

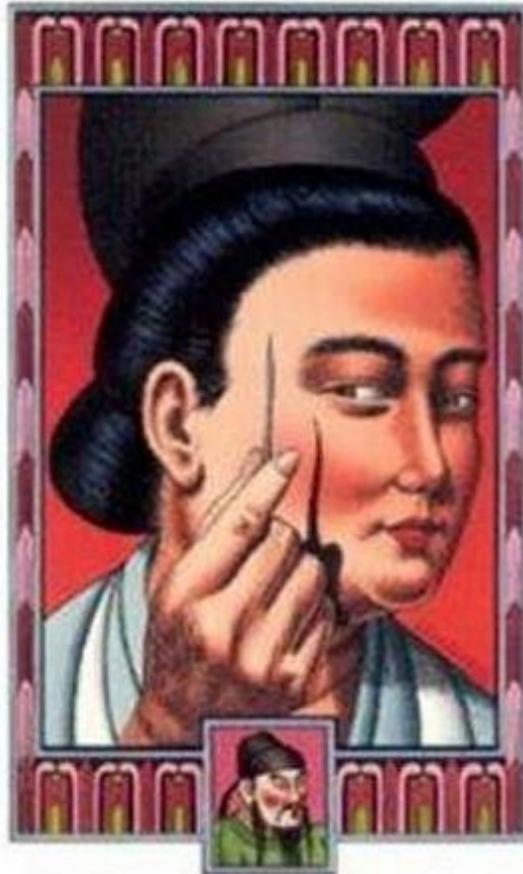
THE CHINESE NAIL MURDERS



A JUDGE DEE MYSTERY

ROBERT VAN GULIK

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*The
Chinese
Nail
Murders*



Books by

Robert van Gulik

THE CHINESE NAIL MURDERS

THE CHINESE LAKE MURDERS

THE CHINESE GOLD MURDERS

THE CHINESE BELL MURDERS



Judge Dee

The

Chinese

Nail

Murders

Judge Dee's Last Three Cases

A CHINESE DETECTIVE STORY

SUGGESTED BY ORIGINAL ANCIENT

CHINESE PLOTS

by Robert van Gulik

HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS

NEW YORK AND EVANSTON

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FIRST EDITION

H-M

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 62-15742

Preface

The Chinese Nail Murders is the concluding novel of my series "Judge Dee Mysteries."

The present novel tells how the master detective of ancient China solved three crimes, a few months after he had been appointed magistrate of Pei-chow, a distant frontier district in the barren north of the Chinese Empire. A sketch map of the town is given on the endpapers, and in the Postscript will be found a list of Chinese sources, together with some general remarks on "Judge Dee Mysteries" and how and why they were written.

The novels of this series cover only the earlier half of Judge Dee's career, when he was serving as magistrate in various districts in the provinces. About this phase the Chinese historical records have little to say beyond the fact that he solved a great number of mysterious crimes. Concerning Judge Dee's career at court, however, those records go into considerable detail, for then the judge became a figure of national importance. He was one of the very few statesmen who could bring some influence to bear on Em-

press Wu, the cruel and dissolute but extremely capable woman who for fifty years ruled the T'ang Empire with an iron hand.* How Judge Dee tried to reform a corrupt administration and, falsely accused, was sentenced to be tortured to death; by what stratagem he succeeded in escaping from prison and how he effected his return to power; how thereafter he prevented the Empress from committing many a cruel deed and how, as crowning achievement of his career, he thwarted her scheme to place an unrightful heir on the Dragon Throne—all this proves clearly that fact is indeed stranger than fiction.

Judge Dee died in A.D. 700, seventy years old, after having occupied with distinction the highest civil and military posts in the Empire. He was survived by two

sons, each of whom had a moderately successful official career. The historical records state, however, that Judge Dee's grandson, Dee Djien-mo, who died as Metropolitan Governor, again possessed the mellow wisdom and deep humanity of his famous grandfather.

During the ensuing centuries the Dee family from T'ai-yuan did not become prominent again in national affairs, although it did produce a few scholars and poets. The family still exists today. In 1936 I met in Shanghai one of Judge Dee's descendants, an amiable elderly gentleman who enjoyed some reputation as a connoisseur of antique paintings. But our conversation was limited to the exchange of the usual courtesies, for I could not then have foreseen that fourteen years later I would start to write several novels about his illustrious ancestor.

Robert van Gulik

* The second part of Judge Dee's career has been vividly described by Lin Yutang in his recent historical novel, *Lady Wu, a True Story* (W. Heinemann Ltd., London 1959, Chapter 37); there his name is transcribed Di Renjiay.

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JUDGE DEE

A MEETING IN A GARDEN PAVILION

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MA JOONG AND A BOXER HEAR A SOLDIER'S STORY

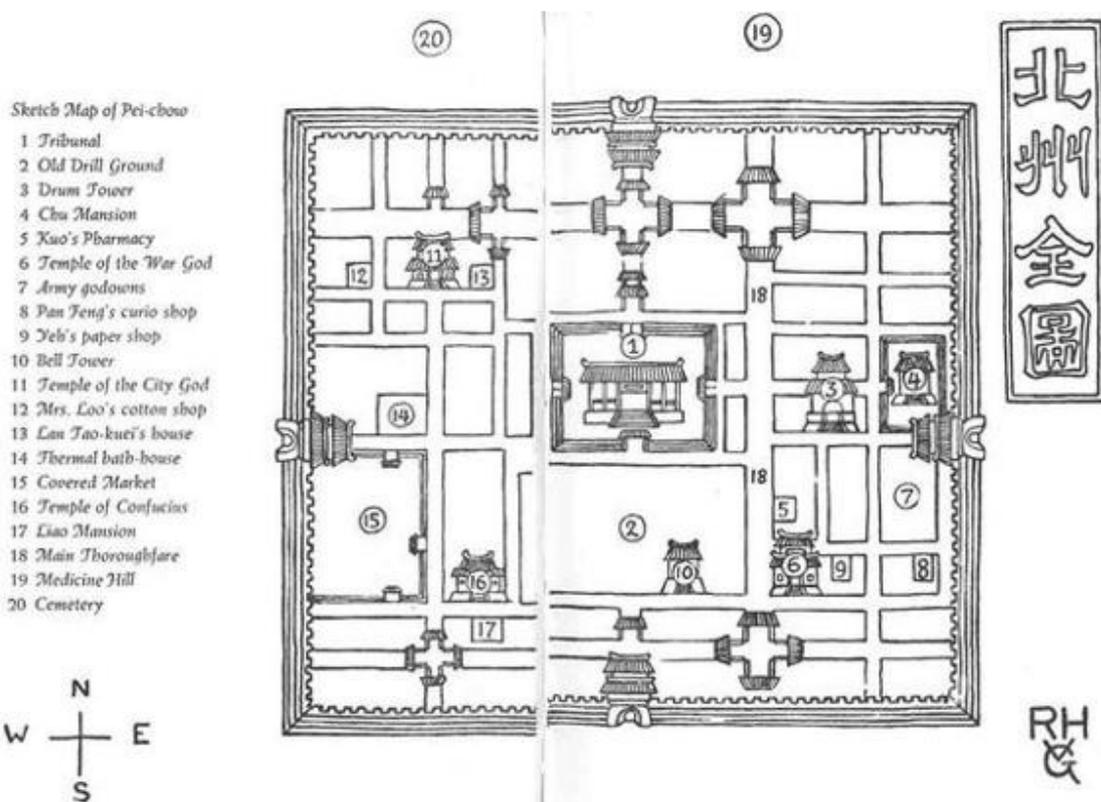
JUDGE DEE AND CORONER KUO

A WOMAN IS PUNISHED FOR CONTEMPT OF COURT

MRS. LOO ARRIVES AT THE CEMETERY

THE LAST MEETING ON MEDICINE HILL

JUDGE DEE READS AN IMPERIAL EDICT



Dramatis Personae

It should be noted that in Chinese the surname-here printed in capitals-precedes the

personal name.

The Tribunal

DEE Jen-djeh, Magistrate of Pei-chow, a town district near the northern border of the Chinese Empire, under the T'ang Dynasty. Referred to as "Judge Dee," or "the judge."

HOONG Liang, Judge Dee's trusted adviser, whom he appointed Sergeant of the tribunal. Referred to as "Sergeant Hoong," or "the Sergeant."

MA Joong *

CHIAO Tai *

TAO Gan *

(* Judge Dee's three lieutenants.)

KUO, a pharmacist, also coroner of the tribunal.

MRS. KUO, nee Wang, his wife, also matron of the women's jail.

The Case of the Headless Corpse

YEH Pin, a paper merchant.

YEH Tai, his younger brother.

PAN Feng, a curio dealer.

MRS. PAN, nee Yeh, his wife.

KAO, warden of the quarter where the crime took place.

The Case of the Paper Cat

LAN Tao-kuei, a boxing champion. MEI Cheng, his chief assistant.

The Case of the Murdered Merchant

LOO Ming, a cotton merchant, died five months previously.

MRS. LOO, nee Chen, his widow.

LOO Mei-lan, her infant daughter.

Others

LIAO, Master of the Guild of the Leatherworkers.

LIAO Lien-fang, his daughter who disappeared.

CHU Ta-yuan, wealthy landowner and leading citizen of Pei-chow.

YU Kang, his secretary, betrothed of Miss Liao Lien-fang.

The

Chinese

Nail

Murders

First Chapter:

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING IN A GARDEN PAVILION; A FIENDISH
MURDER IS REPORTED TO JUDGE DEE

*A judge must brave the foaming billows of hate, deceit, and
doubt,*

The only bridge across is straight and narrow as a rapier's edge.

*He may not lose his foothold once, once pause to listen to his
heart,*

*Heed Justice only, lodestar unfailing, though always remote and
cold.*

Last night I was sitting all alone in my garden pavilion, enjoying the cool evening breeze. The hour was late, my wives had retired to their respective quarters long before.

The entire evening I had been working hard in my library, keeping my boyservant busy getting the books I wanted from the shelves, and making him copy out the passages I needed.

As you know I devote my leisure hours to writing a compendium of crime and detection in our present great Ming Dynasty, also adding an Appendix containing the biographies of the famous detectives of former days. I am now working on the biography of Dee Jen-djeh, the eminent statesman who lived seven hundred years ago. In the earlier half of his career, when he was still serving as district magistrate in

the provinces, he solved an amazing number of mysterious crimes, so that now he is known chiefly as "Judge Dee," the master detective of our illustrious past.

After I had sent my yawning boyservant off to bed, I had written a long letter to my elder brother, who is serving as Chief Secretary to the Prefect of Pei-chow, far up in the north. He was appointed to that post two years ago, leaving his old house in the next street here in my care. I wrote him about my discovery that Pei-chow had been the last post where Judge Dee served as magistrate, before he was appointed to a high office in the capital. I asked my brother, therefore, to search the local records for me; perhaps he would find interesting data on crimes solved there by Judge Dee. I knew he would do his best, for we have always been very close.

When I had finished my letter, I noticed that it was very hot in my library. I strolled out into the garden, where a cool breeze was blowing over the lotus pond. I decided that before turning in I would sit for a while in the small pavilion I had built in the farthest corner, by the side of a cluster of banana trees. I was not too keen on going to bed, for to tell you the truth there had been some domestic trouble recently when I had introduced into my household a third wife. She is a lovely woman, and also quite well educated. I fail to understand why my first and second lady took an instant dislike to her, and must grudge every night I spend with her. Now I had promised to stay the night in the quarters of my First Lady, and I must confess that I did not feel in too great a hurry to proceed there.

Sitting in the comfortable bamboo armchair, I leisurely fanned



A meeting in a garden pavilion

myself with my fan of crane feathers, contemplating the garden bathed in the cool rays of the silvery moon. Suddenly I saw the small back gate open. Who shall describe my delighted surprise when my elder brother came walking in!

I jumped up and rushed down the garden path to meet him.

"What brings you here?" I exclaimed, "why didn't you let me know you were coming south?"

"Quite unexpectedly," my brother said, "I had to depart. My first thought was to come and see you; I hope you'll excuse the late hour!"

I affectionately took him by his arm and led him to the pavilion. I noticed that his sleeve was damp and cold.

When I had made him sit down in my armchair, I took the chair opposite and looked at him solicitously. He had lost much weight, his face was gray and his eyes seemed to bulge slightly.

"It may be the effect of the moonlight," I said worriedly, "but I think you look ill. I suppose the journey down from Pei-chow was very tiring?"

"It proved difficult indeed," my brother said quietly, "I had hoped to be here four days earlier, but there was so much mist." He brushed a patch of dried mud from his simple white robe, then went on, "I have not been feeling too well of late, you know, I suffer from a searing pain here." He delicately touched the top of his head. "It goes deep down behind my eyes. I am also subject to fits of shivering."

"The hot climate here in our native place will do you good!" I said consolingly, "and tomorrow we'll let our old physician have a look at you. Now tell me all the news from Pei-chow!"

He gave me a concise account of his work there; it seemed he got along quite well with his chief, the Prefect. But when he came to his private affairs he looked worried. His First Lady had been acting rather strangely recently, he said. Her attitude to him had changed, he did not know why. He gave me to understand that there was some connection between this and his sudden departure. He started to shiver violently, and I did not press him further for details about a problem which evidently caused him much distress.

To divert his thoughts I brought up the subject of Judge Dee, telling him about the letter I had just written.

"Oh yes," my brother said, "in Pei-chow they tell a weird old tale about three dark mysteries that Judge Dee solved when he was serving there as magistrate. Having been handed down for generations, and being told and retold in the tea houses, this story has of course been much embellished by fancy."

"It is only just past midnight," I said excitedly. "If it doesn't tire you too much, I wish you would tell me the tale!"

My brother's haggard face twitched in pain. But when I hurriedly started to apologize for my unreasonable request, he stopped me with his raised hand.

"It may be of advantage to you to hear that strange story," he said gravely. "If I myself had given it more attention earlier, maybe things would have turned out differently. ..."

His voice trailed off, again he lightly touched the crown of his head. Then he resumed:

"Well, you know of course that in Judge Dee's day, after our victorious campaign

against the Tartars, the northern frontier of our Empire had been moved for the first time farther out in the plains north of Pei-chow. At present Pei-chow is a prosperous, densely populated prefecture, the busy trade center of the northern provinces. But at that time it was still a rather isolated district; among the sparse population there were many families of mixed Tartar blood, who still practiced in secret the weird rites of the barbarian sorcerers. Farther north the great Northern Army of Generalissimo Wen Lo was stationed, to protect the Tang Empire against new invasions by the Tartar hordes."

After these preliminaries my brother started upon an uncanny narrative. The fourth night watch had sounded when he finally rose and said he had to go.

I wanted to accompany him home, for he was shivering badly now and his hoarse voice had become so weak that I could hardly hear what he said. But he resolutely refused, and we parted at my garden gate.

I felt in no mood for sleep, and returned to my library. There I hastily started to write the weird tale my brother had told me. When the red glow of dawn was in the sky I put down my writing brush and lay down on the bamboo couch out on the veranda.

When I woke up the time for the noon meal was approaching. I had my boyservant bring my rice out to the veranda, and ate with gusto, for once anticipating with pleasure the announced visit of my First Lady. I would triumphantly cut short her harangue about my not joining her during the night by adducing the unassailable excuse of my elder brother's unexpected arrival. When I had thus dealt with that aggravating woman, I would walk over to my brother's house for a leisurely chat. Perhaps he would tell me then exactly why he had left Pei-chow, and I would be able to ask him some elucidation about a few points which had not been very clear in the old story he told me.

But just when I was laying down my chopsticks, my steward came and announced that a special messenger had arrived from Pei-chow. He handed me a letter from the Prefect, who regret-

fully informed me that four days before, at midnight, my elder brother had suddenly died there.

Judge Dee sat huddled up in a thick fur coat in his armchair behind the desk in his private office. He wore an old fur bonnet with ear flaps, but still he felt the icy draft that blew through the spacious room.

Looking at his two elderly assistants sitting on stools in front of the desk, he said:

"That wind blows in through the smallest crevices!"

"It comes straight from the desert plain up north, Your Honor," the old man with the frayed beard remarked. "I'll call the clerk to add more coal to the brazier!"

As he rose and shuffled to the door, the judge said with a frown to the other:

"This northern winter does not seem to bother you, Tao Gan."

The gaunt man thus addressed put his hands deeper into the sleeves of the patched goatskin caftan he was wearing. He said with a wry smile:

"I have dragged this old body of mine all over the Empire, Your Honor, hot or cold, dry or wet-it's all the same to me! And I have this fine Tartar caftan that is much better than those expensive furs!"

The judge thought that he had rarely seen a more wretched-looking garment. But he knew that this wily old lieutenant of his was inclined to be parsimonious. Tao Gan had been originally an itinerant swindler. Nine years before, when Judge Dee was serving as magistrate in Han-yuan, he had extracted Tao Gan from a nasty situation. Then the trickster had reformed and asked to be admitted to Judge Dee's service. Since then his wide knowledge of the ways of the underworld, and his shrewd understanding of his fellow men had proved most useful in the tracking down of astute criminals.

Sergeant Hoong came back with a clerk carrying a pail with glowing coals. He piled them on the fire in the large copper brazier next to the desk. Having resumed his seat he said, rubbing his thin hands:

"The trouble with this office, Your Honor, is that it is too large! We have never had an office that measures thirty feet square!"

The judge looked at the heavy wooden pillars supporting the high ceiling blackened by age, and the broad windows opposite pasted over with thick oil paper that faintly reflected the whiteness of the snow in the courtyard outside.

"Don't forget, Sergeant," he said, "that till three years ago this tribunal was the headquarters of the Generalissimo of our Northern Army. The military always seem to need much elbow space!"

"The Generalissimo will have plenty of that where he is now!" Tao Gan observed. "Two hundred miles farther up north, right in the frozen desert!"

"I think," Sergeant Hoong said, "that the Board of Personnel in the capital is a few years behind! When they sent Your Honor out here they evidently thought that Pei-chow was still on the northern border of our Empire!"

"You may be right!" Judge Dee said with a bleak smile. "When the Director handed me my papers, he very courteously but a little absent-mindedly said he trusted that I would handle barbarian affairs as well as I did in Lan-fang. But here in Pei-chow I am separated from the barbarian tribes over the border by a distance of three hundred miles and an army of a hundred thousand men!"

The old Sergeant angrily tugged at his beard. He rose and went over to the tea stove in the corner. Sergeant Hoong was an old retainer of the Dee family and had looked after the judge when he was still a child. Twelve years earlier, when Judge Dee was appointed to his first post as magistrate in the provinces, Hoong had insisted upon accompanying him, notwithstanding his advanced age. The judge had given him official status by appointing him Sergeant of the tribunal. The old man, devoted to him and his family, was invaluable to him as a trusted adviser, with whom he could discuss unreservedly all his problems.

Judge Dee gratefully accepted the large bowl of hot tea the Sergeant handed him. Cupping his hands around it to warm them, he remarked:

"All in all we can't complain! The people here are a sturdy race, honest and hard-working. In the four months that we have been here now, we have had, next to the routine affairs of the administration, only a few cases of assault and battery, and those were quickly settled by Ma Joong and Chiao Tai! And I must say that the military police are most efficient in dealing with deserters and other backwash of the Northern Army that strays to this district." He slowly stroked his long beard. "There is though," he continued, "that case of the disappearance of Miss Liao, ten days ago."

"Yesterday," Tao Gan said, "I met her father, old Guildmaster Liao. He asked again whether there was not any news about Lien-fang."

Judge Dee put down his teacup. Knitting his shaggy eyebrows he said:

"We investigated the market, we circulated her description among all military and civil authorities of the province. I think we did all we could."

Tao Gan nodded.

"I don't think the case of Miss Liao Lien-fang's disappearance is worth all the trouble we took," he said. "I still believe that she eloped with a secret lover. In due time she'll turn up with a fat baby in her arms and with a bashful husband at her side, and beg her old father to forgive and forget!"

"Remember though," Sergeant Hoong remarked, "that she was engaged to be married!"

Tao Gan only smiled cynically.

"I agree," Judge Dee said, "that the circumstances seem to point to an elopement. She went to the market with her duenna, and while standing among the dense crowd looking at a Tartar with a performing bear, she suddenly was not there any more. Since you can't kidnap a young woman in a crowd, one does indeed think of a voluntary disappearance."

The deep voice of the bronze gong echoed in the distance. Judge Dee rose.

"The morning session of the tribunal is about to start," he said. "Anyhow, today I'll look over again our records of Miss Liao's case. Missing persons are always a nuisance! I much prefer a straight murder!"

As Sergeant Hoong helped him to don his official robe the judge added: "I wonder why Ma Joong and Chiao Tai are not yet back from the hunt."

The Sergeant said:

"Last night they said they would leave before dawn to catch that wolf, and be back in time for the morning session,"

With a sigh Judge Dee replaced his warm fur bonnet by his official judge's cap of black silk. Just as he was going to the door the headman of the constables came in. He said hurriedly:

"The people are very excited, Your Honor! This morning a woman was found cruelly murdered in the south quarter!"

The judge halted in his steps. Turning to Sergeant Hoong he said gravely:

"That was a very foolish remark I made a few moments ago, Sergeant! One should never speak lightly of murder."

Tao Gan said with a worried look:

"Let's hope it isn't that girl Lien-fang!"

Judge Dee made no comment. As he crossed the corridor connecting his private office with the back door of the court hall, he asked the headman:

"Have you seen Ma Joong and Chiao Tai?"

"They came back a few moments ago, Your Honor," the headman replied, "but the warden of the market had just come rushing to the tribunal reporting a violent brawl in a wine shop. Since he urgently asked for assistance, Your Honor's two lieutenants rode back with him straight away."

The judge nodded.

He opened the door, pulled aside the curtain and entered the court hall.

Second Chapter:

A PAPER MERCHANT ACCUSES AN ANTIQUE DEALER; JUDGE DEE PROCEEDS TO THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

Seated behind the high bench on the raised platform, the judge surveyed the crowded

court hall. Down below more than a hundred people were assembled.

Six constables stood in two rows of three before the bench, with the headman by their side. Sergeant Hoong had taken his customary place behind Judge Dee's chair, and Tao Gan stood by the side of the bench, near the lower table where the senior scribe was arranging his writing brushes.

The judge was about to raise his gavel when two men clad in neat fur robes appeared in the entrance of the hall. They had difficulty in getting through the crowd, as a number of people accosted them with questions. The judge gave a sign to the headman, who quickly went through the assembly and led the newcomers in front of the bench. Judge Dee hit his gavel hard on the table.

"Silence and order!" he shouted.

Suddenly the hall grew still, all watched the two men, who knelt down on the stone floor in front of the dais. The elder was a thin man with a pointed white beard, his face drawn and haggard. The other was heavily built; he had a round, broad face and wore a thin ring beard that circled his fleshy chin.

Judge Dee announced :

"I declare the morning session of the tribunal of Pei-chow open. I shall call the roll."

When the personnel had duly answered the roll call, Judge Dee leaned forward in his chair and asked:

"Who are the two men who apply to this tribunal?"

"This insignificant person," the elder man said respectfully, "is called Yeh Pin, a paper merchant by profession, and the person by my side is my younger brother, Yeh Tai, who helps me in the shop. We report to Your Honor that our brother-in-law, the antique dealer Pan Feng, has cruelly murdered our sister, his wife. We implore Your Honor . . ."

"Where is that man Pan Feng?" Judge Dee interrupted him.

"He fled the city yesterday, Your Honor, but we hope . . ."

"Everything in its own time!" the judge said curtly. "First state when and how the murder was discovered!"

"Early this morning," Yeh Pin began, "my brother here went to Pan's house. He knocked repeatedly on the door, but no one answered. He feared that something untoward had happened, because Pan and his wife are always at home at that time. So he rushed home to . . ."

"Halt!" Judge Dee interrupted. "Why didn't he first ask the neighbors whether they

had seen Pan and his wife go out?"

"Their house is located in a very lonely street, Your Honor," Yeh replied, "and the houses on both sides of Pan's place are empty."

"Proceed," the judge said.