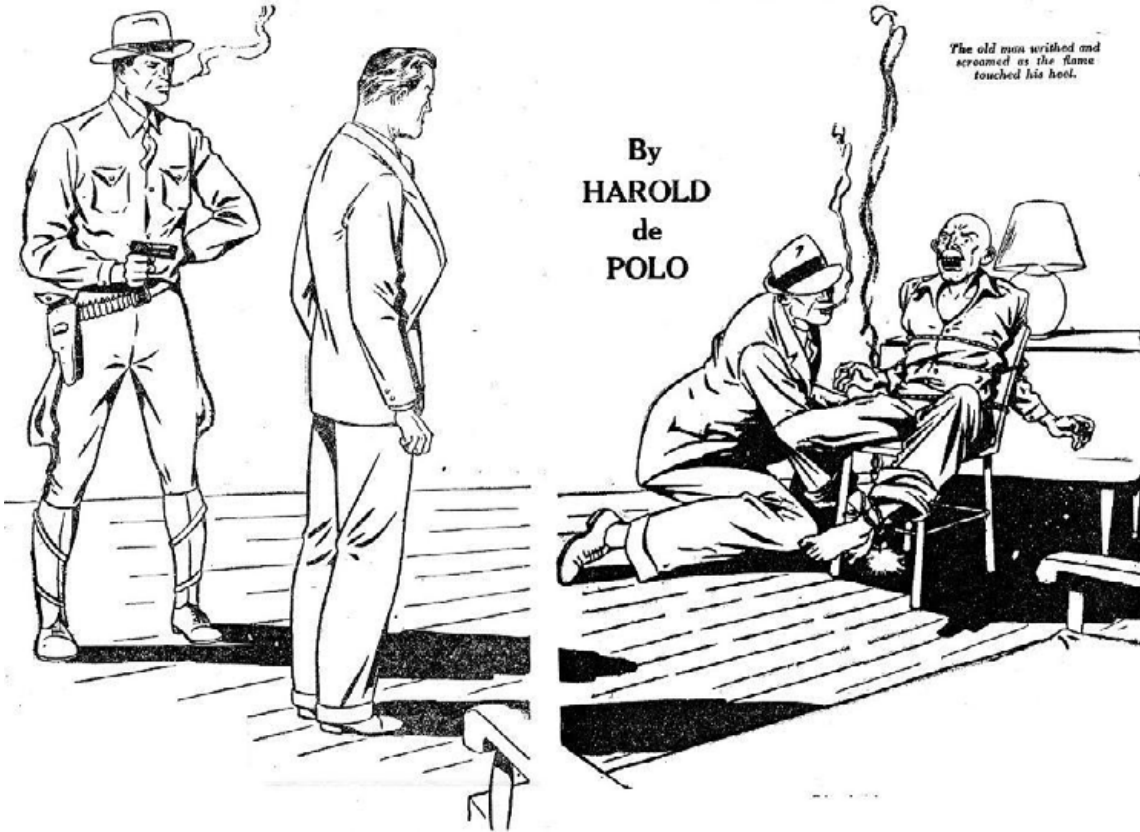


THREE BIRDS WITH ONE STONE



Chan Buzzell had always been a little suspicious of the old German-Swiss hermit, but there was nothing he could prove. Perhaps it's true that "it takes a thief to catch a thief"

CHAN BUZZELL, the Loon Lake game warden, was doing the part of his job that he didn't like. That he hated. Rigged up in spick and span uniform, he was driving around in a shiny department car visiting the Summer residents of Loon and Little Loon Lakes. He was checking up to see that they'd procured their fishing licenses for the season and to see that no one had broken the law by illegally taking fish or game. He did this twice a year, Summer and Fall, and it was humdrum work. He never found anyone without a license and he never found anyone with any out-of-season fish or game. They could spot him coming the proverbial mile away, he thought ruefully.

All these vacationists to Maine did was be extremely pleasant to him and offer him a drink or a cigar, and Chan seldom drank and never smoked cigars. Still, his chief demanded this chore of his men, so Chan did it.

He'd covered the northern and least inhabited end of Loon Lake, by late afternoon, and he'd be glad to get back to his cabin on the east shore. Although it was along toward the end of June, the ice had been late in leaving the lake and the salmon were still hitting a dry fly on the surface. He'd like to get in a little casting, after early supper, over on Moose Cove. He had only one more call to make, and this was usually a mighty short one.

Herman Lescaze, the German-Swiss who was practically a hermit, never kept him long. The grouchy old man never offered him a drink or a cigar, but showed his license and barked out that he hadn't even fished or hunted—depending upon the season—and then had his black servant and bodyguard just about slam the door in Chan's face. That was one place Chan decidedly didn't like to go. Neither did any other local people, for that matter.

CHAN told himself that he wasn't so sure, as he left the Gunther place and wheeled out onto the main road, that Lescaze was as innocent as he professed. The German-Swiss gem dealer had been coming up here to this remote logging settlement, with scattered Summer homes, for the past fourteen or fifteen years. He was a notorious miser, doing very little buying at the Loon Lake Landing store. He said that he brought most of his food up with him, as he could get it much cheaper in Boston. That was what local gossip said. Gossip from a few of the Summer residents, however, had come to Chan that Lescaze usually killed one or two deer out of season. Chan never paid attention to gossip, but he'd always figured that there might have been something behind this bit of it. If so, he'd never been able to discover anything.

Lescaze lived away from the lake, in a big farmhouse he had bought that was a few miles from any other dwelling. He had a private road to it close to a mile long, and he had a "No Trespassing" sign at the beginning of this. Further along, up by the house, Chan knew that his black servant—some fellow from one of the African tribes, people said—would be waiting at a barred gate with a rifle on his shoulder. Report had it that the reason for this was that Lescaze kept a lot of his precious stone collection here. No, Chan never *had*

liked making this visit, he again reminded himself. As he started to turn off on the private driveway, two men came walking along the road from behind a bend in it. They hailed him:

"Hello, Mr. Buzzell," said the taller and elder of the pair. "How about giving us a lift back to the Landing? Walked a little longer than we thought, on our constitutional."

"Glad to, after I've finished this last call," said Chan as he stopped. "Won't be gone long. Wait here for me."

"Guess we'll drive up with you," said the younger man, stepping over to Chan's side of the car and sticking an automatic through the open window. "Keep your hands on that wheel. Don't move."

"No, do not move," said the other, and for the first time Chan noticed a slight foreign accent in his words that now came so precisely. "It might be bad for you, my friend," he advised, also showing a gun as he got in beside the game warden.

Chan kept his hands on the wheel. He believed in obedience when two guns were pointed at him.

Swiftly, expertly, the younger man yanked Chan's own weapon from its own holster, went through his pockets and took out his official handcuffs, and slipped them over Chan's wrists. Then he motioned for him to move over, and got in behind the wheel. After that he put the car in gear and went up the private road.

CHARACTERISTICALLY, the game warden kept silent as they drove slowly ahead. He had met these men as Mr. Martin and Mr. Brown at the Loon Lake Landing Hotel when they had come up a week ago for a vacation from hard war work in Boston, as they had said. He'd noticed that they hadn't fished, as most people did who came to this section, and now he partially understood why.

They weren't interested in fishing for fish, at least. He'd find out in what they were interested, before very long. He'd learned years ago that if you kept your mouth shut the other man eventually opened his.

The older man, Martin, did just that when they reached an abandoned logging road a quarter of a mile from the main one:

"Here. Drive off in there, Alec," he ordered.

The man at the wheel ran the car along the overgrown trail for about a hundred feet. Then the other got out and waved his gun at Chan:

"Get out, Buzzell. Be quick. Take your clothes off," he finished, removing his own coat and starting to shed his trousers.

Chan got out and stretched. Chan was lean and long and tanned, with a loosely-knit figure that hid his superb muscles as completely as his lazy air hid his amazing swiftness of action. He had wide gray eyes with an odd sombreness in them. Somehow, they seemed to be looking at and into and through a man. They were looking at the other that way now. He said in his slow drawl:

"Know it's a real serious offense to hold up a game warden here in Maine—Mr. Martin?"

"We do not think of small things with big things waiting," said Martin, a slight grin on his saturnine face as his pale, close-set eyes narrowed coldly. "Come, out of that uniform. It will not fit me too badly, I think."

Chan, with one of his own rare smiles, held out his handcuffed wrists.

"True. Get out his keys and unlock those things, Alec. Keep that gun pointed on him and watch him carefully, while he undresses. Shoot at the first sign of danger, and shoot him to kill . . . Hurry, Buzzell," he commanded brusquely as his companion unlocked the manacles.

Chan never hurried, unless he had to,

and he didn't figure he had to now. If he had hoped to get a chance to turn the tables, while he was undressing, he was mistaken. Martin kept a dozen feet away from him and had him toss his clothes over to him, and the younger man he had known as Brown held two automatics, including Chan's own, pointed unwaveringly at him. Then he was told to slip on Martin's suit, while the latter got into the uniform and puttees and cap of the game warden. After that the handcuffs were put back on Chan's wrists.

"Now we go to see that old miser Lescaze," said Martin, rubbing his hands together. "His black man will let me in, when he thinks I am a game warden. . . . Does not this uniform fit me well?" he ended with a laugh.

Chan, getting into the car as ordered, spoke for the second time as Alec started the engine:

"Goin' to arrest him for killin' illegal game an' get some graft? Wish I could. Wish I could arrest him, I mean. Never could catch the cuss doin' wrong, though."

"Illegal game? Bah! . . . We are after his jewels. He is a foxy old devil. He lets no one near him. We knew that and we have seen that. Now, with this uniform . . . Yes, Buzzell, we are grateful that you spoke to that man in the hotel lobby last night and told him this was your day to visit people. We had been waiting a few hours for you. You make it easy for us."

"Take care o' that uniform, please," cautioned Chan. "Don't get it shot up. Not so keen on wearin' it, I admit, but when I do, I like it to look neat."

"Oh, it will not be shot up. Will it, Alec?" chuckled Martin. "I am sure Lescaze and his black man will give up when they have my gun at them . . . No, do not worry. When we get these jewels we want, you may again have your uniform, and then you will drive us close to a

station where we will get a train. No, do not worry.”

Chan knew what driving them near a railroad station would probably mean. They’d dump him out and fill him with lead, most likely. They’d abandon the car, of course. It would be what they would call “too hot.” He’d have to keep watching for a break before that happened. He said, dryly:

“That’s comfortin’.”

A COUPLE of hundred yards from the gates to Lescaze’s place, in a hollow below a steep hill, Martin told Alec to get out of the car with Chan and wait for him. Then he stepped on the gas and went up the incline. The game warden didn’t see any chance for a break. Alec wisely kept eight or ten feet away from him, and he kept that automatic leveled all the time.

“Come up with that Buzzell man, Alec,” a cry came down to them after what seemed long ten minutes or more. “The old fool will not talk. You will have to help me make him.”

“We’re coming,” yelled back the stolid-faced Alec.

They walked up the hill and went through the opened gates, and Chan could see Martin, on the porch, holding his gun on Lescaze and the black man, Walanda. The guard’s rifle was on the ground, probably thrown there by Martin, and his hands were held high over his head.

“You are here, Buzzell, are you? How could you allow this—this outrage? You are in with these thieves?” cried Lescaze excitedly.

“Seems as though,” drawled Chan, casually backing off a step or two toward the discarded rifle.

“No soap, Mr. Game Warden,” said Alec gruffly, getting there first and stepping on the weapon.

“Can’t blame a man for tryin’,” said

Chan with a shrug.

“What iss this—*what iss this*, Buzzell? You are a thief, too, heh?” shouted Lescaze.

“Peace. Quiet,” warned Martin, holding up his hand.

“You are mixed up in this, Buzzell, I tell you,” insisted Lescaze angrily. “You have always been my enemy, coming here to ask about licenses and fish and deers. Now you want my jewels.” He paused and went on, with a leer. “Well, you will not get them, no more than you found any fish or deer or other things.”

“Admit havin’ ‘em out o’ season, do you?”

“I admit nothing—*nothing*. I—” He shook his fist. “I will have you arrested for lending your uniform to thieves to rob me.”

“I said quiet, did I not?” snapped Martin, and Chan noticed that his accent was something like that of Lescaze. “I have been waiting for this opportunity a long while, Lescaze. Yes, I even tried to corner you when we were back in our native Switzerland. I have tried in Boston, but you were too smart—too smart until now. I do not know how many of your jewels you have here with you, but I do know you have that Orvitch collection from Russia. Quite a profitable business you have been doing, buying from refugees who have smuggled out their stones. I will take some of those profits, now. Those Orvitch opals—”

“I have not them here, I have not them here,” protested Lescaze frenziedly.

“I know you have them, Lescaze,” said Martin. “We will make you remember where you have them, I think . . . Come, Alec, tie up this black man. It is safer. Or knock him on the head, if you wish . . . But hurry. We must get these jewels and we must be driven to that night train.”

Apparently Alec was well prepared,

Chan saw, for he pulled a rope out of a hip pocket with a grin. As the African started to quiver, the game warden said:

“Better let ‘em do it, Walanda. No use gettin’ shot up. Right, Mr. Lescaze?”

“It iss safer, I suppose,” admitted the dealer in precious stones surlily.

CHAN watched the black man submit to having his wrists and arms bound, calm and docile, at Lescaze’s words. It was rumored that the Swiss, years before, had run across his servant in Africa and saved him from the wrath of some tribal chieftain. Ever since then, it was said, the man had been an adoring and abject slave.

“Let us go inside,” suggested Martin softly. “We will see if we can find those jewels. I did not see any safe here in his living room, yet.”

Inside, it was Alec who took charge. He waved his gun at Lescaze with a grin:

“Get your shoes and socks off.”

“Changin’ clothes with another feller?” drawled Chan.

“No. No, not exactly, my friend,” purred Martin. “We are using one of the oldest and simplest means of persuasion known to the world. Fire, Buzzell . . . Come, Lescaze, be prompt. Remove those shoes and socks.”

The old man, his wizened face drawn into a knot, looked at Martin and Alec and Chan with his darting brown eyes that were filled with fear. He gulped and shrank away.

“Sit in that chair,” ordered Alec. “I’ll take ‘em off for you, all right.”

Cowering, trembling, Lescaze sank down into the chair into which Alec pushed him.

Still Chan didn’t see a chance for a break. Martin, anyway, waved his automatic at him, motioning him to step back.

Roughly, Alec unlaced the shoes and,

along with the socks, ripped them off. Then, a slow grin on his square-jawed, unemotional face, he took out a wooden match and lighted it. He held the flame to the ball of one of his victim’s feet.

“You enjoy it, Lescaze?” inquired Martin gently.

The gem dealer gritted his teeth.

“Try the other foot now, Alec. Just easily, at first, to give him a taste of what is coming.”

Alec lighted another match, but Lescaze still clenched his teeth and tautened his body.

“That Orvitch collection, Lescaze?” asked Martin soothingly.

Chan found himself coming close to gritting his own teeth as a convulsive shudder went through the old miser. It was plain hell for a man to have to stand by and watch this torture. But Martin’s automatic was still leveled at him. The African was making guttural sounds of rage. Most likely, Chan figured, he’d seen plenty of other and more delicate forms of torture, but his eyes showed that it was also torture for him to see his master suffer.

“I—haf no—jewels—here,” Lescaze gasped.

“Do not become impatient, Alec,” cautioned Martin. “Do not roll and light a newspaper—just yet. Try a few more matches first. We do not want to blister his feet so that it will be too uncomfortable for him to walk to the hiding place of his jewels.”

The old man began to writhe as the flame of the next match was held to one of his heels. Then he let out a terrified, agonized shriek.

Chan, suddenly, had an idea. He remembered the former owner of the house, a local farmer, had installed a gigantic icebox, of his own construction, in the cellar. He, too, like the present

occupant of the farm, had been a miser, and the refrigerator had been large enough to hold the carcasses of beef critters and sheep and hogs. The thick, heavy door, Chan also remembered, was fastened by a huge iron bar. If he could get his idea across to Lescaze, if he could make Martin and Alec think that the jewels might be hidden there . . .

"Say, Mr. Lescaze, these fellers mean business," he broke in firmly as the gem merchant let out another cry of pain. "Why not tell 'em you got those jewels hidden down there in that big icebox in the cellar?"

"Icebox? My jewels?"

"A-a-aah," gloated Martin, his pale eyes glinting.

Chan had taken a couple of steps closer to him, and his eyes were boring hard into those of Lescaze:

"Yep. You'd better take 'em to that icebox. They'll burn your feet off, if you don't. They—well, they mean business, like I already said."

Herman Lescaze, for an instant, looked at the game warden with wide, uncomprehending, questioning eyes. Then he shook his head in a vague and jerky manner. The veiled meaning of Chan's words, Chan's expression, must have gotten to him. He mumbled, haltingly out with eagerness:

"Yes. Yes, you are right. We do that. We go down to the icebox right away."

Chan noticed that Martin and Alec exchanged open and satisfied winks, and that the African groaned. Chan was on the alert for a break, but none came. Martin even stepped close to him and held his automatic closer while Alec yanked Lescaze from the chair onto his feet.

WITH Alec leading the way with Lescaze, they went down into the cellar, Martin bringing up the rear with the

African and Chan in front of him. Chan said casually when he got there, hoping to possibly distract the crooks:

"Pretty good idea, keepin' your jewels in this big icebox, Mr. Lescaze."

"Yes. Yes," said the other dully, looking nervously around as if wondering what he should do now.

"Well, you better open her up," said Chan with almost cheery resignation, at the same time trying to catch the African's eye and intimate that he was to be ready for any emergency. He thought that he had succeeded, from the slight nod he got in return.

"Yes. I do it," sighed Lescaze.

It was the game warden who was happily surprised when the big door was swung open. Beside a quarter of beef, a side of bacon, two hams, a leg of lamb, there hung as nice a twelve-point buck as Chan had ever seen in his life. He whistled instinctively:

"So you *did* kill a deer, eh?"

"Cripes, but that's a big one. I never did see a deer that close to," said Alec, taking a step forward and examining it as a city man who has never been close to game is apt to.

Lescaze shrugged his shoulders, helplessly, and shook his head in bewildered nervousness.

"Come. Come, those jewels, you old fool," said Martin, shoving Lescaze into the huge refrigerator and going in after him.

"Yessir, that sure is a big deer," Alec was saying.

Chan, then, saw his chance. Alec was a step ahead of him, his automatic lowered, and the game warden flung himself on him with all his strength, from the rear, and bore him down to the ground. He yelled sharply, at the same time:

"*Slam that door and bolt it, Walanda.*"

Chan, struggling on the ground with Alec, saw a black form hurtle by him. He heard the thick door close, heard the bolt shoot home, heard an enraged foreign curse from inside the great refrigerator. Then he got his handcuffed fingers around the throat of his adversary. He showed no mercy. He couldn't afford it. He clamped his sinewy fingers and thumbs around that throat until the man gasped, gurgled, turned blue. He didn't let up until he saw the automatic drop from the nerveless fingers of his opponent. He picked it up nimbly, got his own gun from Alec's pocket, and leaped back onto his feet.

"You have saved my master, Mr. Game Warden Buzzell," breathed the African gratefully.

"With your help. Thanks," nodded Chan. "Come here, hold out your arms."

Stepping back and sticking the gun under his left armpit, and keeping his eye on the unconscious Alec, Chan rapidly and deftly proceeded to untie Walanda. Then he nodded at Alec:

"Pull his arms around behind him and tie him up."

When it was done, Chan went up to the icebox door and spoke authoritatively:

"Martin—or whatever your name is—I'm going to open this door a few inches. First toss out your gun and then toss out

my keys in the front right pocket of my breeches. I'm still handcuffed but I can squeeze a trigger. I'll blow your head clean off at the first wrong move you try to make. This is when I mean business . . . Slide that door open a few inches and brace yourself against it, Walanda."

The African did so and an automatic and a bunch of keys attached to a ring and chain were thrown out onto the cellar floor. Chan pocketed the gun and unlocked the handcuffs. He said:

"Come out with your hands in the air when I open this door, Martin. Remember, I still blow your head off if you make a wrong move, so don't try it . . . Thanks for killin' that deer, Mr. Lescaze. It sure did pull Alec off base, when he saw it, and let me get the jump on him . . . Yep, I've had a good day. Got a couple of crooks that we don't want here in Maine an' grabbed a game violator I've been suspectin' for years . . . Three birds with one stone, you might say . . . Wouldn't go for to kill no more illegal deer, in your place. They come high. That one'll cost you about a hundred dollars."

"A *hundred dollars?*" wailed the old miser as he came out of the icebox behind Martin. "I do not kill more, I swear it . . . A hundred dollars? . . . Meat is cheaper—*any* kind of meat!"