

Earl Derr Biggers



*Keeper
of the Keys*

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CHAPTER I

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Snow on the Mountains

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The train had left Sacramento some distance behind, and was now bravely beginning the long climb that led to the high Sierras and the town of Truckee. Little patches of snow sparkled in the late afternoon sun along the way, and far ahead snow-capped peaks suddenly stood out against the pale sky of a reluctant spring.

Two conductors, traveling together as though for safety, came down the aisle and paused at section seven. "Tickets on at Sacramento," demanded the leader. The occupant of the section, a pretty blonde girl who seemed no more than twenty, handed him the small green slips. He glanced at them, then passed one to his companion. "Seat in Seven," he said loudly. "Reno."

"Reno," echoed the Pullman conductor, in an even louder tone.

They passed on, leaving the blonde girl staring about the car with an air that was a mixture of timidity and defiance. This was the first time, since she had left home the day before, that she had been so openly tagged with the name of her destination. All up and down the car, strange faces turned and looked at her with casual curiosity. Some smiled knowingly; others were merely cold and aloof. The general public in one of its ruder moments.

One passenger only showed no interest. Across the aisle, in section eight, the girl noted the broad shoulders and back of a man in a dark suit. He was sitting close to the window, staring out, and even from this rear view it was apparent that he was deeply engrossed with his own affairs. The young woman who was bound for Reno felt somehow rather grateful toward him.

Presently he turned, and the girl understood, for she saw that he was a Chinese. A race that minds its own business. An admirable race. This member of it was plump and middle-aged. His little black eyes were shining as from some inner excitement; his lips were parted in a smile that seemed to indicate a sudden immense delight. Without so much as a glance toward number seven, he rose and walked rapidly down the car.

Arrived on the front platform of the Pullman, he stood for a moment deeply inhaling the chilly air. Then again, as though irresistibly, he was drawn to the window. The train was climbing more slowly now; the landscape, wherever he looked, was white. Presently he was conscious of some one standing behind him, and turned. The train maid, a Chinese girl of whose guarded glances he had been conscious at intervals all afternoon, was gazing solemnly up at him.

"How do you do," the man remarked, "and thank you so much. You have arrived at most opportune moment. The need to speak words assails me with unbearable force. I must release flood of enthusiasm or burst. For at this moment I am seeing snow for the first time!"

"Oh—I am so glad!" answered the girl. It was an odd reply, but the plump Chinese was evidently too excited to

notice that.

"You see, it is this way," he continued eagerly. "All my life I can remember only nodding palm-trees, the trade winds of the tropics, surf tumbling on coral beach——"

"Honolulu," suggested the girl.

He paused, and stared at her. "Perhaps you have seen Hawaii too?" he inquired.

She shook her head. "No. Me—I am born in San Francisco. But I read advertisements in magazines—and besides——"

"You are bright girl," the man cut in, "and your deduction is eminently correct. Honolulu has been my home for many years. Once, it is true, I saw California before, and from flat floor of desert I beheld, far in distance, mountain snow. But that was all same dream. Now I am moving on into veritable snow country, the substance lies on ground all about, soon I shall plunge unaccustomed feet into its delicious cold. I shall intake great breaths of frigidair." He sighed. "Life is plenty good," he added.

"Some people," said the girl, "find the snow boresome."

"And some, no doubt, consider the stars a blemish on the sky. But you and I, we are not so insensible to the beauties of the world. We delight to travel—to find novelty and change. Is it not so?"

"I certainly do."

"Ah—you should visit my islands. Do not think that in my ecstasy of raving I forget the charm of my own land. I have daughter same age as you—how happy she would be to act as your guide. She would show you Honolulu, the flowering trees, the——"

"The new police station, perhaps," cried the girl suddenly.

The big man started slightly and stared at her. "I perceive that I am known," he remarked.

"Naturally," the girl smiled. "For many years you have been newspaper hero for me. I was small child at the time, but I read with panting interest when you carried Phillimore pearls on flat floor of desert. Again, when you captured killer of famous Scotland Yard man in San Francisco, I perused daily accounts breathlessly. And only three weeks ago you arrived in San Francisco with one more cruel murderer in your firm grasp."

"But even so," he shrugged.

"Your pictures were in all the papers. Have you forgot?"

"I seek to do so," he answered ruefully. "Were those my pictures?"

"More than that, I have seen you in person. Two weeks ago when the Chan Family Society gave big banquet for you in San Francisco. My mother was a Chan, and we were all present. I stood only a few feet away when you entered building. True, I was seated so far distant I could not hear your speech, but I was told by others it was brilliant talk."

He shrugged. "The Chan family should have more respect for truth," he objected.

"I am Violet Lee," she went on, holding out a tiny hand. "And you—may I speak the name——"

"Why not?" he replied, taking her hand. "You have me trapped. I am Inspector Charlie Chan, of the Honolulu Police."

"My husband and I recognized you when you came aboard at Oakland," the girl went on. "He is Henry Lee, steward of club car," she added proudly. "But he tells me

sternly I must not speak to you—that is why I cried 'I am so glad!' when you spoke first to me. Perhaps, said my husband, inspector is now on new murder case, and does not want identity known. He is often right, my husband."

"As husbands must be," Chan nodded. "But this time he is wrong."

A shadow of disappointment crossed the girl's face. "You are not, then, on trail of some wrong-doer?"

"I am on no trail but my own."

"We thought there might have been some recent murder ___"

Charlie laughed. "This is the mainland," he remarked, "so of course there have been many recent murders. But I am happy to say, none of them concerns me. No—I am involved only in contemplation of snow-capped peaks."

"Then—may I tell my husband that he is free to address you? The honor will overwhelm him with joy."

Chan laid his hand on the girl's arm. "I will tell him myself," he announced. "And I will see you again before I leave the train. In the meantime, your friendly words have been as food to the famished, rest to the jaded. Aloha."

He stepped through the door of the car ahead, leaving his small compatriot flushed and breathing fast on the chilly platform.

When he reached the club car, the white-jacketed steward was bending solicitously over the solitary passenger there. Receiving the latter's order, he stood erect and cast one look in the direction of Charlie Chan. He was a small thin Chinese, and only another member of his race

would have caught the brief flame of interest that flared under his heavy eyelids.

Charlie dropped into a chair and, for lack of anything better to do, studied his fellow traveler, some distance down the aisle. The man was a lean, rather distinguished-looking foreigner of some sort—probably a Latin, Chan thought. His hair was as black and sleek as the detective's, save where it was touched with gray over the ears. His eyes were quick and roving, his thin hands moved nervously about, he sat on the edge of his chair, as though his stay on the train was but a brief interlude in an exciting life.

When the steward returned with a package of cigarettes on a silver tray and got his money and tip from the other passenger, Chan beckoned to him. The boy was at his side in an instant.

"One juice of the orange, if you will be so good," Charlie ordered.

"Delighted to serve," replied the steward, and was off like a greyhound. With surprising speed he returned, and placed the drink on the arm of Charlie's chair. He was moving reluctantly away, when the detective spoke.

"An excellent concoction," he said, holding the glass aloft.

"Yes, sir," replied the steward, and looked at Chan much as the Chinese girl on the platform had done.

"Helpful in reducing the girth," Chan went on. "A question which, I perceive, does not concern you. But as for myself—you will note how snugly I repose in this broad chair."

The eyes of the other narrowed. "The man-hunting tiger is sometimes over-plump," he remarked. "Still he pounces

with admirable precision."

Charlie smiled. "He who is cautious by nature is a safe companion in crossing a bridge."

The steward nodded. "When you travel abroad, speak as the people of the country are speaking."

"I commend your discretion," Charlie told him. "But as I have just said to your wife, it is happily unnecessary at this time. The man-hunting tiger is at present unemployed. You may safely call him by his name."

"Ah, thank you, Inspector. It is under any conditions a great honor to meet you. My wife and I are both long-time admirers of your work. At this moment you seem to stand at very pinnacle of fame."

Charlie sighed, and drained his glass. "He who stands on pinnacle," he ventured, "has no place to step but off."

"The need for moving," suggested the steward, "may not be imminent."

"Very true." The detective nodded approvingly. "Such wisdom, and such efficiency. When I met your wife, I congratulated you. Now I meet you, I felicitate her."

A delighted smile spread over the younger man's face. "A remark," he answered, "that will find place in our family archive. The subjects are unworthy, but the source is notable. Will you deign to drink again?"

"No, thank you." Chan glanced at his watch. "The town of Truckee, I believe, is but twenty-five minutes distant."

"Twenty-four and one-half," replied Henry Lee, who was a railroad man. The flicker of surprise in his black eyes was scarcely noticeable. "You alight at Truckee, Inspector?"

"I do," nodded Charlie, his gaze on the other passenger, who had evinced sudden interest.

"You travel for pleasure, I believe you intimated," the steward continued.

Chan smiled. "In part," he said softly.

"Ah, yes—in part," Henry Lee repeated. He saw Chan's hand go to his trousers pocket. "The charge, I regret to state, is one half-dollar."

Nodding, Charlie hesitated a moment. Then he laid the precise sum on the silver tray. He was not unaware of the institution of tipping. He was also not unaware of the sensitive Chinese nature. They would part now as friends, not as master and menial. He saw from the light in Henry Lee's eyes that the young man appreciated his delicacy.

"Thank you so much," said the steward, bowing low. "It has been great honor and privilege to serve Inspector Charlie Chan."

It chanced that at the moment the detective's eyes were on the foreign-looking passenger at the other end of the car. The man had been about to light a cigarette, but when he overheard the name he paused, and stared until the match burned down to his finger-tips. He tossed it aside, lighted another and then came down the car and dropped into the seat at Charlie's side.

"Pardon," he said. "Me—I have no wish to intrude. But I overhear you say you leave the train at Truckee. So also must I."

"Yes?" Chan said politely.

"Alas, yes. A desolate place, they tell me, at this time of year."

"The snow is very beautiful," suggested Charlie.

"Bah!" The other shrugged disgustedly. "Me, I have had sufficient snow. I fought for two winters with the Italian Army in the North."

"Distasteful work," commented Chan, "for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Pardon—no offense. But one of your temperament. A musician."

"You know me, then?"

"I have not the pleasure. But I note flattened, calloused finger-tips. You have played violin."

"I have done more than play the violin. I am Luis Romano, conductor of the opera. Ah—I perceive that means nothing to you. But in my own country—at La Scala in Milan, at Naples. And also in Paris, in London, even in New York. However, that is all finished now."

"I am so sorry."

"Finished—by a woman. A woman who—but what of this? We both alight at Truckee. And after that——"

"Ah, yes—after that."

"We travel together, Signor Chan. I could not help it—I heard the name. But that was lucky. I was told to look out for you. You do not believe? Read this."

He handed Charlie a somewhat soiled and crumpled telegram. The detective read:

"Mr. Luis Romano, Kilarney Hotel, San Francisco: Delighted you are coming to Tahoe to visit me. Owing to very late spring, roads around lake in poor condition. Leave train Truckee, I will telephone local garage have car waiting, you will be driven to Tahoe

Tavern. At Tavern pier my man will wait for you with motor-launch, bring you down to my place, Pineview. Other guests may join you in car at Truckee, among them Mr. Charlie Chan, of Honolulu. Thanks for coming.

"Dudley Ward."

Chan returned the missive to the eager hand of the Italian. "Now I understand," he remarked.

Mr. Romano made a gesture of despair. "You are more fortunate than I. I understand to the door of this place Pineview—but no further. You, however—it may be you are old friend of Mr. Dudley Ward? The whole affair may be clear to you."

Charlie's face was bland, expressionless. "You are, then, in the dark yourself?" he inquired.

"Absolutely," the Italian admitted.

"Mr. Dudley Ward is no friend of yours?"

"Not at all. I have yet to see him. I know, of course, he is a member of a famous San Francisco family, very wealthy. He spends the summers at his place on this high lake, to which he goes very early in the season. A few days ago I had a most surprising letter from him, asking me to visit him up here. There was, he said, a certain matter he wished to discuss, and he promised to pay me well for my trouble. I was—I am, Signor, financially embarrassed—owing to a circumstance quite unforeseen and abominable. So I agreed to come."

"You have no trace of idea what subject Mr. Ward desires to discuss?"

"I have an inkling—yes. You see—Mr. Ward was once the husband of—my wife." Chan nodded hazily. "The relationship, however, is not very close. There were two other husbands in between us. He was the first—I am the fourth."

Charlie sought to keep a look of surprise from his face. What would his wife, on Punchbowl Hill, think of this? But he was now on the mainland, with Reno only a few miles away.

"It will be perhaps easier for you to understand," the Italian went on, "if I tell you who is my wife. A name, Signor, known even to you—pardon—to the whole world. Landini, the opera singer, Ellen Landini." He sat excitedly on the edge of his chair. "What a talent—magnificent. What an organ—superb. And what a heart—cold as those snow-covered stones." He waved at the passing landscape.

"So sorry," Chan said. "You are not, then, happy with your wife?"

"Happy with her, Signor? Happy with her!" He stood up, the better to declaim. "Can I be happy with a woman who is at this very moment in Reno seeking to divorce me and marry her latest fancy—a silly boy with a face like putty? After all I have done for her—the loving care I have lavished upon her—and now she does not send me even the first payment of the settlement that was agreed on—she leaves me to——"

He sank into the chair again. "But why not? What could I expect from her? Always she was like that. The husband she had was never the right one."

Chan nodded. "Ginger grown in one's own garden is not so pungent," he remarked.

Mr. Romano wakened to new excitement. "That is it. That expresses it. It was always so with her. Look at her record—married to Dudley Ward as a girl. Everything she wanted—except a new husband. And she got him in time. John Ryder, his name was. But he didn't last long. Then—another. He was—what does it matter? I forget. Then me. I, who devoted every waking hour to her voice, to coaching her. It was I, Signor, who taught her the old Italian system of breathing, without which a singer is nothing—nothing. If you will credit it—she did not know it when I met her."

He buried his head emotionally in his hands. Charlie respected the moment.

"And now," went on Mr. Romano, "this boy, this singer—this what's his name. Will he command her not to eat pastries—seeking to save that figure once so glorious? Will he prepare her gargle, remind her to use it? Now I recall the name of the third husband—he was Dr. Frederic Swan, a throat specialist. He has lived in Reno since the divorce—no doubt she flirts with him again. She will flirt with me, once she has hooked this boy. Always like that. But now—now she can not even send me the agreed settlement——"

Henry Lee approached. "Pardon, Inspector," he announced. "Truckee three minutes."

Mr. Romano dashed for the door, evidently bound for the Pullman and his baggage. Charlie turned to his compatriot.

"So happy to know you," he said.

"Same for you," replied Henry Lee. "Also, I hope you gain much pleasure from your journey. In part," he added, with a grin. "I am going to watch newspapers."

"Nothing about this in newspapers," Charlie assured him.

"If you will pardon my saying it," replied Henry Lee, "I watch newspapers just the same."

Charlie went on back to his Pullman. Swift dark had fallen outside the windows, the snow was blotted from view. He gathered up his bags, turned them over to the porter and proceeded to don the heavy overcoat he had purchased for this journey—the first such garment he had owned in his life.

When he reached the car platform, Mrs. Lee was awaiting him. "My husband has told me of his happy moment with you," she cried. "This is notable day in our lives. I shall have much to tell my small man-child, who is now well past his eleventh moon."

"Pray give him my kind regards," said Charlie. He staggered slightly as his legs were struck from behind by some heavy object. Turning, he saw a tall man with a blond beard, who had just snatched up a bag from the platform—the object, evidently, which had struck Chan so sharp a blow. Expectantly Charlie waited for the inevitable apology. But the stranger gave him one cold look, pushed him ruthlessly aside and crowded past him to the car steps.

In another moment the train had stopped, and Charlie was out on the snowy platform. He tipped his porter, waved good-by to the Lees and took a few steps along the brightly lighted space in front of the station. For the first time in his life he heard the creak of frost under his shoes, saw his own breath materialized before his eyes.

Romano came swiftly up. "I have located our motor," he announced. "Come quickly, if you will. I secured a view of the town, and it is not even a one-night stand."

As they came up to the automobile waiting beside the station, they beheld the driver of it conversing with a man who had evidently just left the train. Charlie looked closer—the man with the blond beard. The latter turned to them.

"Good evening," he said. "Are you Dudley Ward's other guests? My name is John Ryder."

Without waiting for their response, he slipped into the preferred front seat by the driver's side. "John Ryder." Charlie looked at Romano, and saw an expression of vast surprise on the Italian's mobile face. They got into the rear seat without speaking, and the driver started the car.

They emerged into the main street of a town that was, in the dim light of a wintry evening, reminiscent of a moving picture of the Old West. A row of brick buildings that spoke of being clubs, but behind the frosted windows of which no gaiety seemed to be afoot to-night. Restaurants with signs that advertised only the softer drinks, a bank, a post-office. Here and there a dusky figure hurrying through the gloom.

The car crossed a railroad spur and turned off into the white nothingness of the country. Now for the first time Charlie was close to the pines, tall and stern, rooted deep in the soil, their aroma pungent and invigorating. Across his vision flitted a picture of distant palms, unbelievable relatives of these proud and lofty giants.

The chains on the tires flopped unceasingly, down the open path between the snow-banks, and Charlie wondered at the sound. On their right now was a tremendous cliff, on their left a half-frozen river.

The man on the front seat beside the driver did not turn. He said no word. The two on the rear seat followed his

example.

In about an hour they came upon the lights of a few scattered houses; a little later they turned off into the Tavern grounds. A vast shingled building stood lonely in the winter night, with but a few lights burning on its ground floor.

Close to the pier entrance the driver stopped his car. A man with a boatman's cap came forward.

"Got 'em, Bill?" he inquired.

"Three—that's right, ain't it?" the garage man inquired.

"O. K. I'll take them bags."

Bill said good night and departed, strangely eager to get back to town. The boatman led them on to the pier. For a moment Chan paused, struck by the beauty of the scene. Here lay a lake like a great dark sapphire, six thousand feet above the sea, surrounded by snow-covered mountains. On and on they moved down the dim pier.

"But," cried Romano—"the lake—it does not freeze."

"Tahoe never freezes," the guide explained scornfully. "Too deep. Well, here's the launch." They paused beside a handsome boat. "I'll put your stuff aboard, but we'll have to wait a minute. They's one more coming."

Even as he spoke, a man came hurrying along the pier. He joined them, a bit breathless.

"Sorry," he said. "Hope I haven't kept you waiting, gentlemen. I stopped at the Tavern for a minute. Guess we might as well get acquainted. My name is Swan," he added. "Dr. Frederic Swan."

One by one he shook hands with each of them, learning from each his name. As this newcomer and the man with

the blond beard climbed aboard, Romano turned to Charlie and said softly:

"What is it? What is it you call it when you reach a town and all the hotel rooms are filled?"

"So sorry," Chan said blankly.

"All right—I will get it. It has happened to me so often. A—a convention. That is it. A convention. My friend, we are about to attend one of those. We are going to attend a convention of the lost loves of Landini."

He and Chan followed the others aboard, and in another moment they were skimming lightly over the icy waters in the direction of Emerald Bay.



CHAPTER II

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Dinner at Pineview

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The mountains were breathlessly still under the black sky, the wind blew chill from their snowy slopes and as the spray occasionally stung Charlie Chan's broad face, he reflected with deep inner joy upon the new setting to which fate had now transplanted him. Too long, he decided, had he known only the semi-tropics; his blood had grown thin—he drew his great coat closer: his energy had run low. Yes—no doubt about it—he was becoming soft. This was the medicine that would revive him; new life was coursing in his veins; new ambitions seethed within him; he longed for a chance to show what he could really do. He began to regret the obviously simple nature of the matter that had brought him to Tahoe; the affair was, on the face of it, so easy and uncomplicated that, as his son Henry might have phrased it, he had come just for the ride.

Though the moon had not yet risen, he could discern the nature of the lake shore on their starboard side. The dim outlines of one huge summer home after another glided by; each without a light, without a sign of life. Presently, in the distance, he saw a lamp burning by the water's edge; a little later and it multiplied into a string of them, stretched along a pier. The boat was swinging inshore now; they fought their way along against the wind. As they reached the wharf, the passengers in the launch looked up and saw a man of about

fifty standing, hatless and without an overcoat, above them. He waved, then hurried to help the boatman with the mooring ropes.

Evidently this was their host, Dudley Ward, debonair and gracious even in a stiff wind. He greeted them as they came ashore. "John, old boy," he said to Ryder, "it was good of you to come. Doctor Swan, I appreciate your kindness. And this, no doubt, is Mr. Romano—a great pleasure to welcome you to Pineview. The view is a bit obscured, but I can assure you the pines are there."

The boat was rocking violently as Charlie, always politely last, made a notable leap for the pier. Ward received him, literally, in his arms.

"Inspector Chan," he cried. "For years I have wanted to meet you."

"Desire has been mutual," Chan answered, panting a bit.

"Your native courtesy," Ward smiled. "I am sorry to remind you that you heard of me only—er—recently. Gentlemen—if you will follow me——"

He led the way along a broad walk from which the snow had been cleared toward a great house set amid the eternal pines. As their feet sounded on the wide veranda, an old Chinese servant swung open the door. They caught the odor of burning wood, saw lights and good cheer awaiting them, and crossed the threshold into the big living-room of Pineview.

"Sing, take the gentlemen's coats." The host was alert and cordial. Charlie looked at him with interest; a man of fifty, perhaps more, with gray hair and ruddy pleasant face. The cut of his clothes, and the material of which they were

made, placed him at once; only a gentleman, it seemed, knew the names of tailors like that. He led the way to the tremendous fireplace at the far end of the room.

"A bit chilly on Tahoe to-night," he remarked. "For myself, I like it—come up here earlier every year. However—the fire won't go so badly—nor will those." He waved a hand toward a tray of cocktails. "I had Sing pour them when we sighted you, so there would be no delay."

He himself passed the tray. Ryder, Romano and Swan accepted with evident pleasure. Charlie shook his head and smiled, and Ward did not press him. There was a moment of awkward silence, and then the irrepressible Romano, posing with feet far apart in front of the blaze, raised his glass.

"Gentlemen," he announced. "I am about to propose a toast. No other, I believe, could be more appropriate at this time. However little she may mean to you now, whatever you may think of her at this late day——"

"One moment," Ryder spoke, with his accustomed cool rudeness. "I suggest you withdraw your toast. Because, as it happens, I want this drink."

Romano was taken aback. "Why, of course. I am so sorry. Me——I am too impetuous. No one, I am sure, has more to forgive than myself."

"Beside the point," said Ryder, and drained his glass.

Swan also drank, then laughed softly. "We have all much to forgive, I fancy," he remarked. "And to forget. Yes, it was always herself Landini thought of first. Her own wishes—her own happiness. But that, of course, is genius. We ordinary mortals should be charitable. I myself have supposed for

many years that I hated the very name of Ellen Landini—and yet when I saw her a few moments ago——"

Dudley Ward paused in his task of refilling the glasses. "A few moments ago?" he repeated.

"Yes. I drove up from Reno to the Tavern, and dropped in there for a chat with my friend, Jim Dinsdale, the manager. When I came into the lobby I thought it was deserted, but presently I saw a woman's green scarf lying on a table. Then I looked over to the fire and saw her—the woman—sitting there. I went closer—the light was poor—but even before my eyes told me, I knew that it was Ellen. I had known she was in Reno, of course, but I hadn't wanted particularly to see her. When we parted years ago—well, I needn't go into that. Anyhow, I've been avoiding her. Yet now we were meeting again—the stage all set, as though she'd arranged it, alone together in the dim-lighted lobby of a practically deserted hotel. She jumped up. 'Fred,' she cried——"

Romano came closer, his face glowing with excitement. "How was she looking, Signor? Not too much flesh? Her voice—how did her voice seem to you——"

Swan laughed. "Why—why, she seemed all right to me. In fact—and this is the point of what I started out to say—after all she'd done to me, I felt in that moment the old spell, the old enchantment. She seemed charming, as always. She held out both her hands——"

"She would," snarled Ryder. "May I have another drink?"

"She was lovely," Swan went on. "Just at that moment Dinsdale came in, and with him a young fellow named Beaton——"

"Hugh Beaton," Romano cried. "The infant she has snatched from the cradle. The callow child she would exchange for me across the counters of Reno. Bah! I, too, must drink again."

"Yes, it turned out that way," Swan admitted. "He was her latest flame. She introduced him as such, with all her old arrogance. Also his sister, quite a pretty girl. The romance was rather gone from our meeting."

"What was Landini doing at the Tavern?" Ward inquired.

"I gathered she was a friend of Dinsdale, and had just driven over for dinner. She's not stopping there, of course—she's served four weeks of her cure at Reno, and she's not staying out of the state more than a few hours. Naturally, I didn't linger. I hurried away." He looked about the group. "But pardon me. I didn't mean to monopolize the conversation."

"It was Ellen who was doing that," smiled Dudley Ward, "not you. Up to her old tricks again. Dinner, gentlemen, is at seven. In the meantime, Sing will show you to your various rooms, though I'm afraid you'll have to sort out your own baggage in the upper hall. Doctor Swan, I've assigned you a room, even though, to my regret, you're not staying the night. Ah Sing—where is the old rascal?"

The servant appeared, and led the procession above.

Ward laid a hand on Charlie Chan's arm. "At a quarter to seven, in my study up-stairs at the front of the house," he said softly. "For just a few minutes."

Chan nodded.

"One more thing, gentlemen," Ward called. "No one need dress. This is strictly stag, of course."

He stood and watched them disappear, an ironical smile on his face.

Presently Charlie entered a warm and pleasant bedroom, meekly following Ah Sing. The old man turned on the lights, set down Chan's bags, then looked up at his compatriot from Honolulu. His face was lean and the color of a lemon that has withered, his shoulders were hunched and bent. His eyes alone betrayed his race; and in them Chan detected an authentic gleam of humor.

"P'liceman?" said Ah Sing.

Charlie admitted it, with a smile.

"Some people say plitty wise man?" continued Sing. "Maybe."

"Maybe," agreed Charlie.

Sing nodded sagely, and went out.

Charlie stepped to the window, and looked down an aisle of tall pines at snow-covered hills and a bit of wintry sky. The novelty of this scene so engrossed him that he was three minutes late for his appointment with his host in the study.

"That's all right," Dudley Ward said, when Chan apologized. "I'm not going over the whole business here—I'll have to do it anyhow at the table. I just want to say I'm glad you've come, and I hope you'll be able to help me."

"I shall extend myself to utmost," Charlie assured him.

"It's rather a small matter for a man of your talents," Ward went on. He was sitting behind a broad desk, over which an alabaster lamp cast its glow. "But I can assure you it's important to me. I got you in here just to make sure you know why I invited these three men up here to-night—but

now I've done it, I realize I must be insulting your intelligence."

Chan smiled. "On second thoughts, you changed original plan?"

"Yes. I thought when I wrote you, I'd just get in touch with them by letter. But that's a terribly unsatisfactory way of dealing with things—at least, I've always thought so. I like to see a man's face when I'm asking him questions. Then I heard this Romano was in San Francisco, and broke—I knew money would bring him here. Swan was already in Reno, and Ryder—well, he and I've been friends from boyhood, and the fact that he was Ellen's second husband never made any difference between us. So I resolved to bring them all together here to-night."

Charlie nodded. "A bright plan," he agreed.

"I'll ask all the questions," Ward continued. "What sort of replies I'll get, I don't know. None of them loves Landini any too much, I imagine, but because of one reason or another—perhaps in view of promises made long ago—the information we are after may be difficult to get. I rely on you to watch each one carefully, and to sense it if any one of them fails to tell the truth. You've had plenty of experience along that line, I fancy."

"I fear you over-estimate my poor ability," Charlie protested.

"Nonsense," cried Ward. "We're bound to get a clue somewhere. We may even get all we're after. But whether we do or not, I want you to feel that you are here not just as an investigator, but as my guest, and an honored one." Before him on the desk stood twin boxes; one of bright

yellow, the other a deep crimson. He opened the nearer one, and pushed it toward Chan. "Will you have a cigarette before dinner?" he invited. Charlie declined, and taking one himself, Ward rose and lighted it. "Cozy little room, this," he suggested.

"The reply is obvious," Chan nodded. He glanced about, reflecting that some woman must have had a hand here. Gay cretonnes hung at the windows; the shades of the several lamps about the room were of delicate silk; the rug was deep and soft.

"Please use it as your own," his host said. "Any work you have to do—letters and the like—come in here. We'll be getting on down-stairs now, eh?" Charlie noted for the first time that the man's hands trembled, and that a faint perspiration shone on his forehead. "A damned important dinner for me," Ward added, and his voice broke suddenly in the middle of the sentence.

But when they reached the group down-stairs before the fire, the host was again his debonair self, assured and smiling. He led his four guests through a brief passageway to the dining-room, and assigned them to their places.

That great oak-paneled room, that table gleaming with silver, spoke eloquently of the prestige of the family of Ward. Ever since the days of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode, the name had been known and honored in this western country. No boat around the Horn for the first Dudley Ward; he had trekked in with the gold rush, a member of that gallant band of whom it has been well said: "The cowards never started, and the weaklings died on the way." Now this famous family had dwindled to the polished,

gray-haired gentleman at the head of the table, and Charlie, thinking of his own eleven children at home in Honolulu, glanced around the board and sighed over the futility of such a situation.

In its earlier stages, the dinner seemed a trifle strained, despite the urbane chatter of the host. Charlie alone knew why he was there; the others seemed inclined to silent speculation. Evidently Ward was not yet ready to enlighten them. As Ah Sing moved along with the main course, Charlie said a few words to him in Cantonese, and got a brief answer in the same dialect.

"Pardon, please," Chan bowed to his host, "I take the liberty of asking Ah Sing his age. His reply is not altogether clear."

Ward smiled. "I don't suppose the old boy really knows. In the late seventies, I fancy—a long life, and most of it spent in our service. I know it's not the thing to talk about one's servants—but Ah Sing years ago passed out of that category. He's been one of the family for as long as I can remember."

"I have heard, my heart bursting with pride," Chan said, "of the loyalty and devotion of old Chinese servants in this state."

Ryder spoke suddenly. "Everything you have heard is true," he said. He turned to Ward. "I remember when we were kids, Dudley. Great Scott, how good Sing was to us in those days. The stuff he used to cook for us—grumbling all the time. Huge bowls of rice with meat gravy—I dream of them yet. He'd been with you ages then, hadn't he?"