



The Sign of the Snake

Howard, Robert Ervin

Published: 1931

Categorie(s): Fiction, Action & Adventure, Short Stories

Source: <http://gutenberg.net.au>

About Howard:

Robert Ervin Howard (January 22, 1906 – June 11, 1936) was a classic American pulp writer of fantasy, horror, historical adventure, boxing, western, and detective fiction. Howard wrote "over three-hundred stories and seven-hundred poems of raw power and unbridled emotion" and is especially noted for his memorable depictions of "a sombre universe of swashbuckling adventure and darkling horror." He is well known for having created — in the pages of the legendary Depression-era pulp magazine *Weird Tales* — the character Conan the Cimmerian, a.k.a. Conan the Barbarian, a literary icon whose pop-culture imprint can be compared to such icons as Tarzan of the Apes, Sherlock Holmes, and James Bond. Between Conan and his other heroes Howard created the genre now known as sword-and-sorcery in the late 1920s and early 1930s, spawning a wide swath of imitators and giving him an influence in the fantasy field rivaled only by J.R.R. Tolkien and Tolkien's similarly inspired creation of the modern genre of High Fantasy. There is no evidence that Tolkien was influenced by the earlier author, however. A full century after his birth, Howard remains a seminal figure, with his best work endlessly reprinted. He has been compared to other American masters of the weird, gloomy, and spectral, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Jack London. Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks for Howard:

- *The Hour of the Dragon* (1936)
- *The Phoenix on the Sword* (1932)
- *The Hyborian Age* (1930)
- *Gods of the North* (1934)
- *Beyond the Black River* (1935)
- *People of the Dark* (1932)
- *A Witch Shall be Born* (1934)
- *The Scarlet Citadel* (1933)
- *Black Colossus* (1933)
- *Queen of the Black Coast* (1934)

Copyright: This work is available for countries where copyright is Life+70.

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks
<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

I was ready for trouble. Canton's narrow waterfront streets were still and shadowy in that hour before dawn when I left the docks. The guttering street lamps gave little light. My bulldog, Bill, bristled suddenly and began to rumble in his throat. There was a rattle of feet on the cobblestones down an alley to the right. Then the sound of a heavy fall, scuffling, a strangled scream.

Plainly it was none of my business. But I quickened my pace and dashing around the corner, nearly fell over a writhing, struggling mass on the cobblestones. The dim light of a street lamp showed me what was going on. Two men fought there in deadly silence. One was a slim young Chinese in European clothes. Down on his back in the muck, he was. Kneeling on his chest was a slant-eyed devil in native riggings. He was big and lean, with a face like a Taoist devil-mask. With one talon-like hand, he clutched the throat of the smaller man. A knife flashed in his other hand.

I recognized him for what he was—one of the bloody hatchet-men the big tongs and secret societies use for their dirty work. I followed my natural instinct and knocked him senseless with a smashing right hook behind the ear. He stretched out without a twitch and the young Chinese sprang up, gasping and wild eyed.

"Thank you, my friend," he gurgled in perfect English. "I owe my life to you. Here, take this..." And he tried to stuff a wad of banknotes into my hand.

I drew back. "You owe me nothing," I growled. "I'd have done as much for any man."

"Then please accept my humble and sincere thanks," he exclaimed, seizing my hand. "You are an American, are you not? What is your name?"

"I'm Steve Costigan, first mate of the trading vessel *Panther*," I answered.

"I will not forget," he said. "I will repay you some day, as my name is Yotai T'sao. But now I must not linger. This is my one chance of escape. If I can get aboard the English ship that is anchored in the bay, I am safe. But I must go before this beast comes to. Best that you go too. May fortune attend you. But beware of the Yo Thans."

The next instant he was racing down the street at full speed. Watching him in amazement, I saw him sprint onto the docks and dive off, without the slightest pause. I heard the splash as he hit and a little later I saw, in the growing gray light, a widening ripple aiming toward the British S.S. *Marquis*, which lay out in the bay. I left off wondering what it could

mean, when the hatchet-man scrambled uncertainly to his feet. More or less ironically, I said: "Well, my bully boy, give me the low-down on this business, will you?"

His answer was a look of such diabolic hatred as to almost send cold shivers down my spine. He limped away into the shadows. I dismissed the whole affair from my mind and went on down the street.

About sun-up I decided I would get a little sleep in preparation for the day. It was my first shore leave in weeks, and I was determined to make the most of it. I turned into a seamen's boarding house kept by a Eurasian called Diego, got a room and turned in.

I WAS WAKENED BY BILL'S growling. He was clawing at the locked door and looking up at the transom, which was open. Then I saw something lying on my chest—a piece of stiff paper, rolled into a dart-shaped wad. I unrolled it, but there were no words on it, either English or Chinese, just a picture portraying a coiled snake, somewhat resembling a cobra. That was all.

Somewhat puzzled, I rose and dressed and shouted for Diego. When he came I said: "Look, Diego. Someone threw this through the transom onto my chest. Do you know what the meaning of it is."

He took a single look. Then he leaped back with a shriek: "Yo Than. Death. It's the murder sign of the Yo Thans."

"What do you mean?" I growled. "Who are these Yo Thans?"

"A Chinese secret society," gasped Diego, white and shaking like a leaf. "International criminals—murderers. Three times have I seen men receive the sign of the snake. Each time he who received it dies before the sun rose again. Get back to your ship. Hide, stay aboard until she sails. Maybe you can escape."

"Skulk aboard my ship like a cringing rat?" I growled. "I, who am known as a fighting man in every Asiatic port? I've never run or hidden from any man yet. Tell me, who is Yotai T'sao?"

But Diego was gripped by the yellow hand of fear.

"I'll tell you nothing," he screamed. "I'm risking my life talking to you. Get out, quick. You mustn't stay here. I can't have another murder in my house. Go, please, Steve."

"All right," I snapped. "Don't burst a blood-vessel, Diego. I'm going."

In disgust, I stalked forth in quest of food. While I ate and Bill had his scoffings from a panikin on the floor, I reviewed the situation and had the uncomfortable feeling that I had somehow blundered into the affairs of some mysterious gang of Oriental cut-throats. Under the bland outer surface of the Orient run dark and mysterious currents of plot and

intrigue, unknown to white men—unless one unluckily goes beyond his depth in native affairs and is caught by some such deadly undertow.

In that case... Well, it is no uncommon thing for a white man to disappear, to simply vanish as into thin air. Perhaps he is never heard of again. Perhaps his knife-riddled body is found floating in the river, or cast up on the beach. In either event, only silence rewards investigations. China never speaks. Like a vast, sleeping yellow giant she preserves her ancient and mysterious silence inviolate.

Finishing my meal, I sauntered out into the streets again, with their filth and glamor, sordidity and allure going hand in hand; throngs of Orientals buying and selling, bargaining in their monotonous sing-song, sailors of all nations rolling through the crowds... .

I began to have a queer feeling that I was being followed. Again and again I wheeled quickly and scanned the crowd, but in that teeming swarm of yellow slant-eyed faces it was impossible to tell whether anyone was trailing me. Yet the sensation persisted.

AS THE DAY WORE ON I found myself in Froggy Ladeau's American Bar, at the edge of the waterfront district. There I spied a man I knew—an Englishman named Wells, who had some sort of a government job. I sat down at his table. "Wells," I said, "did you ever hear of a man named Yotai T'sao?"

"That I have," he answered. "But I fear the blighter's been potted off. He's been working with the government trying to get evidence against a certain gang of dangerous criminals and last night he disappeared."

"He's all right," I replied. "I saw him swim out to an English ship which weighed anchor shortly after sun-up. But who are these criminals?"

"Bad blokes," said Wells, taking a long swig of ale. "An organized society. It's rumored their chief is a coral button mandarin. They specialize in murder and blackmail, to say nothing of smuggling, gun-running and jewel-stealing. Of late they've been tampering with bigger things—governmental secrets. The Yo Thans, they're called. The government would jolly well like to lay hands on them. But you've no idea what snaky customers they are. They're here, there and everywhere. We know they exist, but we can't nab the beggars. If the natives would talk—but they won't, and there's China for you. Even victims of the society won't blab. So what can we do?"

"But the government has gotten a promise of assistance from the most Honorable and Eminent Yun Lai Kao. You've heard of him?"

"Sure," I nodded. "Sort of a wealthy Oriental recluse and philanthropist, isn't he?"

"That and more. The natives look on him as a sort of god. He has almost unbelievable power in Canton, though he's never bothered to wield it very much. He's a philosopher—too busy considering abstract ideals and principles to bother with material things. He seldom ever appears in public. It was the very deuce to get him interested enough in sordid reality to promise to help the government scotch a gang of thugs. That shows, too, how helpless the government really is in this matter, when it has to call on private individuals. The only argument that moved him was the assurance that the Yo Thans are swiftly assuming a political importance, and were likely to start a civil war in China."

"Is it that important?" I asked, startled.

"Believe me, it is. These things grow fast. The unknown power, the nameless man, directing the activities of these thugs, is ruthless and clever as the devil, quite capable of raising the red flag of anarchy if he gets a little more power. China is a powder keg, ready for some unscrupulous rogue to set it off. No conservative Chinese wants that to happen. That's why Yun Lai Kao agreed to help. And with his power over the natives, I believe the government will lay the Yo Thans by the heels."

"What sort of a man is this mandarin, Yun Lai Kao?" I asked. "A venerable, white bearded patriarch, with ten-inch finger nails encased in gold and a load of Confucian epigrams?"

"Not by a long shot," answered Wells. "He doesn't look the type of a mystic at all. A clean-cut chap in middle life, he is, with a firm jaw and gimlet eyes—a graduate from Oxford too, by the way. Should have been a scientist or a soldier. Some queer quirk in his Oriental mind turned him to philosophy."

A COMMOTION BURST out in the bar. Ladeau was having some kind of a row with a big sailor. Suddenly the sailor hauled off and hit Froggy between the eyes. Ladeau crashed down on a table, with beer mugs and seltzer water bottles spilling all over him, and began yelling for Big John Clancy, his American bouncer. Hearing this, the sailor took to his heels. But Ladeau, floundering around in the ruins of the table with his eyes still full of stars, didn't see that. Big John came barging in and Froggy yelled: "Throw him out! Beat him up! Give him the bum's rush! Out with him, John!"

"Out with who?" roared Clancy, glaring around and doubling up his huge fists.

"That blasted sailor," bawled Froggy. Clancy then made a natural mistake. As it happened, I was the only sailor in the bar. I had just turned back to speak to Wells, when to my outraged amazement, I felt myself gripped by what appeared to be a gorilla.

"Out with you, my bully," growled Big John, hauling me out of my chair and trying to twist me around and get a hammerlock on my right arm.

I might have explained the situation, but my nerves were on edge already. And being mate on a tough tramp trader makes a man handier with his fists than with his tongue. I acted without conscious thought and jolted him loose from me with a left hook under the heart that nearly upset him. It would have finished an ordinary man, but Big John was built like a battleship. He gave a deafening roar and plunged headlong on me, locking both of his mighty arms around me. We went to the floor together, smashing a few chairs in our fall. As we cursed and wrestled, his superior weight enabled him to get on top of me.

At that instant my bulldog Bill landed square between Clancy's shoulders. By some chance his jaws missed Big John's bull neck, but ripped out the whole back of his coat. Big John gave a yell of fright and with a desperate heave of his enormous shoulders, shook Bill off and jumped up. I arose, too, and caught Bill just as he was soaring for Clancy's throat. I pushed him back, ordering him to keep out of it, and then turned toward Big John, who was snorting and blowing like a grampus in his wrath.

I was seeing red myself.

"Come on, you son-of-a-seahorse," I snarled. "If it's fighting you want, I'll give you a belly-full."

At that he gave a terrible howl and came for me, crazy-eyed. Ladeau ran between us, dancing and howling like a burnt cat.

"Git away, Froggy," bellowed Big John, swinging his huge arms like windmills. "Git outa the way! I'm goin' to smear this salt-water tramp all over the joint."

"Wait a minute, please, John," screamed Ladeau, pushing against Clancy's broad chest with both hands. "This here is Steve Costigan of the *Panther*."

"What do I care who he is?" roared Big John. "Git outa the way!"

"You can't fight in here," Froggy howled desperately. "If you two tangles here, you'll tear the joint down. I can't afford it. Anyway, he ain't the man that hit me."

"Well, he's the swine that hit me," rumbled Big John.

"Get aside, Froggy," I snapped. "Let us have it out. It's the only way."

"No, no!" shrieked Ladeau. "It cost me five hundred dollars to repair the place after you threw Red McCoy out, John, and I seen Costigan lick Bully Dawson in a saloon in Hong Kong. They had to rebuild the joint. Come down on the beach, back of the Kago Tong warehouses and fight it out where you can't bust nothin' but each others' noses."

"A jolly good idea," put in Wells. "You fellows don't want to make a spectacle of yourselves here, in a respectable district, and have the police on you. If you must fight, why don't you do as Ladeau says?"

Big John folded his mighty arms and glared at me, as he growled: "Fair enough. I ain't the man to do useless damage. I'll be at the beach as quick as I can get there. Get some of your crew, Costigan, so as to have fair play all around. And get there as soon as you can."

"Good enough," I snapped. Turning on my heel, I left the bar. Oh, it seems foolish, no doubt, grown men fighting like school boys. But reputations grow. A man in the ordinary course of duty acquires the name of a fighter and before he knows it, his pride is forcing him into fights to maintain it.

HOPING TO FIND SOME of the *Panther's* crew, I went down the narrow waterfront streets. My efforts met with no success. As a last resort, I thought of a shop down a little side street in the native quarter, run by a Chinese named Yuen Lao, who sells trinkets such as sailors buy in foreign ports to give to their sweethearts.

With the thought that I might find some of my friends there, I turned into the obscure, winding street. I noticed that there were even fewer people traversing it than usual. An old man with a cage full of canary birds, a coolie pulling a cart, a fish peddler or so—that was all.

I saw the shop just ahead of me. Then, with a vicious *zing*—something came humming through the air. It hissed by my neck as I instinctively ducked. It thudded into the wall at my shoulder—a long thin bladed knife, stuck a good three inches into the hard boards and quivering from the force of the throw. Had it hit me, it would have gone clear through me.

I looked across the street, but all I could see was the blank fronts of a row of vacant shops. The windows all seemed to be boarded up, but I knew that the knife had come from one of them. The Chinese on the street paid no attention to me at all. They went about their affairs as if they seen nothing, not even me. Little use to ask them if they saw the knife-thrower. China never speaks.

And the thought of the Yo Thans came back to me with a shudder. It had been no idle threat, that cryptic sign of the snake. They had struck and missed, but they would strike again and again until they opened the Doors of Doom for Steve Costigan. Cold sweat broke out on me. This was like fighting a cobra in the dark.

I turned into Yuen Lao's shop, with its shelves of jade idols, coral jewelry and tiny ivory elephants. A bronze Buddha squatted on a raised dais, its inscrutable face veiled by the smoke of burning joss sticks. Only Yuen Lao, tall and lean, with a mask-like face, stood in the shop.

I turned to leave, when he came quickly from behind his counter.

"You are Costigan, mate of the *Panther*?" said he in good English. I nodded, and he continued in a lowered voice. "You are in danger. Do not ask me how I know. These things have a way of getting about among the Chinese. Listen to me. I would be your friend. And you need friends. Without my aid, you will be dead before dawn."

"Oh, I don't know," I growled, involuntarily tensing my biceps. "I've never been in a jamb yet that I couldn't slug my way out of."

"Your strength will not help you." He shook his head. "Your shipmates cannot aid you. Your enemies will strike secretly and subtly. Their sign is the cobra. And, like the cobra, they kill swiftly, silently, giving their victim no chance to defend himself."

I began to feel wild and desperate, like a wolf in a trap, as the truth of his words came home to me.

"How am I going to fight men who won't come into the open?" I snarled, helplessly, knotting my fists until the knuckles showed white. "Get them in front of me and I'll battle the whole gang. But I can't smoke them out of their hives."

"You must listen to me," said Yuen Lao. "I will save you. I have no cause to love the Yo Thans."

"But why have they turned on me?" I asked in perplexity.

"You prevented their chief hatchet-man from slaying Yotai T'sao," said he. "Yotai T'sao was doomed, tried and sentenced by their most dread tribunal. He had intrigued his way into their secret meeting places and councils, to get evidence to use against them in the court. For he was a spy of the government. His life was forfeit and not even the government could save him from the vengeance of the Yo Thans. Last night he sought to escape and was trapped by Yaga, the hatchet-man who hunted him down and caught him almost on the wharves. There had Yotai T'sao died but for you. Today he is far at sea and safe. But the vengeance of the Yo Thans is turned upon you. And you are doomed."

"A nice mess," I muttered.

"But I am your friend," continued Yuen Lao. "And I hate the Yo Thans. I am more than I seem."

"Are you a government spy too?" I asked.

"Shh!" He laid his long finger to his lips and glanced around quickly and warily. "The very walls have ears in Canton. But I will tell you this. There is but one man in Canton who can save you, who will, if I ask him, speak the word that will make even the Yo Thans stay their hands."

"Yun Lai Kao," I muttered.

Yuen Lao started and peered at me intensely for an instant. Then he seemed to nod, almost imperceptibly.

"Tonight I will take you to—this—this man. Let him remain nameless, for the present. You must come alone, hinting your errand to no one. Trust me!"

"It's not many hours till sundown," I muttered. "When and where shall I meet you?"

"Come to me alone, in the Alley of Bats, as soon as it is well dark. And go now, quickly. We must not be seen too much together. And be wary, lest the Yo Thans strike again before we meet."

AS I LEFT THE SHOP I HAD a distinct feeling of relief. I had not been inclined to trust Yuen Lao's mere word, but his evident connection with the mighty and mysterious mandarin, Yun Lai Kao, together with what Wells had said of the mandarin, reassured me. If I could evade the hatred of the unknown murderers until dark... .

Suddenly, with a curse of annoyance, I remembered that at this very moment I was supposed to be on my way to the beach to fight Big John Clancy with my naked fists. Well, it must be done. Even if I died that night, I must keep that appointment. I could not go out with men thinking I dared not meet Big John in open fight. Besides, the thought came to me, that was the safest place in Canton for me—on the open beach, surrounded by men of my own race. The problem lay in getting there alive. I made no further attempts to find the crew, but set off at a rapid walk, keeping my eye alert and passing alleyways very warily. Bill sensed my caution and kept close to me, walking stiff-legged, rumbling deep and ominously in his throat.

But I arrived unharmed at the strip of open beach behind the big warehouses. Big John was already there, stripped to the waist, growling his impatience and flexing his mighty arms. Froggy Ladeau was there and half a dozen others, all friends of Clancy. Wells was not there. I couldn't help wondering about that.

"I couldn't find any of my friends, Clancy," I said abruptly. "But I'm not afraid of not getting fair play. I've always heard of you as a square shooter. My dog won't interfere. I'll make him understand that. But Froggy can hold him if you'd rather."

"You've kept me waitin'," growled Big John. "Let's get goin'."

It's like a dream now, that fight on the Kago Tong beach. Men still talk about it, from Vladivostok to Sumatra, wherever the roving brotherhood gathers to spin old yarns over their glasses.

"No kickin', gougin', or bitin'," Big John growled. "Let it be a white man's fight."

And a white man's fight it was, there on the naked beach, both of us stripped to the waist, with no weapons but our naked fists. What a man John Clancy was! I was six feet tall and weighed 190 pounds. He stood six feet one and three quarter inches and he weighed 230 pounds—all bone and muscle it was, with never an ounce of fat on him. His legs were like tree trunks, his arms looked as if they had been molded out of iron, and his chest was arching and broad as a door. A massive, corded neck upheld a lion-like head and a face like a Roman senator's.

I weighed my chances as we approached each other, I and this giant who had never known defeat. In sheer strength and bulk he had the edge. But I was strong, too, in those days, and I knew that I was the faster man and the more scientific boxer.

He came at me like a charging bull and I met him half-way. Mine was the skill or fortune to get in the first punch, a smashing left hook square to the jaw. It stopped him dead in his tracks. But he roared and came on again, shaking his lion-like head. I went under his gigantic swings to rip both hands to his body. I was fast enough and skilled enough to avoid his mightiest blows for a time, but let it not be thought that I back-peddled and ran, or fought a merely defensive fight. Men do not fight that way on the beach—or anywhere in the raw edges of the world.

I stood up to him and he stood up to me. My head was singing with his blows and the blood trickled from my mouth. Blue welts showed on his ribs and one of his eyes was closing.

He loomed like a giant over me as I ducked his terrible swing. It whistled over my head and my glancing return tore the skin on his ribs. Gad, his right hand whistled past my face like a white hot brick, and when he landed he shook me from head to heel. But my battles with men and with the Seven Seas had toughened me into steel and whale-bone endurance. I stood up to it.

I was landing the more and cleaner blows. Again and again I had him floundering, but always he came back with a crashing, bone-crushing attack I could not altogether avoid. I bulled in close, ducking inside his wide looping smashes, and ripped both hands to body and head. I had the better at the infighting. But, staggering under a machine-gun fire of short hooks and uppercuts, he suddenly ripped up an uppercut of his own. Gad, my head snapped back as if my neck was broken. Only blind instinct made me fall into Big John and clinch before he could strike again. And I held on with a grizzly grip not even he could break, until my head cleared.

The onlookers had formed a tense ring about us. Their nails bit into their clenching palms and their breaths came in swift gasps. There was no other sound save the scruff of our feet on the beach, the thud and smash of savagely driven blows, an occasional grunt, and Bill's low, incessant growling.

CLANCY'S HUGE FIST banged against my eye, half closing it. My right crashed full into his mouth and he spit out a shattered tooth.

My left hook was doing most of the damage. Big John was too fond of using his right. He drew it back too far before he let it go. Again and again I beat him to the punch with my left, and I made raw beef out of the right side of his jaw. Sometimes he would duck clumsily and my hook would smash on his ear, which was a beautiful cauliflower before the fight was over. But I was not unmarked.

Things floated in a red mist. I saw Big John's face before me, with the lips smashed and pulped, one eye closed and blood streaming from his nose. My arms were growing heavy, my feet slow. I stumbled as I side-stepped. The taste of blood was in my mouth. How long we had stood toe to toe, exchanging terrific smashes, I did not know. It seemed like ages. In chaotic, flashing glances, I saw the strained, white, tense faces of the onlookers.

From somewhere smashed Big John's thundering right hand. Square on the jaw it crashed. I felt myself falling into an abyss of blackness, shot with a million gleams and darts of light. I struck the beach hard, and the jolt of the fall jarred me back into my senses. I looked up, shaking the blood and sweat out of my eyes, and saw Big John looming above me. He was swaying, wide-braced on his mighty legs. His great, hairy chest was heaving as his breath came in panting gasps. I dragged myself to my feet. The knowledge that he was in as bad a way as I, nerved my weary muscles.

"You must be made outa iron," he croaked, lurching toward me. I took a deep breath and braced myself to meet his right. The blow was a glancing one and I blasted both hands under his heart. He reeled like a ship in rough weather, but came back with a left swing that staggered me. Again he swung his right, like a club. I ducked and straightened with a left hook that cracked on the side of his head. But it was high. I felt my knuckles crumple. His knees buckled and I put all I had behind my right. Like a swinging maul, it smashed on Big John Clancy's jaw. And he swayed and fell.

I felt men about me, heard their awed congratulations, felt Bill's cold wet nose shoved into my hand. Froggy was staring down at the senseless form of Big John in a sort of unbelieving horror.

Then came memory of Yuen Lao and the Yo Thans. I shook the blood and sweat from my eyes, pulling away from the men who were pawing over me. The sun was setting. If I expected to see that sun rise again, I must meet Yuen Lao and go with him to Yun Lai Kao.

Snatching up my clothes, I tore away from the amazed men and reeled drunkenly up the beach. Out of sight of the group, I dropped from sheer exhaustion. It was minutes before I could rise and go on.

My mind cleared as I walked, and my head ceased to sing from Big John's smashes. I was fiercely weary, sore and bruised. It seemed impossible for me to get my wind back. My left hand was swollen and sore, and the skin was torn on my right knuckles. One of my eyes was partly closed, my lips were smashed and cut, my ribs battered black and blue. But the cool wind from the sea helped me, and with the recuperative powers of youth and an iron frame, I regained my wind, shook off some of my weariness and felt fairly fit as I neared the Alley of Bats, in the growing darkness.

I FOUND TIME TO WONDER why the Yo Thans had not struck again. There was something unnatural about the whole business, it seemed to me. Since that knife had been flung at me earlier in the day, I had had no sign at all of the existence of that murderous gang.

I came unharmed to the narrow, stinking rat-den in the heart of the native quarter which the Chinese call, for some unknown reason, the Alley of Bats. It was pitch-dark there. I felt cold shivers creep up and down my spine. Suddenly a figure loomed up beside me and Bill snarled. In my nervousness I almost struck out at the figure, when Yuen Lao's voice halted me. He was like a ghost in the deep shadows. Bill growled savagely.

"Come with me," whispered Yuen Lao. And I groped after him. Down that alley he led me. Across another even darker and nastier. Through a wide shadowy courtyard. Down a narrow side street, deep in the heart of what I knew must be a mysterious native quarter seldom seen by white men. Down another alley and into a dimly lighted courtyard. He stopped before a heavy arched doorway.

As he rapped upon it, I realized the utter silence, eeriness and brooding mystery of the place. Truly, I was in the very heart of ancient and enigmatic China, as surely as if I had been five hundred miles in the interior. The very shadows seemed lurking perils. I shuddered involuntarily.

Three times Yuen Lao rapped. Then the door swung silently inward, to disclose a veritable well of darkness. I could not even see who had opened the door. Yuen Lao entered first, motioning me to follow. I stepped in, Bill crowding close after me. The door slammed between us, leaving the dog on the outside. I heard the click of a heavy lock. Bill was clawing and whining outside the door. And then the lights came on. While I blinked like a blinded owl, I heard a low throaty chuckle that sent involuntary shivers up and down my spine. My eyes became accustomed to the light. I saw that I was in a big room, furnished in true Oriental style. The walls were covered with velvet and silken hangings, ornamented with silver dragons worked into the fabric. A faint scent of some Eastern incense or perfume pervaded the atmosphere.

Ranged about me were ten big, dark, wicked-faced men, naked except for loin-cloths. Malays they were, tougher and stronger than any Chinese. On a kind of tiger-skin covered dais across the room an unmistakable Chinaman sat on a lacquer-worked chair. He was clad in robes worked in dragons like those on the hangings, and his keen piercing eyes gleamed through holes in the mask which hid his features. But it was the figure which stood image-like beside the lacquered chair which drew and held my gaze. It was the hatchet-man from whom I had rescued Yotai T'sao on the wharfs that morning.

In a sickening instant I realized that I was trapped. Blind fool that I was, to walk into the snare. A child might have suspected that mask-faced snake of a Yuen Lao. He too was a Yo Than, I realized. And he had not brought me to the Honorable and Benevolent Yun Lai Kao. He had brought me before the nameless and mysterious chief of the Yo Thans, to die like a butchered sheep.

And there he stood before me, Yuen Lao, smiling evilly. I acted instinctively. Square into his mouth I crashed my right before he could move. His teeth caved in and he dropped like a log.

The masked man on the dais laughed. And in his laughter sounded all the ancient and heartless cruelty of the Orient.

"The white barbarian is strong and fierce," he mocked. "But this night, my bold savage, you shall learn what it is to interfere with the plans of Kang Kian of the Yo Thans. Fool, to pit your paltry powers against mine. You, with the striding arrogance of your breed.

"Know, fool, before you die, that the ancient dragon that is China is waking slowly beneath the feet of the foreign dogs, and their doom is not far off. Soon I, Kang Kian, master of the Yo Thans, will come from the shadows, raise the dragon banner of revolution and mount again the ancient throne of my ancestors. Your fate will be the fate of all your race who oppose me. I laugh at you. Do you deem yourself important because the future emperor of China deigns to see personally to your removal? Bah! I merely crush you as I crush the gnat that annoys me."

Then he spoke shortly to the Malays: "Kill him."

THEY CLOSED IN ON me silently, drawing knives, strangling cords and loaded cudgels. It looked like trail's end for Steve Costigan. I, with two black eyes, ribs pounded black and blue, one hand broken, from one fierce fight, pitted against these trained killers. They approached warily. Bill, outside, sensing my peril, began to roar and hurl himself against the bolted door. I tensed myself for one last rush. The thought flashed through me that perhaps Bill would escape my fate. I hoped that it might be so.

I drew back, tensed and watchful as a hawk. The ring was closing in on me. The nearest Malay edged within reach. He raised his knife for the death leap. I smashed my heel to his knee and distinctly heard the bone snap. He went down. I leaped across him and hit that closing ring as a plunging fullback hits a line.

Cudgels swished past my head. I felt a knife lick along my ribs. Then I was through, bounding across the room and onto the dais.

Kang Kian screamed. He jerked a pistol from his robes. How he missed me at that range, I cannot say. The powder flash burned my face, but before he could fire again I knocked him head over heels with a blow that was backed with the power of desperation. The pistol flew out of reach.

The hatchet-man was on me like a clawing cat. He drove a long knife deep into my chest muscles. Then I got in a solid smash. His jaw was brittle. It crunched like an egg-shell. I swung his limp form up bodily above my head and hurled him into the clump of Malays who came

leaping up on the dais, bowling over the front line like ten-pins. The rest came at me.

Carried beyond myself on a red wave of desperate battle fury, I caught up the lacquered chair and swung it with all my strength. Squarely it landed and I felt my victim's shoulder bone give way. But the chair flew into splinters. Then a whistling cudgel stroke laid my scalp open and knocked me to my knees. The whole pack piled on me, hacking and slashing. But their very numbers hindered them. Somehow, I managed to shake them off momentarily and stagger up.

A big Chinaman I had not seen before bobbed up from nowhere and got a bone-breaking wrestling hold on my right arm. A giant Malay was thrusting for my life. I could not wrench my right free. So, setting my teeth, I slugged him with my broken left. I went sick and dizzy from the pain of it, but the Malay dropped like a sack.

But they downed me again, as my berserk fighting frenzy waned. They swarmed over me and forced me down by sheer weight of manpower. I heard Kang Kian yelling to them with the rage of a fiend in his voice, and a big dark-skinned devil raised his knife and drove it down for my heart. Somehow, I managed to throw up my left arm and take the blade through it. That arm felt like I'd bathed in molten lead.

Then I heard the door crash and splinter. A familiar voice roared like a high sea. And something like a white cannon-ball hit the clump of natives on top of me.

The press slackened as the group flew apart. I reeled up, sick, dizzy and weak from loss of the blood that was spurting from me in half a dozen places. As in a daze, I saw Bill leaping and tearing at dark, howling figures which fell over each other trying to get away. And I saw a white giant ploughing through them as a battleship goes through breakers.

Big John Clancy!

I saw him seize a Malay in each hand, by the neck, crack their heads together and throw them into a corner. A dusky giant ran in, lunging upward with a stroke meant to disembowel, only to be stretched senseless by one blow of Big John's mighty fist. The big Chinaman—a wrestler, by his looks—got a headlock on Clancy. But Big John broke the hold, wheeled and threw the wrestler clear over his shoulders, head over heels. The Chinaman hit on his head and he didn't get up.

That was enough for the Yo Thans. They scattered like a flock of birds, all except Kang Kian, the masked lord. He sprang for the fallen pistol. Before he could reach it, Bill, jaws already streaming red, dragged him

down. One fearful scream broke from the Yo Than's yellow lips and then Bill's iron jaws tore out his throat.

BIG JOHN CAME QUICKLY toward me. "By golly, Costigan," he rumbled, "you look like you been through a sawmill. Here, lemme tie up some of them stabs before you bleed to death. You've lost a gallon of blood already. We got to git you where you can git dressed right. But for the time bein' we'll see can we stop the bleedin'."

He ripped strips from his shirt and began to bandage me. Bill climbed all over me, wagging his stump of a tail and licking my hand.

I gazed at Big John in amazement. I had thought my own vitality unusual, but Big John's endurance was beyond belief. He looked as if he'd been mauled by a gorilla. I was astounded to realize the extent to which I had punished him in our battle. Yet he seemed almost as fresh and fit as ever. My smashes which had blackened his eyes, smashed his lips, ripped his ears, shattered some of his teeth and laid open his jaw, had battered him down and out, but had not sapped the vast reservoir of his vitality. I had merely weakened him momentarily and knocked him out, that was all, and accomplishing that feat had taken more of my strength than it had his.

"I supposed you'd be laid up for a week after our fight," I said bluntly.

He snorted. "You must think I'm effeminate. I wasn't out but a few minutes. And when I'd got back my breath, I was ready to go on with the fight. Of course I'm kinda stiff and sore and tired-like, right now, but that amounts to nothing.

"When I'd got my bearin's I looked around for you. Froggy and them had a hard time convincin' me that I'd been licked, for the first time in my life. I'll swear, I still don't see how it could of happened. Anyway, I started right out to find you and take you apart, because I was mighty near blind mad. A coolie had seen you go into the Alley of Bats and I followed, not long behind you. I know Canton better'n most white men, but I got clean tangled up in all them alley-ways and courtyards.

"Then I heard your dog makin' a big racket. I knowed it was yours, because they ain't but one dog in China with a voice like his. So I come and found him roarin' and plungin' at the door and I heard the noise inside. So knowin' you must be in some kind of a jamb, I just up and busted in. Who was them thugs, anyhow?"

I told him quickly about Yotai T'sao and the Yo Thans. He growled: "I mighta knowed it. I've heard of 'em. I bet they won't put no snake sign on no more Americans very soon. Come on, let's get outa here."

"I don't know how to thank you, Clancy," I said. "You certainly saved my hide... ."

"Aw, don't thank me," he grunted. "I couldn't see them mutts bump off a white man. And you'd sure give 'em a tussle by yourself. Naw, don't thank me. Remember I was lookin' for you to beat you up."

"Well," said I, "I hate to fight a man whose saved my life, but if you're set on it... ."

He laughed gustily and slapped me on the back. "Thunderation, Steve, I wouldn't hit a man which has just stopped as many knives as you have. Anyway, I'm beginnin' to like you. Who's this?"

A tall man in European clothes stepped suddenly into the doorway, with a revolver in one hand.

"Wells!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Following a tip-off I got earlier in the evening," he said crisply. "I got wind of a secret session of the Yo Thans to be held here."

"So you are a Secret Service man after all," I said slowly. "If I'd known that, I might not have all these knife-stabs in my hide."

"I've been trailing the Yo Thans for some time," he answered. "Working with special powers invested in me by British and Chinese authorities. Whose this dead man?"

"He called himself Kang Kian and boasted that he was the mysterious lord of the Yo Thans and the next emperor of China," I answered, with an involuntary shudder, as I glanced at the grisly havoc Bill's ripping fangs had wrought. Wells' eyes blazed. He stepped forward and tore away the blood stained mask, revealing the smooth yellow face and clean-cut aristocrat features of a middle-aged China-man.

Wells recoiled with an exclamation.

"My word! Can it be possible! No wonder he delayed the aid he promised the government, and only promised, I can see now, to avert suspicion. And no wonder he was able to keep his true identity a secret. Clancy, Costigan, this is the Honorable and Eminent Yun Lai Kao."

"What, the philosopher and philanthropist?" Clancy, who knew Canton, was even more amazed than I.

Wells nodded slowly. "What strange quirk in his nature led him along this path?" he said half to himself. "What a mind he had. What heights he might have risen to, but for that one twist in his soul. Who can explain it?"

Clancy, who knew the Orient, seemed to be groping for words to frame a thought.

"China," he said, "is China. And there's no use in a white man tryin' to figger her out."

Aye, China is China—vast, aloof, inscrutable, the Sphynx of the nations.

**Loved this book ?
Similar users also downloaded**

Robert Ervin Howard

Blood of the Gods

Robert Ervin Howard

The TNT Punch

Robert Ervin Howard

The Fearsome Touch of Death

Robert Ervin Howard

Blow the Chinks Down!

Robert Ervin Howard

The Horror From The Mound

Robert Ervin Howard

Fist and Fang

Robert Ervin Howard

The Dream Snake

Robert Ervin Howard

The Apache Mountain War

Robert Ervin Howard

Guns of the Mountains

Robert Ervin Howard

The Voice of El-Lil



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind