

Chinatown Challenge

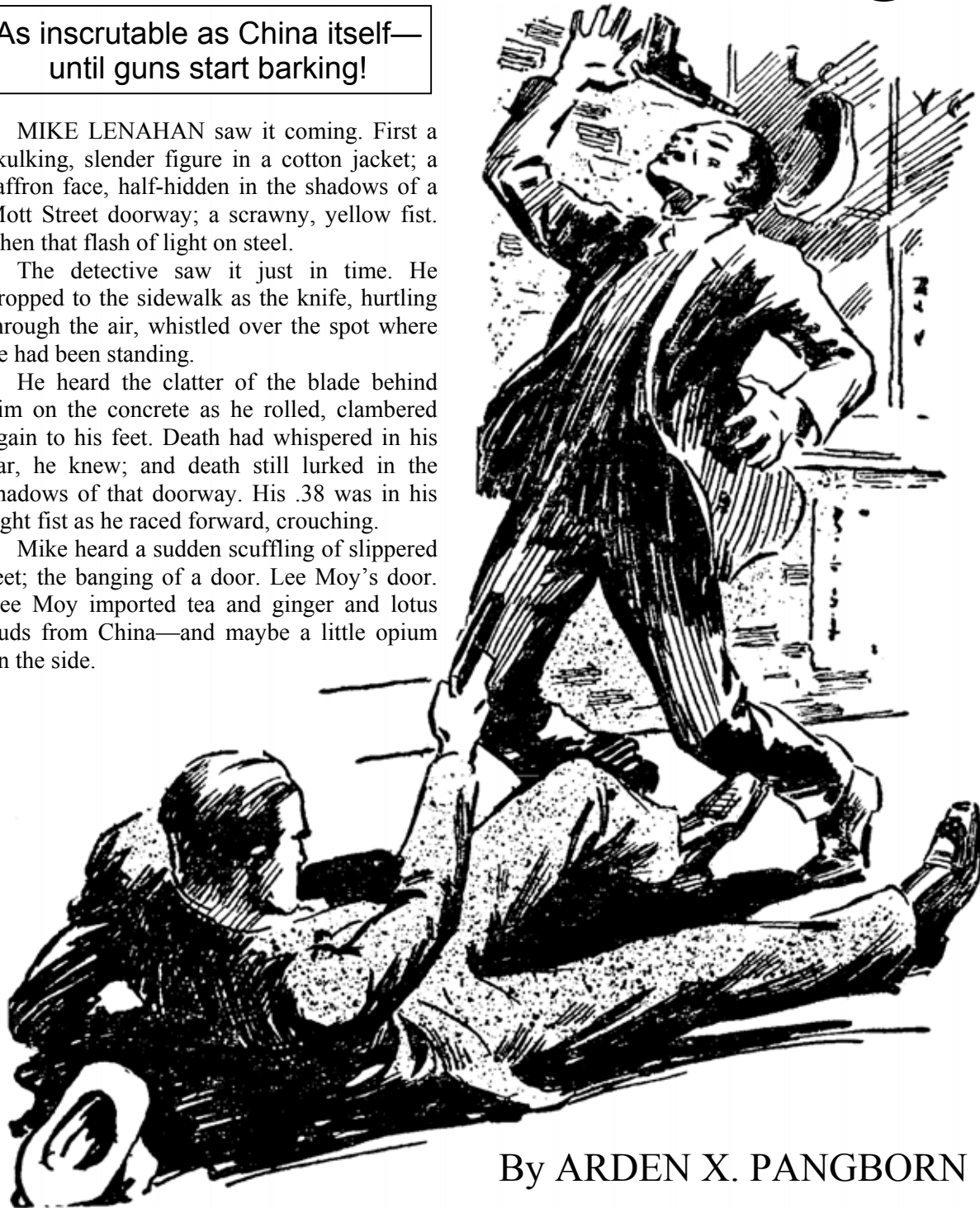
As inscrutable as China itself—
until guns start barking!

MIKE LENAHAN saw it coming. First a skulking, slender figure in a cotton jacket; a saffron face, half-hidden in the shadows of a Mott Street doorway; a scrawny, yellow fist. Then that flash of light on steel.

The detective saw it just in time. He dropped to the sidewalk as the knife, hurtling through the air, whistled over the spot where he had been standing.

He heard the clatter of the blade behind him on the concrete as he rolled, clambered again to his feet. Death had whispered in his ear, he knew; and death still lurked in the shadows of that doorway. His .38 was in his right fist as he raced forward, crouching.

Mike heard a sudden scuffling of slipped feet; the banging of a door. Lee Moy's door. Lee Moy imported tea and ginger and lotus buds from China—and maybe a little opium on the side.



By ARDEN X. PANGBORN

The detective rattled the knob. The door was locked. He did not hesitate. He stepped back, lowered his shoulder, leaped forward like a two-hundred-pound battering-ram propelled by massive springs. The door crashed inward.

Mike stood in the center of the little shop. It was a damp, musty place, heavy with the odors of stale incense, strange Chinese herbs.

The wooden floor was bare. On one side were stools—teakwood stools inlaid with mother-of-pearl. On the other was a counter and Lee Moy's meager stock. At the rear, a swinging door led into mysterious regions within the bowels of the old brick building.

The detective had started toward this door before he realized he was not alone in the shop. So quiet had Lee Moy sat upon his high stool in the corner that, in the dim light of the one electric globe, Mike had not seen him. Mike paused.

"I saw him come in here. Where'd he go?"

Lee Moy shrugged his round shoulders. He was a soft man, fat and oily, and folds of skin drooped beneath his little almond eyes.

"Heaven sees many things that the eyes of man do not," Lee Moy murmured.

Mike let out a snort. He wouldn't get anywhere stopping to question Lee Moy. He'd only give his assailant more time to get away. He hurried through the swinging door into a little boxlike room where there were tables, another counter. Fan-tan, he thought, and lottery—but closed now.

A second swinging door led the detective into a long hall and to the rear of the building. This was the way the scrawny Oriental must have come. But here the trail ended, for from the courtyard in the rear a dozen different exits opened.

Mike shrugged and turned back. He hadn't been a detective on the Chinatown squad for six years without learning enough to know when he was stumped.

MIKE found Lee Moy still sitting on his stool in the silent shop. Lee Moy was puffing quietly upon a slender bamboo pipe, and his little eyes, buried in their mounds of flesh, showed only peace and contentment.

It was as if attempted murder and the breaking down of his door by the police were an everyday occurrence.

"You saw him, anyway," Mike said. "Who was he?"

Again Lee Moy shrugged. "It is most unfortunate," he murmured, "but his face was unfamiliar. I did not know him."

"Horsefeathers! Are you telling me you sat over there in the corner while someone you didn't know dashed in, locked the door, then beat it out the back way?"

"It was no concern of mine. Besides, I could not have stopped him."

Mike considered. Lee Moy's fat face remained impassive; there was no hint upon it of the thoughts that surged behind its calm exterior.

"How did he know about that bolt on the door if he'd never been in here before?" the detective asked. "How was he able to lock it so quick?"

"That," said Lee Moy, unperturbed, "is a problem for scholars. Who are we to question the workings of fate?" He puffed on his pipe, and his pudgy hands, cradling its round bowl, showed not the slightest tremor.

"Well, you're a material witness, anyway. Whoever it was tried to kill me. You'd better get your hat, Lee Moy. We're going down to headquarters."

"The lamb does not argue with the tiger," murmured Lee, "nor does the hare seek to outwit the fox." He climbed off the stool and shuffled toward the rear room.

MIKE held open the swinging door to see that Lee Moy did not attempt to escape. His .38 still dangled from his fist. He started to shove it back into its shoulder holster, halted abruptly.

There was no warning. One moment he saw Lee Moy, the next everything was blotted out as completely as if it had never existed. Someone had pulled a master switch; the room was plunged into darkness. A sudden crawling, helpless feeling assailed Mike. Instinctively, almost, he dropped into a crouch.

His eyes, staring ahead, met only an impenetrable wall of blackness. It seemed to him he heard a stealthy movement. Then there was a gasp, a gurgling sound, a thud, heavy breathing.

Mike managed to free his pocket flash, hesitated a second. He knew well enough the target a torch would make in that blackness. But he had to know what was happening. He gripped the butt of his gun more tightly, snapped on the button of his flashlight.

The circle of light leaped across the little room.

It took in the empty fan-tan tables, the counter with its dragon-shaped pots of red and blue ink and its pads of unused lottery tickets.

The room was empty. But no! The flashlight lowered. Mike sucked in his breath, took a rapid step forward, got down on one knee.

Lee Moy lay on the floor before the counter. He was on his back; his legs were drawn up to his body, as if in a spasm of pain. He looked like some huge, gross bug in his brown silk jacket and his black cotton trousers.

The dull bronze handle of a knife protruded from his chest, and a dark stain grew larger as Mike watched.

Lee Moy's eyes flickered open. They were blank, staring. His thick lips moved.

"The moon gives more light than a paper lantern," he murmured, and it almost seemed he smiled. Then he shuddered slightly, and his fat legs straightened again.

Mike rose. Lee Moy was dead.

BACK at headquarters, Detective Mike Lenahan stood in the office of Captain Ryer.

"It was simple the way they worked it," he reported. "When we turned the riot squad loose with sledge hammers we found a passage between the walls behind Lee Moy's lottery counter. The killer came out of there, did his job, then disappeared the same way."

The captain nodded his grizzled head. "But the thing's deeper than that. It looks like a challenge from Chinatown—a challenge we've got to meet. Where'd that passage lead to?"

"No place. That's the rub. We thought we had something for a while, but it just went down to a bunch of interconnecting cellars. Might as well have led to Broadway and Forty-second Street, for all the good it'll do us."

"M-m-m."

"The way I've got it figured, someone was afraid Lee Moy would squawk once we got him down here. He was on the hop, and all hopheads turn canary when the stuff's taken away from them. They killed him to keep his mouth shut."

"Why 'they'?"

"Because the Chinese who tried to kill me was one I'd never seen before. Someone else must have sent him—and individual Chinese don't hire highbinders very often. Tonges do, and groups; but not individuals."

Captain Ryer appeared puzzled. "Where does that get us?"

"Not very far, except it proves two things: It proves we're on the right trail in that dope case, and that they're convinced I know a whole lot more than I do."

"Then you think Yet Chang—"

"I'm more sure of it than I've ever been before. Yet Chang is the brains behind the group of Orientals smuggling dope into this country. We know it, but can't prove it."

"But we've raided Yet Chang's gambling hall twice. There wasn't a bit of evidence either time."

"His scene of operations is somewhere else. He wasn't fooled by those raids. He knew what we were looking for. That's why his gang sent that highbinder after me. They're afraid I know something."

"Then what do we do next?"

Mike Lenahan's gray eyes clouded. "That's just it. I don't know." He stared for a moment out of the captain's broad window into the lazy evening traffic of Centre Street. Then he added: "I only wish I knew what Lee Moy meant when he said 'The moon gives more light than a paper lantern.'"

IT was nearing midnight when Mike, togged in a dinner jacket and starched shirt front, climbed the steps which led to the second-floor gambling house known as The Hall of Golden Pleasure. Yet Chang's place.

For two hours Mike had pondered the meaning of Lee Moy's last words; for two hours he had struggled mentally to find some way to prove his conviction that Yet Chang was the brains behind the dope ring which had the city in a turmoil.

Now was the psychological time to strike, he knew—if he could only find where to strike.

He rapped at the heavy, green door on the landing. A panel slid back; a round, yellow face stared at him through the bronze grillwork. The face looked startled. Mike grinned.

"Pleasure," he said. "Not business."

The grillwork snapped shut. From behind the heavy door came a jabber of Cantonese. Presently the lock snapped; the door swung back. The round-faced lookout bowed obsequiously, smiling. Yet Chang himself hurried forward.

Mike knew the features of the gambler well—the short, stocky body, with its surprisingly broad shoulders; the thin, sallow face with its high cheek

bones and its cold, little eyes.

He knew the smile that tried—and failed—to hide the glitter in those eyes. Yet Chang was hard all through, and nothing he could do could hide that fact.

He clasped his hands before him as he approached. The gesture was Oriental, as were his words, but his voice betrayed his Western training.

“The humble establishment of Yet Chang is unduly honored,” he said.

Mike returned his gesture of welcome, clasping his own hands. “The honor,” he insisted, “is entirely mine.”

For a moment Yet Chang hesitated, his eyes searching the detective’s lean face. It was as if he were about to say something else, to ask a question. Then he seemed to change his mind.

“May your fortune be excellent,” he murmured, and moved away.

MIKE bought a stack of chips. He stood for a second, undecided. At this hour the tables were busy. The whir of a roulette wheel and the croupier’s sleepy voice mingled with the rattle of dice, the *slap-slap* of cards, the muttered exclamations of the players.

Both Chinese and American men were at the tables, and a group of American women in dinner gowns were clustered about the roulette wheel.

Mike stopped at a blackjack game. He played indifferently, his eyes wandering. The room was hot and stuffy, the air laden with stale tobacco smoke.

Mike wondered if he had been unduly cautious in strapping an extra automatic to his right wrist, just under his coat sleeve; if, perhaps, his venture into the stronghold of the enemy would not fail, as everything else he had tried on the case had failed.

He wondered if his nerves were jumpy, or if that strange feeling of being watched were really justified. Once he looked up to find Yet Chang at his elbow, but the little Chinese merely smiled and crossed to another table without speaking.

At the end of an hour Mike cashed in his chips. He had lost eight dollars. If he were right, Mike thought as he pocketed his change, Yet Chang would have had plenty of time by now to have made his plans. If he were wrong— He shrugged. It would make no difference.

Yet Chang was at the door when he was ready to leave. “Let us hope,” he said, bowing, “that the

white detective will honor The Hall of Golden Pleasure more often.”

It seemed to Mike there was a hint of mockery in the polished tones of the gambler. He started to answer, then sudden inspiration struck him. He lowered his voice, leaned closer to Yet Chang.

“The moon gives more light than a paper lantern,” he said. “Perhaps we shall see each other—more often.”

He went out the door, down the musty stairway. Had he been right? Had he seen Yet Chang’s face go harder behind its artificial smile? Had he seen a new gleam come into Yet Chang’s sharp, bright eyes?

He reached the sidewalk, turned toward Chatham Square. His right hand was on the butt of the .38 beneath his left armpit. Now was the time—

Mike had taken a dozen steps when the sound came from behind him. A dull, cough-like sound, it was. Then something struck him in the back, throwing him forward, knocking the wind from his lungs.

He gasped, stumbled. But even as he did so, he managed to wheel. His right hand tugged at the trigger of his weapon.

There was a screech of pain, the metallic clatter of an automatic against the sidewalk. Mike saw the Chinese who had shot at him fling up his hands, reel drunkenly; saw him collapse.

He hurried back, bent over the falling figure. An oath came to his lips. He had not meant to kill, only to wound; but the great hole below the Oriental’s left eye showed that death had been almost instantaneous.

Mike was aware of banging windows, excited voices, pounding footsteps. The steps would be those of Pete Mulvaney, the uniformed cop stationed at the corner.

“Get an ambulance and get him to a hospital,” the detective snapped at Mulvaney as the latter came up panting.

“Right,” said Mulvaney. Then he hesitated. “But the man’s dead.”

Mike raised his voice. “He’ll live long enough to talk—plenty.” Lowering his voice, he said, “Get that ambulance, and get it quick.”

He then pulled the dead highbinder’s cotton jacket over the wounded half of his face and motioned back the little crowd of curiosity seekers that had begun to form.

“Give the man air!” he barked.

IN Captain Ryer's office again, Mike paced nervously back and forth, sucking at a cigarette.

"Tried to shoot me in the back with a silenced automatic," he said. "Would have made it this time, too, if I hadn't expected it. Nearly knocked me down as it was, in spite of that steel-mesh vest."

Captain Ryer swung in his swivel-chair, glanced at the wall clock.

"Been nearly an hour now," he said.

"Don't worry. We'll be getting action pretty quick." Mike flipped his cigarette at a blue-enameled cuspidor, missed by a foot.

The telephone rang. Both men started. The captain lifted the instrument from its hook, listened a moment, then muttered a monosyllable to Mike.

Over the wire came the voice of the sergeant at the information desk. "There's a man here says he is the brother of Kee Soo, who was shot tonight. Wants to know where he is so he can go to see him."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Just what you told me. Nothing, except that I'd find out."

"Good. Stall him for two minutes. Then tell him Kee Soo died without regaining consciousness. Tell him to come back tomorrow if he wants to claim the body."

Outside headquarters, Mike climbed into a waiting taxicab. He saw the slender Chinese come down the steps, cross the street, enter another cab.

"Follow him," he ordered.

At the corner of Bayard and Mott streets, the Chinese dismissed his driver. Fifty feet behind him, Mike did likewise. The Chinese padded down Mott Street, turned into Pell. He did not pause, did not look back.

Mike clung to the shadows of the deserted streets, gained on his quarry. He was but a few steps away when the man turned abruptly into a Pell Street doorway.

The door opened into a narrow hallway. Halfway back, a flight of steps led upward. Another flight led down. The Chinese took the second flight, disappeared toward the basement of the building.

Mike kicked off his heavy shoes, advanced in his stocking feet. He could hear the Chinese moving ahead of him in the darkness. Then a pencil of light came from a shaded torch in the Oriental's hand.

Their way led through a short, earthen tunnel,

reinforced with wooden timbers, into an adjoining basement and up another flight of stairs. When the Chinese finally halted, Mike judged they were near the rear of the ancient building that housed the joss house of Lum Woo.

He shrank back into the darkness of a recess in the hall as the Chinese rapped five times sharply on the thick panel of a door that seemed to shut off the whole back portion of the building.

The door opened a trifle, revealing a crack of light and the sound of voices speaking Cantonese.

"The moon gives more light than a paper lantern," said the Chinese, and in the darkness Mike smiled grimly. A password! That was what Lee Moy had murmured with his dying breath.

No wonder Yet Chang had betrayed a little of his consternation hearing those words from the lips of the man he had ordered killed.

The Chinese vanished; the door closed. Mike turned. It had been simple—almost too simple—he thought. He'd get help, and then—

He froze. A soft voice had come from the darkness at his side. The voice of Yet Chang!

"You should let us know when you are coming. Then perhaps we might arrange a more fitting reception."

MIKE felt his throat go dry, felt the blood pumping into his head. In the darkness he could only vaguely make out the form of Yet Chang; could only vaguely catch the dull sheen of the blue steel automatic in his yellow fingers.

He cursed himself for a fool. Why had he taken off that steel-mesh vest? Why had he not kept a closer watch behind him?

"It is fortunate," Yet Chang went on, "that I arrived late. Otherwise, this pleasure should have been denied me. I am afraid you will find Sam Wing, who was fool enough to lead you here, a very dull person; but perhaps you would like to meet him? Please lead the way."

The room they entered was large, well-furnished. But it was not the thick rugs, the silken screens, the dainty scrolls that drew Mike's eyes as he stood there in his stocking feet. It was, instead, the little group that lounged about a table under a green-shaded drop-light playing cards.

Stolid, gray-faced Chinese, they were; but their eyes held a glitter, and their full, loose lips spoke of unchecked viciousness. Killers, Mike thought, every one of them.

At his right, a partition marked off what appeared to be an office. Through the open door, he could see a heavy teakwood desk, the corner of a conference table, some filing cabinets—all very modern.

At his left, along the rear wall, were a number of cubicles in a long row, like cells. Some of the doors were ajar. They were thick doors, padded.

Yet Chang, following Mike's glance, smiled. "Soundproof," he said. "Sometimes we have guests."

He uttered a command in Cantonese, and the Chinese Mike had followed from headquarters came forward, ran yellow hands over his body, removed the .38 from his shoulder holster.

Yet Chang spoke again; the others in the room filed silently into the little office, took places about the big table.

It was not until Yet Chang sat behind the heavy teakwood desk, facing the others, that Mike spoke.

"You can't get away with this," he said then. "You ought to know that, Yet Chang. The quicker you give up, the easier it's going to be for all of you."

The Chinese smiled coldly. "You are very clever," he said. "Clever enough to learn our password, and clever enough to discover our headquarters. But our little business is too profitable to be interrupted by the white police. It was our decision you should die. You have been fortunate twice. But now—"

The sentence ended in midair, and Mike felt a little shiver run along his spine. Cold perspiration moistened his collar, gleamed on the backs of his hands.

He remembered the tiny automatic strapped to his wrist, remembered they had not found it. But they were seven to one, and the little, unblinking eye of Yet Chang's weapon, held on the desktop, did not waver.

"There is evidence enough in here to send you all to Sing Sing for twenty years," Mike went on, stalling, fighting for time while his eyes roved the room, desperately seeking some opening. If only Yet Chang would relax for a moment! If only that automatic would shift from its deadly aim!

Then a new idea came to him. It was so simple, he almost smiled. He edged forward, faced Yet Chang across the desk. "You are a fool!" he spat suddenly. "You speak with the mouth of a calf!"

MIKE saw his captor stiffen, saw his lips draw into thin line. That insult, he knew, could not go unanswered. It had cost Yet Chang face in the eyes of his subordinates; and Yet Chang would risk his life, if necessary, to regain that face. He saw the Chinese start to rise. And then the detective acted.

With one mighty heave, Mike caught the desk edge, jerked it upward. He saw the opposite edge catch Yet Chang, off balance, in the stomach; saw the Chinese stumble backward. He heard Chang's grunt, the roar of his automatic. Then he, too, was on the other side of the desk.

At the conference table, there was a sudden shuffling of chairs; a sudden outbreak of excited Cantonese. But Mike did not heed the confusion he had caused.

His own automatic came from its sleeve straps. He brought it down, barrel first, on Yet Chang's head as the latter sought to regain his balance. He saw the Oriental crumple, and a grim smile curled his lips.

He dropped behind the heavy desk, fired twice at the ceiling.

"Hands in the air—everyone!" Mike barked above the turmoil.

But the others in the room were desperate. Mike heard the whistle of a knife above his head; heard the sharp *ping!* of another as it struck the desk.

He fired again, and one of the knife throwers toppled backward, clutching wildly at his chest. A second tried to charge and went down writhing with a bullet through his neck.

Then someone overturned the table. The four remaining Chinese crouched behind it. There was one hail of lead, then silence, grim and ominous.

"Come out with your hands up, and I won't fire," Mike promised them.

But there was no answer.

THE detective sensed what they were planning—a concerted charge. He might get one of them, might even get two. But four was impossible. He gripped his automatic tighter, waited, tense.

It seemed like a year that he lay there, but it must have been less than a minute. He heard their whispers, heard a sudden, sharp command. Bullets thudded into the desktop. A voice rose, shrill and strident, as they charged.

Perhaps a tenth of a second passed in that mad scramble. Then the chatter of a Tommy gun rose above the roar of the automatics. Suddenly the

room seemed full of dicks.

The Chinese halted midway in their rush, fell back. Mike heard their weapons drop. He heard Sergeant Donovan's bass voice growling. He pulled himself to his feet.

It seemed to him that nothing ever before had looked quite so good as did the burly form and round, ruddy face of Sergeant Donovan.

"We'd have been here sooner," the sergeant said, "but we had to smash down the outside door. Are you hurt?"

Mike shook his head. "Not a scratch. But I didn't have much hope for a minute. It was plenty lucky we loaded Chinatown with men tonight."

"We crashed in as soon as we heard the shooting, like the captain told us. Only we figured we'd find you full of holes."

"Well, don't look so disappointed about it." Mike grinned, fished for a cigarette. "Maybe you will next time. In the meantime, you'd better have some one notify the other squads that they're through for the night. And don't forget to bring in those filing cabinets. I've got a hunch they'll hold a lot of bad news for Yet Chang when he wakes up."

AT headquarters again, Mike dropped into one

of the squeaky swivel-chairs in Captain Ryer's office. The captain looked up from the mass of papers on his desk, took off his reading glasses.

"Looks like the works," he said. "Enough evidence here to send them all up." He leaned back, a thoughtful expression on his lined face. "There's only one thing I'd like to know, though," he admitted at last. "And that's how you knew that chink would show up at headquarters and lead us directly back to the hideout we've been trying to find for three months."

Mike shrugged. "They killed Lee Moy to keep him quiet, didn't they? And they thought Kee Soo was alive and might talk when he regained consciousness. It seemed pretty likely to me they'd try to silence Kee Soo the same way. But they had to find out where he was before they could kill him."

"Oh, I get it. And you figured when the killer found out Kee Soo was already dead, he'd hurry back to report."

"Yeah. It seemed to me that's what I'd do if I were in his place." Mike sighed, wriggled his toes in his stocking feet. "The only thing I didn't figure on was losing a good pair of shoes. If I ever find the guy who stole them out of that doorway—"