

SHADOW

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CAREFULLY, CAUTIOUSLY, WITH HIS FULL FORCE OF UNDERWORLD SPIES DID TAO, THE CHINESE FENCE, KEEP AN EYE ON THE NEWEST RECRUIT AMONG HIS CLIENTS. AND RIGHT UP TO THE FINAL ACT HE COULD NOT BE SURE WHETHER OR NOT THIS O'BRIEN WAS OF THE POLICE

ON THE streets of the lower east side, Charles Tao, as he was known, wore the conventional dress of the country in which he operated, a blue serge suit, which bagged on his squat figure, a soft brown hat covering his black hair, a white shirt and necktie, and yellow shoes to match his complexion. His expression was pleasant, he smiled often.

But in back of the curiosity shop, where the Chinaman's headquarters were, he was a different proposition. In European dress he was a pseudo-American; here he was a real Oriental. With silken, voluminous robes, pigtail let down, and soft shoes, slant eyes of black steel in his yellow face, Tsing Fui Tao seemed a sinister being. The indirect lighting of the heavily furnished rooms, with the Chinese decorations, showed him as he was.

The white thieves entered this sanctum with a nervousness which they could never quite conquer, in spite of the fact that they brought to Tao the goods he fenced.

Not everyone was allowed the privilege of contact with Tao. Only gang leaders, or lone wolves who were productive enough in crime to warrant the danger of their acquaintance, saw the fence.

The false front of the novelty shop was kept up by Tao. There were always clerks in there, and the store made a good excuse when occasionally the

receiver wished to handle bulky goods. He was extremely careful, took no chances, getting rid of stolen articles brought in to him by his operators as soon as possible. Yet the Chinaman, with his sharp brain, enjoyed the danger of his calling.

He had not come under suspicion yet, so far as he could tell through his spies. All his henchmen, those who were personally connected with him, were of his own race. His chief lieutenant, Ah Ching, was a Chinaman. Yet most of his customers were white, burglars, stick-up men, and pickpockets.

IT WAS well into the early hours of the morning. Tao was seated on a large cushion in a darkened corner of the room, waiting. Ah Ching had just announced the coming of Diggity George, a stick-up man who had brought in several lots of fine diamonds. Diggity specialized in diamond salesmen, and had been very successful. Tao had made handsome profits from his jobs.

Perhaps Diggity had another bunch for him, and Tao waited patiently while Ah Ching put George through the rigmarole.

Yet Tao said nothing as Diggity, fingering his hat, waited upon the threshold, peering into the shadows of the darkened room. Someone stood behind Diggity, a tall, lean white man in a dingy blue suit.

The Chinese receiver inspected this newcomer under the carefully arranged light above the door. Tao took nothing for granted. Evidently this fellow was O.K., since he was with a man like Diggity; just the same, the stick-up man himself might be fooled. Tao had no doubt now of Diggity's good faith; the Chinaman knew enough of the hold-up man to have a couple of thousand volts of electricity sent through him if he lived long enough to squeal. Diggity had been checked and rechecked.

Keenly, Tao's eyes narrowed, looked over the stick-up man's comrade. The latter was not nervous; he had opened his eyes at sight of this Oriental splendor and was drinking in the scene. With his blue eyes wide, he was off his guard for the moment; he did not see Tao seated in his corner.

But Diggity, more accustomed to Tao's mode of reception, located the receiver and bowed jerkily.

"Lo, Charlie."

"Lo."

"Meet me frien' Dave O'Brien. Good scout. O.K. He helped me out the other night."

Tao said nothing. If Diggity had let the fellow in, already he had informed him of the Chinaman's calling. Still, there was no harm done yet. There was plenty of time.

The fence watched while Diggity drew from his pocket a small package wrapped in brown paper. Opening this, the stick-up man displayed shining stones, and Tao, with one eye, inspected them, while with the other he watched the facial expressions of Diggity's friend. Diggity, stout, ugly, with a curling underlip and flattened nose, was talking loudly, praising the stones he had, endeavoring to get a few more dollars over what the Chinaman was prepared to give.

The lean fellow, O'Brien, squatted at his pal's side, and now, knowing he was being observed, there was no readable expression on his sunken countenance. He wore as efficient a mask as did Tao himself.

THE fact that this man was with Diggity meant that he might not be a stoolie or a detective. Diggity himself would check him as far as that went, though either sort of person might fool a single man.

Placidly, Tao bargained for the diamonds, and the hidden eyes about the room, the yellow man's spies, watched his hand signals for orders. With a

single gesture, Tao could kill a man, moving only one arm; assassins would spring out and the silken cord would do its work. Or he could order spies out to tail such a man as O'Brien.

The latter signal he made as he talked over the jewels with Diggity.

Two hours later, after Diggity had left with his comrade, Tao had his first report, made by Ah Ching, the Chinese lieutenant.

"He lives alone in a cheap furnished room. He has been there for two months. He has no visible means of support. He met Diggity in a saloon. A detective named Meyers tried to arrest Diggity, and this fellow sprang in and struck the officer down, giving Diggity the opportunity to escape. For this, Diggity was grateful."

Ah Ching had spoken with Diggity when he had parted company with his friend. Diggity had been certain O'Brien was right. The stick-up man had observed O'Brien closely before entrusting him with any secrets. Even now, Diggity preferred to work alone, and had only introduced O'Brien so that the latter might have a place to bring loot from his own stick-ups.

"Watch day and night, then," ordered Tao.

OTHERS came, tried and found reliable. The Chinaman's money bag was depleted, but one after another dark figures had slipped from the many entrances of the building carrying loot to the distributing points, retail stores and a wholesale jeweler clever in changing the shapes of stones, or in obliterating telltale traces.

Every two hours, reports came to Tao, among them those concerning the new applicant, O'Brien. Before the fence would trust the fellow, he must prove himself.

"Nothing." "Nothing." "Nothing."

So it went, Ah Ching aware of what details his master wished to know. Eating, sleeping, drinking, these were not necessary to report, though the lieutenant checked everything. But, say, if a man of O'Brien's position should look about, to see if he was being tailed; or if he should make attempts to catch or shake off shadows, or slip into a telephone booth and call someone, no matter whom, then the finger of suspicion would be on him—even now, Tao was ready to acknowledge his instinct about O'Brien was wrong. But safety first.

It was the manner through which O'Brien had become acquainted with the stick-up man, Diggity,

that made Tao wary. It smacked of something more than a stool pigeon or detective. If it had been aboveboard, and O'Brien had really aided Diggity, as he had seemed to, then all was well. But O'Brien had pushed himself in. Though he might not have known anything about Tao before, he did now that Diggity had brought him to the receiver.



But there was no attempt to report, as a detective would make at once upon being led to such a place as Tao ran. Nor did O'Brien meet anybody in the shadows of the night, to slip a whispered word of warning into a detective's ear. Thus the stoolies worked, turning up their fellows for gold or to save their own hides.

There was little of the fatalist left in Tsing Tao. Confronted from youth with the American scene, he had accommodated himself to it, using what he wanted, discarding the rest. He could take care of himself.

He had no fear of the police detectives, or of stool pigeons. He had dealt with more than one ere this. They showed themselves quickly, easily, to the trained observers of Tao's bodyguard and spies. Well-covered at every point, the Chinaman could congratulate himself upon his immunity.

Yet, as he went about his business of crime, Tao kept the newcomer in mind. Occasionally, someone he dealt with might be apprehended, caught, identified. But with his system, there was never any trouble for the fence. And only when positive identification was made by victims of the crooks themselves could they be convicted. Then the gang leader was assisted as far as possible by Tao. When bail was allowed, the Chinaman put it up and took it out of the proceeds. Otherwise, the leaders took their medicine with the rest and came back to Tao when they had finished their terms.

"Nothing." "Nothing." "Nothing."

THEN, O'Brien brought in some loot. He had held up an all-night lunch wagon and relieved the customers of watches and rings. It was not much. Tao paid him ten dollars for the lot, and O'Brien took it—and grumbled not. Which made the fence really suspicious. They always

complained of the small amounts paid them—when they were real crooks.

He ordered his spies to tighten up. Surely, after this, O'Brien would report. He had seen Tao receive stolen goods in two instances. But nothing happened. O'Brien went about his business.

Was he wrong? Had his instinct deceived him? There were wrinkles in the yellow brow of the Chinaman now. Not even by so much as the posting of a letter had O'Brien exposed himself.

Yet, the alertness of the man, and the sudden mask he had put on! The method by which he had reached the fence. The failure to complain because Tao had purposely paid him a quarter of what he should have had!

O'Brien seemed to be standing the acid tests. "Nothing." "Nothing." "Nothing." So it went.

And all this time, the coffers of the Chinaman were overflowing with the dishonest gold of the receiver.

Ere this, Tao would have considered another trustworthy, abandoned the attempts to catch him in an overt act.

As he sat upon his cushion, pondering upon the fellow, Tao, in spite of his great self-control, could not restrain a shiver. Why, if this white man was really a spy, then he could almost match him, Tsing Fui Tao, in cunning. Almost—not quite.

Was it possible?

"Watch more carefully than ever. Watch every movement. Keep spies in abundance, at every point."

Ah Ching nodded, obeyed his orders. The weeks slid by. O'Brien appeared several times, with loot. Each time, Tao accepted it, paid him a fraction of its worth, a half or a quarter of what he would have given Diggity, or another of his operators. And O'Brien took what was given him without complaint. And once again, when Tao left the room on some pretext, to observe the fellow's actions when alone from a peephole behind the heavy hangings, the receiver surprised that alert look upon the man's face.

Yet no move was made. Such patience Tao had not encountered before in the white man. It smacked more of the Oriental.

It was a game to the Chinaman, a game of cat and mouse. Tao enjoyed it, in his own way. In his many years of criminal life, he had not yet been defeated.

OUTWARDLY, Tao was on familiar terms with O'Brien. No man could penetrate the Chinaman's mask on the occasions when he interviewed the fellow. O'Brien was always quiet of speech, his eyes were devoid of any expression save that of desire for the money Tao gave him. He never questioned the receiver, he never seemed to snoop about. The spies on him could catch no false gesture.

In fact, Tao had at last decided upon a final check of the white man. After much cogitation upon the subject, he had come to the conclusion that perhaps O'Brien was what he seemed to be, a stupid crook. But he must be certain.

And the next time O'Brien appeared with some loot—which the spies reported he had obtained by holding up a restaurant—the Chinaman was ready.

"Three days hence," purred Tao, his eyes veiled by the wrinkled yellow lids, "all my men—that is, those who work for Tao—will come here. All will bring what they can. Some large orders have come in, new distributors. Do you understand?"

O'Brien nodded. He did not blink nor did he show any surprise, or excitement.

"Yuh mean yuh want us all to be here with everyt'ing we kin git?" he asked.

"Yes. All the leaders will make a grand coup. Jobs have been allotted to each one. As for you, since you wish to work alone, as does our friend Diggity, then get what you can and bring it to me."

"What day, master?"

The quiet authority of Tao impressed everyone who worked for him. He took the deference accorded him by his own yellow servants, and the freelance crooks and gang leaders caught the power of the Chinaman and treated him accordingly.

"On Wednesday next. Be here by midnight. You will be rewarded. Remember, I wish you to bring all you can. There will be many who come here, all, in fact, who work for me. Do not fail."

O'Brien nodded his head. He took the bills which Tao gave him, and saluting, left the house, the spies under Ah Ching on his trail. The master had warned his lieutenant in advance to have an extra number of men ready, and to guard every channel through which the doubted O'Brien might betray himself.

For a time, Tsing Fui Tao remained in his sitting posture, motionless. About him were the spy-holes, his trusted retainers. Presently, as might a general who had wearied of directing the battle from afar

and must have a taste of action, the Chinaman rose, crossed the room into another chamber, and in a few minutes was clad in European dress.

He spoke no orders; signs were enough. When he left the sanctity of his house, with him were five men, his bodyguard. Three trailed him noiselessly, two were in the van, to see the way was clear. They did not show themselves, even to the master.

Ah Ching appeared from the shadows.

"He is there, in his room as usual, master," whispered the little lieutenant. "See, there is his shadow."

Looking up, Tsing Tao could see in a second-story window the features and shoulders of a man silhouetted against the light curtain.

For a moment, Tao stared at this. "He lives alone?"

"Yes, master."

"Where are your men?"

"Here, with me. When we cannot see him, then we cover all exits; but when we can watch from here, we do so. It is safer."



Something akin to disappointment passed through the Chinaman's breast. For weeks he had played his game of stalking, and though he had not lost, he had evidently made a mistake. He dug his nails into his palm, but

otherwise made no sign that he was angry.

Again, he glanced up at the motionless figure shadowed on the curtain. "He should have moved by now," he murmured.

"What do you say, master?"

In reply, Tsing Tao suddenly rushed toward the front doorway of the tenement, and entered, his men on his heels. The hallways were deserted, and the silent yellow men, following their master, were at the second-floor landing in quick time.

For a moment, Tao listened outside the door which led into O'Brien's room. Then he tapped, but no answer came.

"Give me the key," ordered Tao.

Gun drawn, Ah Ching preceded his master. The room was empty, but in front of the shade stood the head and shoulders of a clothing-store dummy.

In his rage, Tao dashed the dummy to the floor.

"Send men to the rear courts and other streets,

quickly," he ordered.

"Had we not better follow them, master?" quavered Ah Ching.

"Yes, fool. Come, we must leave everything as we found it, so he will not suspect."

Tao himself went to replace the dummy. They left no signs of their presence. They went to the street again, and already a yellow shadow awaited them.

"On the other street—a woman in red."

With the panting Ah Ching behind him, Tao ran toward the designated point. One of his men was awaiting him there, and pointed down the block. Tao saw the receding figure of a tall, well-clad woman in a dark red cloak and hat.

"But—can it be he?" gasped Ah Ching.

"Yes. He nearly tricked us. Hush, now, fool. Luckily, he has not eluded us, due to my wisdom, not yours."

THE master and his men trailed the figure ahead. They did this expertly, so that when O'Brien looked about, he saw no signs of tails. But the spies had picked him out at once, as he slipped up the street, having come out of a rear exit. His extreme caution had led him to make sure the way was clear, and this had given Tao chance to discover the profile in the window was but a dummy, yet have time to catch the elusive police spy.

Hurrying men ahead, around the block, the Chinese got in front of O'Brien, in his disguise. Then, when by a series of tests to catch any tails who might by some wild chance be on him, O'Brien shook off Tao and Ah Ching, the two were able to pick him up again in a few minutes.

After he had cleared himself—or thought he had done so—O'Brien made straight for the great stone building. In the night, police headquarters brooded over its section of the city. Into a side door slid the woman in red.

Tao was sure now.

"Master, he is the dreaded one," whispered Ah Ching. "The secret police!"

Tao nodded. Gone to report the coming to Tao's of the mobs of crooks, so that a general clean-up might take place and the Chinese receiver be taken with the goods. Yes, it was just the way the secret undercover men worked. They took part in the crooks' game, lived the lives of thieves until they came to the point where they could tip off their

superiors to a gigantic haul—and escape themselves, if possible.

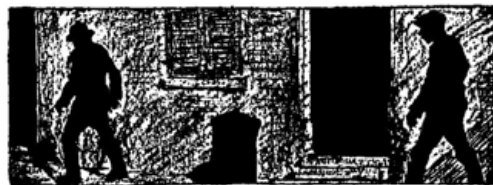
So, Tao had succeeded. He had begun to suspect, when he could not catch O'Brien as he would have if the fellow had been a stoolie or a disguised detective, that such might be the case. And it was for this reason that he had given the false word to O'Brien that all the men would be at his, Tao's establishment. Such an opportunity was what O'Brien should have been waiting for—and was!

YET now, as he returned to his den, Tao was deep in thought. He had never before come up against such a contingency.

The first thing he did was to clear the house of all loot—as he usually kept it so that no chance raid by the police might surprise him. Then he set men along the different streets to sidetrack any thieves who might be coming to him to bring in incriminating goods.

Tsing Tao knew something of the secret police. The detectives themselves would not know these few undercover men, for frequently the police spies were used to check up the regular force. Yet now, to have Ah Ching and his cutthroats murder O'Brien would be dangerous, for the Chinaman did not know to what extent O'Brien had exposed him. Yet it would take O'Brien's evidence to do any harm to the fence. With what he now knew, the spy could bring ruin upon the head of Tao. Yet, with O'Brien out of the way—

Evidently O'Brien, as he called himself, had expected to be watched, and that was the meaning of the little jobs he had pulled and the reason for the dummy's shadow in the window, to give him opportunity to report. Tao could not help admiring him for his trickiness, yet the Chinaman hugged himself for having discovered the dummy and caught the spy.



Wednesday night came. Tao had worked out his plan. In accordance with this, at ten o'clock the Chinaman donned his street clothes and went out. He returned an hour later, accompanied by a large, florid man in a dark suit—Detective Botts of H.Q.

The Chinaman was most cordial to his guest. He offered drinks and smokes and a comfortable chair to Botts, with whom he was acquainted. Botts was good-natured, and ready to believe the receiver's story.

"It is thus. This fellow O'Brien threatens me with death," said Tao. "I think he must be mad. He has been here twice. Tonight he is coming again—to kill me, he says, unless I give him much money."

"He must be a tough baby," said Botts. "These racketeers are gettin' worse every day."

"Be careful," warned Tao. "He will not hesitate to kill."

Skillfully, Tao worked Botts into a state of nervousness. When the lights went out, and the shooting started, they would finally rise again on the dead body of O'Brien, shot down by Botts.

It was safer than killing O'Brien outright. Tao would be clear, he could lie low for a time. Botts could not be blamed, since he had no way of knowing O'Brien was a police spy. It would be a regrettable accident, and though, from O'Brien's reports at H.Q. Tao would be forced to refrain from exercising his criminal trade until the police tired of watching his den, there would be no way to convict the Chinaman.

Yes, Tao counted on the state of mind into which he had talked Botts. He was sure that O'Brien would be killed, by Botts's hand. And Botts would be forced to stand by Tao or confess himself a careless killer.

Possibly, thought Tao, he would be able to force O'Brien into pulling a gun. If he himself, behind Botts's back, showed a weapon, O'Brien would draw to protect himself.

And if Botts should prove slow in shooting—well, Tao would signal, the lights would go out, and O'Brien would die like a dog in the blackness.

The receiver's yellow skin was drawn taut over his lean face. Yet he tried to smile pleasantly at Botts.

AT TEN minutes to midnight, steps sounded without, and Ah Ching entered. "It is he, master," he reported, as he had been coached by Tao, "the man who threatens to kill!"

"Let him enter," Tao ordered.

"Be careful, now," he whispered to Botts.

Ah Ching left; it seemed ages to Tao, waiting there with the sound of Botts's heavy voice in his ears, before he heard steps on the threshold.

His men were clumsy; yet, could it be his own state of mind that persisted in telling him through his ears that his men were moving about in their hiding places in the other rooms?

Ah Ching did not again appear; O'Brien it was who stepped across the room toward Tao.

"Hey, there," growled Botts.

For an instant, O'Brien stopped in surprise. Botts's broad back was turned on Tao, and the Chinaman, cool in this critical moment, did as he had planned; he reached into the folds of his gown and allowed a glint of metal to show, meanwhile half rising as though he were about to fire at O'Brien.

The master fence, at the same moment, gave the signal—the lights were to go out, and death was to find O'Brien, the undercover man.

If the sun had refused to rise in the morning, Tao would have been no more surprised than at the following events. For his men did not respond; the lights remained on, and O'Brien raised his hands over his head.

Shots did ring out, then; Tao heard them after he felt the sharp pain of a bullet entering his shoulder. He sank back, his black eyes staring and round, the blood flowing out on his silken robes.

"Hey, what's the idea," bawled Botts, brandishing his weapon.

"Put down your gun, Botts," came a gruff voice.

A CAPTAIN of police stepped from the room behind, which could be reached by going around a passageway. In there had been Tao's men; now, uniformed officers came out, dragging with them frightened and cowed Chinese, gagged and handcuffed.

"What is this, what is this?" babbled Tao.

"Yeh, what the hell's the idea?" asked Botts.

"I'm one of Inspector Martin's men," said O'Brien coolly. "This yellow devil is a receiver. He tricked me into coming here tonight; told me I'd catch a lot of crooks. So I reported, anyway. But it was to force me into a false move, wasn't it, Tao?"

O'Brien was smiling coldly at the Chinaman. The game was over, Tao knew that. But his brain was in a muddle now. How could the spy have guessed his plan?

"Didn't realize what you were up to till I saw Botts coming at me with that gun, Tao," went on O'Brien.

"You have wounded an innocent man," said

Tao, in a low voice.

The captain of police held up a package. "Yes? Well, here's twenty thousand dollars worth of diamonds from a hold-up just done last night," he said. "We got the crook, too, one Diggity. He fenced them here."

Tao's soul cried out; O'Brien, he knew, must have brought those, taking them from Diggity after a job, and framed him, just to make sure.

"I'm sorry to be brought out this way," O'Brien said.

For though the police spy had beaten Tao, he would be forced to move very circumspectly from now on, since he had come from undercover.

"It's a lie," cried Tao. "I am no fence!"

But he knew O'Brien would never let him go.

"Tao," said O'Brien, "you nearly fooled me. Only one little mistake, and that was a natural one. If I wasn't such a careful man, I'd probably never have noticed you'd been in my room the other night, when I went to report. Of course, I figured

then that you'd spotted me, followed me to H.Q. That's why I rushed Ah Ching and spread my men about inside before I took a walk into the spider's den."

"A mistake?" repeated Tao. Stunned, his mind, still playing the game, passed rapidly back over the events of the night when he had entered O'Brien's room. Had he dropped something? Never! Left telltale footprints? No, they had checked that.

"Can't figure it out, eh?" said O'Brien, and chuckled. "Well, it was the shadow of the dummy, Tao. Did you knock it down when you came in?"

Tao nodded dumbly. What use to fight this white devil made of ice?

"When you put it back, Tao, you put the dummy back just the way it had been when you looked at it from the street. Only looking at it from the inside, the features were on your left. When you replaced it, you put the features on your right, as it had looked from the street!"