

The High-Powered Corpse

By E. C. Marshall



Chinatown kept the mystery of that safe-blowing gang hidden from all save Detective Tom Ching who knew an explosive secret himself.



DETECTIVE TOM CHING of the Chinatown Squad loitered only for a practiced instant on the crooked curbstone of Doyers Street in New York's Chinatown before passing out of the shadow of the high old tenements, into the sunlight and up the next sidewalk.

He did not hesitate as he chose a door from the many that crowded the narrow thoroughfare and pressed it inward.

The shop—an exact duplicate in merchandise and furnishings of a hundred other gift stores in Chinatown—was silent and cool. Its windows were dusty and filled with gimcrack statues of ancient Chinese gods and goddesses leering their long-dead smiles at the passersby. But behind the rear door a chime bell tinkled and a Chinese mandolin twanged awkwardly.

It was the hour of rest. Thin streams of incense filled the air. Not the nickel-and-dime olfactory horrors, but real temple powders of Oriental flowers. For an instant, Tom Chang resisted, then his Americanized face softened into grave lines of inward Chinese calm.

He was not to be uninterrupted, for he had violated the sign hanging on the outside door and written in both Chinese and English, reminding the buyer that for the noon hour the store was closed. With a clash of glass-bead drapes, a tall, thin figure clad in an ordinary business suit emerged from behind the rear counter followed by a small Chinese girl carrying a mandolin.

It was not long before the frown of displeasure of the face of the other vanished as he recognized the popular Chinese-American plainclothes man. Then he spoke in Cantonese:

“Greetings, Tom Ching. My shop is honored, as am I—and my daughter.”

“Hello, Anna.” The detective playfully chucked the little girl under the chin. Then he glanced seriously up at her father, Lu Tai.

“Lu Tai, you are an honest man and a member of an honest tong. I know you would not willingly betray another tong member or the tong itself, but the robberies in Chinatown, occasioned with the help of TNT which is used to blow up the iron safes of the merchants, must be stopped.” His voice dropped lower and he invoked his ancestors. “People come to you and tell you things. I believe nothing goes on in Chinatown that you do not know. It is not easy for us to do as well. Not even for me—and I am Chinese. But the robberies must be stopped. I want to know where the cache of TNT is hidden, and who owns it.”

Lu Tai stroked his white beard, smiled and sat down on a rattan chair. “And did you not know, my son, that the tongs themselves have attempted to lift the veil of mystery surrounding the source of the explosive, and that all honest men in Chinatown would give much to know the answer to your problem. Nevertheless”—he paused and glanced quickly at the girl.

“Anna,” he continued, “was playing with some of her friends in the backyard near the establishment of the embalmer Wong Sung and there overheard some talk from within the cellar about a planned robbery on my neighbor K’ang Ho, the dealer in live chickens. But I have warned K’ang and—” Lu Tai stopped suddenly, clutched at the counter.

The shop and about three yards of pavement on all sides of it lifted toward heaven, settled back onto its foundations and shook as a terrible

explosion filled the street with the glass windows of many shops.

TOM CHING acted instantly. He did a standing broad jump from where he stood clear across the threshold into the street. His hands were in his pockets in an instant. When they emerged one clutched a pistol, the other a police whistle. And when he blew the whistle, a torrent of bluecoats erupted at the shattered shop front of K'ang Ho, dealer in live chickens.

Most of them were no longer alive, though they had been at a considerable distance from the blast which had taken place in the indolent quiet of the noon hour in the back office of the establishment. The proprietor, who was obviously a case for the shellshock ward, had also parted with a rusty old iron safe and some three hundred dollars in cash. The safe lay in huge chunks over the office floor and sections of it stuck in the walls, while the money was missing.

Patrolman Lenihan, a tall Irish cop, made a quick investigation of the losses, then walked over to Tom Ching who was helping K'ang Ho into a waiting ambulance.

"'Tis the crookedest thing I've seen since me grandmither's gold teeth were stolen on Leary Street in Dublin—and she asleep on a park bench, poor thing."

The detective waved off the ambulance, turned and grinned. "How many men you got?"

"Twinty. And what'll I do with 'em?"

"Have 'em surround that undertaking parlor over there, front and back, then you come with me."

When Lenihan returned from posting men in the backyard, Ching, surrounded by an excited crowd of Chinese, was standing at the door of the embalmers. The detective kicked the door open with a quick movement of his foot and entered. Lenihan followed, shutting the door behind him.

Confronting them was a tiny, aged Chinese with a huge head and two beady black eyes. Dressed in rusty black, both hands folded into his cuffs, mandarin style, he bowed low.

"Do not speak Amelican good—" he began.

"You can talk in Chinese," replied the detective in that language. He threw a quick glance around the room which served as an entrance to the funeral parlor proper.

"There are services going on?" he asked.

Wong Sung nodded gravely. He wiped his eyes. "There are always services going on. The living die—and the dead cannot linger. They must be buried and their souls assisted to heaven in the proper manner."

Tom Ching nodded. "That is right. And may I ask whose happy departure for the realms of the blessed is being attended to right now?"

Wong Sung padded about for an instant. "Even so," he replied. "It is the dead merchant, Ku Sui, who lies in state below. He is to be buried this afternoon."

"We may, perhaps, pay our respects to the dead?" asked Ching. When the other had nodded, he turned to Lenihan.

"Take five of your men and turn this place inside out. Tap the walls, look into closets. Somewhere there may be a couple of quarts of TNT and it's gotta be found. You'll find me downstairs. Don't be surprised when you walk in. American funerals are funny, too."

Thirty minutes later, Lenihan clattered down the steps leading to the first cellar which had been converted into a huge and elaborate funeral parlor, Canton style. The place was silent, though not deserted, for about half a dozen mourners were seated against the wall. The patrolman looked about for the detective, found him gazing down into the open coffin. The cop took a look and shuddered.

"I'd say the deceased looked a bit on the peaked side." Then he nudged Ching. "If there's a drop of TNT in the joint, it must have evaporated. What about down here?"

Ching shook his head. "Not a trace. I grilled Wong Sung, but he denied everything. Guess the stuff isn't here."

A few minutes passed, then some pallbearers entered the room, approached the coffin, closed the lid, and prepared to convey their burden into a backroom from where it would be loaded into a hearse.

Ching nursed his chin. The stuff was in the place, had to be in the place. Another minute and they'd have to leave. Abruptly he rose. Lenihan gazed after him in astonishment, for the detective had carried his chair with him and was raising it over the coffin that was being trundled on its way out, raising the light rattan chair and bringing it

down with all his strength on the top of the elaborately decorated box.

"Aieeee!"

Lenihan whirled to see Wong Sung who had entered the room scream, clap his hands over his head and faint dead away on the floor. The cop's eyes popped when he took in the spectacle of six pairs of pallbearers' legs quaking dismally, while Chinese oaths broke out upon the air. The rattan chair stopped abruptly just before it hit the coffin top. Tom Ching grimaced with the effort, tossed the chair aside and drew his revolver.

"Put that casket down on the floor!" he barked to the pallbearers, and in an aside to Lenihan, "Get me the coroner."

Back at the precinct house a few hours later, Tom Ching explained to Lenihan.

"I never cottoned to a thing until I realized what a dull sort of funeral it was. Chinese funerals

are gay. They last for days. The dead are sung to, drunk to, prayed over, praised and danced around. That room was gloomier than a dungeon. Obviously a funeral was going on—but a fast one, and a phony one because we'd got on the scene too quickly. Clearly, then, the stuff was somewhere in the coffin—actually it was in the corpse.

"Wong Sung just stored the stuff in his clientele, pumping it out with a stomach pump into the next customer just before the ex-customer's coffin got into the hearse."

The cop shuddered. "Sure and that was an awful chance you took, forcin' their hand by makin' believe you wuz going to sock the coffin."

The detective laughed. "Don't think about it, Lenihan. If I'd hit a homer by mistake, you'd never have had to worry over it!"

