidewalk—thinking that with a 32-foot sidewalk in that block, the city would be willing to call it Parradine Plaza. But—and the hides dealer now chuckled derisively at the naivete of people who created real-estate

enterprises—“the Parradine gazabo didn’t pass the proper mazuma to the proper aldermen, and so, on top of not getting it called Parradine Plaza, he had a godawful 32-foot sidewalk to cross—with his theaytre marquee— with the result that it’s the biggest in height and depth in all New York, and probably eats him out of house and home for lighting it, since— But here!— I’m discussing real estate, you’re discussing fillums, and we’re both supposed to be discussing a book. So what are these two first-run pics, anyway—of my fav’rite fillum fare?”

“Why—ah—” returned the bookdealer, as one who was a bit surprised to see what he had started, “one is this— this Broome Sherwood, English comic, who is said authoritatively to have—to have rolled the very cameramen who took the film in the aisles. Or—or whatever,” the bookdealer suggested, a bit uncertainly, “cameramen would roll in or on, in a film studio! And the other feature,” he added, “is of the—the fight that’s due to take place tomorrow night in Brooklyn, between—”

“Oh yes—I know! The fellow Napoleoni, who has fought under so many names it makes one dizzy—‘Napoleon’— ‘The Little Corp’—even ‘The Kid.’ ” Hutchcock McDol- phus shook his head, as one who had viewed many fights on many screens. “They’re generally not so hot when they keep switching their names. Wondeer what name he’ll step into the ring under in this set-to? For—but the other is the better man. Yes, this Casey O’Kelly. Who’ll probably— But here!—now I’m off on pugilism—instead of real-estate!” Having, however, as he talked, made some careful notations about the two films, Hutchcock McDol- phus put his book away, was momentarily silent, and resumed, with some difficulty. “Well, as I started out to say, Jark, a few minutes back, in trying to emphasize why I can’t sell that book, I’m a man of pract’cal idees. No mys- terycism or—or occultishism in me. For—but the point is that when I was a boy, Jark, in Kokomo, Indiana, our fam’ly were desperately poor and—and catastrophe-ridden: I couldn’t begin to tell you what ill luck dogged our family, my mother, my father, us kids. But one day my mother picked up a copy of this work in some secondhand bookstore sidewalk bin for io cents, and brought it home. And instantly—believe this or not, Jark!—our luck changed overnight. The old man—uh—our father got work—amazing well paid work, too—we kids found ourselves eating real food for a change—the baby ceased getting ill- mother’s whole nature changed for the better—oh, our whole existence altered. It just seemed, you see, that possession of that p’ticler lit’iary work by our fam’ly created luck. Mother tried to explain it on the basis of something she called caramel—Indian cara—”

“Karma,” corrected the bookdealer, frowning, however. “Indian Karma.”

“P’raps it was that. I’m only a practical man, Jark, who discusses practical phenomenals. Theorems are out of my line; pure facts are all / deal with. Anyway, that possession of the work created Luck with a capital L, was proven when we lost possession of the book. Sold it, by accident, with some old books and newspapers, to a wandering junk buyer. And lo—everything went to billy-be-dam— er—pot—no, to hell, in fact. Oh, we had a terr’ble time.

The old ma—cr—Father lost his job. One of my brothers fell out of a tree, and fractured both arms. Our baby was dying. Our farm was put under foreclosure. Godamighty, but our luck blew right up in our own faces.

“But—we recovered the work. Yep, we did! Traced it from the local Kokomo junk-dealer to one in the nearby city of Indianapolis. Found our work again—at least Mother did. She brought it triumphyantly home. And lo— everything changed again—instantler. The baby recovered. Father got work. The man who owned the mortgage on our home and garden patch died—and lo, left the mortgage to us. To us! Why, immediately the whole setup changed. Don’t ask me to explain it. It’s—it’s one of them things.”

The hides-dealer paused combatively, as though waiting to cross verbal arguments. But none were forthcoming. For the bookdealer sat stroking his chin helplessly. Hutch- cock McDolphus went on.

“But, when Mother died, the book passed from out of possession of our family—or any other, so far as that goes. I was away, at time of her death, with an uncle in Ohio. This time, the work got burned up. I never tried to reobtain a copy of it, for it was too closely connected with her, you see—and her death—it had become somewhat painful. Just a chapter—that was over, that’s all. But what happens the other day, in your shop? Where I’d been a couple of times before, but no more? And always on the same errand—looking amongst the second-hand trade magazines for old Christmas Annuals of the Hide and Leather Review. You know what happened as well as me.

I’m running my eyes along a row of books, after having riffled over your latest second-hand magazines, thinking to maybe just see something interesting-looking on hides or leather; and I come across that ident’cal work that we had in our house years ago! Ident’cal even to the same publisher, if not maybe the exact same edition. But the ident’cal work, Jark, which so often, as a kid, I’d viewed at my own then-eye-height of 4 feet, in my mother’s house. I might have gassed with you a little about it, before buying it—sure!—you being a bookman, and all—but my ticker showed me I was later than billy-be-damned for a business appointment that was more important than—than Hell and Hades, and Hades and Hell! So I plucked that book quickly out, had you slap some paper and string swiftly about it, paid you for it—and without question, don’t forget, as to price—and took it back to my office here, where my man, of that appointment I spoke of, was waiting for me even then outside the door. And—now wait!—this all may sound, Jark, like a lot of rumdum, having nothing to do with the subject, but it has a tremendyous bearing on why I won’t sell the book back to you for any price. Well, while I’m talking to my man, who drops in but my niece—who lives on Knightsbridge Terrace, in upper New York—and to whom I pass the wrapped book for safekeeping for me, since I’m in the process of moving where I live, and this place here is nothing but a tinderbox firetrap, and— But here’s the point, Jark, here’s the point: From the moment I owned and—and legally possessed that work, my luck changed. Instantly. Startlingly. And even though ’twas in my niece’s possession, for safekeeping for me. For before, Jark, she’d even gotten home with it under her arm, I got a call on the wire here, and consumyated a profitable business deal in hides that had been originally lost to me because the other man, the seller, had got angry and walked out of it; then, several days later, I sold 2000 hides at a larger profit than I would or should have had due to—uh—error in the figures; then, not long after that, I got news from my doctor that the results of a medical examination that I was awfully, frightfully fearful of—” and Hutchcock McDolphus shook his head, almost fear- somely. “—were negative—yes, all okay—nothing materially wrong, in short; then, subsequent to that, a man came in here from the far West and offered me a consignment of hides dirt cheap all because he—hrmph—thought I was some man named MacDollypus—to whom his brother had been morally indebted—whereas my name was McDolphus! Which consignment I grabbed, of course, while the grabbing was good; for in the hides business, Jark, you have to—but skip it—for there you are, see? Everything in the good luck line has broken for me from the moment I acquired a copy of that litiary work. And merely because of my legal possession of it—and not even my actual possession—since my niece is still taking care of it for me. And so I’d be abs’lutely nuts, don’t you think, to part comp’ny with that lucky piece of—of writing now? Well, I do—and by Godfrey I won’t part with it, ever. For so long, b’Godfrey, as—as I live. For I can vision infynite sim’lar pieces of good luck breaking all along the line of my life, as long as I own it. Wc-ell—all clear now?”

As Hutchcock McDolphus had talked, the bookdealer

had sat in what appeared to be helpless amazement at the facts. At least, he kept moving his head from side to side, as a man quite baffled by something. But now, with the facts completed, he spoke. Reflectively, studiedly.

“Your mother, of course, had the initial—er—occult experience with this—this literary work which you— But here’s what I’m getting at: what was the name of the work?”

“What—what was the name?” barked Hutchcock Mc- Dolphus. “Well, you—you ought to know. You wrapped it up for me; took my money for it—”

“I mean,” declared Jark somewhat cryptically, “the work your mother had, and—and apparently swore by?” “Why, damn it to Hell and Hades,” bit out the hides- dealer irately, “it was—well, that sure is a hell of a funny question, Jark! You must wrap things up, and take money for ’em, without even having looked at—well, it was a novel, of course. Entitled The Way. By an author named Oliver Out. And the publisher was—yes—somebody called Higsmith.”

“Well, I’ll be!” was all Ochiltree Jark said. “I’ll be!” “What do you mean?” rasped the hides-dealer angrily. “You’ll be? If I want to follow my mother’s beliefs about a fool novel written by a clergyman-missionary in Japan who—”

“Now—now wait,” pleaded Jark. “Wait, Mr. McDol- phus. The work you now have—in your niece’s safekeeping, that is—isn’t this work your mother had, and derived undeniable luck from, at all.”

Hutchcock McDolphus gazed at the other almost com

batively. “Isn’t? Well, by Godfrey it said on the back edge of the book THE WAY, and underneath it was the author’s last name, OUT. And below that the publisher, Higsmith. Moreover, ’twas bound in red, as was our copy; and the stamping of—of title and author was in Japanesy- like brush-stroke letters like— As I told you, the author, decadys ago, was a missionary in Japan, and—”

“Yes, I know,” nodded Jark. “I know of the author, now that you’re bringing his name up somewhat unexpectedly. But this book that you’ve got, Mr. McDolphus, is named The Way Out. A fact, believe me! Even though the words, ‘THE WAY’ cover one line, and the word ‘OUT’ a second line below it. As for the author of this book, his name is Highsmith, and it appears ’way down. Plainly, you took it to be the publisher, Higsmith, naturally enough. All this is God’s own truth, Mr. McDolphus. And as for the brushstroke-like letters, they—they don’t symbolize Japanese writing at all. For this book is a book of Chinese wisdom. Collated, and compiled, from all the ages of China. I give you my word on it.”

As Ochiltree Jark spoke, profound disgust was written on Hutchcock McDolphus’ face.

“Chinese wisdom?” he echoed. “We-ell, if you know that fact, you—you must know it. But, damn it, once I acquired the—the fool book, my luck started to—”

“Belief in luck, Mr. McDolphus, or sheer coincidence. Rather, let me put it, your mother’s turn of luck may have been coincidence, or maybe not,” the bookdealer hastened to say, “but your belief that you had good-luck by the—er—tail, gilded your affairs with 24-karat gold.”

“Hrmph,” grunted the hides-dealer dubiously. Then: “Maybe it did, at that. Just as people who believe in their doctor get well; and those who don’t—” He stopped. “Well, fooey on all my theories. And I thought I was owning a copy of—hell-fire and Hades’ smoke!—and so I’ve been owning a book named The Way Out, all the time, instead of a work The Way by Oliver Out? Well, I’ll be—I feel like an idiot.” He stopped. “However, on the other hand, maybe this book itself is luck—”

The phone in back of him rang.

“Excuse me a minute.”

He turned about. Took up his instrument.

“Hutchcock McDolphus, Dealer in Hides and—”

He was interrupted by a male voice on the other end. “Listen here, McDolphus, those beef hides you got from that ‘Westerner’ who thought you were named “MacDollypus’ and wanted to ‘pay back some moral debt that his brother’—well, they—”

“Don’t—don’t tell me they’ve got—”

The other man laughed harshly. “I can’t say they ‘stink,’ because all hidees stink. But they’re on the rotten fringe, all of ’em, when they catch the new three-way pull-test. The cattle they were off of plainly were infected with— I can’t pay you a cent more now than their worth as ground-up leather pulp for fertilizing broccoli and—” “I’ll—I’ll call later,” said Hutchcock McDolphus. Deposited the instrument. Turned about.

“Good luck—my behind!” he said bitterly and unpoet- ically. “The—the goddamned book—”

“—May now,” pointed out Jark, “brings you bad luck,

since you now discovered bad luck to be associated with it. But tell me now if I can buy it back?”

“Hell and Hades—yes!” snapped the hides-dealer. “For a song. You can even have it for noth—now wait— whadll you give me?”

“I’ll give you, Mr. McDolphus,” the bookdealer declared, “nothing less than a copy of the very book in which you do have such profound faith as to its being a— a luck fetich. Yes, a copy of The Way—by Oliver Out! For I know a dealer, specializing quite heavy on religious books, who has an entire set of Oliver Out. In the Hig- smith edition, even. Some dozen volumes, all in all. He’s been quite unable to dispose of it as a set, even to clergymen, for the author’s neither interesting, nor colorful, nor dram—but that’s not the point here, is it? The point is that this dealer is ready to break up the set, and toss it in the outside bin—or he’ll sell it to me for the cost of that The Way Out book, and I can put out in my bin all the copies other than the one that—that figures in your life. And—but that’s my offer. The book you thought you had for the one you have. Is—is it a deal?”

“A deal it is!” said the hides-dealer quickly. “It’s a deal. No backing out now! For—”

Again the phone in back of him rang.

“Just a minute, Jark,” he said impatiently. And again turned ’round, and took up the instrument.

“Hutchcock McDolphus, Dealer in Hi—” he began. But was interrupted by an amused trill, in pronouncedly feminine tones.

Then a girl’s voice.

“This is Carmine, Uncle Hutchcock,” said that voice. Hutchcock McDolphus’ demeanor changed completely, in discussion with this, his only and much-beloved niece. “Ah there, child? What can I do for you?”

“I have your book, Uncle, now that you’re safely ensconced in your new quarters—and we, at home, are going to to housecleaning! That book, you know, of Chinese wisdom, by Gordon Highsmith?”

“Hrmph,” was all Hutchcock McDolphus said.

“I—I just got it back,” the girl replied, a bit contritely, “from a young man to whom I had loaned it.” “Shouldn’t have done that, Carmine,” the hides-dealer criticized. But then, suddenly realizing the facts of the matter, added: “However, it doesn’t matter, at that. Except that now—but where are you, my dear?”

“Oh, I’m calling you from uptown, Uncle. The Renoir- Carlton, in fact, where I’ve come for a hair-do. I have the book with me, however; so I was wondering whether you’d be there, if I dropped in with it much, much later this afternoon. For unless you would—” She stopped.

“Just a minute, Carmine. And I’ll let you—you’re at the Renoir-Carlton, you say? Just a minute.”

Hutchcock McDolphus turned half around.

“It’s my niece, Carmine JelelTe, who has the book with her. She’s at the Renoir-Carlton. Would you want to go ’way up and get it, or have her bring it to your shop, or what?”

“Neither,” replied the bookdealer hurriedly. “Ask her, if you will, if she will be willing to deliver it upstairs to a Miss Muriel Ordway, the famous opera singer, who’s

—who’s waiting for it, to turn it over to a customer of mine who—oh, it’s a complicated sort of deal; so I won’t go into it. But ask your niece, if you will, if she would deliver it to this party. And take a receipt for it. And then—say—mail the receipt to me?”

“Okay. Hold ever’thing.” Hutchcock McDolphus turned slightly, returned the phone to his lips. “Carmine, would you deliver that book upstairs to a Miss Muriel Ordway—yes, Ordway—the warbler. She’s to receive it for and on behalf of another party—oh, it’s a complicated deal, Carmine, with a—my bookdealer. Anyway, will you take a receipt, and then—ah—mail the receipt to Ochiltree Jark—O—C—H— on the ‘Och’ part—at 222^2 West 22nd Street.”

“Am I dreaming, Uncle Hutchcock?”

“Dreaming? Why?”

“All my life I—I wanted to meet this wonderful woman personally—all my life I—and now you put my meeting her right in my lap. Indeed yes!—I’ll deliver the book and mail the receipt—” And the girl repeated the information given her. Even to the “J4.”

“That’s right,” Hutchcock McDolphus nodded. “All correct.” Paused, while she too paused. “Anything else, then? If not, I’ll hang—”

“We-ell, nothing else, Uncle, maybe, except that—” “Yes, that what?”

“That you might be interested to know that you can, within a few nights from now, sit in on a first run of what you love so much—a screeen comedy—and what you also love so much—a fight picture—at one and the

same time. For I saw in the paper a notice about them both, and—”

“What is the comedy? For maybe it’s one I already know about?”

“Oh, something called ‘Die, You Dog!’ or ‘Die, You Cur!’ Or something like that. But—”

“A C-picture, of course,” snorted McDolphus dis- gruntledly. “I never even crack a smile on these C- comedies. I—”

“On the contrary, Uncle, it’s an A-picture. A burlesque! A burlesque on Hollywood and the very making of C- pictures. With a finale that’s said to be more screamingly funny than that John Barrymore one where he burlesqued himself? Remember? When he wound up flying around in the air in tights? You thought that one to be a— Anyway, in this one there’s a new English comic named Broome Sherwood, a—”

“Oh yes—yes. Well, dear girl, this is a show, then, I’ve already made notes on. My various good friends seem to— ah—help me out. But thank you just the same. For—but wait. Just to check up on other information. Parradine Moderne, isn’t it? And the fight in question is the one between one Casey O’Kelly, and one Napoleoni, or The Kid? Or whatever he will call himself when he enters the ring?”

“That’s right, Uncle. I noted the latter carefully only because of your interest. Casey—O’Kelly—that’s the name. Well, this is all I can do, I guess—which is nothing. For your friends take better care of you, I fear, than I do.”

“Well, thanks a lot, my dear, just die same. I’ve it all down in my book. And keep your eye out, as before, for other pictures I’d like. Now—ah—anything else? If not, I’ll sign off. And come down when you can.”

They hung up, practically together.

And Hutchcock McDolphus turned back to the waiting bookdealer.

“All settled,” he said. “About the book, I mean. It’ll be delivered to your party within probably 60 seconds, or less. And from what I know of my niece’s proclivyties t’wards not letting undischarged duties lie around, that receipt’ll be in your hands on the morning mail delivery, tomorrow.”

The bookdealer’s face shown with supreme gratification. “We-ell,” he exclaimed, “but that certainly all worked out very beau—nicely, didn’t it? Smooth as a—a whistle.” He rose. Stood looking down, almost thankfully, at the hides-dealer. “Well—I’ll be going on, then. So’s I can start immediately getting you that copy of Oliver Out’s work.”

He saluted, in a half-jocular but quite airy-fairy manner, then turned and went across the room and out the door.

Chapter XXIV

RANSOM $ioo}ooo.

GILBERT PARRADINE, pacing the floor of the strange hideout where he had now been held for 3 days and 4 hours, wondered desperately what was the latest news in the matter of his ransom negotiations. The little radio in the corner of the limited space, vouchsafed him by Rocco, but tuned permanently down by the latter, was now silent. Not that it had been over the intervening days— no!—for on it Parradine had heard much about his successful kidnapping in Chicago! But now tonight—close onto 8 o’clock, according to the slender gold watch he had been permitted to retain—he dared not turn that radio on and listen to the news, for fear the dread tidings that the ransom money had passed—or even was about to pass—would fall on his ears. For that news, as he well knew, spelt his doom!

Now he stopped for a moment in his pacing to survey, by the bright generous 500-watt bulb in the ceiling of the hideout, the newspaper picture, full 3 columns wide, taken from some New York paper of the last 2 days which had dealt voluminously with the “Chicago” kidnapping, and which had been sardonically passed to him, for his delectation, by Rocco himself. And pinned by Parradine to one wall—to look at, now and again. Himself! Gilbert Parradine! A dignified, almost aristocratic-looking man of 44 faced him, with kindly brown eyes and a touch of grey around the ears, and with

a richly tailored vest, carrying a heavy gold watch chain peeping from between Bond-Street-made coat lapels. But tonight—what? And Parradine, passing one hand over the bristly stubble of beard on his face, feeling higher yet with the other his unkempt uncombed hair, his unwashed face with doubtlessly red-rimmed eyes from lack of decent sleep, and noting with his downward glance the dust and wrinkles in the unpressed grey suit that was not his own, the soft and now soiled shirt that was not his either, his tielessness to boot, wondered whether he even were Gilbert Parradine at all!

And now, resuming his pacing, he glanced troubledly downward, not far from his feet, to the radio on the floor, alongside the two thin blankets that served as a bed. Stood still. Shook his head. Turned again, and resumed his pacing.

A curious hideout this, where Parradine was being held. A square uncarpeted room, minus any furniture whatsoever, with fireproof cement floor, and with one entire wall, including the space for several feet in front of that wall, cut off from ceiling to floor by a grating of powerful, beam-braced heavy iron webbing, to prevent contact between anyone in the room and the dangerous bit of electrical paraphernalia in back of it. A place by no means unknown to Parradine, since he owned it, and all that was in it! For it was the room, no less, which constituted the very topmost one—indeed, so far as that went, the very topmost story—of that slender tower which reared itself 8 full stories above the roof of the small 7-story office building called Parradine Tower. Only one window did this strange room contain, and that a small and extremely high-up one, its sill almost beyond handgrasp, its unbreakable plate glass thickly painted over with jet black paint, and the whole heavily barred, from the inside, with stout iron webbing, to prevent its use, for all time to come, by any would-be suicide. Though had it not been rendered thus opaque by black paint, it would, as Parradine knew, have but given out to a sky against which not a single other skyscraper impinged. Or else looked dizzily down and along the i-block-long stucco cornice that marked the Broadway edge of the Parradine Apartments and shops.

A cheerless place, by any measure. In view of its utter lack of furniture and furnishings. In one corner, off and away from the iron-web partition, was the duo of thin dirty blankets on which Parradine slept. Nearby the top blanket’s outer edge, with flexible connecting wire trailing across the room to wall socket beyond the webbing, the tiny flat-topped metal radio, now silent. In back of the radio, up-ended against it, the crimson-bound book— the single bit of reading that had ever reached Parradine in response to his frantic pleas for such—and that but late this afternoon. And over in the corner of the room diagonally opposite to where the blankets were laid out— but again, safely beyond and behind the iron webbing— and just clearing the end of the electrical device occupying most of the space back of that protective partition, the one and only entrance to the room: the snugly-fitting, airtight and smoke-proof trapdoor, locking within its floor socket by a Yale key, by which Rocco, ascending an iron ladder from the electrical materials room below, came and went as he wished, without ever having to enter the penlike space which held Parradine. Without ever, indeed, even once unlocking the padlocked meshwork door lying in line with, and but a few feet off, from that trapdoor. Since that meshwork portal, clearing the cement floor by a full 2V2 inches, had given just enough space through which, twice a day, a certain three narrow flat pans could be shoved, and later withdrawn—one, a round tin one, containing food—one, an oblong tin one, containing water —one, a square white-enameled one, always shoved in empty—three pans, by which a human being, penned like a wild animal, could carry on his valuable function of living. Without ever once gaining even momentary opportunity to essay some desperate, futile thing, such as trying to overcome his captor the while the latter handed over food. Or, even more, performed those certain tasks that Rocco must do—in this room.

And which were, of course—Louis Rocco being electrician for Parradine Tower and Parradine Moderne Motion Picture Theatre at the other end of the block— to make certain and occasional adjustments of the Schiir- dein, lying back of that powerful ceiling-to-floor, wall-to- wall guard-web. Or, in more technical language, the Schiir- dein Automatic Light-Flashing Board, made in Berne, Switzerland, designed to close and open electric circuits in any combinations or sequences whatever—and which, being set here for the simplest of all—the “spell-out”— kept those lights on the marquee of the Parradine Moderne Theatre far down below, and down the street

as well, ever spelling out the film attractions for the night.

Now Parradine stood for a moment, about midway between the points corresponding to where the long switchboard-like structure within commenced and ended, his nose pressed in one of the interstices of the webbing, his lean hands clenching the ironwork mesh, as indeed, he had stood so often, for hours on end, watching the endless plays of those long copper contact tips lying a full 8 inches back inside—those literal pairs of copper fingers, the upper ones of which, tripped in succession by the automatic system of relays in back of the board, dropped heavily down—made contact, each with its corresponding and rigid finger below it—flashed forth the particular letter on the marquee sign to which it was wired—and lay passively where it was, so that the next letter could add itself. Till, all were spelled out, and the whole stood, for i full minute, for uptown New York to read. After which—when the automatic revolving timer closed the master-relay, and it in turn closed, simultaneously, a circuit through every one of the electro-magnets attached to each and all of those movable fingers—all of the latter were drawn instantly from their fixed companions, to the tune of a sizzling, dazzling greenish arc of flame between each pair of receding fingertips, to commence the whole operation all over again!

Perhaps it was the weird effect of those greenish arcs of flame, at this very second blazing forth over the entire board, that made it seem to Parradine, all of a sudden, that it had been but yesterday when, in Switzerland, while recovering from that desperate illness which had almost

cost him his life, he had gratefully permitted this complicated yet amazing device to be constructed for him by the young Swiss inventor, August Schiirdein, who had given him quarts and quarts of vital blood for transfusion, during that rare blood infection of Parradine’s in which both men had been victims of the same disease. Schiirdein had thus gotten his big chance to have his bulky but efficient device actually installed in at least one New York City theatre, then in the very process of construction.

But here Parradine jerked himself, by a powerful mental effort, back from out the past—the past of several years now hopelessly gone—and into the present again. A present marked by copper fingers—ever moving— greenish arcs—clicking relays—

And now, heartsick at the even fuller realization of this “Now” in which he must shortly die, attained by that brief contemplating of a “Then” which had been happy and free from danger, Parradine, still watching the ever-dropping upper copper fingers, found himself wishing that just one single one would, by some supreme miracle, stick—fail to come down—fail to make its contact; and its failure to flash its specific letter be noted by the ever-observant Rocco, strolling continuously in and out of the theatre, sending him hurtling up here to adjust the device—in which case, he, Parradine, might beg the Sicilian to make his own death as easy as possible.

Or, instead, that by an equally supreme miracle, the current supply from board to marquee would be interrupted—making the latter go dark, and continue so—

which would again bring Rocco up. Or even that, by the sheerest supreme miracle of all supreme miracles, that single master-relay, in back of the board, whose single operation closed the circuits through all of the electro-magnets, and brought everything back to beginning again, would fail to come together. In which case—what? The sign would remain permanently lighted up—would fail to re-spell its message—would again bring Rocco up. But no! So well encased, in powerful metal conduit, were those wires that ran down inside the tower wall, and across those roofs, beneath the block-long cornice, to the theatre, that current failure there could be none; and so mechanically and electrically perfect was that device which had been created by the young Swiss electrical engineer, that the thing never missed. Tick—tick—tick, the hidden relay- system of trips in back of the board operated ceaselessly. To the tune of a low purr made by the revolution of the encased motor that operated the timing device. Click— click—click—the copper fingers in front of the board made contact inexorably with those below. Never missing by the thousandth of a second!

With a sigh, Parradine left the iron-web-guarded sign- flasher, and resumed his pacing. He paused long enough, as this time he rounded his spread-out blankets, to pick up the crimson-bound book which stood up-ended against the radio. And gazed at it as a man from Mars would gaze at an egg on Venus.

The Way Out. A compilation of Chinese wisdom!

Which work, as now Parradine realized dully, had successfully, after all, passed from the hides-dealer on

South Street to the Lower New York bookdealer; from the bookdealer, in turn, to Muriel Ordway; and from Muriel—exactly in line with Parradine’s own instructions to her—to Rocco, before she had flown to London. And Rocco, ever frantically asked by Parradine for something —anything—to read, had finally brought it up from those garish quarters 2 full floors below, and with a grunted oath kicked it under the mesh work door; the very book, no less, that Parradine himself now owned. Owned at a cost of $250.

$250!

How unimportant was $250—now.

As unimportant, indeed, as was the book itself. At least now. For what was the book, after all? Just aphorisms and sayings of Ancient China—for Parradine had riffled fiercely through it once, after receiving it—aphorisms and sayings of Ancient China collated together into curious alleged ‘systems’ to be applied to modern-day problems. Ridiculous concept! Despite even the fanatical belief in such wisdom by John Hoi, the half-Chinaman who had talked to him, Parradine, eons, eras, milleniums back, so it seemed. Ridiculous concept—ancient wisdom applied to modern times! Right now Parradine realized the complete irony of the book. If only in its mocking title, The Way Out. Realized it far, far more so indeed than he had done that first night he had spent here in darkness when the ceiling bulb, operated from the other side of the iron-web partition, had been cruelly turned out on him.

Without even bothering to stoop over, he tossed the

book down upon the blankets, where, falling on one corner, near the radio, it opened halfway out and came to rest, grotesquely astraddle its two half-opened out sections. The curious though now struck him that he was going to have to die without ever having seen, on the screen, the very film star that he himself was showing first in New York: Broome Sherwood, British comedian, who, no doubt, right now was packing the customers in far down below in that super-burlesque which—if the Motion Picture Exhibitors’ Review was correct—was the “screaming burlesque” to end all “screaming burlesques” of Hollywood: “Die, You Whelp.” Curiously, it even struck Gilbert Parradine at this strange moment that the entire show his theatre would be giving tonight was a show that he himself would have liked to have seen. For the exclusive fight films for which he’d paid $2000 cash in advance—that undoubtedly bloody fight between the Irish Terror, Casey O’Kelly, and the unknown Italian who in previous fights had called himself by such various flamboyant title as “The Little Corp,” “The Kid,” “Napoleoni the Great,” and what-not else—was due tonight for its first public showing.

And now Parradine, for the dozenth time that evening, took from his watch pocket the slender gold watch he had been allowed to retain. Pressed its winder, and its cover flew up. Showing not only the time: 8:23—but, inside that cover, the face of a beautiful blonde woman of 32, with silver eardrops and a Russian hat on her head. The miniature, no less—of that great picture that stood on Parradine’s desk, floors below! And he groaned. Muriel!

Whose own name was to have graced that marquee soon, on her last public appearance before she became Mrs. Gilbert Parradine. And now? He wondered dully what she was doing tonight, in far-off London. Did such mere American events as the kidnapping of a New York theatre owner get over there, as news? And if it had, was she crushed because of it? Or was she resting in supreme, confident belief of his being safely ransomed? Or was she—

Desperately he strode over to the wall which held that black-painted, iron-web-protected, high-up window. Standing on tiptoes, he reached up and seized the iron webbing with his fingers; and by powerfully muscled arms that had been kept so by rigorous attendance at his athletic club—and by planting his feet against the wall— climbed, muscled himself up, a handgrip at a time above the level of the other hand, till, like a monkey, he was clinging to the entire grating, kneees on the bare edge of the sill, trying to catch one last peep through the cracks in that paint at dear, wonderful New York. Moving his eye wildly about, he found a scratched or fallen away area, perhaps an inch in width, considerably below the level of his face, however, but through which something twinkled brightly, brilliantly. Moving his head a bit to one side, he peered squintingly through it. And knew that he was now looking downward—dizzily downward —and downward of the street, a full block, as well—at no less than the foyer entrance of his own theatre, at the other end of the block. The marquee facing him was literally shrunken to a mere brilliant oblong, in spite of

the fact that it was the largest marquee in New York City—in all the East, in fact—with its full 32 feet of width. And now Parradine peered squintingly at it. The letters on it facing him seemed almost microscopic at the distance—so foreshortened that he had to squint harder yet to separate them—but perhaps because he possessed that amazing vision for line detail that had baffled more than one New York oculist, he was able to read that sign. The entire sign had just finished spelling itself out— was standing for its i-minute-long announcement. And it read:

“DIE YOU WHELP!”

Comedy Scream

with

BROOME SHERWOOD

Showing at

7:11, 9:25, and 11:04

Special fight films tonight

“KID” NAPOLEON vs. CASEY O’KELLY

The effort of clinging there like a monkey, however, was too great, if not for Parradine’s muscles, then for his fingers! And he came down again. But having glimpsed, while up there, a slightly sprung-out section of the fireproof metal window casing—at the very top thereof, and hence invisible below—an idea had come to Parradine. Not an idea to save himself, but an idea by which those who tore down Parradine Tower, a hundred years or more from today, might know the strange tragedy that had occurred here this night in the 20th century!

Chapter XXV

THE PERFECT “SNATCH’

FOR that sprung-out section of metal windowcasing was wide enough, in extent, to slip in a paper. A narrow paper anyway. Or, say, a folded paper—like one of the blank end-sheets of that book over by the radio. Once poked down inside, it would remain in the hollow metal windowcasing for all time to come. Safe against fire— against anything. Slipshod work, of course, that windowcasing installation. But slipshod, no doubt, because it had been installed in the very last room to be completed in Parradine Block. And once inside the casing, the paper would remain there. And some day—some day in the 21st century—when tall buildings like this were drugs on the market, archaic structures which would not even rent—when airplane travel had leveled skyscrapers, and scattered offices and habitations all over the State—workmen would be tearing down this tower—ripping out that windowcasing—withdrawing that sheet which would tell exactly how Gilbert Parradine had been abducted and killed in the 20th Century.

Within a trice, Parradine was over squatting cross- legged atop his blankets. Even more, ripping out a blank end-sheet from that book. And within but a few seconds more was hastily writing on that sheet, laid atop the flat top of the small radio, with the stub of a pencil that he had been permitted to retain. And, 8 minutes after that, was reading what, in almost microscopically small letters, thanks to the fortunately sharp point of the pencil, he had written. And which, covering both sides of the end-sheet, and fully so, ran:

To Whom It May Concern, in

that 21st Century, when

This Shall be Found!

I sit tonight, in a room atop a tower of my own building, doomed to die.

For I have been “snatched,” as the term today is. And so cleverly that nobody in New York dreams that I am here.

The man who evolved and conducted the “snatch” is one Louis Rocco, an electrician whom I befriended—to whom I even gave full and exclusive control of my theatre-foyer and marquee lighting—who has, as his bulbs- and special electrical-materials room, the room in this tower just underneath this one where I sit a prisoner —and, in turn, his own quarters in the room beneath that one. Thus I sit, a prisoner of Rocco and his henchmen, in virtually his own quarters.

For no elevator runs to this story—this room, considering that in the tower there is but one room to a story. Indeed, the one tower-ascending elevator runs only as far as the 12th story, where my own office is. From there, access to Rocco’s quarters, on the floor above, is by the building-stairway only, but which stairway terminates there; access to the room above Rocco’s quarters is by a flight of metal stairs inside of Rocco’s quarters; and, finally, access to this room, the so-called control-room for the theatre marquee, is only an iron ladder and close- fitting fireproof iron trapdoor.

Thus I am cut off from the world by many doors and floors—and all in Rocco’s own domain!

The men who helped Rocco in the “snatch,” at least here at the New York end, are a pockmark-nosed German called Heinz, and a one-eyed Italian called Blinky. Two men operating in Chicago are evidently known, according to things I heard dropped, as Silk and Chopper.

The fifth man, operating in both cities, so to speak, is, God help me, no less than my double. And about whom I shall speak more, later in this letter.

I was held, bound and tied to a considerable extent, over the afternoon of the “snatch,” and all the evening thereafter, in the special materials room above Rocco’s quarters, probably to have me handy pending Rocco’s hearing how things were proceeding in Chicago. And only after midnight, and the tower elevator had stopped running, making it possible for Rocco’s men later to get out of the building unseen, was I hoisted by all three, my body bound tightly with ropes, up the last step of the way—the iron ladder—to this control room. And now unbound, shoved into an area off of it cut entirely off from the control board by powerful iron webbing so that no materials that might ever be stored in the unused space can ever come in contact with the board itself. And perhaps catch fire from the arcs resulting from the breaking of the different circuits.

There was to be a delivery of bulbs to the room below

me next morning. Whether I could have gotten an alarm through the thick floor, and tight-fitting trap-door, I do not know. Probably not. But Rocco took care of that! For he gave me, before dawn, a can of salt fish to eat. And then, just before dawn, crazy with thirst, I was given a pan of water which, as I gulped it, I noticed tasted slightly bitter. I thought it was the tin. Instead, it was drugged. For I went out like a light. And came to only in the late afternoon. When the materials delivery below was over and done with. So much for that.

And now, for purposes of my record, to write of the fifth man in the “snatch,” because of whom the “snatch” has been a success. A complete success—according to certain radio accounts I have listened to up here. He is one Albert Magwire, of Webb Crossing, New York. A corn- doctor and, it seems, amateur magician. Unmarried. He is my perfect and absolute double—possessing, consequently, identical vocal cords and head cavities, and with practically my own voice. He happened, a half year ago, to see my picture, by chance, in a theatrical magazine: and so while in New York dropped up, out of curiosity, to see me, his double. Because of my having to work late that night, he had come up after midnight—just before taking a train out—and it was Rocco himself who operated an elevator for him, brought him up. Rocco evidently saw an amazing possibility in the existence of this man— had him followed—later contacted him—found he plainly had the potentialities of those of the world of crookdom, and needed money—and so the plot, or scheme, was evolved. And so, on that terrible day of yesterday, when

I was about to leave for Chicago, Rocco asked me secretly to come upstairs to his quarters before leaving, to view a lighting exhibit. I did so around 3 in the afternoon. And was grabbed.

I was forced, under partial torture and threats of more, to sign a Palmer House hotel-registration card which they had obtained somehow; to write out a demand on the Acting Trustees of my Estate to pay $100,000 ransom for me; and to also write out a slip of manila paper reading simply “The two men with me are kidnapping me— summon police quick.”

Everything went off perfectly. For, according to the facts in the case—facts of which I know the truth, but no one else does—my double went to Chicago, leaving the broadest of trails behind him. The elevator man here took him down, from my floor; the cabman he flagged on the street to take him to the airport happened to know me, and recognized him as me; by more luck for Rocco’s gang—or was it luck?—I was even “recognized,” aboard the airliner, by the pilot and the hostess with whom I had travelled before. I was of course “recognized” at the Palmer House, by many of the employes who knew me from previous stays. Most ingenious part of the Snatch appears to be the way in which my double checked “me” and not himself into the Palmer House! (And I picked up enough from the gangsters’ conversation to know that this was the way it was to be done—plainly later was done.) For it seems that my double, about to sign the hotel registry card, or perhaps having just signed it, and waving it in the air to dry it, presumably “recognized” a friend across the lobby, stepped over to the latter, found it was a “mistake,” and came back with—through simple prestidigitation—the substituted card with my real signature. Thus I conclusively checked in. And it was thus that next evening, when I presumably came down the elevator with two men with me, hands in their pockets—and “I” slipped the surprised elevator boy a folded dollar bill for “all his trouble”—and a handwritten manilla slip was found in it two hours later announcing I was being kidnapped—well, it was plain I had been grabbed, practically before the noses of the police, in Chicago, home of gangsterism and gangdom.

Thus the hunt, going on all the time, centers for me in Chicago and its environs. A city in which I am “known” —absolutely and unequivocally—to have disappeared.

The Perfect Snatch.

The gang has asked $100,000 in cash money. And forwarded my pay-order to pay it. The Acting Trustees of my Estate who have more or less free handling of my monies and interests even without written orders—but most particularly so with—are even now, according to one news bulletin on the radio, trying to effect the “pay-off contact” there in Chicago. The validity of the pay-off being verifiable in some way by the manner in which my pay-order was torn. A case of matching edges, or something. But they do not know, of course, that when they have paid the money—I will die. Because I know who did the job. And did it right here in New York. And I can do quite nothing about it.

I want this communication to be found in the 21st century and to be a record, at least, of the foul and rotten things that were done in the 20th.

Gilbert Parradine.

Now, Parradine rose from his blankets with set teeth. Went over below that window again. Folded, almost- microscopically-written end-sheet letter in teeth, he seized the webbing above his head. Went up again, like a monkey. And, once up, poked it down into that windowcasing aperture. Well in, till it vanished. Wondering dully just what the workman who some day would see it flutter forth, when that casing was ripped off, would think—on a date when everyone living in this century was dust and ashes.

Since he was up there again, he took another glance, through the tiny gap in the black paint on the window- pane, downward and down-block. People galore were filing into the show, along the plaza-like sidewalk. Either the fact that its owner had been snatched in Chicago—or else the fact that this British comedian was funny, indeed —was bringing business to the Parradine Moderne tonight. And Parradine wondered which of the two reasons it could be. He even wondered—but what did it matter, at that ?

And because of the effort of clinging up there, like a fly, he came down again.

Walked restlessly over to his blankets—his radio. Leaned down. Turned it on gently. That being, alas, the only way it could be turned on! He even essayed to turn it exactly on to what would be the latest news broadcast.

And was just in time to catch, in fact, the words:

“—but the controllers of Mr. Parradine’s interests, fully authorized in writing by the theatre-owner to pay the ransom, have refused the Chicago police and G-men all details of how the ransom money is to be passed—where or by whom—claiming diat their employer’s life is worth more than the doubtful efficacy of the bungling attempts of the police to capture these gangsters; but the controllers of the Parradine interests do, at least, vouchsafe the information that the ransom money is to be passed within 1 hour and 50 minutes from now, and in Chicago, in full compliance with the absolutely police-proof method which the thieves have worked out to obtain it. The controllers expect the return of Parradine within but a couple of hours or so afterward, for—”

With a sharp snap Parradine turned off the radio. His face was very white. And automatically, he picked up his book of ancient Chinese wisdom to read as he paced—to keep from going stark crazy. For he was now, he knew, a dead man sure!

CHAPTER XXVI

DETECTIVE HAGERUP TURNS IN HIS TRACKS

PLAINCLOTIIESMAN Harfy Hagerup, who had been in and out of the Uptown Broadway Police Station tonight a half dozen times on the Me Wilfred Murder Case, which had broken today in 190th Street, was now coming out again for the umpteenth time!

He went down the stone steps in deep reflection, and turned up street.

But hardly had he proceeded 30 feet than he nodeed that people around him were staring curiously, fixedly up ahead. So he too, being a detective—even if a stocky little one in a tweed suit, with a pracdcal, round red face— and interested at least in staring people, did the same.

And, doing the same, his lower jaw fell.

For about 1 full minute did weird chaotic thoughts course deviously through the gargantuan intricacies of Detective Harfy Hagerup’s brain; then he dashed back to the station steps, up the steps, and into the booking- room presided over by his Chief, Sergeant Wylon Mallory.

The latter, sitting patiently back of the wicket, his corpulent form shrouded tightly in blue, and bedizened with shiny brass buttons, and with great braided cap on head, looked at Detective Hagerup bewilderedly.

“Hi, Chief,” the latter said, passing a hand helplessly over one cheek. “Come outside, willya—to the sidewalk— with me?”

“What do you want me out there for?” asked Mallory

quizzically. “To help you arrest somebody who spit on the sidewalk?”

“Hell no, Chief. No!”

“Come, come, Harfy,” said Mallory, “tell Uncle Mallory what’s on your mind?”

“Damn it, Chief, I—I can’t even tell you—you’ll have to come outside.”

“Okay! My bump of curiosity has never been sawed off yet.” And Mallory bestirred his great blue-clad frame out of his chair back of the wicket, and followed the puzzled and excited Hagerup out of the station, down the stone steps, and onto the sidewalk. Two men, coming along the sidewalk at the time, stopped dead in their tracks, looking ahead—then at each other.

But at this Mallory did not pay so much attention as he did to what Harfy Hagerup was pointing at, a full block upstreet, where the brightly lighted marquee of the Par- radine Moderne Theatre crossed the unsually broad sidewalk. And on which, at that very second, was just being added, to some letters which already had become lighted up, a final letter—at least judging from the fact that no more proceeded to light up; in short, the whole was now standing unchanged for its usual i-minute-long fixed announcement. But which announcement—facing Mallory and Hagerup—and the two men who were transfixed, and heaven knows who else?—held the somewhat curious wording:

ROOM

1 5 1

KID NAP CASE

“What—what the hell do you make of it, Chief?” Hagerup was demanding. “Is it a joke? Or is it—”

“Get back inside there,” ordered Mallory gravely. “And bring out Tutweiler, Meekins, McGurk and Consequeency. Crazy as it sounds, Hagerup, I think we’ve touched the Parradine Case!”

CHAPTER XXVII

MR. PARRADINE’S ORDERS!

IT TOOK less than 3 minutes for the 5 men, quickly assembled, and led by Mallory, to reach the office of Par- radine Block, midway between the theatre and Parradine Tower. It was open tonight, though only a boy with red hair worked away stamping letters, presumably rent notices. An open rear door gave into a further room, fitted up like an office, in which could be seen a huge grey-painted safe.

The boy looked up, mouth open, as the assemblage filed in.

“Where will we find the man,” demanded Mallory, “who is manager of Parradine Block?”

“You—you want Mr. Blacksell,” said the boy. “He’s— he’s in there.” He pointed at the rearward office.

But here an elderly man, with long nose and gold pince-nez on the end of it, came through the door, a large cloth-bound ledger in his hand.

“Are you the manager of Parradine Block?” Mallory demanded.

“Why, yes. What’s wrong?”

“Where is Room One-five-one of this entire outfit?”

“Room One-five-one? Well, of course you mean Apartment 15-1.”

“Okay. How do we reach it?”

“Why, you go around to 189th Street, to the entrance marked No. 15—and Apartment No. 1 would be the

apartment first on the left— But wait—say—is your name Mallory?”

“Yes, yes, why?”

“Why, that apartment was moved into today by a man who said his brother was a police sergeant around here: James L. Mallory.”

Mallory’s face fell. “Jim! So—so that’s where he moved to? Well, that’s out, unless—but see here—I didn’t ask you about apartments—I asked about rooms— Room 151— where is it?”

“Oh, room? Well, it’s only the suites and so forth in the tower that have actual room numbers. But—151? Well, there are no rooms at all on the tower’s first floor, let alone a 51st room!”

“No Room 151 ? How about, then, a Room 1 on—well, haven’t you even a 15th floor?”

“We-ell, yes—there’s a 15th floor—though no 16th. For the 15th is the very top of the tower. And—but of course —there being one room to it, that room would be, wouldn’t it, technically—Room 151? But you must be following up some error, Sergeant—whatever you are following up—for that’s not a regulation room at all. It’s only a—”

“Come on!” Mallory was already saying impatiently to his men. And out they were going.

They were up-street within 10 more seconds.

And passing into the tessellated lobby of Parradine Tower.

It was devoid of people tonight, and only one elevator of the 3 was in operation. Its operator lounged on his

246

high stool.

Into it the party shoved.

“We want to go to Room 151—or rather, the 15th floor, since there’s only one room on it.”

The elevator man was making no attempt either to close the door of the cage, or to press a button on his automatic stop rack.

“No can do, Chief,” was his only explanation.

“No can do?” grunted Mallory. “Stop your damned nonsense, and yank us up there fast, or—”

But the other was pointing to his automatic stop board. “I tell you, Chief, I can’t take you there, because this machine doesn’t go any further than the 12th. See?”

“No further than the—what the hell is this 15th story room, anyway?”

“It’s the control room, Chief, for the marquee sign. And is under the sole management of our chief electrician, Mr. Rocco. Only he is permitted to have the key, and only he, so far’s that goes, has ever got the key! Besides, you can’t get to that particular room without going through the special electrical materials room under it—and through Mr. Rocco’s quarters, in turn, below that. To each of which rooms also he’s got the key. So how you can ever get up there to the topmost one without Mr. Rocc— But what—what didja want to go up to the control room for, if I may ask?”

But at this juncture, from somewhere around the bank of elevators—perhaps because of having just descended the stairway on foot from the 2nd floor—came a man in one of whose hands was a wire-cutters, and in the other an electrical coil of some sort. He was dark of skin, black

of hair, with cold black eyes and a scar on his cheek. He was at the open elevator door.

“Pardon me, folks—ah, Sergeant Mallory, if I’m not mistaken! Watch your step, Sarge! That poker game going on in Room 506 is headed by Bennie Kondrolle, brother of the ward committeem—”

“Bennie Kondrolle?” grunted the sergeant. “I’m not here pulling Bennie Kondrolle.”

Mr. Rocco’s hands had dropped. “Not raiding—”

“No. We’d been talking about the control room.”

“Oh—the control ro—but what’s wrong? Anything wrong in the theatre?”

“Some of your marquee lights are out,” returned Mallory, gaxing at the other suspiciously.

“You don’t say? Well, thanks for telling me. I’ll fix that in short order.”

Mallory turned to the two rearmost of his men.

“ITarfy—both of you boys—you ride up to 506, anyway, and warn Bennie that the D.A. is putting heat on tonight. Come back to the station after you do.”

“All—all right, Chief,” said Harfy Hagerup, a bit puzzledly.

Mallory and the two others stepped out.

Rocco, who had stowed away his wire-cutters and coil in a side coat pocket, stepped in.

“On second thought,” said Mallory, now completely on the outside, with his two men, “we’ll go on up with you, Mr. Rocco, and watch you. I’d like for the 3 boys here at my elbow to see how that light flash stuff is done.”

The man with the dark skin, now in the elevator, seemed startled.

“I’m—I’m sorry, Sarge,” he said coldly, “but that’s against the rules. Mr. Parradine’s very special orders himself. Nobody but the chief electrician allowed in that room.”

“Yeah? Well, Mr. Parradine isn’t in a position to give orders these days, so I’m giving ’em. In fact, you’re not going up there at all this trip. And we are? So are you going to hand over the 3 keys we’ll need, or must we—”

“A’right!” The snarl had come from Rocco. “You asked f’r it.” His hand had come out from a hip pocket. A black automatic in it. But that, of course, was quite as far as it got. For the two men who had been neatly left in that elevator did the precise job which it appeared they had been left there to do—if necessary! They grabbed Rocco each side so tightly that he was literally held in a human vise; indeed, Hagerup was twisting the hand that held the revolver. It clattered to the floor. Hagerup kicked it expeditiously out of the cage. Mallory picked it up.

“You—you bastards’ll get broke on this,” Rocco was screaming. “I know big Jim Cuccini. He’ll have your stars as sure as—”

“Shut up!” snapped Mallory. He was contemplating, in fact, a bunch of 3 Yale keys which Hagerup had ruthlessly fished out of Rocco’s trousers pocket.

“That must be them,” Mallory grumbled. And turned to the operator. “Take us—us who are out here—to the 12th floor, anyway. And you, Harfy—and you, Tute—stay in the lobby here—and hold this odd actor tight till we get back. After which— All right—” this as Rocco was dragged out of the car, and Mallory and the two men with him tumbled in to fill it—“let’s go!”

Chapter XXVIII

POST-MORTEM

A COMPACT little assemblage of individuals sat in the green-carpeted private office of Sergeant Mallory.

Mallory sat at his polished mahogany flat-top desk, with his swivel chair turned about to face two persons who sat atop a hastily drawn-over leather-upholstered settee— Gilbert Parradine, smiling wanly in spite of his shaveless- ness and soiled wrinkled clothes, and a beautiful blonde woman of 32 or so, clad in Parisian-like black velvet street gown and black velvet toque—a blonde woman with delicately cut face, from the ears of which swung quaint Russian-like silver earrings, and who fearfully held one of Parradine’s hands in her ringed fingers.

Against the side wall, facing the one window looking out on Upper Broadway, sat Hagerup, stupefiedly fingering a check for $5000, the ink on which was scarcely dry, particularly that in its signature which read “Gilbert Parradine.” A like check, except that it was for $1000 only, lay on Mallory’s desk slide, and there was little doubt that, of a certain four men outside that room who at that moment were examining still like checks, also for $1000 each, sent out by a secretary, all, without exception, must have had on their faces the identical stupefied look that was on Hagerup’s.

Mallory was embarrassedly ignoring his check; was, indeed, reading from a wire that had just been brought in by the very secretary who had taken out those checks.

“Yes, Mr. Parradine,” the police sergeant was saying, “this case is closed now, all right, all right! For this wire from Chicago says they have stopped the ransom payment just in time, as it appears. And with those two men who were lounging in Rocco’s quarters when we walked in, with drawn guns, squawking the way they are, even to the names of those Chicago rats and with your info on your double—the whole gang may be said to have been rounded up.”

Muriel Ordway was speaking now.

“I’m—I’m so happy, Gilbert! Not just alone because Mr. Hagerup over there acted as he did—and immediately!— when he glimpsed that marquee tonight. But because I passed the book on to Rocco successfully before the news of your kidnapping broke.”

“How was that?” Parradine asked, a bit bewilderedly. “And how comes it, darling, that you’re not in London?”

“It is just,” she explained, “that I received the book that afternoon, as you forecast I might, but from the hands of a young lady who called on me in person—a young lady living uptown—a relative of some man who had had it— and because of my being about to leave that night, I got it to Rocco at once. Exactly as per your instructions, you know? But just as I was about to board the Clipper that night around midnight, the newsboys started to call out about your kidnapping in Chicago. So-o I immediately canceled the trip—and, by cable, my London appearance.”

“And if,” nodded Parradine, “my kidnapping had broken before you passed the book—”

“I would,” she said slowly, “have held on to it forever

as perhaps the last memento of you I would ever have.”

A momentary silence followed. And then the sergeant spoke.

“Well, Mr. Parradine, I think I’d better let you go home now. For you do look a bit tuckered out, to say the least! And—just as you’ve asked me to do—I’ll do all the talking to the reporters for you. For it’s only a question of about 30 minutes, now, at the most, before they’ll all be up here in droves. For silently as we worked tonight, the story must have leaked out by now. If for no other reason than that those fellows you gave a thousand dollars apiece to out there tonight, are even now calling up their relatives—and some of their relatives, in turn, calling the newspapers—after which, the deluge! Not poor Hagerup over there—no!—he won’t call anybody up—he won’t come out of his daze, I think, for a month. Not even to attend a wrestling match—wrestling happening to be his bug! But before I do let you and Miss Ordway out of here—and, for safety’s sake, the back way—I want to say that that was an amazing idea you had tonight— amazing! To tear pages out of that lone, single book you had—fold them into long i-inch-wide strips—and poke them through the iron-webbed grating till their ends lay between where certain copper fingertips came together, after which—” But here Mallory scratched his head.

“Something puzzles you, eh?” queried Parradine amusedly. “Meaning, perhaps, how I knew which pair was for which letter? Oh, Rocco always used to fix up a guide for himself, in case of circuit trouble, by pencilling the letter lightly on the panel above the moving finger that was to flash it. By pencilling up, in fact, at least 3 announcements, in advance. What I mean is, he would slither through, at an hour when the board was dead and cut off from all power, between grating and contacts— oh yes, there was quite a clearance—all of 10 inches—so that a man could pass in, and clean or sandpaper any of the contact points that might have gotten too oxidized— 10 full inches at least—don’t forget that I had to hold my paper strips in the tips of my long index and third fingers here, and insert strip and fingers all the way in and through an interstice, in order to lay the opposite end of that strip between moving finger and fixed finger; and Rocco, being a thin man, from chest front to backbone, that 10-inch space was more than ample to do anyth— “Anyway,” Parradine broke off, “he would slither through, as I say, at an hour when the board was dead and cut off from all power, between grating and contacts, and transfer the letters of at least 3 announcements, from a pencilled layout given him by the theatre manager, onto the panel. When he’d get done, all the top letters would correspond to one full program announcement—the middle ones to another—the bottom ones to a third. He had done all this for the present Broome Sherwood program before I was ever even locked in there. There were 3 sets of letters there tonight, to be sure; but after I’d gotten that look at the marquee, and realized that it was the Sherwood program running, I could see that the middle letters of each trio were the ones for me to follow. Indeed, to check to a 100-percent certainty that nothing was out of step, I climbed once more up on the window ledge and checked the flash of a single letter downstairs with the movement of one single switch contact. Came down, and examined it. Found it ‘okay.’ And then—”

Parradine paused.

“And so,” he finished, “there should be no puzzlement left now; for even you, Sergeant Mallory, I daresay, know enough about simple circuits to know that two copper fingertips, clenching a strip of paper tightly between them, can’t make a circuit. Since—

“But oh,” he broke off, “I think I get you now—you mean, maybe, why the imprisoned paper-ends didn’t get released, and the folded strips flutter to the floor, when the movable copper fingers would all fly up again, at the end of each announcement? We-ell, those movable copper fingers never flew up again! You see, Sergeant, I happened to know a few elemental things about how my board worked. Including the quite simple fact that each of the individual circuits which operated the electromagnets which drew those movable fingers all up—when, you understand, the automatic relay closed all those circuits simultaneously—included the very copper fingers themselves whose tips supposedly were then lying in contact. Except that those tips weren’t! Don’t query me why. The inventor, one August Schiirdein, would best know why. My guess, however, is that he wanted any pair of fingertips which were failing to make contact because, say, an unlucky fly had gotten crushed between, to make a permanently unlighted letter on the marquee so that the outside theatre employees could note it and the electrician could fix it pronto.”

“Well,” said Mallory, scratching his head again, “that really wasn’t what I had in mind, when I said it was an amazing idea you had. What I meant was the idea you had that by cutting out some of the letters from that whole advertising set-up, you could still have a set-up of letters that—that would make a message—a message which would be spelled out and which would stand complete, too, but which would lead to your rescue. That’s the amazing id— But what—whatever gave you that idea— when you had been up there in that control room for so many days—hadn’t even tried it?”

“Well,” returned Parradine gravely, “when I got the news on that little radio tonight that the ransom money was to be passed in one hour and 50 minutes, I—well, I opened up that Chinese wisdom book for the last time, to read—to keep from going stark crazy—and almost the 4th aphorism that hit my eye—on that particular page— one which is credited as being one of the possibly apocryphal sayings of Mencius—meaning that if it was not written by Mencius, around 300 B.C., or so, then it was written by his chief disciple Hwang Lo—however, that aphorism, from ’way back when science was in its infancy, sprang out at me—completely illuminated my problem—showed me the way!”

“Just what I’ve been trying to convey,” retorted Parradine. “And as you yourself have stated it. It said that there were all sorts and kinds of possible messages, advertising or otherwise, which could be sent forth from a motion picture theatre marquee if one could but kill off, here and there, a few of the contact points on the Schur- dein dashboard which operated it.”

“Now, now, Mr. Parradine,” grunted Mallory, “don’t try to kid a poor police official. For the Ancient Chinese knew nothing about contact points on a—a Schiirdein motion picture theatre marquee dashboard—nor about letters in advertising messages—nor even letters, so far as that goes, since they used hier’glyphics—nor advertising, for they didn’t advertise. So what could that aphorism have said?”

“Well,” explained Gilbert Parradine, “it said what I stated it said, only in a graver and more beautiful way. It said—” But from his hip pocket Parradine drew the perspiration-damp folded page on which that precious aphorism had lain—that aphorism with its wisdom out of the day of 300 B.C., whether Mencius had writen it, or Hwang Lo had done so. And, while all in the little room listened, including Hagerup with mouth open, Parradine, slowly, read it aloud:

“'What if the stars do ever and ever fall from the sJ{y? New and more interesting constellations will but therefore evolve!' ”

The thoughtful silence that followed, on the part of all in the room, was broken by no less than Detective Harfy Hagerup, who had come back to life—a practical detective again!

“But see here, Mr. Parradine,” he asked pointedly. “With all respeck to this Chinky wisdom, it seems to me —darned if it don’t—that you played in a—a lot of luck tonight. For one thing, whoever wrote that piece you just spieled—whether ’twas Mencius or Hwang Lo—didn’t know what comets were—though they were stars!—but let that pass. The real piece of luck seems to me—well, as man to man, Mr. Parradine, and speakin’ in plain straight English, what would you have did now if, f’r instance, your theaytre had been showin’ Rita Hayworth tonight in—say—‘Confession’—and your news-feature fillum had been, say, the fillums of them two Polish wrestlers, ‘Gorilla’ Karlowski and ‘Strangler’ Cherwinski —and—and your three shows tonight had been scheduled for 7:20, 9:34, and 10:59. What would you have did then?”

“Well, Hagerup,” laughed Parradine, “answering you as man to man—not, however, in straight English, but in the language of the Ancient Chinese of the Middle Kingdom—“‘dun’t esk!”’