

Jade Bells

Complete Novel

By BASSETT MORGAN

CHAPTER I.

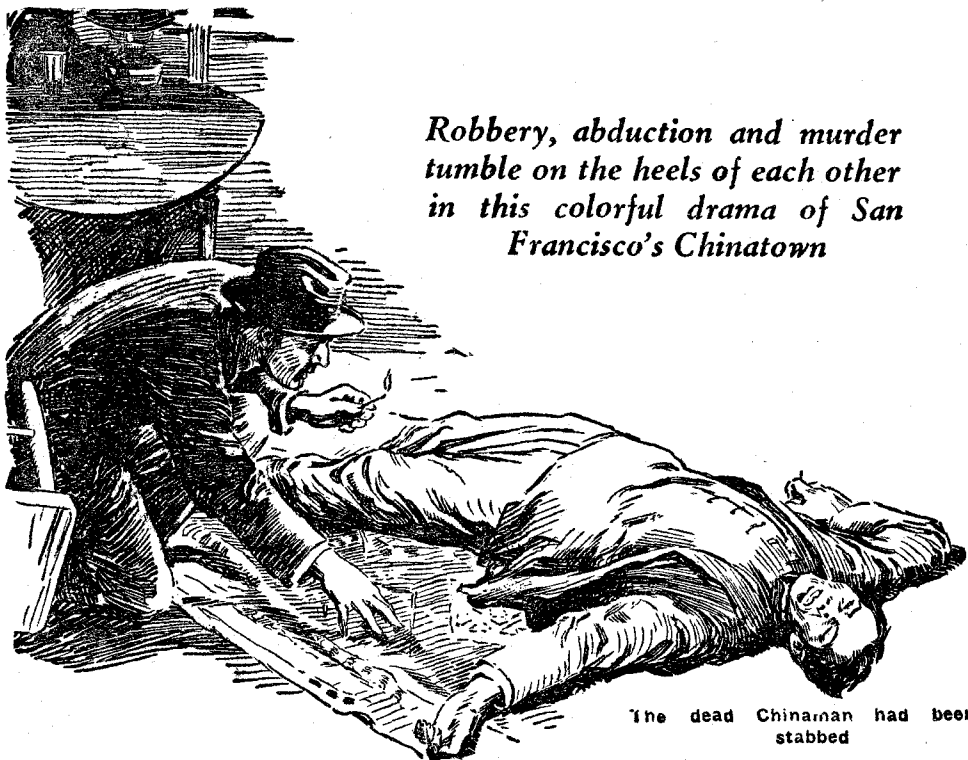
CHINATOWN'S THREAT.

WITHIN a half hour after we entered the place I realized that it had been a mistake to bring Jean to Ah Boon's Chop Suey House.

Darting glances from slant eyes and felt-soled shoes shuffling near our table had set my nerves on edge. The yellow men have long memories yet I imagined four years of absence was enough to let them forget the man who had once been chief clerk in the Samuel Strunski Importing Company,

and who stood in well with old Asia Low, a power in San Francisco's Chinatown. I had been in Asia Low's rooms a score of times and through him had seen places in Chinatown undreamed of by the average citizen, nests of treasure guarded by the very shadows concealing them, as well as places of weird squalor.

Four years ago I knew the Chinese quarter as few white men do. I had even seen the dancing girls that old Chew See keeps to adorn the feasts of local mandarins. In those days the Chinks had been friendly towards me. I wondered what gave me



*Robbery, abduction and murder
tumble on the heels of each other
in this colorful drama of San
Francisco's Chinatown*

The dead Chinaman had been
stabbed

that sense of surveillance and unfriendliness at Ah Boon's joint.

The Chinks had no grievance against me and I surmised it was curiosity about a man who had lost four years of life that made them slyly attentive, but their glances seemed to smirch the sweetness of Jean. No Chinese rests his gaze on a woman of his own race unless she is a sing-song girl or one of the "linnets" of that noseless old character of underworld life, Chew See.

It's odd how a nice girl like Jean is thrilled by an adventure into sordid surroundings. Jean exclaimed about the dragons and tinsel decorations. Her eyes seemed to reflect the gold paint as she gazed around while our tea and chow mien cooled. We had been to dinner and a movie where we held hands in the darkness and I suggested something to eat. Jean asked for a Chinese dish and after four years behind the gray walls of San Quentin through which her faith in my innocence had never wavered, I could refuse her nothing I was able to afford.

I suppose she never understood what "coming back" meant to me, a chance to clear my name of the stigma of crime. In spite of letters from her I was not too sure things would be the same between us nor would I have blamed Jean for trying to forget me. Instead, for two months we had been happy together at shows, dances, little suppers and Sundays in Golden Gate Park, all the entertainment I could supply on the wages I was getting as clerk in an Oakland store.

Selfish? Of course. Most men are about the only girl. But I needed her. A good many times I might have run amuck in reality during those two months of freedom only for Jean's belief that I was innocent of the Jade Bells crime. I needed her faith to keep me from gunning for the crook who sent me over. I needed her to remind me that I was not the only one wronged and that old Samuel Strunski's heart nearly broke at the loss of the Jade Bells for which he had refused small fortunes in good cash many times.

My conviction hurt two people beside

myself: Samuel, who gave me my first job as a kid lighting Sabbath fires for the orthodox Jewish people of his neighborhood and later a job in his importing company, and Jean, who is a cuddlesome, red-headed spit-fire.

Ah Boon's place smelled of years of hot grease, food, tobacco and incense. The old dragons appeared blue through the smoke but the food is fairly good. I enjoyed watching Jean's teeth bite at honeyed limes not as sweet as her lips. On her side of the table was an alcove telephone booth which had a sliding panel where the initiated could obtain certain small bundles of the stuff of dreams and idiocy.

I REMEMBERED the night when Poppy Sanders went into that booth and was found later with a sharpened knitting needle in her heart. Lots of queer things had happened at Ah Boon's joint. The memory of them came crowding back. I was a fool to bring Jean.

"Tell me, have you found track of George Bullant?" she asked.

"Soft pedal that name here, honey," I said to her. "It's safer not to mention names. The man who wanted those bells is a king in Chinatown. Perhaps he got them. I don't know. Old Samuel said they had been stolen from some ancient temple and Asia Low wanted to get hold of them to restore to the temple. I don't think Samuel would have parted with them until he died but he and Asia Low were good friends and Asia Low wanted the Jade Bells like I want you."

"Jack, have you any hope of finding them?" she asked.

"Very little," I admitted, "yet finding them would clear me of what they said I did. Not that I want them. It's dangerous to possess some things. All I ask is proof that I did not take the Bells. For my own sake I don't give a damn. It's for you, Jean, so when we go to a preacher you won't feel ashamed..."

She said a lot of nice things after that and had me so spellbound that I forgot my first uneasiness as well as the time o' night.

When I did think of it and looked at my watch I jumped and grabbed her coat from the chair-back.

"You'll loose your dimples keeping such late hours, Jean, and I've already lost the last Alameda ferry. I'll have to take the news boat over," I said. I wasn't regretting it, for after the dinner, show and late supper only a few cents jingled in my pocket and I wanted Jean to have a taxi ride home.

"Jack," she said when we were outside, "don't take the long trip home with me. Just get me a taxi and then run for your boat or you'll have to stay at a hotel on this side. And you know why we need to save money. I've had a lovely time and I'll cat-nap in the taxi all the way home."

I stepped into the telephone booth to call a taxi and held the door curtain aside to keep my eyes on Jean. Her face above the fur collar of her coat was heart-shaped, her hair was a band of shining color under her hat. I've told her her nose got that way from powdering it so often. Three little freckles on it dance when she laughs and she holds a job in the Aids to Beauty department at Maison Blanc because the Lord made her in one of His loving moods. She had to make her way since she was sixteen and has brains. Where she boards they treat her like one of the family which is a fair recommendation for any girl and the reason for what happened.

On that night I felt extra lucky because she offered to go alone in the taxi while I caught the boat that carries first morning editions across the Bay. She knew I needed a couple of hours' sleep to be enthusiastic about my job in the morning, but I was a fool about it for the second time that night.

I had just got the telephone number when a waiter gathered up our dishes, unusually prompt for an Ah Boon chop suey slinger. Not that I took warning. Jean and I strolled down the street to the corner where Sing Fat's windows were bright with embroidered silks, ivories, lacquer, jades and a string of carved elephants. There was also an assortment of crystal balls big and little.

"WHAT do those balls remind you of?" Jean asked.

For many reasons they remind me of George Bullant who had steered me up to have Madame Olga read my fortune. Silly stuff, maybe, but I was eighteen and George was thirty; he was Strunski's manager also, which counted. In the anteroom where I waited while George let Madame Olga hold his hand and tell him things, sat Jean with cheeks glowing from excitement and eyes like stars. Our eyes meet and Jean's eyes speak. She can't help it. It wasn't a minute until my eyes asked questions. You know how things start from a girl's eyes answering the glance from a man's. That night I took Jean to a show.

In the meantime Madame Olga held my hand and I almost forgot Jean in the other room on account of that she-devil inside the velvet hung room. The lights had pink shades. The incense was thick enough to suffocate you. Olga was dressed to show off her extraordinary beauty and her voice flowed like smooth cream.

I don't remember what she saw in my hands but I do recall that she had plenty of chance to take impressions of all my digits on the sheet of black wax that covered her table.

At the trial where I was convicted and given four years, I realized that I was led like a lamb to slaughter—framed.

God! when I remember how they proved my finger prints were on the safe where Strunski kept the Jade Bells, and heard Olga give testimony that my hands showed the lines of a pilferer, I cursed myself for that night's foolishness . . . except for Jean whom I might not have met in any other way. It was worth four years of prison to find a girl like her. But anyway Madame Olga had a crystal ball which she didn't gaze into on my account. The balls in Sing Fat's window reminded me of her and took some joy from the night. Thinking of Olga I see red. She is more than plausible. Her palm-reading is innocent enough; she doesn't prophesy, merely reminds you of the good, the true, the beautiful until you shove out your chest and take heart.

I had not a doubt that she and George Bullant split the income from the Jade Bells. Olga, who claims she is a Russian Grand Duchess, was living in Piedmont and Bullant still held his job with Samuel Strunski. I was the goat.

"Jack," said Jean to me that night, "I blame myself for admitting on the witness stand that I met you at Olga's that night. I should have disappeared. Then you could say you hadn't been there and make her out the liar she proved to be in other things."

"Honey, that's past and forgotten," I said. "I am starting from where it stands right now. Here comes the taxi and I oughtn't even to kiss you goodnight on a street corner, but I'll make up for it tomorrow night . . ."

It's a wonder Fate didn't nudge my elbow for a statement like that considering what it was preparing for Jean and me!

The street corner at that hour was no place to air regrets so I handed Jean into the taxi and said her street and number to the man who was driving it. She kissed her fingers to me as I turned away and hurried down Grant Street to Market to catch a Third Street car which would land me near the pier where the news boat lay moored. I was whistling a tune to which we had danced that night and thinking of Jean. Being in love does things as profound as China's poppy to a man. Without thinking I hopped on the first car that came along headed toward the Ferry Building and only remembered when I was aboard it that I needed the Third Street car.

God knows I need all my time, wits and money to get by, run the Jade Bells to earth, clear my name and marry Jean. And here I go, squandering every dollar on shows and dinners so I can't afford to take a taxi for myself, and to crown stupidity jump on a car that lands me a mile from my destination.

But I kept on whistling that song that seemed particularly appropriate to the case of Jean and me:

"I wonder if I keep on pra-aying."

Will your dreams be the same . . ."

Believe me, I prayed in earnest before that night's darkness gave way to dawn.

CHAPTER II.

THE MISSING COAT.

ABOVE the tule fog blowing in over the China Basin, lights on tall standards along the Embarcadero seemed cold, blue and aloof from the shadowy forms of night-prowling citizens. There are dark affairs afoot between those long warehouses of the waterfront where human derelicts sleep on the freight heaped wharves. By day there is a certain romance in the spicy smells of coffee and pepper cargoes, Oregon fir and the sounds of hearty stevedore language and rumbling trucks; but by night it isn't so wholesome.

If I had not wanted to save a dollar taxi fare I'd never have taken that stroll from the Ferry Building. Penny wise and a million scads foolish! Yet I shiver even now to think that I might not have been on hand. The little gods that mock men grinned that night at me.

I can't say why, of the shadows that slipped past stirring a swirl in the thick white fog, I saw one in particular. Two piers from the wharf where the news boat lay there was a gleam of black water through a hole in the moisture. Something darted by me towards the wharf edge and vanished. There was no splash; nothing but the lap-lap of water against teredo-bitten and barnacle whitened piling. But I had certainly seen a skirt!

A woman overboard? I started on the double towards the place where she vanished and dug out my pocket flash. Its round finger of light showed oily, uneasy water but nothing floating. Nor had there been a cry. I still heard nothing except faint thuds under the wharf that might have been a bit of wood bumping the piling.

Yet behind me were padded-soles hurrying almost noiselessly.

Some men observe physiognomies and some glue their gaze on hands, others re-

member mannerisms. I happened to know footsteps and I've learned most of them from the thump of carefree indifference to the toe-slouch of a man that's getting away from something he dreads. Footsteps have tonal character varying with temperament, moods and races of men. I know the slithery gait of an Oriental and I know how hard it is to slough off the trick of the lock-step after the big gray gates open and release a man. I know!

The steps I heard in the fog were neither honest, made by leather, nor a white man's tread. They went deeper into the gloom. Something had stood where the fog thinned from a draught of wind between the warehouses, and somebody ran away on padded feet leaving my little electric wand searching the crinkling black water where the tide coiled below.

The water looked black and forbidding. To dive without a visual objective seemed more violent than valiant. My urge was to yell to whatever went overside. Instead I slid off my shoes and overcoat and made a heap of them on the wharf edge. A truck was rumbling nearer, headed in my direction. Still no head bobbed where I was sure one had gone down. Yet moving the flash I saw a ladder leading down.

IN three more seconds I had descended half way. The flash shone on oily water and ancient piles winking with wet sea slugs, also a skiff and in that small boat crouched a motionless figure. The relentless little flashlight picked it out, a cloth coat, a fur collar, a white cheek, a band of bright hair, the white terrified face of my Jean!

She couldn't see me, for which I was glad just an instant. Put yourself in my place hanging with one hand to a rickety ladder on the Embarcadero wharf and discovering the girl you love and had kissed good-by as she started home, crouched in a leaking boat under that wharf, with horror in her eyes.

The voice that had crooned that love-song "Charmaine" as we danced so short a while ago lifted in a screech of fear that

ended in a gasp as the boat, already half filled with water, slopped a little more and threatened to sink.

"Honey," I said, trying to speak so she wouldn't be more terrified, "shove out here. You know it's me, don't you?"

"Jack!" she wailed and her voice sort of creaked. My own heart thumped. The water is thirty feet at low tide there.

She shoved along the piling till she was near enough for me to grab her and climb the ladder.

"That Chink," she gasped.

I guessed right about those footsteps padding away in the fog; they were felt-soled Chinese shoes.

Jean had been crouching in the water-filled boat and was soaked to the waist. She shuddered and her teeth chattered as I reached the top of the ladder and heard a flock of honest leather boot-soles come jiggling over the cement and the lumbering truck came to a stop with a squeal of brakes. The morning editions had arrived. Great bundles of them fell with a stolid thump and the boys from the boat were running to load them on board. A larger searchlight than my little flash was feeling around through the fog.

My one desire was to hide. You can't have the name of a girl like Jean featured in the morning headlines for being hauled from under a wharf near Pier Forty-seven by Jack Duncan, ex-convict, and so on. Jean was sobbing with hysteria in hard, gasping sounds as we waited until the flash moved away. I hauled her top-side and streaked away without waiting for even my coat or shoes. I was carrying Jean and running on my toes.

Near the street-end we almost collided with a man dashing up to satisfy curiosity, I figured, since there is no great attraction in the news boat pulling out at that dark hour.

The fog was thicker, woollier, wetter than ever. When I let Jean slip to her own feet she wobbled on her high heels.

"Where are we going?" she whispered.

"To a safe place for you, honey," was all I said.

Instead of heading for a street car at the Ferry Building or a chance at catching a stray taxi on Market Street I was taking her to Mother Villiston's boarding house for sailors. Mother Villiston and I are friends. A good many curio stores buy pearl beads and curios smuggled in by sailors, deckhands and engineers from Mother Villiston and the Oakland store where I worked got the best selection of them.

THE shortest way to her house that night was over the railroad switch-back, through a few dark alleys, past lumber piles, but we were not long getting there because I kept Jean stepping.

There was no time for her to talk and I surmised what she would have to say needed privacy.

I am acquainted with Mother Villiston's back door. Anyway, it was no hour to ring a bell and wake the boarders. I know which is the old lady's room also and have seen its spotless shabbiness, cheerful with a bouquet of red geraniums and a canary singing in a brass cage as well as a red and green parrot on a perch. The whole house is scoured so clean it looks raw, and the yard is gay with marigolds and geraniums. Mother Villiston still wears skirts to her ankles and has scallops on her white petticoats. Long braids of yellow hair now turning white are wound around her head.

When I tapped on her door that night it opened and the light flashed on. She was pulling a courduroy robe over a flannel nightgown and jabbing her feet into loose slippers. Pink color came into her milk-white cheeks when she saw Jean, who clung to me and was as limp in my arms as her own wet clothing.

"Mother Villiston, look after Jean for me, will you?"

"For sure," she said before I had time to explain. "Fetch her in. You want I should take care of her awhile?"

"Till morning. You'll hear from me then. It's all right, honey," I told Jean. "I left my coat and shoes. I'll get them and be right back. Stay here till I come."

Jean was crying again and I left her knowing that if she talked it would be safe with Mother Villiston. She knows all about me and why George Bullant took a vacation in the Orient after my conviction. She knows how often innocent men have taken the gaff. Her husband, Captain Villiston, was broken because Chinks were smuggled on his ship though he knew nothing about it. Being on the beach after forty years as honorable master of a big vessel broke his heart and killed him in a few months.

Only as I hurried away from Mother Villiston's did I regret not asking Jean the meaning of what had happened. To tell the truth I dreaded hearing what she would say. I didn't doubt her being the sweet kid I'd always found her, but to my knowledge she knew nothing about the wharf and had no intention in the world of being there when I had put her in the taxi a few minutes before. What occurred wasn't damaging my love for her; in fact it brought her a little nearer the ex-convict she was willing to love and marry; I knew she could have had men without my background.

IT took longer to return to the wharf where I had left my shoes and coat because my thoughts were speeded up and my feet lagged as a result. I wouldn't invite investigation by a cop who might see me running. But when I arrived at Pier Forty-seven the truck was gone, so were the news boat and crowd, and so were my coat and shoes! I used the flashlight and a kid carrying papers came out of the fog and handed me the shoes.

"You must have left 'em," he said, looking at my socks.

"Thanks, buddy. And did you see a coat beside them?"

"Nope. Just the kicks. I wasn't here when things started. When I dashed up they was just takin' pictures of the guy that fished that dame from the briny."

"What?" I asked. "Who fished who from the briny?"

"Some dame tried to commit suicide an' a guy pulled her out. The newshounds off

the boat snapped his pitcher. He was lyin' like hell, too. It wasn't five minutes before that I sold him a paper and he was in a hurry to catch the news boat. He beat it just before I got here an' he sure had nerve. You oughta hear the yarn he told 'em. Maybe he was lit up and he fell in and climbed out. His name was Jack Duncan because he pulled some papers out of his overcoat pocket and showed the news reporters. Say . . ." an idea had occurred to the kid, "you was looking for an overcoat, you said?" He stared at me in frank curiosity.

"Not now," I told him and cheerfully handed over all my change but the fare to Alameda which was twenty-one cents. The kid had done me a good deed, but changed my plans. I legged it to the Ferry Building, mentally calling the guy who swiped news notoriety I was anxious to avoid some harsh names. I needed my overcoat. He was probably the man I had almost collided with in the fog and he'd seen enough to prompt him to tell that yarn. He had quick wit to dive into my overcoat pockets and haul out the name of the owner in time to use it.

THE newsy, trotting alongside, ignored by me, was chatting about the picture taking at the news boat and dropped a remark that registered, oblivious as I had been and sunk in my own troubles.

"If you're crossin' the Bay it's too bad you didn't catch the news boat. Then you'd of seen the guy that got your overcoat. He went on it."

"The ferry'll have to do me," I said, but my brain was spinning. Jean under the wharf was put aside for the moment. The address of the little waterfront shack that I rented along the Alameda shore was in that overcoat along with my name. The man wearing the coat would arrive on the other side two hours ahead of the ferry. No doubt the news-hounds had the address by this time.

My spirits were at the cipher and the gray dawn was due to begin breaking, a

A 4—5

bleak hour after a night out. I ceased splitting my brain wondering about Jean and the Chink she feared sneaking through the fog. A more or less marked man I ambled through the ferry turnstile and sat down to wait for the first boat, picturing a man in my little rented house, perhaps searching through my belongings.

I tried to remember what there was I didn't want a stranger to find and hoped as the kid said he was just "lit" and perhaps would help himself to crackers and cheese, make his own coffee and clear out.

But in the desk of the house was a bundle of letters written by Jean to me when I was behind stone walls. There was also data I had gathered concerning Madame Olga and George Bullant, and something about the stolen Jade Bells. There were names of Strunski's customers who had seen and gloated over the bells and tried to buy the necklace from the old importer. Every one who saw them yearned to possess those bits of translucent green light that had once adorned the throat of a brooding golden Buddha in an ancient Eastern temple.

I cursed myself for leaving the note book instead of keeping it on me. I was tired and cold and hungry, and the mystery of Jean was taking the heart out of me in spite of loving her and trying to have the same faith in her that she had in me and not succeeding because I'm not made of the fine stuff that went into the heart and mind of Jean.

The news-kid followed me into the Ferry Building and handed me a morning paper.

"I just got this one. It's last minute stuff."

At my first glance at the headlines, I almost keeled over. On the front page glared at me:

TAXI DRIVER STABBED BY WOMAN FARE

William Moore, called to Hop Chuck Alley for a woman passenger, was found unconscious in his cab on Clay Street. Only clue woman's handbag found in cab.

Jean had got into the taxi at Hop Chuck

Alley and her way home would take the taxi through Clay Street!

CHAPTER III.

DEAD CHINAMAN.

AFTER that I wasn't sleepy or cold. The forty-five minute trip across the Bay was all too short to consider things. As sure as God made little apples, Jean's handbag was the one found in William Moore's taxi. His picture was in the paper and I recognized it. Undoubtedly he had seen Jean and me by the light of Sing Fat's windows. He could identify us both. I remembered him perfectly, a slim man about thirty-five, dark-haired and sort of friendly.

"I'll get the lady home safely," he had said to me.

I felt sorry for William Moore. And I began to realize that the accursed Jade Bells were at the bottom of this night's adventure. I wished I'd been twins so one of me could have been with Jean asking the thousands of questions that were now as important as the one Jean had answered to my satisfaction when I asked her to marry me.

The first thing pressing me was to reach home and to keep Jean out of the mess. I knew only too well that you don't need to be guilty to take punishment. Jean didn't carry a knife and she could not have stabbed a fly, but they had found her purse and God knew what it contained beside lipstick and powder and beauty aids. The taxi driver would remember the address we gave him. If she went home the police would gather her in.

I had to get her word that she mustn't leave Mother Villiston. I had to leave or miss a boat; there was no time to telephone. Yesterday the biggest thing in my life had been to get track of the Jade Bells, clear my name and hand it to Jean. This morning Jean was under the black shadow of crime and it was cast by the Jade Bells which she had never seen. The more I conned it over the more I realized the need

of locating the Bells. And it began to percolate through my mind that somebody suspected I had taken them and still knew where they were hidden.

There was the mysterious undercurrent in Ah Boon's dive, the covert glances of Chinese veiled by the appearance of indifference. I had been recognized. Word flickered by mute secret telegraph in Chinatown that Jack Duncan who had stolen the Jade Bells, was loose again. The Chink who frightened Jean proved that the source of this mysterious chain of events was Chinatown, perhaps Asia Low himself, living in his gorgeous quarters deep in and high up above the warrens.

Until then I hadn't figured him in. Whoever got the Bells might have sold them to him and retired rich. George Bullant knew that. But if Chinatown suspected I had them and would bring them to light eventually, it proved Asia Low didn't have them. I wished I could get a word with Asia Low if only to ask him to call his shadows away from Jean. But there was no time that morning to run over to Chinatown because of this business of Jean and the taxi driver.

It may seem trifling but my job was important to me also. When I came outside there was a dreary, disheartening search for work before I found it. I had to exist. I had to have a presentable appearance to be seen with Jean and I was glad to get the clerk's wages. The streets were full of job-hunters, and the reason I got the place was my friendship with Mother Villiston, from whom I could get sailors' bargains.

It's all very well in stories to discount the grind for daily bread and butter and a roof over your head. My goal was respectability for Jean's sake.

THE little Ark on the Alameda shore is in a respectable neighborhood of old houses with deep lots on the Bay where the small cottages on stilts embedded in the tide flats rent at a reasonable figure. I wondered what was happening in it as I hung around the engine room windows on the ferry. When she landed I caught the

electric train. Before it reached the Chestnut station I heard the newsies hollering:

"Woman drowned in the Bay!"

Hurrying home through the gray darkness lingering because of the fog, I walked on the grass instead of the gravel path leading through the Kimmerly yard to my house and fitted the key in the lock. It is entered from the kitchen and the living room looks over the water. Inside the door I stumbled on a fire-screen knocked over since I left it. My skin prickled. I struck a match and saw the litter of overturned tables and chairs, a broken flower vase, my desk open.

Half expecting such a scene, the reality started my heart pounding as it did the day I was arrested for the theft of those double-damned Jade Bells. I dared not turn on a light for fear some early rising neighbor would see the house lighted and note the time. A cool moist wind touched my face from an open window over the bay.

Lighting a second match I saw the rent money I had placed in the desk was gone. Every pigeonhole had been emptied, newspaper clippings and papers littered the floor. But the black note-book lay on the blotter. I grabbed it and ran my fingers through the pages and it fell from my limp hands. There were bloody fingerprints on the pages. This was a worse scare than when they took me to Headquarters four years ago. Blood stains meant a grimmer crime, especially for a man who has done time. God! the presentiment of cold metal clamped my wrists again. The dread of Friday mornings when some poor devil mounted the thirteen steps came over me and I was mounting them and a chaplain was chanting as I went to hell!

The bloody fingerprints put fear into my heart and I crouched as if eyes stared through the windows, though the house through which I slunk, feeling along the walls, was dark when the match went out. A sluggish wind stirred the window curtain somberly and carried the stench of the tide flats and clammy touch of fog. I started across the room to close the window and

stumbled. I yelped, unable to throttle the cry in time.

Jerking the chintz curtains across the window I almost yelled again at the bony rattling of curtain rings on the rod. Another match flame shielded by my hands showed what I had tripped over. My hunched body sank to one knee as I stared at a Chinese lying on the rug, still warm but dead as Methuselah.

He'd been stabbed; his blood soaked into the rug. Sightless eyes rolled until only the yellow-colored balls were visible with an edge of black like mourning quarter moons at the upper lids. I don't know what prompted me to go through his pockets; there were cigarette papers and "makings," matches, loose silver and one folded paper brushed with black ideograms.

ON the wall my shadow flickered, crooked with fear that warped body and mind out of shape, and to escape the wry thing I pinched out the match flame. I should call the police, but I dared not. I had no telephone; my calls across the Bay to Jean were charged on my landlord's bill because I phoned her from his house, and if the police checked my record they would connect her with Jack Duncan, ex-convict. With the stabbing affair in the taxi there was enough to send her where I had been.

Cold to the heart, shaking, I pictured Jean facing trial and the wealth of circumstantial evidence.

A dead Chink in my house. God! I could see people crowd the little shack looking at it, looking at me. My thoughts whirled, but out of the chaos came the dank touch of moist wind and the moan of the fog siren on Alcatraz. The dark curtains were sucked outward and a rift of gray gloom pointed the next step I must take.

Captain Kimmerly kept a boathook on my porch for spearing driftwood that fed his fireplace and mine. Four minutes after I stumbled over the dead Chinese the body was rocking face down on the out-going

tide water, and I thrust it away with the handle of the boathook, guiding it to the outward flow. My eyes ached with staring, watching the lifeless thing sway in a sea choppy from the dawn wind that already thinned the fog.

Over the Berkeley hills the sun came up red, as bloody as I felt. I straightened the room and washed the rug, soaking it with peroxide on both sides, and dried it with an electric heater from the bathroom. A cold plunge in the tub and hot coffee didn't take long, and I was out as usual at seven-thirty on my way to the street car.

Waiting for it I felt as if every acquaintance who nodded or spoke eyed me and could read on my guilty face that I was Jack Duncan of the Jade Bells affair. I longed to grab a boat and beat it out and far away. To crown my misery the car was late; an open bridge over the estuary had delayed the service, and I cursed that town of Alameda for being on an island. To kill time I dashed into the drug store opened early for commuter trade and called Mother Villiston.

"Jack speaking," I said. "How's everything?"

"Fine. Off to work already," came back to me.

"God! I said to keep her there . . ."

"All right. Call me later." And the phone clicked.

I was too late to prevent Jean reporting at Maison Blanc that morning, too late to catch her en route and couldn't get the store till nine o'clock.

HOPPING the first car that came, I reached East Fourteenth Street in Oakland and found the bookkeeper where I worked holding a bridge party post mortem on the telephone. She played over every hand of a long session the night before without missing a card, although she knew I wanted to use the telephone after the seventh time I had stood in the door hinting without words.

There are times when murder is justifiable. I was ready to swear that the poor Chink whose body ebbed with the tide

didn't deserve death half as much as that dame whose throat I wanted to squeeze before she ended her conversation and gave me a chance to call Maison Blanc.

It seemed to me my voice sounded funny. I know I shivered while the switch-board got Jean's department.

"Miss Winters is not here to-day," was all the satisfaction I obtained.

What had happened to Jean? Had she walked into a police net spread for suspects? I called Mother Villiston again and got no answer. She was usually out at that hour marketing for her boarders. A customer came in and asked to see mandarin coats and an hour went by before I got to the telephone again. It happened to be a busy morning. I tried to sell cheap brass opium bowls and dragon pillows while imagination scrawled on them the image of a dead Chink rocking in the Bay waters and Jean in the hands of a burly San Francisco police officer. I could see the fear in her eyes as they showed her the small bead bag that had betrayed her, with its poor little aids to beauty scattered on the desk at a precinct station, perhaps headquarters.

By noon I was cold and couldn't have swallowed anything like food. Perhaps a walk in the sun might clear my brain of terror that gripped with feverish claws.

Grabbing my hat I went to the office to call Mother Villiston again. The receiver was at my ear when some one darkened the open door of the office and I looked up.

My hand grasped the desk to steady my body, which swayed. In the doorway stood a police officer in uniform!

CHAPTER IV.

"FLY FROM EVIL."

FOOTSTEPS coming towards me, stolidly thudding. I can still hear them as I heard them that day. I see him yet, two hundred odd pounds of brawn with the weight of the law behind him. He looked at me. I was seeing a lifeless body floating in the Bay.

"Come on," he said. "I'm in a hurry."

It's a wonder I didn't hold out my wrist for his bracelets. The idea that a guilty conscience betrays a man is sound.

"I have to call the coroner," he added.

That information gave a respite in which I lighted a cigarette and asked if there had been an accident. He said a body had been found on the Bay shore. He was sending for a mortuary wagon and it appeared to be a case for the coroner. Omitting the mention of that word *murder* saved a crowd gathering, of course.

I went into the sunshine and kept going, fighting an urge to take the first train to the mole on my way to San Francisco; it would not do to make a false move now. I bought a noon paper to read on a street car and learned from it that the police were searching for the owner of a beaded handbag found in William Moore's taxi. They expected to make an arrest before night.

There was another item that interested me: Madame Olga, a fingerprint expert, whose work was well known around the Bay in crime detection cases, had been robbed in the night by a sneak-thief who entered the house while she was entertaining friends. No clues were found.

Things seemed to be warming up fast. I was in the mood to find Jean and stow away with her on board a tramp vessel that had no wireless, and thinking of its temporary safety gave me an idea. I couldn't face the clerk job that afternoon, so I got off the car and telephoned my boss that a vessel was in and I might pick up some Jap pearls if I hurried over. He said to go ahead.

It was taking a big risk. If I was wanted he'd say I had started for San Francisco and mention Mother Villiston's house, though he wouldn't give away that address unless forced to do so; contraband is against the law and he carried plenty of it.

Then I took a street car that carried me to Piedmont, where Madame Olga lived in a pretty bungalow with green lawns and flowers. Strolling past, I saw a chauffeur washing her car. I walked in and asked for a match, intending to mention the bur-

glary casually, but one look at his jaw decided me against it.

My nerve was breaking, and I remembered I had eaten nothing since the chop suey at Ah Boon's around midnight, except the hot coffee I imbibed at my own house at seven in the morning. The afternoon was going when I reached the ferry, and it was half gone when I arrived through the railroad switchback at Mother Villiston's house. I didn't wait to knock at the door. Opening it, I stepped into the kitchen and found her making pies. There was pot-roast cooking, and the smell of it made me hungry.

"Where is she?" I said quietly.

Her eyes warned me. "Hello," she said. "You'll have to wait till I finish this pie. I got a new girl working for me today and I haven't got her trained to do things my way yet. It's quite a bother teaching new help." She held up a pie and cut the extra crust, then made a pattern around the edge with a fork. She popped it in the oven and stalked away. When the door opened again I jumped. The "new girl" was in my arms. In a blue cotton dress, a cap and apron setting off her prettiness, I found Jean.

BUT in those few hours since midnight she was changed from a happy kid to a woman with fear haunted eyes and cheeks that wore two burning red spots instead of yesterday's peach-bloom.

"Jack," she whispered against my lips. "They think I committed murder."

In another minute she was sobbing in hysteria. Mother Villiston came running. All I could do was to catch Jean tight and smother her shuddering sobs against my shoulder so no one would hear and wonder what was wrong.

"Take her upstairs," said Mother Villiston.

I carried her as a man carries the woman he loves. The canary in Mother Villiston's room was singing to burst his throat. The parrot was cursing cheerfully in three languages while I managed to quiet Jean and get a little of her adventure.

Jean said she had been sitting in the taxi thinking of me when it stopped at a corner on Clay Street to let a street car go through the intersection. Somebody jumped on the running board. He jerked open the door and slid inside. Jean screamed and the driver turned his head to see her. A man's arm swung and the driver groaned.

Jean said she thought of kidnapers first of all, and while the stranger was tugging at the driver, evidently dragging out his knife, she lunged past him out of the door. He tried to grab her. His hand touched her cheek as she broke away. The taxi driver had slumped under the wheel. Her cheek felt wet, and touching it, her fingers were wet. Then she knew it was blood and the taxi driver had been stabbed. All that happened in very few seconds, though it takes longer to tell it.

Jean was terrified. She saw the murderous stranger leap from the cab as she started running down Kearney Street, which leads to Third. She remembered that I would go that way to catch the news boat. The thin soles of her slippers made very little sound and a passing street car gave her a break as she ran on, too excited to think of anything but finding me at the wharf. She had been there with me on one Sunday stroll when we sniffed at the spice smells and said how good it would be to go across the Pacific and see spice growing.

Hearing the padding steps of her pursuer coming nearer, Jean lost her head. The fog prevented her seeing much, but she remembered the ladder leading down to the water and a boat tied there for emergency use. There I found her.

Her story was simple, but it took time for me to hear it, and further precious time to comfort her. She had read the papers that morning.

"Don't worry," I said, "even if your bag was found in the taxi you didn't stab William Moore, and he isn't dead yet. Perhaps he will live."

"But if he lives he can give them my address," she argued.

"Listen, honey," I said, "we don't want the guy to slip over even to save us a lot

of bother. You leave everything to me. I'll fix this for both of us."

What else could I say? Jean trusted me.

"Don't you dare even try to fix anything," she came back at me. "They'll get you again as they did before when you were innocent. I can't go on living if you have to serve time again, Jack. I can't go to the store and I can't go home. What will I do?" And she cried again in a way that made me quiver inside.

IT was supper time before I left her, worn out with crying, but strangely game in spite of tears. She wanted to go to headquarters and tell her story. It took Mother Villiston and me both to fight down that idea. Mother Villiston made her help set the table and work in the kitchen to keep her from doing anything worse.

I left the house still thinking of the dead Chink who would be at the morgue by now. I felt as if his ghost slithered along at my shoulder. Perhaps it did, because without planning a course I eased down California Street towards the Paulist church where black words on the illuminated dial of the tower clock warn everybody "My son, consider the time and flee from evil."

I had seen the warning hundreds of times, but that night it registered meaningfully. Five minutes to ten and I was flying from evil like a fox with the hounds closing in, nowhere to go. It was the last night of the Feast of Lanterns and the streets were crowded. Brown, yellow and white faces slipped past like coins in the dark melting-pot of Chinatown, blurred by falling rain. Wet pavements reflected automatic electric colors that crawled in dragons on satiny black cements. Shop windows blazed light and colors and in the doorway of the Golden River Bazaar stood Billy Kim, son of old Kim Wo.

Billy supported a cigarette drooping from one corner of his mouth and let the corner of the doorway support him. He is American born, and a jazz-hound, but he knows his Chinese onions, and he has

known me for some years. On that night his glance slipped like quicksilver over me and his cigarette rose two points higher.

"Hello, Billy," I said as I slipped alongside. "How are chances to see the sights to-night?"

On the Feast of Lanterns the Chinese keep open house just as they do at New Years. Billy Kim was friendly enough to lead me through the bazaar to a back room furnished luxuriously, where he poured colorless drinks from a blue stone jar lettered in black brushed ideograms. It was good ware, as I knew, because I had picked up a good deal of ceramic lore at Strunski's in the old days before the Jade Bells disappeared.

"A rat in the bin, a woman on the street and a priest in the house are the beginning of destruction," was the way I translated the jar label.

"And On Wing Low on the street in the rain with his gunmen also leads to trouble," said Billy Kim. "I was watching the old pot-belly as you came along. Have another drink. Where are you working now, Duncan?"

"Nowhere this evening, Billy," I replied.

"Did you get a chance at Strunski's again?" he asked, waving me to one chair and sliding into another with his leg over the arm. He looked at me through smoke from his cigarette. Samuel Strunski got his best stuff from the Golden River Bazaar and Billy opened conversation with that lead. He is a good scout even if he is also the sorrow of Kim Wo's life because he refuses to marry one of the few lily-footed house-birds in Chinatown and settle down to running the Golden River Bazaar.

"You were a fool not to take those Jade Bells to Asia Low," he said. "He would have shipped you East until the fuss had blown over and he'd have made things right with Strunski."

"Billy, if I ever had had the cursed Bells, knowing Asia Low as well as I did, I'm not idiot enough to keep him from having them and do time for it. The only time I ever flirted with temptation was

when I saw Asia Low look at me with his eyes asking me to get him the Bells. He'd have adopted me as his son if I had. But Samuel Strunski was good to me when I was a kid. And I did not take the Bells then or ever."

BILLY remained silent for a minute or two while I sipped another drink of fiery liquor, then he said:

"George Bullant won't last much longer at Strunski's."

"Why?" I wanted to know.

"In fact," he went on, ignoring my interruption, "if On Wing Low has luck to-night, Bullant is through."

"On with the rat-killing," I suggested, aching now for further information. Billy Kim is college educated and thinks white on most things, but when he is pondering deeply he is all Chinese as was his mood that night. I tried again:

"On Wing Low is out in the rain, all wet?"

"Asia Low would pay well for those Bells," he urged again, ignoring my question. "And I imagine George Bullant would rather have a trip through the Orient than land in hell. You see, Duncan, old Chew See has an extra lovely linnets in her cages, a dancing girl from Pengyang whom she holds for top prices, many top prices."

The news of a new dancing girl owned by the noseless old Chew See did not cheer me.

"What have On Wing Low, linnets, and George Bullant's Oriental trip got to do with me and the Jade Bells?" I asked.

The liquor from the blue stone jar was powerful, and though enough of it made me feel generously inclined to bestow San Francisco on some needy orphanage, I wasn't fuzzy-headed yet.

"Have another drink," said Billy. "You know that George Bullant keeps an expensive house in Piedmont, and lives like a mandarin himself, and you can bet he doesn't do it on the salary paid by Samuel Strunski. Well, the answer is 'snow.' Bullant and Ah Boon work together."

"So that's it!" I straightened in my chair and set down the cup of "courage."

"Bullant eats some of his own profits and that has led him to take an interest in Chew See's Pengyang dancer. The girl is already famous. Also, On Wing Low has a nice taste in dancing girls; he keeps two gunmen and his patience is limited."

In spite of my former gloom, in spite of falling rain outside, and the fact that Billy Kim turned out the shaded light and left only a tiny blue flame floating on the wick in a golden dish of oil for lighting cigarettes, I felt brighter.

The little flame stood upright and did not waver, which proved there were no draughts of air, consequently no doors except the one by which we entered, and no eavesdroppers.

"If Bullant were threatened by death he might say where the Jade Bells are hidden. Bullant wants the Pengyang girl on whom On Wing Low has set envious eyes. He has not the price to compete with Wing Low, but he is bidding, and Chew See is letting them raise each other's offer. And even a white man would suit the girl better than pot-bellied On Wing Low whose mother and grandmother were the . . ."

BUT the scandals among the female ancestry of On Wing Low did not matter to me. I was thinking of the tangible treachery in the very air of Ah Boon's place last night, and what had happened to a Chinese in my house. The rising warmth of my blood was not alone from Chinese liquor; it appeared I had one end of the tangled skein to work with.

"I'm taking a little stroll," I told Billy Kim.

"Better leave here the back way," he advised, and pulled aside a tapestry covering the wall. He opened a shutter and let in cold wind. I dropped from the opening into a dark alley that lies between the walls of the Golden River Bazaar and a fish-shop owned by Lung Yuen. The wall shutter clicked shut behind me as I headed towards the street and turned into Ah Boon's.

The tables were crowded, but I found an

empty place and ordered chow mien and tea. Chinese waiters scurried everywhere, but again I felt the prickling of skin that warned me I was watched. There was no reason for Ah Boon to dislike me, so it meant that George Bullant had persuaded the Chinks to watch me, and I sat eating and wondering why he and Madame Olga feared me.

Madame Olga, robbed last night, no mention in the papers of the loot taken from her house, appeared to me as if she concealed what was lost. That might be the Jade Bells which had disappeared utterly. I wondered if Billy Kim had thought of it and decided to give him a call.

I had sipped enough bottled courage to be reckless. Leaving the chow steaming on the plate, I started for the telephone booth. I was between two tables when a waiter stuck out his foot as he leaned over one table. I tripped, plunged forward, and had sense enough to dive under one table. Instantly, and like a thunder-clap that rumbled after a first crash, came gun-shots.

Into my mind flashed the warning on the church tower: "Fly from evil."

Not flying, but crawling, I scrambled under tables toward the door. The crowd had leaped and screeched and made for the same destination, and you couldn't blame them at that staccato fire of guns. Somebody yelled: "Tong war!"

CHAPTER V.

THE BELLS.

I KNEW it wasn't a tong war; no such luck. In Ah Boon's restaurant several persons were gunning for Jack Duncan. I heard lead slugs thudding the walls and peppering peep-holes in gilt decorations. Through shooting and screeching of frightened customers sounded the shrill whistle of cops on the street. I knew the Chinks would not kill any customers if it could be avoided, so I dived into the crowd, or rather leaped from under a table into people crowding through the door.

Once on the street I made my way into

crowds that gathered at sound of the uproar. Umbrellas gouged my head and shoulders and tilted my hat over one eye, but on Grant Avenue I felt safer, and also felt I was on the trail of the Jade Bells, though it was faint. Walking along, I turned over the conversation of Billy Kim to get his story straightened alongside facts I knew. George Bullant, who handled dope through Ah Boon, wanted me dead or missing. He was using the drug, Billy said, and crazy about this dancing girl from Pengyang, bidding against On Wing Low, who also wanted her, and risking his life by doing so.

It occurred to me that Strunski's was a capital place to distribute the drug. Samuel was a kindly, trusting old man, and Bullant had been his manager for years.

On that hunch I turned down the tradesman's alley that led to the Strunski Importing House, and standing in the rain, gazed at the barred door and windows of its rear wall. Suddenly I slid into the black shadow of a cornice. Footsteps! The gentle, gliding *slosh* of shoes feeling their way. There came a scraping sound and faint click. I held my breath. Some one was working at old Samuel Strunski's rear door.

The store held treasure enough to reward a burglar, in jade, money in the safe, priceless objects of art; but the burglar alarms were the best yet invented. It was time for me to go, before the alarm flashed at headquarters, and a squad came dashing to the scene. But I heard the door slipping open and a very tiny point of light poked through darkness to a telephone box fastened to the inside wall about eight feet from the door. I heard the receiver lifted and a man's voice giving the headquarters number. I had memorized it when I worked for Strunski. Hearing it I almost ran down the alley.

"This is Bullant, manager of Strunski's Importing House," I heard George himself say. "I expect our burglar alarm rang. The fact is, I forgot my front door key and used the rear door to get in. Sorry to set off the alarm . . . Oh, they're on their

way already. Fast work. I'll wait till they arrive and explain what happened." The receiver clicked.

The tiny flash light moved to a switch-box on the wall. Then George Bullant followed its small gleam into the ware-room and through to the glass walled office. He pulled down blinds that covered the glass and was closed in with the light from a shaded desk lamp. I strolled to the alley entrance and saw the emergency squad arrive in a fast car. Three officers tried the front door then circled to the rear and entered. I was on the Grant Avenue corner when they emerged from the front door smoking cigars and George was with them. He passed, but did not see me, a big, prosperous looking Bullant swaggering in his camel-hair overcoat and good looking, broad-brimmed hat. But there were fat bags under his eyes and cheeks, and he stared ahead with eyes that showed dark and enlarged irises, not a healthy sign.

I RETURNED to the alley because I knew George Bullant had disconnected the burglar alarms. In fact, at his request, I had figured a way of disconnecting them merely by brushing a hand over the wires after old Samuel set them for the night, because George Bullant often held little parties in the office during the days when I was head clerk under the management of George. That fact was not mentioned at the trial, though I longed to tell it when I suspected Bullant was framing me. It would have counted against me and done nothing but destroy any faith left in old Samuel regarding me.

In the dark alley I waited with my body flattened against the wall and a trickle of dripping water sliding down inside my collar. I figured George would be back. Sure enough, within twenty minutes after the police car roared away, George came out of the rear door and walked past me to peer from the alley down the street. It was the chance I wanted; I grabbed it.

Stepping from under the stream that filled my underwear, I cat-footed to the door, glancing at the alley end. George

was standing in the gloom, though street lights made him visible to me. He was waiting for a friend, I judged.

A lot of queer ideas flashed into my mind and trickled into the discard. I wanted to see the show-rooms and old Samuel's desk with the basket on it from which he once peddled plaster saints on the streets and gathered the foundation of his fortune. In that office I taught him to write his own name in English, imitating the writing because he didn't know even his alphabet, though I was the only person who knew it, and this is the first time I've told.

I recalled endless kindnesses to me, and wished he had not needed to think that the boy he had befriended had stolen his most cherished possession. Samuel had run into bad luck, yet he deserved the best. George Bullant was using his store to cater to the most despicable trade on the coast. I had helped George work out the burglar alarm stunt and I was ashamed of it. Perhaps Billy Kim's hooch made me feel soft-hearted, but I was in the mood to undo my one deliberate dirty trick about the burglar alarm, especially now since by doing so Bullant might be trapped.

Bullant was still waiting down the alley as I slid along the wall to the other end and headed for the Golden River Bazaar from where I intended to telephone Samuel Strunski. The Chinese stores keep open late on festival days. A few tourists were looking at porcelain gods and carved ivories in the Golden River, so I slipped up the alley hoping to enter by the wooden shutter Billy had opened to let me out. It was locked, so I started towards the street.

WITHIN twenty feet of emerging I saw a big limousine gleaming with plate glass, black lacquer and chromium, slide along the curb. It was full of fat mandarins, a gathering of the lords of Chinatown at the Golden River Bazaar.

Kim Wo, Billy's father, is one of the influential Chinese. Perhaps the shooting at Ah Boon's place made this meeting necessary. Every gun fired in Chinatown is

blamed on tong wars. Any coolie taking private and personal vengeance on a fellowman is likely to get the tongs in wrong.

When a uniformed chauffeur opened the limousine door, seven fat mandarins waddled out, five of them wearing ceremonial robes and among them was old Asia Low!

It was four years and more since I'd seen him, but he had not changed. A face like a yellow mask was shortened by a skull cap cutting across his forehead. Winged eyebrows and dark thin lips marked the face in straight slashes. Rumor says he was once a trader among South Sea islands, and that he owns the island named after him where he built a temple for a golden Buddha around whose neck he wanted to hang the Jade Bells. It was a religious urge with him to possess them.

It seemed to me the gods of China signalled a message to me that I was too dumb to understand, but there wasn't a chance of getting speech with him that night.

The mandarins entered the Golden River Bazaar where Kim Wo waited at the rear, wearing his robe and shaking his own hands in greeting as they did also. Then they disappeared rearward. Somewhere in the upper rooms they would have a meeting. But if I could get word to Asia Low that I was looking for the Bells I would be protected from Ah Boon's henchmen until I failed to find them and admitted it.

Back down the alley I went, feeling both walls to find an opening, door or window. It was blacker than bats, and I almost gave up the idea, only I knew fast action was all that would save Jean and me from the cops looking for us. I had to get back to her soon, and there was Strunski's rear door that needed watching. With groping hands I examined the walls as high as I could reach, and at the end of the alley found a black door.

That door might lead to sudden hell. Chinatown is no safer than any other American city where loot is to be found. Warrens wriggle through it just as they did in the beginning. There is only so much ground space, and it is necessary to build

high and dig deep to accommodate its increasing population.

I felt around in the mud and slop underfoot until my hand grasped a broken brick. Then I heaved against the door and found it as rickety as most Chinese contraptions of wood. After the fourth attempt it gave way, making enough noise to rouse Chinatown. I waited for reprisals, but none came. My foot found steps. Flattening my body against the wall in case an upper door should open, I mounted the stairs. The old steps creaked, but no one heard or investigated. At the top was another door and a window in the wall facing California Street. Light blurred its dirty panes of glass.

I tried to lift the sash, which stuck but finally yielded. Leaning out, I saw a wall two feet away with a roof ledge on which I stepped. Reaching across the narrow aperture I managed to walk that narrow ledge to a farther roof and almost lost my bearings. A couple of minutes reconnoitering on the roof brought me to a skylight, which in Chinatown is a sign of a more exclusive store beneath it. It was locked and dark. Hauling the brick from my pocket, I tapped the glass and heard the *clink* as it broke but did not fall. The skylight was covered inside by cloth or paper.

REACHING one hand between jagged splinters of glass, I felt cloth. After removing pieces of glass I unfastened the frame and lifted it. Everything was dark, and at the risk of breaking my neck I hung on the skylight and dropped, not very far. I felt around with my hands; chairs in padded burlap, chests, bales, bundles revealed a storeroom, and I knew it was the Golden River Bazaar.

I crawled over bales in tea matting and felt the walls till I found a door that wasn't locked, though I felt a lot less comfortable than ever in my life. In a second storeroom were more padded, wrapped bundles and furnishings over which I climbed to feel the walls until my arms went through a doorless opening where noises began, the

gabble-gabble of women and children in high-pitched Chinese sounds, Wo Kim's living quarters, his Flowery House. That wouldn't do. I slid over the bales to a space in the center and, taking off my shoes, tied them around my neck. Feeling with my toes, I found an iron ring in the floor, a trap-door.

Believe me, I lifted it cautiously, but there was no light below. A cracked Chinese voice cackled Cantonese. Sneaking down, I stood in a sort of dark entry lighted by a grimed electric bulb dropped from the ceiling on a cord. I had one look at somebody coming up the stair and nearly squawked. By the two holes in her noseless face it could only be Chew See. Her black hair was sleeked from her forehead to a bun on her neck stuck full of jeweled pins that glittered. Behind her came a young and slender figure wrapped head and all in black, but the cloak or shawl or whatever it was fell from her face a little and I caught a glimpse of her.

I don't mind admitting my heart leaped at the sight. I had never seen her before, neither had any other white man this side of the Pacific, unless it might be Bullant; darn few Chinese ever saw her. Her skin was creamy gold, warmed by color like ivory seen through sunset pink. Her black hair fluffed out in sheer sprightly vitality from its severe fashion like black storm clouds touched up with burnished copper gleams. She was half-caste, all right. She was beautiful. And she was scared to death of old Chew See, for which I didn't blame her.

That old horror, infamous in Chinatown, clutched one of the girl's wrists. She spoke to somebody behind a door which they faced. A wicket opened because I saw the gleam of a brighter light bring out the pock-marks in Chew See's cheeks. She yapped some message to the gate-keeper and turned to snap a few words at the girl.

A slender hand in the silver embroidered sleeve of a kingfisher green coat came from the girl's black shawl drape. She took something from inside her coat and dropped it in the reaching yellow claw of

Chew See. The old hag fumbled to thrust whatever it was inside her own coat. And I saw *it*!

I had one flash of green sight, but it was enough. I had one tinkle of elfin sound as the tiny golden clappers struck the perfect bells.

This was the dancing girl from Peng-yang. She was being presented to a gathering of influential mandarins.

And on Chew See's wrinkled bosom were the Jade Bells!

CHAPTER VI.

A FRIENDLY HAND.

AT sight of the Jade Bells, the apparatus with which I do my plain and fancy thinking curled up and quit.

I hardly had a sight of them, the heavy golden links and pure green beauties hanging between. But I had seen old Samuel gloating over their perfection as they lay in his gnarled palm; I had seen Asia Low staring at them as they lay over his tapering yellow fingers, with holy fervor in his eyes. I knew them again.

It did not matter to me how they fell into the hands of Chew See nor why the dancing girl had been wearing them. The proof of my innocence, a decent name for Jean and me lay down in that hall protected only by an old woman, vicious but fairly aged and feeble.

The door-keeper had refused to admit Chew See, and she demanded the Jade Bells from the dancing girl before she was led to gladden the eyes of mandarins.

The door opened and the girl went in alone. Chew See's hand, resting for a moment, began shoving the Bells inside something covering her breast. She walked towards where I was crouching, out of sight of any one coming up the lower stair, and she was so intent on hiding them securely she did not see or hear anything.

Never have I hated worse to touch anything than that old fiend who made money from her possession of Oriental slave girls. I'm no saint, but that was enough without

the repulsive holes where her nose had been bitten off by a girl gone insane from ill-treatment, so Billy Kim once told me.

When she reached the end of the passageway, only a few steps, my hand was curved like a claw. It darted to her neck and squeezed. There wasn't much breath in the old crone after climbing the stairs and being excited over the Bells, but I squeezed half of it from her wind-pipe. Then I groped for the Bells. Her skin was flabby and cold like a snake's scales. But I darted up the steps with the Jade Bells buttoned in an inside pocket, and left her like a chunk of thicker shadow groping at the foot of the steps. I lowered the trap-door and hauled bales on it, piled more of them on top to climb on and reach the upper store-room and repeat the hauling and climbing until I was through the skylight opening and running across the roofs to reach the wall ledge and open window on the last stairway. Not caring to risk that last descent, I hung by my hands and dropped from the window, went through the alley and reached the street.

THE big limousine was gone. Kim Wo was probably having an all night party. By the church tower clock it was twelve-eighteen. You can cover a lot of ground in two hours when dodging death in only three or four city blocks of down town San Francisco.

The Jade Bells were the biggest responsibility I had ever carried. If I was taken with them in my pocket I'd go up for twenty years as a second time loser without the murder in my shack and Jean's suspected stabbing of the taxi driver counted or reckoned with. George Bullant would laugh if that happened. George Bullant! I wondered if he were still waiting in the rain, and how he would have liked to be caught with the Jade Bells in his pocket.

There was an idea for retribution. He had worked cleverly to have me sent over. I wasted three or four minutes standing in the dark alley considering vengeance. And when I was ready to saunter into the street, Billy Kim was standing in the Bazaar look-

ing at a magazine lying open on a glass showcase.

Billy has a sneaking fondness for movie magazines. I wished I had another shot of courage from the blue stone jar with its proverb about the rat in the bin and woman on the street; pretty wise people, these Chinese, regarding their philosophies that take the place of our ancient heaven and hell.

George Bullant was a rat in Strunski's bin. Chew See was on the street. I wondered if she had regained enough breath by this time to raise an alarm in the upper passageway. If so the alley was perilous ground for me and the Jade Bells. I began to wonder if Billy would take care of them for me. There had been a reward offered for their recovery by a big insurance company when first they disappeared. Probably it still stood. Billy might restore them and collect. He spent money freely on roof gardens, expensive tailors and speed fines while driving.

Ducking into the alley, I hammered on the wooden shutter. He heard it, and a minute later was opening it and giving me a hand to crawl inside the Golden River Bazaar office.

"How's chances for a little more 'rat in the bin'?" I asked. Billy closed the shutter and went into the store where he locked the front door and switched off the lights. Returning, he offered me cigarettes and filled the little liquor cups.

"I'd like to telephone," I said, taking up the desk phone as he nodded assent. I wanted to hear news from Jean. Mother Villiston answered the call so quickly that I knew she was camping near her telephone.

"How's Jean?" I asked.

"Nobody by that name is here," she snapped. "I'm tired of saying so. I ain't got a hired girl at all. The one I did give a day's work to didn't like my place and she left. I don't know where she went."

Her information, deliberately worded, jolted me.

"This is Jack. Can't you speak out?" I pleaded.

"I can't help that, she ain't here," came back to me, followed by a bang of the receiver. I almost slumped. The cops had crowded Mother Villiston so close she had got rid of Jean and she was afraid of spies in her own house by the way she spoke. She dared not risk information to me over the wire. All the spunk oozed out of me. I grabbed the cup of "courage."

"Billy," I said, "I know where we can get the Jade Bells. More than that, if you'll do me one favor I'll get them and hand them to you to do with as you please. My girl has disappeared. I don't dare ask questions, and I've got to find her. Help me find her and I'll lead you to the Bells. I don't give a damn about them any more."

FROM that hour Billy Kim, already prejudiced favorably towards me, was my friend; in fact, he wouldn't let me out of his sight. He said we would start out in his car and we went through the alley window, which clicked behind us, automatically locked. He unlocked a door in the farther wall which led into another alley boring through the block to a street where his car was parked in a public garage. The car, a slinky but powerful roadster, glided out with us and speeded down the street, turning corners that led us by the back way to Mother Villiston's house.

The rear door was unlocked, but she had heard the car and opened it as I came quietly up the steps. It was pitch black and I saw only the bulk of her figure.

"It's Jack," I whispered. "Where is she?"

"My God, I don't know. I had one of my boys, Sidney Johnny, keeping watch, and he said the cops were headed this way. She got scared and went to look for you. I couldn't stop her."

"But where would she go looking for me?"

"I don't know. Try your own house. She mentioned that, and said she was the only one that knew where you lived."

It was enough to send me back to the car, which purred away as I leaped for it.

"Alameda next," I said to Billy.

"But that means crossing on the ferry," he objected. "I know a quicker way than waiting. Anyway, it's after twelve. The Alameda boat has stopped running for tonight." He was speeding toward Hunter's Point, which lies across the narrow southern end of San Francisco Bay almost opposite Alameda.

By day along here the fishboats painted blue sway on the Bay waters, coils of brown fish-net lend atmosphere and old men sit mending them with wooden needles and twine. There are stands that sell shrimp and crab cocktails, fish soup, oysters and Dago Red; coffee, too.

Billy Kim dickered with one of the fishermen to take me across the Bay in his boat and he paid the ten dollars requested. I hadn't the money. It took time because the tide was turning and the fisherman was all set to go out to the nets. Billy said he'd wait on the wharf with his car.

The fishboats are fast and have powerful engines, yet that one seemed slow to me on that night as she chugged across the black water towards the Alameda beach. The water wasn't deep enough for her to get nearer than two hundred feet from shore, so I took off my shoes and socks, rolled up my pants and waded in the direction of my own shack. Coming near it I saw the curtain blowing in and out of the window and I remembered closing the window before I left that morning. I wasn't likely to forget a single movement of my own that day.

THEN, without apparent reason, the curtain ceased wagging to and fro.

Something or some one was holding it steady, having heard me splashing towards the bulkhead ladder. It might be a cop, but if so he'd have a gun aimed at me and I was caught anyway. I risked it.

"Honey," I called softly.

The curtains parted. Her little white face was between them and she didn't wait for me to give further directions. Jean was out of the window running to the ladder, and I took her on my shoulder and waded out. I had my girl again!

Where to take her, what to do with her, I didn't know, and I was carrying the Jade Bells, a load that would make the Old Man of the Sea a mere featherweight. The boat chugged across the Bay while I hugged her close and tried to think and plan ahead. She was too tired to ask questions, and I didn't offer information, because Tony at the engine could hear, and he must have wondered what was doing anyway.

But Billy was waiting for us and I introduced Jean.

"Billy," I said, "where can this little lady stay while you and I ring those well known Bells?"

Jean was clinging to my arm, all in, and I was pretty near the same.

"I wonder if Tony could take her to his house?" Billy suggested. We decided to ask Tony, but he declined. He said stealing a girl from a window didn't look so good to him. Anyway it was too late for him to wake his family by bringing home a young lady and not being able to say why he had a visitor. Besides, he was going out to lift his nets. The herrings were running fine. He would have been there by now if he hadn't take that trip to Alameda.

"Take me fishing with you," cried Jean. "I'd like that. I'd feel so safe on the water . . ."

"No-no-no-no," began Tony, but Billy Kim held out a twenty-dollar bill. The triple-tongued negatives ceased immediately.

I lifted Jean into the boat and kissed her.

"I'll be waiting here when the boat comes in, honey," I promised recklessly. "We'll find a preacher right away. By that time all this fuss will be over. Billy Kim is helping me straighten it all out."

"But the Bells," she whispered.

"I'll have them too. Honest, Jean."

And she trusted me enough to laugh softly. I hated to let her go but she vanished into Tony's cabin and I wished I was going with her. The distant clock bell struck two before Tony shoved out and

started his engine and Billy and I went to his car.

"I HAD time to think while I waited for you," he began. "When a man wants to conceal something very valuable he might give it to his woman if he cares for her. That would happen among my people. The Jade Bells were stolen and never found. When you came from San Quentin you were watched immediately to see if you had hidden them and would resurrect them again. That happened in Ah Boon's. You were seen with your girl and she was followed. The driver of the taxi she was riding in was stabbed by some one from Ah Boon's restaurant; perhaps two men were following her in a car after they heard you give the taxi driver her address and they reached the taxi when it stopped for the street car to pass.

"Now I think both those men went to your Alameda house where one of them, a Chinese, was stabbed by the same man who stabbed the taxi driver, William Moore."

I agreed entirely. Billy Kim's college education gives him the advantage of mental training and concentration that I lack. But from that point in his argument he was wrong, because I got the Bells from Chew See, and he figured that Bullant had given them to Madame Olga.

"I think," he went on, "that Bullant was waiting until you were out of prison to plant the Bells on you and have them found on your person, which would look as if you had stolen them first, hid them securely, and dug them out when you were free to dispose of them. Now who is this man who stabbed William Moore and the Chinese in your house, who evidently followed your girl from Ah Boon's?"

"I wish to God I knew," was my helpful reply. "It's still as clear as mud. His picture was snapped by the news reporters, which I had forgotten among other things until this moment. Billy, get that picture. It must be in the papers, but the taxi stabbing got the front page, and I didn't look at any other page all day!"

That slip of memory had complicated

everything, but I did have a busy day and considerable worry. Billy pulled up at the first news-stand and asked for yesterday's papers. Our luck had turned. They were sold out except one the kid had used to cover his fresh stock from the rain. We opened the water-soaked sheet and found the item by the dashboard light of his car.

There it was, somebody else's picture, but my name attached to it, "Jack Duncan, who tried to rescue a woman supposedly jumping in the Bay to commit suicide, off Pier Forty-seven."

I knew that face. I had seen it yesterday afternoon in the driveway of Madame Olga's garage. The owner of it had been washing her car.

Billy Kim knew him also. The man had driven Madame Olga in her car to the Golden River Bazaar, not once, but many times. Neither of us had figured Olga in on the hectic recent events. I merely hated her on general principles for helping to frame me, because there was no doubt her evidence at my trial clinched the case against me. But why in thunder had she started her chauffeur on my trail and Jean's?

Olga had been robbed last night. Surely she didn't think I was the burglar on that occasion also. She knew I had not taken the Jade Bells in the first place. She and Bullant were preparing the case against me six months before it happened.

If this chauffeur of hers was the man who stabbed the taxi driver, he was in San Francisco at midnight, miles away from Olga's house in Piedmont, an hour's time by ferry even with a car. But since I had the Bells now, who stole them from Olga, if she had possessed them?

I gave up the puzzle.

CHAPTER VII.

TRAIL'S END.

MADAME OLGA'S chauffeur was the key to the whole business. We need only locate him, which was out of the question at this hour of the

morning. And I wanted to know how George Bullant was getting along, and if he still waited at Strunski's Importing House. I had explained it to Billy Kim, and now I reminded him about Bullant.

Billy was full of bright ideas that made me respect his intellect.

"Suppose I telephone Strunski's and speak Cantonese. I can pass for Ah Boon. I know that coolie's lingo." And Billy Kim spat to the wind his opinion of the low-born Ah Boon.

We stopped the car before a quiet hotel and Billy went inside. He came out with the corners of his mouth nicked in a smile and leaped into the car.

"The Strunski telephone line is busy, which means the store is not deserted. Bullant is there," he said.

By the clock in his car it was nearly three. Old Samuel Strunski would have a seizure if he knew what was happening in his store at that hour of a wet morning.

The car shot over wet pavements and through misty rain which blurred the street lights. Chinatown had mostly gone to bed. The festival was over. Billy Kim pulled up in front of the Mandarin Café some distance from the Golden River Bazaar.

"We'll leave the car here," he said, which was good policy. I'd rather walk any day when possible than risk his driving. "Let's stroll over and see who was using the Strunski telephone."

We walked as quietly as possible without appearing too suspicious, down California to the Stockton Street tunnel and through it to the alley behind Strunski's. It was as black as ever in the alley. Billy walked through to the other end, but I halted at Strunski's rear door and tried it carefully. It was open about two inches, a heavy door through which truckloads of goods were brought, rolling on overhead wheels. In my time the door creaked as it rolled. But when I flattened both hands and shoved, it moved silently. The wheels had been well oiled. Shoving it another ten inches I was through. Billy Kim would guess I was inside, but it no longer mattered.

Voices sounded in the office behind the lowered shades, low, cautious voices, but tones that let me know two men were having a showdown and losing their tempers over it. I recognized the voice of George Bullant as one.

"You stand there and tell me that you're not in with that crook?" he demanded.

"You know damned well I ain't," said the other. "What's more, if ever I meet up with this bird you call a crook I'm willing to mention who had the Bells while he was keepin' step over the Bay."

Keeping step over the Bay! San Quentin! Myself! And they say eavesdroppers never heard anything that does them any good!

"What about being with this girl on the wharf and getting your picture in the paper as Jack Duncan?"

"That's easy explained. The minute the Bells were missing last night, Olga sent me scouting for you at Ah Boon's. I saw Duncan and his girl there. When he put her in the taxi I figured she had the Bells for safe-keeping. Shop-girls and convicts don't pay for taxis without some good reason."

"So you followed and stabbed the taxi driver . . ."

There it was, just as Billy Kim had figured! If only I could make this chauffeur talk to the police. But he wouldn't admit anything for fear he'd swing for murder.

I MISSED a little of their talk, but it flared up louder again:

"... Ah Boon figured the same way I did. His man got to Duncan's shack in Alameda ahead of me and hunted, but he didn't find the Bells. I tell you that girl must have them right now. Find her and you find them. Duncan probably gave them to her the same as you gave them to Olga long ago—"

"Shut your face!" yelled Bullant.

"Not till you hand over what you promised. It ain't my fault I didn't find the Bells. You know they couldn't be found. Ah Boon knows it, too. And if I don't get the money you promised, Asia Low

and Strunski are goin' to know. I've kept quiet so far. I even went on that bum steer after Duncan and his girl because I believed what you said about Duncan diggin' up the Bells the minute he got out of prison.

"I'll tell you somethin' more. Ah Boon knows you slipped them to Chew See to get that Pengyang dancing girl. And if Olga hears about that she'll know where the Bells went last night on that little necking party you staged in her room before the big party downstairs got started. She was pretty drunk, but I'll remind her of a few things. You haven't been any too lovin' to her lately, since you got that dancin' girl on the brain. She'll believe me when I tell her you traded the Bells for the cast-off women of Chinks that old Chew See peddles to the highest bidder. She'll know . . ."

I was wondering how George Bullant managed to hold his temper. His voice was dangerously cool for safety to anybody. I knew all I needed about the mystery of the Bells, even to Bullant trading them to Chew See for the girl, and that old crone going to the gathering of mandarins to ask protection from the gunmen of On Wing Low who was liable to kill her for double crossing him.

It was quite a mess. And it was late in the morning, after three o'clock. George Bullant seemed to be sparring for time by keeping on talking and letting Olga's chauffeur insult him. I grew uneasy. There had been a telephone call on this line. The back door was open. I knew Bullant well enough to realize his ability to plot and watch and wait for results.

It wasn't safe for me in that store, and I went silently to the rear door. Billy Kim was there.

"Let's get out," he said. "Some one is coming."

I didn't inquire who it was or how he knew. I dug into an inner pocket and poked the Bells into his hand.

"If I get out alive I'll see you to-morrow," I said. "If anything happens to me, share what you get with my girl."

A 5—5

Billy Kim could negotiate with Asia Low though I could not. I had to stick around and prove to everybody that I was not a thief.

No sooner was I inside the rear door again when I heard sounds from beyond the show-room. In the office there was a noisy row, with both men yelling and cursing each other, hurling epithets, with Bullant doing most of the yelling, calling the other man a liar.

I went past the office which was between the ware-room and the show-room, and at the front door I saw a commotion. A key was fitted in the lock and turned.

It took all my nerve to do what I did. The odds were against me. If I was found in the store I was supposed to have robbed, who was going to believe my story?

AS the big door swung open I stepped into the light from the street that was reflected against a long Chinese mirror in a carved frame. A flashlight snapped on and its light wandered to my feet and then to my face, blinding me. But I heard the guttural voice of old Samuel Strunski, and I'd have known it anywhere.

"Hands up!" said another voice. My hands went up, but I talked fast.

"Don't make a noise. Just listen a minute to that talk in the office," I begged.

A cop's gun rested against my ribs while they listened. From the yelling and cursing some sentences came clear:

"Damn you, haven't I seen Olga wear those Bells in bed time after time when she rang for me to bring booze or cigarettes up to her? She was scared to wear them in company, but she was so nutty about them she wore them to bed every night of the four years after you give them to her. What if I tell that to the cops?"

"You'd have to explain about stabbing the taxi driver and letting a girl take the blame," sneered Bullant.

Lord, it was good to hear them spilling one detail after another until old Samuel stepped nearer to me, and with his wrinkled hand gently lifted the cop's gun so it point-

ed at the ceiling. His hand was shaking as it reached for mine and pulled it down inside his fingers.

"I'll be responsible for him," he said gently. "You go and arrest Bullant and his friend." And the old voice cracked on a high note that carried to the office during a lull.

There came a yelp from that direction and the door burst open.

"You dirty, lousy, double crossing—" came from Olga's chauffeur, cut short by a gun-shot and his screech.

Old Samuel slumped so heavily against me I had to hold him upright on his feet, and couldn't move to follow the cops to the office. It was dark now, but their flash-lights showed Olga's chauffeur pitched forward on the floor at the open door. He was moaning as Bullant stepped out of the office, pompous and cocky as ever, saying:

"This is the reason I asked you to come down, Mr. Strunski, and bring police officers. I suspected this man of pilfering here, and I managed to hold him till you came . . ."

One of them grabbed Bullant, while the others bent over the wounded man, who had strength enough to talk. They took down what he said in a notebook, and when he slowed down they sent for an ambulance.

He died on the way to the hospital, but he had fixed Bullant.

All I could do was lead old Samuel to a seat and hang on to him while I told what I knew about the mess. The dying man had paraded the whole company by his words, Olga with the Bells these four years, Bullant taking them from her and giving them to Chew See for the Pengyang girl, Ah Boon and Bullant using the store to peddle snow, the taxi stabbing and the stabbing at my house.

I saw Billy Kim the next day. Asia Low paid him five thousand dollars, which he split with me. Samuel took me on again as his head clerk, and said it was because he needed some one he could trust, the highest compliment I ever had except Jean's love. He came to our wedding, and so did Billy and Asia Low, a strange wedding party for Jean, who was christened an Episcopalian and married in the Paulist church with Samuel, who is Jewish, and Asia Low, who says his prayers to Buddha, looking on.

At our wedding supper in Chinatown, Asia Low handed the Jade Bells to Samuel Strunski. But my old boss loved them a little with his hands and eyes and gave them back to the mandarin.

"It ain't goin' to be very long I'm here," he said. "And I'd be glad to know they were where they belong. Let us both restore the Bells to the temple and maybe the gods will give us peace for the gift through the remaining days left to us."

THE END

A Freak Star

ONE of astronomy's queerest museum pieces is a star near Sirius, the Dog Star, the brightest in our heavens. Years past the men at the telescopes noticed that Sirius does not move in as orderly a fashion as it should, and they concluded that a near-by star must pull it out of line. In time a ray of light was found to show that such a star was there.

Strangely the "Faint Companion," as they called the newly discovered, gave but a tiny glimmer of light in proportion to the weight it must have. It must, therefore, be small but heavy. It is now accepted as fact that the material of this "Faint Companion" weighs 61,000 times as much as water. One teaspoonful of it would weigh a ton.

J. W. Holden.