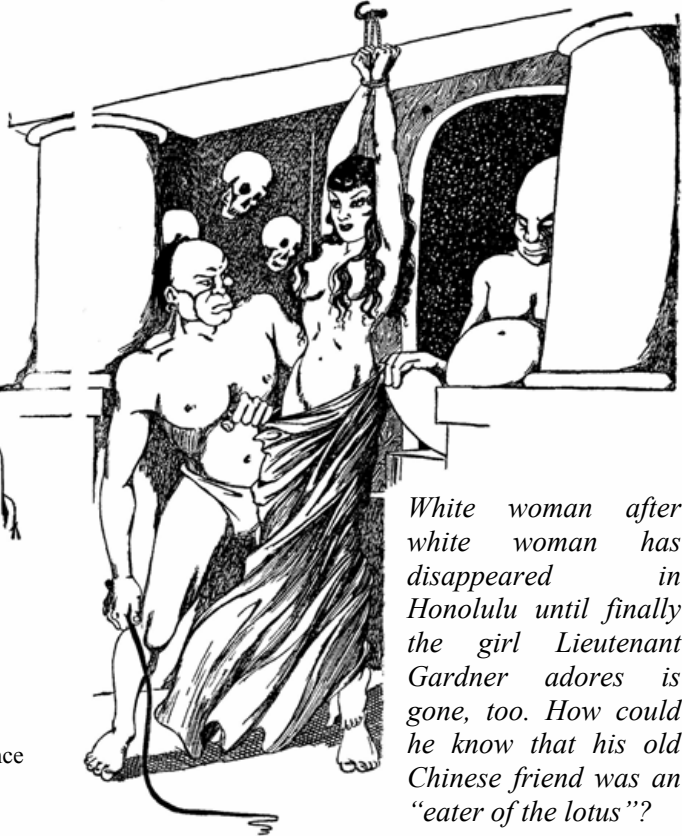


## LEAF OF THE LOTUS

By GUY RUSSELL



Methodically, the huge Chinese measured his distance before striking.



*White woman after white woman has disappeared in Honolulu until finally the girl Lieutenant Gardner adores is gone, too. How could he know that his old Chinese friend was an "eater of the lotus"?*

LIEUTENANT PAT GARDNER drove his battered roadster along Honolulu's palm-lined Ala Moana Road toward Waikiki. At a curve, he left the road and swung into a shell-paved driveway. Vivid hibiscus shrubs grew along the drive, flaunting bright blooms as high as a tall man's head. Gardner parked the roadster beneath a huge poinciana tree in full flower, its scarlet sprays of wicked, passionate loveliness dripping down over him. He left the car and climbed a long flight of pink coral steps to keep his date for dinner in the huge house above.

The drive, like the terraced garden through which he climbed, was pure Hawaiian. But the flagged courtyard in which his host met him, was China. Ah Lee Cheng-kai, fat, ageless, and the richest and most influential man, white or tinted, in the Islands, put out a pudgy hand.

"You honor my poor house, Lieutenant," he greeted Gardner. "I am glad you could come."

"Did I ever miss a dinner here, Ah Lee?" Gardner asked, grinning. "I haven't eaten since yesterday. I wanted to be sure and be ready for one of these feasts of yours."

Cheng bowed, gravely pleased. "My table does

its best to deserve the compliment of your presence," he said. "If you will enter, we will first drink to our continued friendship."

Gardner speculated idly about the dignified old Chinaman as he followed him across dark, polished floors into the cool interior. No one knew, or dared to care very much, how many white wives the old man had had in the last forty years. There were tales or rumors, some pretty ugly ones, about that. But, for all the world could really prove, Cheng lived in solitary majesty in his great, sprawling house. White women disappeared completely from sight the moment they became Cheng's property.

Cheng bowed his guest to a seat in a dim, spacious room, and asked, "Whiskey, Gardner? I do not believe you like our proper drink of ceremony, rice brandy, so I shall not insist."

"Whiskey, please," Gardner assented, smiling. "But I'm not that particular, Ah Lee. When a man's used to okolehao, he can drink anything."

Wun Kow, Cheng's huge, idol-faced number one boy, appeared in a doorway and Cheng gave a rapid order. Wun Kow clapped enormous hands together and, almost with the sound, a slim girl glided past him, bearing a tray.

AT sight of her, Gardner forgot his curiosity about Cheng's establishment. Staring, he forgot, for a moment, all about Cheng, his drink, and everything else. Soft, black hair framed an oval, lovely face the color of warm ivory. She wore conventional Chinese costume but its clinging material only accentuated what it was meant to hide. The dark blouse was drawn intimately high at the throat, then draped itself closely over breasts that were soft, yet dainty as little Chinese teacups; and soft trousers clung lovingly to full, swaying curves, of hip and thigh as she walked.

She placed decanter, iced glass and siphon on the low table at Gardner's knees. As she bent to mix the drink, her breasts, thrusting out in two swinging, cone-shaped mounds, made enticing little ripples in the satin of her jacket. Gardner's fingers clenched, in spite of himself.

She carried the tray back through the doorway and Gardner dragged his eyes away, to see Cheng watching him with a tiny smile.

"You approve of my servant, Gardner?" he asked, quietly amused. "If we were in China, I should have to give Puen T'ang to you, should your eyes so plainly express your thoughts."

"Then I'm sorry I wasn't born Chinese, Ah Lee," Gardner breathed, fervently. "I had no idea . . ."

"You did not know that Chinese women could be like that," Cheng helped him. "The Chinese, Gardner, are an old race. One of the things we have learned is the necessity of keeping our women to, and for, ourselves."

"That's something *we* evidently need to learn," Gardner said, bitterly. "And we're beginning to learn it, but we're paying for the lesson."

Cheng inclined his head in grave agreement. "Another American girl disappeared last night," he stated as a fact.

"You knew it!" Gardner exclaimed. "We've tried to keep it quiet."

"I have lived in the Islands for a long time, Gardner. People tell me many things."

"I suppose so. Well, you're right. A Navy officer's daughter, in Pearl Harbor, turned up missing."

"White flesh has an irresistible attraction for the mongrel spawn of these brown people," Cheng said. He made a spitting sound through his teeth. "The misbegotten, liliha dogs!"

"But, damn it, Cheng! I could understand a few attacks. That's happened before, when natives

catch a girl alone. But they don't just disappear. *These* girls simply drop from sight! Nothing's ever heard of them again!"

"It might be very dangerous for the abductors if the victims were returned to their homes," Cheng pointed out. "The girl might have some clue to her identity, or the place to which she was taken."

"Cheng, they can't simply dissolve into thin air! Something has to be done with them! And . . . they don't leave the Islands, alive or dead. We're almost certain of that."

"Things happen here which no man understands, Gardner. Things which it is, perhaps, not safe to understand."

"We *will* understand them," Gardner growled. "And, when we do, these gugus will wish they had picked some other way of amusing themselves."

"I believe that day will come," Cheng agreed. To Wun Kow, he made an imperceptible gesture toward Gardner's emptied glass. Wun Kow boomed his palms together again.

GARDNER kept his glass in his hand as Puen T'ang placed ice and liquor in it. He wanted to bring those soft, swelling mounds beneath her blouse under the best possible observation. As she held the siphon bottle up to fill the glass, one of them brushed against his shoulder. She gave a little, muffled gasp and the siphon twisted in her hands, the fizzing stream soaking Gardner's wrist and his starched coat sleeve.

Wun Kow snarled. Cheng, his eyes stiffening the girl with a cold stare, said sharply, "Take her to the quarters below, Wun Kow. We shall see her punished, later."

"Wait a minute, Ah Lee," Gardner pleaded. "It was an accident. She couldn't help it."

"Servants in my house are not excused for awkwardness or carelessness, Gardner," Cheng told him, harshly. "Puen T'ang knows that."

"Well, of course, I don't even know what you're going to do to her," Gardner admitted. "But, whatever it is, don't do it for my sake. *She'd* have to more than squirt fizz-water up my sleeve to make *me* mad."

Cheng chuckled. "She knows that, too, Gardner. And I believe she fears her punishment very little—because she knows that you will witness it. Now, shall we see what my humble kitchen has prepared for us?"

GARDNER sat through one of Cheng's two-hour long dinners with impatience which he concealed as best he could. He ate baked duck, the meat so tender it could be scooped up with a spoon, and long fish broiled with bamboo shoots; ate without any of his usual enthusiasm. Something in Cheng's last remark, concerning the punishment he was to watch, made him think that he was about to see a thing which might not rest so well on a Westerner's conscience. Still, he couldn't help his curiosity.

Finally, Cheng turned to Wun Kow, standing expressionless, arms folded across his yard-wide chest, and asked, "Puen T'ang?"

"She is ready, Master," the huge man rumbled.

"Shall we follow Wun Kow and watch him teach a thoughtless girl the sin of carelessness?" Cheng said.

Wun Kow led them down a broad, unlighted stairway into the depths below the house. At the end of a long corridor, he threw open a door and stepped aside. Gardner followed Cheng through the opening and Wun Kow pulled the door shut behind them.

Gardner gasped at the sight which struck his amazed eyes. The girl, Puen T'ang, stood facing him, a strong light above her head spotlighting her shrinking body in an inverted cone of brilliance, against the bare, shadowy room. A shapeless, sack-like garment hung about her, from a drawstring pulled tight just above the thrusting mounds of her creamy, heaving breasts. Her wrists were cuffed together in front of her, fastened to a cord running up and over a pulley in the ceiling, directly overhead.

Wun Kow stepped noiselessly into the ring of light and hauling down on the free end of the cord, pulled her shackled arms high above her head. Looping the cord over a hook in the floor, he yanked at the drawstring about her breasts, and the sack-like affair down about her feet. Gardner's breath sucked in sharply.

Except for a brief loincloth of some native material, she had been stripped naked beneath the tubular shroud. Her upstretched arms threw every line of her perfect body into bold relief against warm, velvety skin. From glowing, honey-colored breasts, down the smooth, swell of her stomach to rounded, curving hips, her perfect little body raised the already dangerous temperature of Gardner's blood another degree.

She stood, motionless except for the quick, panting tremor of her breast, as Wun Kow stepped back and picked up a three-foot, braided whip. The huge Chinaman measured his distance and began, slowly and methodically, to strike, lashing her from the inward swell of her waist, down to her knees.

Three times the whip fell, curling almost caressingly around the tawny columns of her thighs before Gardner caught at Cheng's arm, iron fingers sinking deep into flabby flesh.

"Stop it!" he rasped, hoarsely. "Stop it, I tell you!"

Cheng shrugged and smiled. "Enough, Wun Kow," he ordered. To Gardner, "I am sorry. I had forgotten that you are a young man, of a young and emotional people."

GARDNER mopped his sweating forehead. "Maybe, Ah Lee," he said, "but, guest or no guest, that's the damndest thing I ever saw. I hope she knifes you in your sleep some night."

Cheng smiled again. "No, Gardner. She has not been hurt. Even an old man can see the sacrilege it would be to break such a silken skin. She is only tormented, now, because of the lack of a strong, young man to assuage the flames she feels raging beneath the stripes of Wun Kow's lash."

"He shouldn't be hard to find," Gardner said. Looking at Puen T'ang, he was forced to admit that Cheng might be right. She was standing with trembling knees and deep-heaving breasts; although her head was bowed, she was evidently in the grip of an emotion stronger than pain.

"Not so easily, Gardner," Cheng told him. "I am, as I have said, no longer a young man, and she is not for coolies." A sudden thought struck the old Chinaman and he considered Gardner, a twinkle in his heavy-lidded eyes.

"Perhaps you, Gardner . . ." he said. "Chinese hospitality has no limits, you may have heard. Would you honor my house?"

"No!" said Gardner. He looked again at Puen T'ang. Dark eyes met his and she drew a quick breath under his gaze, quivering, voluptuous breasts lifting sharply.

Gardner said, "Well . . ."

Cheng motioned to the huge major-domo. Wun Kow snapped off the bright center light and followed his master out, shutting the door with a click behind them.

Gardner blinked, adjusting his eyes to the

sudden half-light. He slacked off the cord and Puen T'ang dropped her manacled hands, covering herself as best she could with their tiny palms. Gardner fumbled with the straps about her wrists, keeping his trembling fingers to their task by pure willpower. For they were drawn, by a force stronger than his mind, by the thrilling, magnetic curves so close beneath them.

At last the straps fell away. "You are kind to me," she murmured, her voice broken by the tiniest hiss of accent. "I am grateful."

Gardner straightened, his arms stealing about her, seemingly by their own volition, to crush closer those quivering mounds now almost against his shirt-front. At his touch, she swayed toward him. Her eyes shot one contented, approving glance upward at Gardner's tall, tanned blondness, as her lips parted to meet his, making electric contact with his mouth. Gardner's right hand slid slowly along the lilting sweep of her back, feeling the fine-textured skin ripple thrillingly beneath his fingers. Liquid fire flamed through his veins as the impulsive pressure of his arms almost lifted her from the floor . . .

**F**INALLY, she whispered, "You will come back to Puen T'ang again, Pat Gardner?"

"I wouldn't miss," Gardner assured her, fervently. "I'm already starting to think up excuses for coming back to call on Cheng."

"You asked the master about the young white maidens who have been stolen," she said, with a scornful, little smile. "You can return to question him further."

"He doesn't know anything about it," Gardner told her. "Nobody does. Except the hell's scum who steal them."

"He knows. Many people know."

Gardner caught her shoulders. "He knows? You're sure, Puen T'ang?" A sudden thought struck him, breathtaking in its unexpected possibilities.

"You mean, he knows what happens to those girls?" he gasped. "Is that old devil the bird who's behind these damned kidnappings?"

"No, no! He doesn't do it. He is very angry, too, and he would stop the taking of these white girls, if he could. But I think he is afraid."

"Afraid?" Gardner asked, puzzled. "What's he afraid of?"

"Puen T'ang does not know," she said, nestling

back beneath his arm. "But she can find out."

"How? What do you know about it?"

"Nothing. But Wun Kow knows. And," with a little grimace, "that stupid old water-buffalo will tell me anything, if I look at him so."

She demonstrated, and Gardner took her back in his arms, puzzlement over a few kidnappings swept from his mind by a warmer, more pressing problem.

**T**HAT problem—Puen T'ang—assumed alarming proportions during the next few days. Gardner fought grimly against an almost irresistible memory of a slim, warm ivory body, pulling him inexorably back to the house on the Ala Moana Road. As far as actually going back was concerned, he fought successfully. After all, she was Cheng's servant, and Gardner couldn't stand the thought of the cynical amusement in the old Chinaman's eyes, if he were to see a white officer hanging about his doorstep like a woman-chasing sailor.

Still, that didn't help to erase the disturbing image. Just a week from the night of Cheng's dinner, it was very fresh in his mind. Donning freshly starched mess jacket and silken cummerbund, for a dull evening of bridge at his colonel's quarters, Gardner groaned to himself. Nan Delane was a swell girl, even a beautiful girl, but the prospect of sitting at a bridge table, through a balmy, Island evening, was almost too much. The better-looking Nan was, the more she'd remind him of Puen T'ang, and other things he might be doing.

His phone jangled and he picked it off its cradle. "Lieutenant Gardner."

A frightened, feminine voice exclaimed in his ear, "Mrs. Delane, Pat. Pat, I'm terribly worried about Nan."

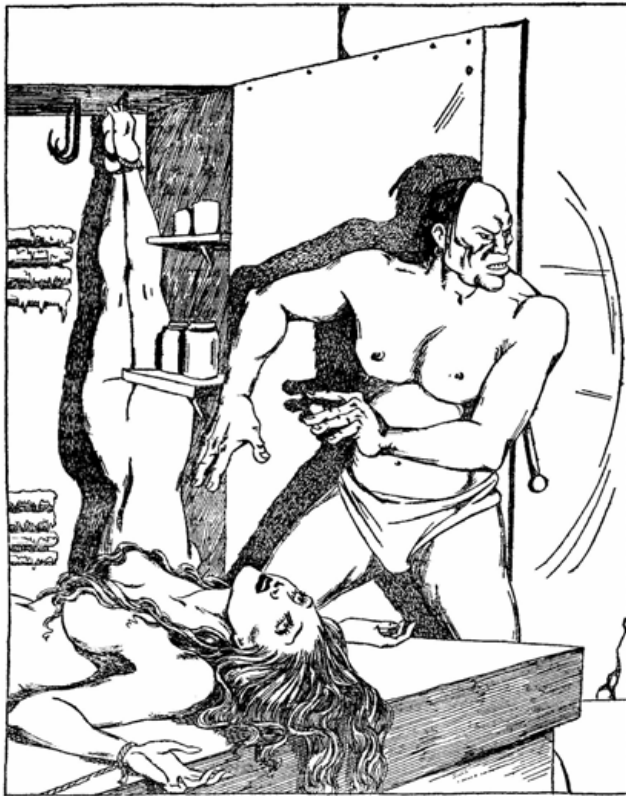
"Why, what's happened?" cried Gardner, alarmed.

"She went to Honolulu this afternoon and she hasn't come back! She said she'd be back by four, and it's after seven."

"She might have stopped somewhere," Gardner said.

"No, she didn't," Mrs. Delane insisted. "I've called everyone on the post, and nobody has seen her. Oh, Pat, I'm so frightened! The Colonel isn't home, and I don't know what to do."

"She's probably all right," Gardner comforted, without much confidence. "Maybe she had a flat tire, or something."



At that sight in the icebox, Gardner went suddenly mad.



"It *couldn't* take her this long, Pat. Pat . . . you don't think anything could have happened to her? They . . . *they* wouldn't take her in broad daylight, would they?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Delane," Gardner said, with sudden, grim resolution. "But I'm going to find out!"

He hung up on her tearful questioning, and stripped the mess-jacket from his shoulders. Pulling on plain white ducks, he jammed a heavy service automatic into his pocket, and ran to his car. He spun the roadster around and sent it roaring out of the post toward Honolulu.

He drove straight to the Ala Moana Road. Wun Kow, silent and forbidding, ushered him in to Cheng.

THE Chinaman rose as he entered, but Gardner brushed aside his greeting.

"Ah Lee, Colonel Delane's daughter went to Honolulu this afternoon, and she didn't come back," he said, without preamble. "Did they get her?"

"She was in the city, alone?" Cheng asked, quietly. "Do the parents of lovely white daughters never learn?"

"It's too late to lecture, Ah Lee," Gardner told

him shortly. "Where is Nancy Delane?"

Cheng shrugged without speaking. Gardner came beside him in one swift step, and jammed the ugly nose of the .45 deep in Cheng's fat ribs.

"Call Wun Kow, and it's your last call," he warned the old man. "Now *where* is Nancy Delane?"

Cheng smiled. "You seem sure that I know, Gardner," he said unfrightened. "I do know, I think. But . . . I shall not tell you."

"You *will* tell me, damn you!" Gardner growled. "I'm not kidding, Ah Lee. I'll shoot you deader than a duck."

Cheng inclined his head, gravely. "I believe you, Gardner. You are young and you are excited. I think you would kill me. Still, I shall not tell you. You do not know what it is to be old, and no longer afraid of death. But I am old, and death no longer is a threat to me. So I shall not tell you because I would rather die, now, than send you to *your* certain death. If I told you where the girl is, Gardner, and you went to rescue her, you would not live until morning. And your end would not be as quick and pleasant as mine."

Gardner stared at him. Uncertainly, he stepped back and lowered the muzzle of the pistol, slowly.

"But, Ah Lee," he pleaded, finally, "what in hell

is this all about? I don't get it."

Cheng nodded, gravely. "True, Gardner. You do not understand. And, for one who knows as little of fear and caution as you, it is better that you do not. I am your friend, Gardner, and I tell you that it is better for you to forget your mission. Let the little Puen T'ang lead your mind along pleasanter paths. I think she pines for you."

Gardner said, dully, "No, thanks, Ah Lee. I've got to go on into the city and find out what I can."

CONFUSED and uncertain, Gardner stumbled down the long steps to his car, in the driveway. As he reached it, a little figure darted from the shadows and caught at his sleeve.

"Pat Gardner!" a soft voice breathed. "I heard you talking to Ah Lee. I can show you where the American girl is!"

"Puen T'ang! Are you sure?" Gardner exclaimed. "Then in with you!" He almost threw her up to the car seat, and shot down the drive in a shower of spun pebbles.

She pointed toward the city, and Gardner shoved the accelerator to the floor. "Where?" he asked.

"Wait!" she whispered, her voice almost lost against the roar of the motor.

"Wait!" he echoed, stupidly. "We haven't a hell of time, you know."

"I know, but . . . stop."

Gardner pulled the roadster over off the pavement and stopped. "All right," he said, as patiently as he could. "What's the trouble?"

"You seek a tall girl, Pat Gardner," she asked, very low. "With yellow hair?"

"That's right," he said. Then sudden fear rose up to choke him. How could Puen T'ang have known?

"She's not . . . in the city. Won't you . . . forget, and not make me tell you more?"

He caught her shoulders and pulled her around to face him. "Listen, Puen T'ang," he told her, rasping. "I want to know where Nancy Delane is. Now, tell me!"

"Ah Lee has her." Her voice was almost unmanageable.

"Ah Lee! Then in hell . . .!" He kicked at the starter savagely. She caught at his arm.

"Wait," she pleaded again. "I was made to tell you she was in the city. To lead you to those who would kill you. Ah Lee did not want it done at his

house. But . . . I couldn't, Pat Gardner!"



Nothing would erase that disturbing image.

She was close to hysteria. Gardner took her in his arms to quiet her.

"Take it easy, honey," he soothed. "Maybe Ah Lee has undertaken a little too much this time.

Killing me is quite a job, I shouldn't wonder. So Cheng has her?"

"Yes, he has her."

"Why? What's he going to do with her?"

"He has all of them. He has the girl whom Wun Kow brought last week . . . part of her." Her voice was breaking again. "He is . . . a lotus-eater!"

Gardner gasped, stunned. "*Part of her!*" A lotus-eater! A half-forgotten sentence, read from an old volume which an officer who had served in China had shown him, came back, every word fire-etched on his brain. ". . . and the stem of the lotus-flower is white and smooth and its petals are golden with the gold of the sun . . ."

Gardner swung the car about in a lurching half-circle. "Listen, Puen T'ang" he grated. "We're going back! You stay in the car! But tell me where he's got her."

"Below the house," she whispered. "At the far end of the hallway where . . . where I was whipped. There is a little door beneath the flame tree—Wun Kow will not expect you to come through there."

He left the car on the road, just short of the driveway, and dove into the shadowy shrubbery. No one was about the grounds and the door beneath the heavy-scented flame tree was unfastened. He stepped, cautiously, into the same darkened corridor down which Cheng had led him on that other night. It was silent and deserted.

A VAGUE murmur of voices came from beyond a door at the end. Gardner listened and then threw a hard shoulder against the panel. It burst inward. Yanking the .45 from his pocket, he followed it in.

Across the room, the huge bulk of Wun Kow tugged at a great, thick slab on hinges before a narrow, cavernous portal . . . a tall icebox! Ah Lee watched him. They both swung to face Gardner at the sound of the door breaking.

As Ah Lee's fat body turned, Gardner stared in heartsick horror at something behind him in that dark, icy closet. Something long and almost luminous in the glow from the room's one light. A girl's slender, naked body hanging head-downward from a great hook through the thongs about her ankles, her hair trailing in a golden cloud below her livid, blood-drained face.

"God!" Gardner shot Cheng twice through his fat belly before he saw Nancy Delane, alive, clothing stripped away from long, smooth thighs

and swelling, upthrust breasts, strapped across the table.

Wun Kow snarled and a knife streaked from his hand toward Gardner's throat. Gardner ducked beneath it and fired at the Chinese's great body as it came driving at him. At that range, he couldn't have missed, yet Wun Kow came on. At the last moment, Gardner smashed viciously at the broad, hate-contorted face with his gun barrel, but he couldn't find room to escape the two great hands that fastened about his windpipe.

He twisted and drove short, powerful blows at the Chinaman's face until he felt lips and nose smash beneath his fists, but that deadly pressure never slackened. In the split-second before consciousness left him, he thought he saw a swift movement above Wun Kow's bowed shoulders.

WHEN he did come to, he had to roll the Chinaman's dead body off his chest before he could rise. Then pain-blurred eyes saw a long-hilted knife driven solidly between Wun Kow's shoulder blades.

Gardner got to his feet and crossed unsteadily to tear the straps away from Nancy Delane's wrists and ankles.

"Damn!" he muttered, thickly. "That was a close one! Who did it—you or my guardian angel?"

Nancy laughed, shakily, as he took her in his arms, comforting, caressing her half-clad form. "I didn't," she told him. "But it might have been your guardian angel. It was a little Chinese girl."

"Puen T'ang! But where is she?"

"She ran as soon as she was sure he was dead."

"I guess she knew best," Gardner said, slowly. "Well . . . let's get out of here."

Nancy Delane said, "but . . .?" She shuddered. "That . . . girl in the . . . icebox. Shouldn't we do something about her?"

"I think her people would rather not know," Gardner told her, gravely. "I'm going to set fire to the whole place. I'm sure it will be better that way. So—let's get going. I've a raincoat in the car that you can wear back to the post."

IN the car, well on the road toward home, Nancy sighed. Gardner patted her knee and tried not to think of her white body, naked beneath the thin raincoat.

"You poor kid," he said. "That was a hell of a thing to go through."

But her woman's mind was on another track. "That little Chinese girl—who was she?"

"Just a servant of Cheng's."

"A servant of Cheng's? How? . . . Why was she safe from . . . that awful room?"

"She was a brunette," Gardner told her, briefly, silently remembering the description: "Its petals golden with the gold of the sun . . ."

"But . . . I don't understand."

"You're lucky. Suppose you just do your best to forget all about it."

"But, Pat . . ." She moved closer and the raincoat slipped away. Gardner discovered that the warm, thrilling length of her figure was snuggling

up, melting undulantly close. ". . . I don't want to forget . . . *all* about it. You saved me . . . and . . . how am I going to thank you?"

Gardner decided that he had had enough narrow escapes for one night. And, in his present frame of mind, it was definitely unsafe for him to drive. He said, "Nancy, honey, I know a swell place along the beach, near here. If you're not too cold in that raincoat, we might stop and consider."

"It is nice along the beach, just about now," she agreed. "And I'm not so very cold, am I darling?"

The lips she lifted to his needed no spoken answer!