

Mendong: laughter, vibrant rainbows of scarlet, jade, canary and amethyst, swirling ribbons and dragons - life-size, silk dragons - supported by poles and manipulated by a team of Chinamen.

*Brrrum, bum, bum. Brrrum, bum, bum...*

They wiggled and swayed, bobbed and swerved to the beat of the gong. This was the night of Peh Goeh Cheh, the sacred Moon Festival, and in the heart of Shanghai west, the streets were as colorful as the most decorated of Asian cities. Mendong: Chinatown of 1930s America, the great, evil dragon west of Shanghai.

*Mendong.*

From the corner of Li's Novelty and Fu Dong's Chicken, a streetlight flickered, wavered, flickered. Nervous fingers tossed the butt of a smoldering Winston. It rolled down the gutter and disappeared neath a pile of paper, chicken bones and fortune cookie wrappers. The street out front was busy. Throngs of brightly colored mandarin gowns flowed in a constant sea - *brrum, bum, bum* - all to the same, steady beat of that gong.

The fingers tugged at a striped necktie. *Too tight.* Or could it be the climbing, mounting tension, working itself into a frenzy like the festival dancers?

*Meow...* ran a cat between trash cans. *Wait!* There was something else. Someone else.

A shadow fell across the brick wall, hesitated, drew closer. Was this the one he had been waiting for? From under a low-sitting derby, pupils rolled back and forth, following the shadow until...

"Ahh!" A scream was cut short. He threw the writhing, squirming figure against the wall and tore the hat away. Straight, blonde tresses fell around a very frightened, very pale face.

"You?"

The eyes never left him, chameleon in color. Were they blue, or gray, or green? He decided they must be green.

"Let me go!"

"Not until you talk!" he held her by the neck. "Who is he?"

She shrunk into the trench coat, black and oversized. *A man's coat.* "I - I want protection. Immunity! I can't tell you anything without some sort of guarantee."

He looked her over, looked around. "All right," he let go. "What did you do?"

"I carried it, but I didn't know what it was. Then one night I looked at it and..."

"Did he pay you?"

She pushed from him. "I don't feel safe here. Please, can we go somewhere else?"

Was she really frail and helpless, or was she baiting him into a trap?

"The name!"

"What?"

He caught her wrist. "The name of the man...I want it. Now!"

"Not until we get away! Please!"

"Tell me and then we'll leave."

She was grappling, struggling. "His name is..." *Flash!* A streaking knife lodged in a tower of old shipping crates. The girl gasped. "It's - it's him!"

He too stared at the parchment, pinned and blowing in the night. On it was drawn the likeness of a dragon. *Red.* It was painted red. *The mark of the Mendong Mafia.*

"I must go!" she turned.

"Wait! You were about to say it."

"You don't understand. That's the death sign. Our only hope is to run."

His laugh was dry and forced. "I've been hunting leads on this case for months now. It will be a cold day in August when I let some phony mob threat..." with a grunt he stumbled against the wall. His eyes were wide, hands clutching a jade knife handle that rose from his chest.

The girl screamed as he fell dead at her feet, blood running like the red paint on the parchment dragon...dripping, dripping. The lamplight swirled. The alley spun. She backed into crates, screaming over and over until a gloved hand stretched from the shadows. With a quick snap of the wrist, it pulled the knife from the still warm body.

A great monster of a man stepped into view; or was it a man? His face was covered in frightful Chinese mask, grotesquely designed, swirled white, black, blue and red. Massive. His frame was massive. The arm came out, the knife pointed.



“No!”

Crates tumbled like a house of cards. *A door!* She tried the handle. *Unlocked!* She was blind but she was running. At least she was running. Bumping against counters, knocking into shelves - *rattle, crash* - she found another door that whisked her into blinding color and brilliant lights. Voices shouted in Chinese. They were shouting at her.

“Be quiet and come with me,” someone whispered by her ear. *The man in the mask!*

He dragged her down the street, past Shi & Shi’s Laundry, past the market. Two Chinamen turned to stare. She tried to motion with her free hand, but they simply smiled, bowed and moved on. A dark corner came fast. Behind it stood death.

*Brrrum, bum, bum...*

Drums sounded as the masked man stopped and looked up. Rushing from all sides was a crowd of white and yellow, American and Chinese, yelling, cheering, dancing to the music. They converged upon them and somehow, she managed to tear free. Ripping off her coat, she blended into the merrymakers, her pink, mandarin gown and bright, blonde hair just another splotch of color.

“Hey, girl! Watch where you’re going!”

“Look out!”

“What are you doing there?”

“Hey!”

Ahead rose the subway, a cylinder tower beckoning shelter, escape. She pressed against the window - empty, with only the ticket master snoozing at the booth. There was an exit. She could see it.

Quickly, she ran through the station, through the exit, into the cool night air so crisp it hurt to breathe. Here lay the other side of town, more commonly referred to as “China Alley.” Here Mafia factions carried out some of Mendong’s most atrocious killings. Suddenly things looked worse. Suddenly she wanted to go back. Only it was too late. Rough hands closed around her throat, dragging her to the docks. The bloody knife flashed, a scream rent the alley.

*Brrrum, bum, bum...*

The gong played on.



"Blast it!" Rhett Brody swore as metal slashed his left palm. Blood - his blood - oozed from a two-inch cut. "A little farther. Just a little farther. Come on, you can do it!"

He coaxed himself as straddling the stack pipe, he swung first one leg then the other, pulling himself hand over hand till he reached the tin roof. Here his top hat decided to take flight. On instinct, he caught it and with a self-congratulatory chuckle, waved at the officer below. Yet the ledge was more narrow than he thought.

"Wh-whoa!" he stumbled.

A different sort of chuckle answered him. Rhett looked up as through the fog, through the dark night, came the silhouette of the Chinaman he had been pursuing, walking - or rather, floating - towards him on that high roof ledge.

"Now look and see where this chase got us!" Rhett called. "I told you I wasn't gonna hurt you!"

The silhouette stopped just under the breaking moon. Rhett could see him standing straight, almost proud, slanted eyes shut, lips moving. He peered closer. Yes, he was muttering something in Chinese. A shiver ran through him. If a black cat jumped from the shadows he wouldn't have been surprised. This was the station repeating itself.

Hours ago, he had saved the same man from an onslaught of the "silver bullet," the subway that ran tracks straight through the heart of Mendong. At the time he didn't think it was suicide. *Yet now...*

"Listen to me," Rhett inched forward. *Squeak, squeak...* the soles of his black and white leather brogues sounded deafening. "Just - just listen. I don't know what this is all about, but death isn't the answer."

The lips became still, the eyes opened. He seemed to balance effortlessly on the ledge like a tightrope walker. Rhett was having a bit more trouble. Not too tall, but taller than the Chinaman, he wasn't entirely graceful.

"I won't hurt you. I just want to help," his voice was calm but his heart was racing. This little man looked ready to die. If Rhett played his cards right, he could save him. If he



didn't? Well, it was a long four stories. Another wind gust sent his hat sailing, this time for good.

"It's okay," he muttered. "I can get another hat. I just can't get another head." A quick glance below made him swoon. "Just don't look down. Don't look down."

"What is going on up there? You hear me, Brody?" Captain O'Roarke bellowed from the street.

Rhett rolled his eyes. How did he get here so fast?

"I say, Brody?"

"I hear you!" By now, he was close enough to the Chinaman to touch him. Yet he dare not. "Listen, friend, listen to me. I'm gonna get you down, okay?"

"No!"

"Come on, now. You don't want to do this."

"Don't I?"

"Believe me, this is not the answer!"

"Then what is? What is?"

"Brody!" O'Roarke called. "Brody, you tell that man to get down!"

Rhett reached out. "Come on, Kid, let's..."

"Ah!" with a wild yell, the Chinaman took a leap. Rhett was thrown off balance. His arms twirled a few times and then he was gone, falling over the ledge, down, down, down...

*Wham!* His body hit something soft. *Squish!* It was filthy smelling, sticky, awful. A light shone above. *Heaven?* Perhaps he wasn't alive. Perhaps he lay someplace between. Grunting and twisting, he felt a hard object next to him.

"My hat!" he held it to the light. "Of all the..."

A head, then two hands appeared.

"O'Roarke!"

"Grab a hold of me, Brody."

"Where am I?"