

The Chambers of Tranquillity

A MYSTERIOUS TRAGEDY IN THE CHINATOWN OF SAN FRANCISCO

By Clarence A. Locan and Lemuel L. De Bra

LEE FONG KWUCK, diminutive and veteran waiter at the Hang Far Low, had cleared away the empty chop suey dishes from before the Eastern tourists who had made San Francisco's Chinatown and its bizarre sights their program for the night, had pocketed his tip—and then had bethought himself of real business again. In the rush of waiting on the tourists he had forgotten for the nonce the special party in the back room—the queer, mysterious group of old Chinese who yearly gathered to enjoy a banquet that took four days to prepare and almost a whole night to consume.

Fearful that the old men would be displeased at not receiving enough attention, Lee Fong Kwuck donned his most apologetic and propitiatory smile and glided swiftly and silently down the hall to the "special room."

Later—only about three flaps of a slipper later—a terrified Lee Fong Kwuck was clinging to the edge of the stained counter and shouting incoherent Cantonese at old Lim Ben, the proprietor. Three flaps after that, Lim Ben, despite his rheumatism, had reached the middle of Grant Avenue and was blowing blast after blast on his police whistle.

Darwood, of the Chinatown plain-clothes squad, reached the scene, pried Lim Ben away from the whistle, and, after shaking him several times, managed to get a few words of sense out of the frightened old man. Then the officer dashed into the restaurant. Up the stairs he went, three steps at a time, down the hall, into the "special room"—and out again.

A moment later he had headquarters on the phone. Lee Fong Kwuck and Lim Ben waited breathlessly.

"That you, captain? Darwood speaking. Well, there's a funny thing here at

the Hang Far Low—five Chinks in a back room sitting around a table, natural as life—and every one dead as a mackerel!"

II

DETECTIVE Barney Dodds never could fathom the doings of the Chinese, he remarked during the brief trip from the Hall of Justice to Chinatown, as he and his "sidekick," Marty O'Brien, speculated on the queer tale that had just come over the wire. Doc Zeig, the autopsy surgeon—who happened to be in the hall, and so took time by the forelock and came along—added to this fund of general misinformation the positive statement that Bret Harte was right about the "heathen Chinese." He further opined that there would probably be a tong war over the reported tragedy, whatever had happened.

While the doctor was casting an expert eye over the bodies—picking up an eyelid on one and marking the coloration, testing another for rigidity, and otherwise investigating—the detectives seized on the frightened waiter and the jabbering proprietor of the restaurant.

Squadman Darwood, however, had already gleaned from them all they knew, or cared to tell—which is vastly different, but amounts to the same thing so far as any foreign devil policeman is concerned.

It seemed that the men dined but once a year at the Hang Far Low. No, it wasn't a tong. Judging by the family names that Lee Fong Kwuck had overheard mentioned at table, the old men, if they belonged to any tong, would represent several opposing factions; but the veteran waiter had never overheard much. The diners almost invariably fell silent as soon as he came within hearing distance.

Only five had come that night; but originally there had been ten. This Lee Fong

Kwuck and Lim Ben could recall easily; for, although death had apparently taken several of the original members, always ten places were set. Food and drink were served in generous portions at each of the vacant places. Lee Fong Kwuck always thought this very queer; but there was about these old men something that discouraged curiosity.

As far back as Lee Fong Kwuck and Lim Ben could remember, these old men had come each year to their banquet. Accompanied by the necessary sum of money—which, by the way, was always in gold—there would be the order to prepare the food, the choicest viands imported from China. Then, shortly after dark, the men would begin to arrive at the restaurant; shortly before dawn they would leave. Neither Lee Fong Kwuck, nor old Lim Ben, nor any one else around the Hang Far Low, knew whence they came or whither they vanished.

"Every year him come," explained Lim Ben for the tenth time. "Have fine dinner—go away. Pay much money, and eat and drink all night. Every year, not so much member—him die. To-night, only five. To-morrow—no more dinner. Lose much money!"

"Bah!" remarked Barney.

Doc Zeig, meanwhile, had finished his examination of the five bodies. Frankly, he was stumped. Pressed by the detectives, he merely shook his head and frowned. He had a reputation to maintain, and he didn't propose to take chances. There were indications of poisoning, and others that contradicted them.

When, later, the autopsy, and a careful analysis of all the food on the table, including the tea and a small jar of Chinese wine, failed to show a trace of any known poison, Doc Zeig was glad he had kept silent.

The detectives went over the ground again, but found nothing in the way of evidence. Very carefully they looked over the few Chinese who had been dining in the restaurant. Then, seeing no reason for holding them, the officers cleared them out of the place.

That's how Detective Barney Dodds happened to spy Juey Loy.

Juey Loy was the star reporter on the *Chinese Herald*, Chinatown's great newspaper. He was a graduate of the University of California, had worked on an Oak-

land daily, and knew the newspaper game from both the Chinese and the American angle.

The detectives knew Juey, liked the young man, and trusted him. They promptly haled him before Lee Fong Kwuck and old Lim Ben, and told him to follow his natural inclinations.

Juey had the advantage, of course, of having understood perfectly everything that had been said in English. Now, in rapid-fire Cantonese, he began questioning and cross-questioning the waiter and the proprietor of the restaurant. At the conclusion, he turned to the detectives, shook his head in perplexity, and remarked in his precise college English:

"I am quite sure, gentlemen, that these men have told you truthfully all that they know about this mysterious and unfortunate affair."

Baffled, and not a little disgusted, the detectives rang for the black wagon. They threw a police guard around the Hang Far Low. Lest a tong war should break out, they ordered an extra detail into Chinatown. Then, on general principles, they arrested little Lee Fong Kwuck, the waiter, and old Lim Ben, the proprietor. And the newspapers got out extras.

III

For about the time that it takes to make the three times three bows before one's ancestral tablets, Juey Loy stood by the curb and watched with narrowed eyes the motley throng that had gathered in front of the Hang Far Low. Then he turned down Grant Avenue and walked rapidly until he came to the stairway that led up to the home of Gar Feng, the august writer of letters.

Gar Feng was an old man, versed in the "Five Books" and the "Five Classics," and a learned Confucian scholar. He earned his rice by writing letters for his less literate countrymen. He knew everybody and everything in the Chinese quarter. He liked Juey Loy, notwithstanding the young man's adopted American ways. When he could do so without breaking a trust, he willingly gave the reporter much valuable information, besides much equally valuable advice.

Juey found Gar Feng sitting before a teakwood desk, reading a yellowed copy of the "Analects of Kung-foo-tsze," and munching at a bowl of Shensi almonds. As

Juey entered, Gar Feng arose, clasped his hands over his stomach, and bowed stiffly from the hips.

"*Hoo la ma!*" he exclaimed in guttural Cantonese. "How do you do, Juey Loy?"

Juey had formed the American habit of discarding the proprieties and getting right down to business. While he told his story, Gar Feng sat with half closed eyes, his hands again clasped over his stomach—which, as any one knows, is the seat of wisdom.

"Did you say there were five?" he inquired, when Juey had finished.

"That is correct, sir scholar."

"Recite to me their august surnames."

"The names," said Juey, reading from notes he had made, "are Leong Soo, Jai Man, Lee Woh, Kang Yuen, and Look Ying."

Gar Feng, in a sibilant whisper, repeated the names after the reporter. When he had finished, the old scholar's long eyes widened for an instant. Then, slowly, the lids drew down over the bronze pupils like shades over windows. He bowed his head.

"The Chambers of Tranquillity!" he murmured in tuneful Cantonese, as if speaking to himself. "Ah, by the nine heavens, where is justice? Where, oh, Eye of Heaven, where is justice?"

"Sir, you speak in riddles," remarked Juey Loy, politely.

Gar Feng started, as if, for the moment, he had forgotten his guest.

"But I speak," he said. "You should be thankful for the riddle." He closed his eyes again for a moment, and then looked up at the young man. "Come to me at this hour three days hence, and you shall receive the answer, Juey Loy."

"Three days! Why not to-night, sir scholar?"

"In three days," repeated Gar Feng. "Will you accept tea?"

The offer of the parting cup of tea, Juey Loy knew well, was merely a polite way of reminding him that he should be on his way. He arose, and bowed.

"I will be here, venerable Gar Feng. *Ho hang la!*"

"Walk slowly, Juey Loy!"

Two doors below, in a darkened stairway, Juey Loy paused to consider what he had heard. His meditations brought him nowhere. He was about to light another cigarette and pass on, when he chanced to see Gar Feng. The old letter-

writer was hurrying down Grant Avenue as fast as his age would permit.

Juey Loy followed, keeping at a discreet distance behind. A few minutes later he saw Gar Feng enter a building on Stockton Street—a three-story brick structure bearing a huge perpendicular sign whose gilt and crimson ideographs proclaimed it as the home of the Benevolent Association of the Four Friends.

Wondering much, Juey Loy took up a station in a doorway across the street, and waited. The Benevolent Association of the Four Friends, he knew, was not a tong; it was an organization composed of prominent members of four friendly tongs. Its object was to look out for the welfare of the Chinese, regardless of tong affiliations. It also performed other duties, occasionally; but concerning these Juey Loy, being, after all, Chinese, knew much but said and wrote nothing.

Not long after Gar Feng had disappeared within the great doors of the brick building, two Chinese hurried out. They wore black satin blouses and felt hats. Juey Loy recognized both men at once; and to his curiosity was added something akin to alarm.

Quietly he stepped out of the doorway to follow; but there he stopped. He suddenly recalled Gar Feng's words, his promise. Gar Feng wanted him to wait three days; and Gar Feng always knew what was best.

Well, he would wait.

IV

ON the third night following, Juey Loy sat by the side of Gar Feng in the secret council chambers of the Benevolent Association of the Four Friends.

To Juey there was nothing unusual or bizarre in the surroundings. He had seen such chambers before—the softly gleaming teakwood furniture, the fantastically garbed Chinese sitting in a semicircle before a raised altar, the walls made practically soundproof with gorgeously embroidered Cantonese tapestries.

On the altar, covered with strips of white linen—white being the Chinese symbol of mourning—lay the bodies of the five old men who had passed away so mysteriously at the Hang Far Low. Following the verdict of the coroner's jury—that the men had died from natural causes brought on by their advanced age—the waiter and old

Lim Ben had been released, and the five bodies had been turned over to the Benevolent Association of the Four Friends for burial.

At the muffled sound of a gong, sibilant whispers stopped quickly, and a hush fell over the assembly. Behind the altar the curtains parted. A gowned Chinese, with the severe countenance and dignified mien of a Buddhist priest, walked slowly past the white row of the dead, to the center of the altar. Juey recognized him as Bow Tsue, the president of the association, and a man of power in Chinatown.

"Our people to-day are fortunate," began Bow Tsue, in the harsh singsong of one who recites a speech he has memorized. "They do not realize the hardships, the sufferings, the deprivations, endured by those who first came to this land of the white foreign devil. To-day there is work for all, profitable business for all, money and food for all. Every one can be as well fed as a pig at a marriage feast."

No one smiled at this remark, for that would have been very impolite indeed. All waited, respectfully silent.

"Because they were always hungry in China," Bow Tsue went on, raising his voice, "our ancestors crossed the Four Seas to this strange land, where men speak a strange language and follow after strange customs. Here they became servants of the white foreign devils. For them they tilled the fields, worked in the mines, washed soiled laundry, and did other menial tasks. The pay was very poor, the work very hard; and often, after the Festival of the Harvests, they had scarcely enough left to keep them alive during the winter until work began again with the coming of spring.

"You and I and all of us of this generation have heard these things from the lips of our august parents, and we know that they are true; but I am going to tell you to-night how certain of these old countrymen of ours, with more wisdom in their stomachs than gold in their purses, planned to cheat poverty and the terrors of a starving old age.

"There were ten of them. They met one night, after the harvests, at a restaurant, and there they ate and drank and made merry, knowing that it would be their last feast for many months. When the night had passed, and it was nearing the hour of morning rice, these ten men, over

their cups of *mui kwei lo*, agreed that so long as they had, they would share with any of their number who had not. If any one of them became ill, the others would provide medicine. Should one die, the others would share the cost of a suitable funeral, including the purchase of a coffin and its transportation across the sea to the burial ground of the deceased's parents and ancestors.

"In order that there might be funds when required, each member agreed to pay a certain sum each month he worked; and this money was given into the care of one appointed as the keeper of the fund. From this fund hungry members would be fed, sick members would be cared for, those who had ascended the dragon would be properly buried; and each year the remaining members would meet one night, to eat and drink and be of merry countenance.

"When they had agreed to all this, they placed in the center of the table a bowl of wine. Each member in turn arose and let a few drops of blood from his wrist, which fell and mingled with the wine. Then all were served; and, touching the wine to their lips, each took the oath of the crimson wine that he would never break faith with his blood brothers.

"Because they now no longer feared the approach of old age when none could work, because they were assured of a proper resting place for their bones after death, they named their organization the 'Chambers of Tranquillity.'

"Because these men were suspicious of the white foreign devils, fearing their secret fund would be stolen, and—I say it with shame—because they were also suspicious of us of the younger generation, they kept this matter as much a secret as possible. Few of us to-day knew of the society, or could name more than two or three of its members.

"Thus having prepared for death, the old men found that for many years death passed them by. Finally, when only six of the original ten remained, and no one of these was able to work, it was found that the fund they had accumulated was rapidly being exhausted. With heaven-born wisdom, they agreed to set aside the sum necessary to purchase six coffins, with other necessary charges, including shipping back to Canton. Then, when the remainder was about gone, they would hold a final banquet and eat and drink and congratulate

each other on a peaceful life, after which each would drink of the essence of dissolving death, and so pass serenely from the Chambers of Tranquillity into the courts of the dead."

Bow Tsue moved to one side of the altar, and again Juey Loy heard a muffled gong. Behind the altar the curtains parted, and four Chinese entered, bearing a coffin. Turning back the white linen covering, they gently placed one of the corpses within the casket.

"That is Jai Man," said Bow Tsue. "Born third year, Hwang Ling, second month, tenth day. May his bones grow yellow with generations of peace!"

Then the lid was closed and sealed. This casket was removed, and another brought, and again Bow Tsue spoke briefly while another of the old men was laid away in the coffin purchased with their secret fund.

When this had been done five times, and the altar cleared of its burden, Juey Loy turned to Gar Feng and started to arise; but the old letter-writer frowned and motioned for silence.

Once more a gong sounded; and at once, from somewhere in the hall behind the assembly, Juey Loy heard the soft *slff-slff* of slipped feet. Since it would be the height of impropriety to look around, Juey, like the others, waited.

Two Chinese, whom Juey recognized as the two he had seen leave the building shortly after Gar Feng had entered, approached the altar. Between them, each holding to one of his arms, was an old Chinese. He was neither bound nor gagged, but he seemed helpless and paralyzed with terror. The two men were obliged to lift him up to the altar. There he was turned to face the gathering.

"This," said Bow Tsue, "is Wah Sin—born second year, Hwang Ling, fourth month, seventh day. Wah Sin," he went on, without the slightest trace of emotion, "is the sixth remaining of the original ten in the Chambers of Tranquillity. He was the trusted keeper of the fund. From him I learned much of what I have told you to-night. From him, also, I heard how, overcome by greed, he renounced the solemn oath of the crimson wine, and how, that he might revel for a few years with the whole of their fund, he slew his five companions."

Juey Loy, despite his Chinese blood, started sharply. Gar Feng quickly laid a

bony hand on the young man's arm and enjoined silence.

"A letter had been written and signed by the six remaining members, explaining about the fund and its use," Bow Tsue continued. "This letter, and the remainder of the gold, Wah Sin was to bring to me on the evening of the final banquet, so that we could attend to the purchase of the coffins and their transportation back to the Middle Kingdom. Then Wah Sin was to join his companions, carrying with him the essence of dissolving death, which he had obtained from China. Of this all six were to drink, so that they would pass together into the courts of the dead.

"On that night, shortly after the hour of evening rice, Wah Sin called on Leong Soo and gave him a jar of the wine called dew of roses, and urged Leong to see that all drank and made merry without waiting for Wah Sin, who might arrive late. This they did.

"As you may know, this Chinese poison, distilled from the wings of the dragon, not only slays quickly, but, exposed to the air, it evaporates in a few minutes and leaves not a trace. That is why the foreign devil chemists did not learn that into the jar of wine he gave Leong, this man, Wah Sin, had already placed the essence of dissolving death."

There was a moment of silence; then again the gong sounded. Behind the altar the curtains parted, and the four Chinese entered.

Between them, slowly and solemnly, they bore—the sixth coffin.

V

LEE FONG KWUCK, the diminutive waiter at the Hang Far Low, cleared the empty dishes from before his distinguished patrons and refilled their bowls with the steaming Souchong.

"That was justice," admitted Juey Loy in cautious Cantonese, when the waiter had gone. "Nevertheless, I think they should have given him opium, or something."

"Elaie-e!" whispered Gar Feng, widening his long eyes. "That would have been very wicked. The letter instructed us to purchase six caskets, place the six remaining members therein, and ship them back to Canton. That Wah Sin was still alive was annoying, of course; but we could not let that trifling matter interfere with our fraternal duty."

The Man Hunt

A ROMANCE OF NEW YORK AND THE CHESAPEAKE

By Hulbert Footner

Author of "Thieves' Wit," "Country Love," etc.

XVII

PEN scampered across the porch, and into the house, closing and locking the door behind her. Her whole being hung on the agonizing question, was he there? She ran back through the hall into the kitchen. In the dark depths of the house her hands served her for eyes, she knew it so well.

Her hand went unerringly to the knob of the door that gave on the cellar stairs. She ran down. At the foot of the stairs an agony of apprehension constricted her throat. She could not speak aloud.

"Don!" she gasped.

From out of the dark came the answering whisper:

"Pen!"

In the ecstasy of relief that flooded her, Pen lost her grip on reality for a moment. Her knees gave under her. She sank down in a heap on the earthen floor.

Don sought all around for her in the dark.

"Pen! Pen!" he whispered urgently.

He stumbled against her. He gathered her up and held her against him. She clung around his neck in a sort of desperation. The warmth of him, the ripple of muscle under his cotton shirt, the strong rise of his breast against hers, all seemed to pour a new life into her. He was very real!

"Oh, my darling!" she whispered. "Oh, Heavens, what a day!"

"Something has happened?" he said.

In her relief, she felt a little light-headed.

"A few things!" she giggled.

"Tell me."

"I will. Let's get out of this hole."

"Is it safe?"

"My dear! Did you think I was going to store you among the potatoes?"

"I'll carry you up."

"No, I'm all right again. I must lead you."

She pulled him after her toward the stairs. She made no allowance for his unfamiliarity with the place, and he fell over the bottom step with a clatter. Don went rigid. Pen laughed as women do in the dark.

"Clumsy!" she whispered.

In the kitchen he asked for water. She led him to the pail, and held the dipper to his lips. They both drank like hard-driven horses, and sighed with refreshment. Then she led him up the back stairs.

At the top she left him for a moment, while she blew out the lamps in the back rooms. When they got to the main upper hall, through the transom over Pendleton's door they heard a sound like a saw being drawn very slowly through rotten wood. It started Pen off again. She hastily pulled Don into her room, and, closing her door, smothered her laughter in his neck.

That set him going. They quivered and rocked with suppressed laughter. They finally sank down on a sofa, weak, but immensely refreshed. There is nothing like laughter.

"What room is this?" whispered Don.

"My room."

"Oh, Pen!" he murmured.

"Don't you like being here?"

He drew her hard against his side.

"Oh, Pen! I can't tell you how it makes me feel!"

"What more natural refuge could you have, dear?"

"But where are you going to keep me, Pen?" he asked.