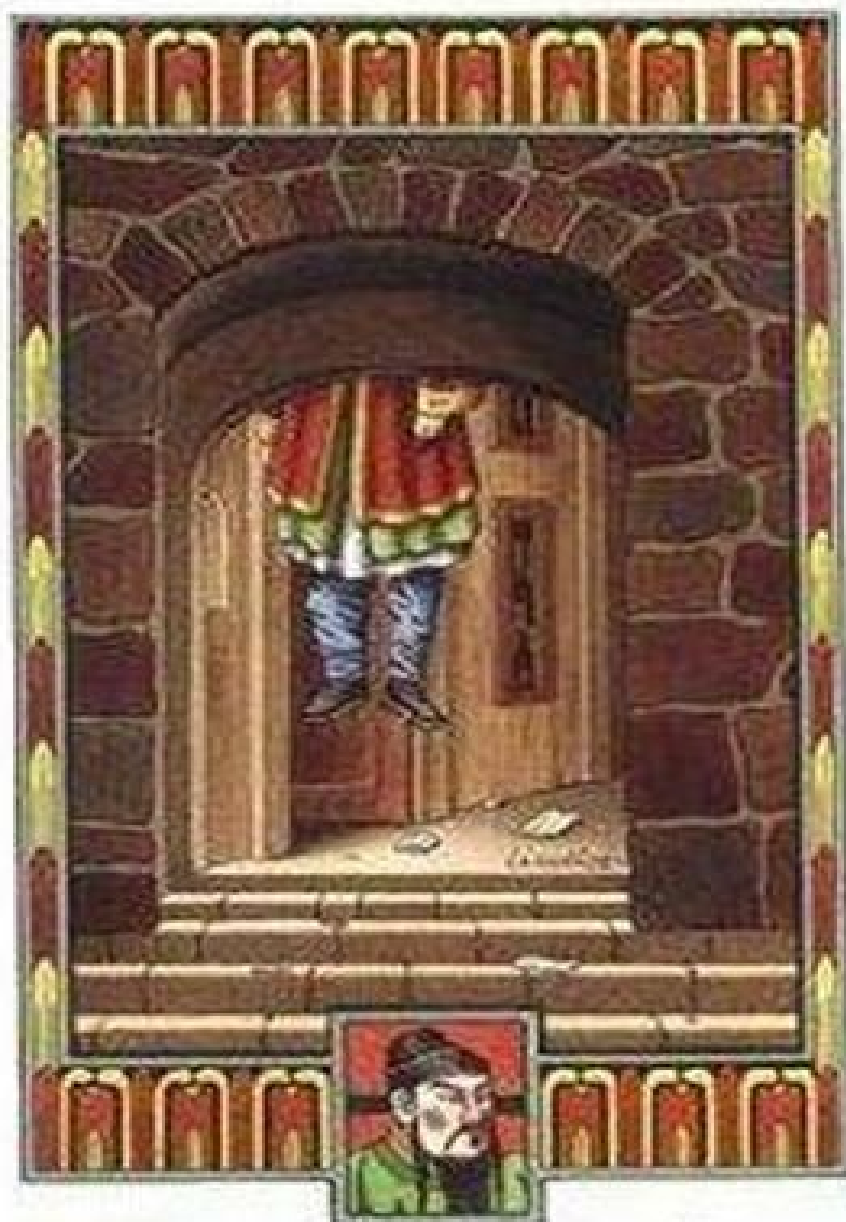


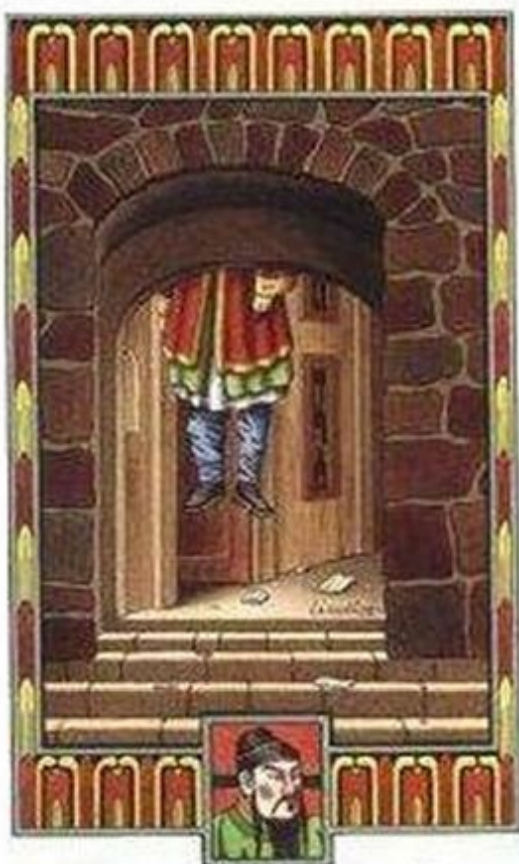
MURDER IN CANTON



A JUDGE DEE MYSTERY

ROBERT VAN GULIK

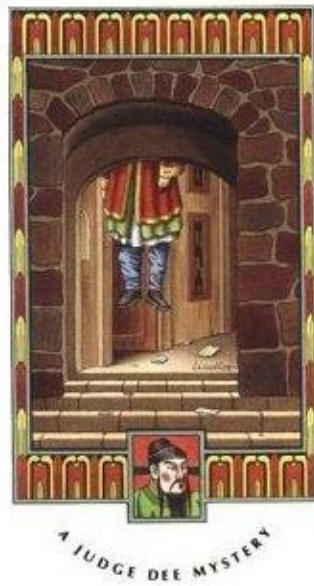
MURDER IN CANTON



A JUDGE DEE MYSTERY

ROBERT VAN GULIK

MURDER IN CANTON



ROBERT VAN GULIK

This was proofed by the scanner and called (v1.0). The OCR program that I use interfaces with MS Word. My scans are done so I can read the books on my smart phone and or REB-1100 eBook reader use WordMagus to convert .DOC files to .RB and HTML. I use Mobipocket Creator to convert to .PRC.

NOVELS BY ROBERT VAN GULIK

The Emperor's Pearl

The Willow Pattern*

The Monkey and the Tiger

The Phantom of the Temple

Murder in Canton

*The present novel, *Murder in Canton*, links up chronologically with *The Willow Pattern*.

Murder in Canton

A Chinese Detective Story by

Robert Van Gulik

With twelve illustrations drawn by the author in Chinese style

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT © 1966 ROBERT H. VAN GULIK

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. NO PART OF THIS BOOK

MAY BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM WITHOUT THE

PERMISSION OF CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

A-6.67 [H]

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD
NUMBER 67-24057

ILLUSTRATIONS

Chiao Tai loses a companion

Tao Gan meets the Golden Bell

Prefect Pao presents Yau and Liang to Judge Dee

Mansur entertains his guests

A meeting at the temple fair

Chiao Tai visits the Smaragdine dancer

Tao Gan and Judge Dee

Chiao Tai converses with Captain Nee

Tao Gan disturbs a reading lady

Dananir welcomes unexpected guests

Judge Dee discusses a chess problem

A warrior's death

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

It should be noted that in China the surname
-here printed in capitals-precedes the personal name

Main characters

DEE Jen-djeh

President of the Metropolitan Court, in this novel visiting Canton in the summer of 680 A.D.

CHIAO Tai

a colonel of the Imperial Guard

TAO Gan

Chief Secretary of the Court

Persons connected with the Case of the Imperial Censor

WENG Kien

Governor of Canton and the Southern Region

PAO Kwan

Prefect of Canton

LEW Tao-ming

Imperial Censor

Dr SOO

his adviser

Persons connected with the Case of the Smaragdine Dancer

Zumurrud

an Arab dancing girl

Mansur

leader of the Arab community in Canton

LIANG Foo

a famous financier

YAU Tai-kai

a wealthy merchant

Persons connected with the Case of the Secret Lovers

Lan-lee

a blind girl

NEE

a sea captain

Dunyazad

Dananir

slave-girls

I

The two men standing at the corner of the custom-house silently watched the long, dreary waterfront. The elder's thin, angular frame was wrapped from head to feet in an old goatskin caftan. The other, a burly, handsome man in his late forties, was clad in a patched brown gown and jacket. While they were standing there, the hot, clammy mist changed into a warm drizzle that wetted the worn velvet of their black caps. The still air was very close, for although it was late in the afternoon already, there was no sign yet of a cooling evening breeze.

A dozen bare-backed coolies were unloading the foreign ship moored a little further on alongside the river quay, opposite the arched gate of the custom-house. Bent under heavy bales, they trudged down the gangway to the measure of a mournful catch-song. The four guards at the gate had pushed their spiked helmets back from their perspiring brows. Leaning heavily on their long halberds, they followed the work with bored eyes.

'Look! There goes the ship we came down the river on this morning!' the elderly man exclaimed. He pointed to the dark mass that came looming up out of the mist, beyond the masts of the other craft moored next to the foreign ship. The black war junk was being rowed with great speed to the estuary of the Pearl River, its brass gongs clanging to warn off the small boats of the river hawkers.

'Weather permitting, they'll be in Annam soon!' his broad-shouldered companion said gruffly. 'There's bound to be a lot of good fighting down there. But you and I have to stay behind in this god-forsaken city, with orders to assess the situation ! Hell, there's another drop running down my neck. A if this blasted humid heat isn't making me sweat enough already!'

He pulled the collar of his jacket closer round his thick boxer's neck, at the same time taking good care to conceal the coat of mail he was wearing underneath, with the golden badge of a colonel of the Imperial Guard, a round plaque consisting of two intertwined dragons. Then he asked testily, 'Do you know what it's all about, brother Tao?'

The lean man sadly shook his grey head. Tugging at the three long hairs that sprouted from the war on his cheek, he replied slowly :

'Our boss didn't tell me a thing, brother Chiao. Must be important, though. Else he wouldn't have let the capital so suddenly, and rushed down here with us, first on horseback, then on that fast war junk. There must be trouble brewing here in Canton. Ever since our arrival this morning, I have...'

He was interrupted by a loud splash. Two coolies had let a bale drop into the muddy strip of water between the ship and the quay. A white-turbaned figure jumped down from the deck and began to kick the coolies, shouting at them in a foreign tongue. The bored custom-guards suddenly came to life. One stepped forward and with a quick swing of his halberd let its flat side thud down on the shoulders of the cursing Arab.

'Keep off our men, you son of a dog!' the guard shouted. 'You are in China here, remember!'

The Arab gripped the hilt of the dagger in his red belt. A dozen white-gowned men jumped from the ship, and drew their long curved swords. As the coolies let their bales drop and scurried away, the four guards levelled their halberds at the cursing sailors. Suddenly iron boots resounded on the cobblestones. Twenty soldiers came marching through the gate of the custom-house. With the ease of long practice they surrounded the angry Arabs and herded them at spearpoint back towards the edge of the quay. A tall thin Arab with a beaked nose leaned over the railing of the ship, and began to harangue the sailors in a strident voice. They sheathed their swords and climbed on board again. The coolies resumed their work as if nothing had happened.

'About how many of those insolent bastards would there be in this city?' the colonel asked.

'Well, we counted four ships in port, didn't we ? And two more are lying in the estuary, outward bound. Add the Arabs who've settled down ashore, and you get a couple of thousand, I'd say. And that wretched inn of yours is smack in the middle of the Moslem quarter ! A fine place for getting a knife in your back at night ! My hostel is nothing to crow about either, but being right outside the south gate, the guards are at least within calling distance.'

'What room have you got there?'

'The one on the corner of the second floor, which gives me a good view of the quay and the wharves as per orders. Well, don't you think we've been hanging about here long enough? The drizzle is getting worse. Let's go and sample the stuff over there.'

He pointed to the end of the quay where a shadowy figure was lighting the red lantern of a wine-house.

'I certainly could use some!' Chiao Tai muttered. 'Never saw such a dismal place! And I can't speak the language either.'

Hurrying over the slippery cobblestones, they did not notice a shabbily dressed, bearded man, who now left the shelter of the godown further along the quay and followed them.

Arriving at the end of the quay, Chiao Tai saw that the bridge across the moat by the Kuei-te city gate was crowded with people. Clad in straw raincoats, they bustled along, each intent on his own business.

'Nobody takes time off for a bit of loitering here,' he grumbled.

'That's why they could make Canton the wealthiest port city of the south!' Tao Gan remarked. 'Here we are!'

He pulled the patched door-curtain aside and they entered a dim, cavernous taproom. They were met by the smell of stale garlic and salted fish. The smoking oil lamps dangling from the low rafters threw their uncertain light on a few score guests, huddling in groups of four or five round small tables. They were busily talking in undertones. No one seemed to pay the slightest attention to the two newcomers.

When the two men were seating themselves at an empty table near the window, the bearded man who had been following them came in. He went straight to the rear, to a worn wooden counter where the innkeeper was heating pewter winejugs in a basin of boiling water.

Tao Gan told the waiter in good Cantonese to bring them two large jugs. While they were waiting, Chiao Tai put his elbows on the greasy table top and glumly surveyed the guests.

'What a crowd!' he muttered after a while. 'See that awful dwarf over there? Can't understand how I missed that ugly mug when I came in!'

Tao Gan looked at the small squat man sitting all alone at the table near the door. He had a flat, swarthy face with a low, deeply furrowed brow and a broad nose. Small, deep-set eyes lowered from under ragged eyebrows. His large, hairy hands were clasped round his empty beaker.

'The only fellow of decent appearance is our neighbour!' Tao Gan whispered. 'Has the looks of a professional boxer.' He pointed with his chin at the wide-shouldered man sitting alone at the next table. He wore a neat, dark-blue gown, its black sash wound tightly round his slender waist. His heavy-lidded eyes gave his handsome, deeply tanned face a sleepy expression. He was staring into space, seemingly oblivious of his surroundings.

The slovenly waiter put two large jugs before them. Then he went back to the counter. He pointedly ignored the dwarf who was waving his empty beaker at him.

Chiao Tai took a sip, looking rather sceptical. 'Not bad at all!' he exclaimed, agreeably surprised. He emptied his beaker and added, 'Quite good, in fact!' He drank his second beaker in one long draught. Tao Gan followed his example with a happy grin.

The bearded man at the counter had been watching them all the time. He counted the beakers they drank. When he saw the two friends begin yet another round, their sixth, he started to leave the counter. Then his eye fell on the dwarf, and he checked himself. The boxer at the next table, who had been watching from the corners of his hooded eyes both the bearded man and the dwarf, now sat up straight. He pensively stroked his short, neatly trimmed ring-beard.

Chiao Tai set down his empty beaker. He clapped his heavy hand on his friend's bony shoulder and said with a broad grin :

'I don't like the city, I don't like the damned hot weather, and I don't like this smelly taproom. But b

heaven the wine's all right, and anyway it's good to be out on a job again. What about you, eh, brother Tao?'

'I got fed up with the capital too,' the other replied. 'Be careful, your badge is showing.'

Chiao Tai pulled the lapels of his jacket close. But the bearded man at the counter had got a glimpse of the golden badge, and his lips curved in a satisfied smile. Then his face fell again as he saw a blue turbaned Arab with a cast in his left eye come in and join the dwarf. The bearded man turned to the counter and gave the innkeeper a sign to fill his beaker.

'Heaven knows I am not cut out for the part of a parade colonel!' Chiao Tai exclaimed, as he refilled their beakers. 'Had four years of it now, mind you! You should see the bed I'm supposed to sleep in! Silk pillows, silk coverlets, and brocade curtains ! Makes me feel like a blooming whore! Know what do, every blasted night? Take out the reed mat I keep hidden behind the bed, roll it out on the floor, and lay me down there for a good night's rest ! Only bother is that every morning I have to rumple the bedding a bit, to keep up appearances for my orderlies, you see!'

He guffawed. Tao Gan joined him. In their happy mood they did not notice that their laughter sounded very loud. Conversation had come to a standstill; the guests stared in sullen silence at the door. The dwarf was talking angrily to the waiter who stood with folded arms in front of his table. The boxer watched them too, then again turned his gaze towards the man by the counter.

'As for me,' Tao Gan said with his sly grin, 'tonight I can go to sleep in peace in toy attic. I won't have to first shoo away those young maidservants my house-steward keeps trotting out. The scoundrel still hopes to sell me one as a concubine some day!'

'Why don't you tell the rascal to stop that nonsense? Here, have another drink!'

'It saves money, my friend ! Those wenches come to work for free, hoping to catch this wealthy old bachelor, you see!' Tao Gan emptied his beaker, then resumed, 'Fortunately you and I are not the marrying kind, brother Chiao ! Unlike our friend and colleague Ma Joong!'

'Don't mention the low wretch!' Chiao Tai shouted. 'To think that after he married those twin-sisters four years ago, he has sired six boys and two girls ! That's debasing into hard labour what ought to be a gentleman's pleasure ! And he's afraid to come home drunk nowadays. Did you...'

He broke off and looked astonished at the commotion by the door. The ugly dwarf and the Arab had risen. Their faces flushed and angry, they had begun to curse the waiter who was trying to shout them down. The other guests were watching the scene with impassive faces. Suddenly the Arab groped for his dagger. The dwarf quickly took his arm, and pulled him outside. The waiter grabbed the dwarf's wine-beaker and threw it after him. It smashed to pieces on the cobblestones. An approving murmur rose from the crowd.

'They don't like Arabs here,' Chiao Tai remarked. The man at the next table turned his head. 'No, it wasn't the Arab, exactly,' he told them in good northern Chinese. 'But you are right, we don't like Arabs here either. Why should they come? They don't drink our wine, anyway. Aren't allowed to, by their creed.'

~~'Those black bastards miss the best things of life!' Chiao Tai said with a grin. 'Join us in a round!' And~~ the stranger smiled and pulled his chair up to their table, Chiao Tai asked him, 'Are you from up north?'

'No, I was born and bred here in Canton. But I have travelled about a lot, and a traveller has to learn languages. I am a sea captain, you see. My name is Nee, by the way. What brought you people down here?'

'We are just passing through,' Tao Gan explained. 'We are clerks belonging to the suite of an official who is now touring the province.'

The captain gave Chiao Tai a judicious look.

'I'd have thought that you were army.'

'I used to do a bit of boxing and fencing, as a hobby,' Chiao Tai said casually. 'You interested in that too?'

'Fencing, mainly. Especially with Arab blades. Had to learn that, for I used to be on the regular run over to the Persian Gulf. There are plenty of pirates about in those waters, you know.'

'It beats me how they manage those curved blades,' Chiao Tai remarked.

'You'd be surprised,' Captain Nee said. Soon he and Chiao Tai were in animated conversation about different kinds of sword-fighting. Tao Gan listened absent-mindedly and concentrated on keeping the beakers filled. But when he heard the captain quote some technical terms in Arabic, he looked up and asked :

'You know their lingo?'

'Enough to get along. Picked up Persian too. All in the day's work!' And to Chiao Tai : 'I'd like to show you my collection of foreign swords. What about coming along for a drink at my place? I live over in the east city.'

'Tonight we're rather busy,' Chiao Tai replied. 'Could you make it tomorrow morning?'

The other darted a quick glance at the man at the counter.

'All right,' he said. 'Where are you staying?'

'At the Five Immortals' Inn, near the Moslem mosque.'

The captain started to say something, but changed his mind. He sipped his wine, then asked casually 'Is your friend staying there too?' When Chiao Tai shook his head, the captain resumed with a shrug, 'Well, you're fully capable of looking after yourself, I dare say. I'll send a litter to fetch you, say about an hour after breakfast.'

Tao Gan paid the bill, and they took their leave of their new acquaintance. The sky had cleared; the river breeze felt pleasantly cool on their flushed faces. The quay now presented an animated scene. Hawkers had set up their night-stalls all along the waterside, lit by strings of coloured lampions. The river was dotted with torches on small boats, moored stem to stern. The breeze wafted the smell of burning firewood to them. The waterfolk were preparing their evening rice.

'Let's rent a litter,' Tao Gan said. 'It's quite a long way to the Governor's Palace.'

Chiao Tai made no reply. He had been surveying the crowd with a preoccupied face. Suddenly he asked :

'Don't you have a feeling that someone is keeping an eye on us?'

Tao Gan quickly looked over his shoulder.

'No, I don't,' he said. 'But your hunches are often right, I admit. Well, since our judge told us to report at six, we still have an hour or so. Let's do some walking, each on his own. That'll give us a better chance to see whether we are being spied upon. And I'll be able to test my memory of the city's layout at the same time.'

'All right. I'll pass by my inn and change, then cut through the Moslem quarter. If I keep to the north-east, I'll sooner or later come to the large street that leads north, won't I?'

'If you behave and keep out of trouble, that is ! Do have a look at the Tower of the Water-clock on the main street, it's a famous sight. The exact time is indicated by floaters in a series of brass water vessels, put one above the other, like a flight of stairs. The water drips slowly from the higher into the lower vessels. Quite an ingenious contrivance!'

'Think I need all those gadgets for knowing the time of day?' Chiao Tai asked with a sniff. 'I go by the sun and by my thirst. And at night and on rainy days I make do with my thirst only. See you later in the palace!'

II

Chiao Tai turned the corner, crossed the bridge over the moat and entered the city by the Kuei-te Gate.

As he pushed his way through the dense evening crowd, he glanced over his shoulder now and then, but no one seemed to be following him. He passed in front of the high, red-lacquered gate of the Temple of the Five Immortals, entered the first street on his left, and so reached his inn, named after the temple. It was a ramshackle building of two storeys. Over its roof he saw the top of the minaret belonging to the Moslem mosque, rising more than fifteen fathoms up in the air.

Calling out a cheerful good-night to the surly innkeeper, who sat slumped in a bamboo chair in the small lobby, Chiao Tai went straight up to his room on the second floor, at the back. It was hot and stuffy inside, for the shutters of the single window had been closed the whole day. After renting it that morning he had only stayed to put his travelling bundles on the bare plank-bed. With a curse he

pushed the shutters wide open. He looked at the minaret, of which he now had a complete view.

'Those foreigners can't even get up a real pagoda,' he muttered with a grin. 'No storeys, no curved roofs, no nothing ! Straight as a piece of sugar cane!'

Humming a tune, he changed into a clean shirt, put on his coat of mail again and wrapped his helmet in iron gloves and high military boots in a piece of blue cloth. Then he went downstairs.

Down in the street it was still very hot; the river breeze did not penetrate this far into the city. Chiao Tai was sorry that he could not take off his jacket because of the coat of mail. After a casual glance at the passers-by, he took the alley next to the inn.

The narrow streets were lit by the lamps of the night-stalls, but there were few people about. He saw several Arabs, conspicuous by their white turbans and their quick, long stride. After he had passed the mosque, the streets assumed a foreign aspect. The white-plastered houses had no windows on the ground floor; the only light came from those on the second floor, filtering through screens of intricate latticework. Here and there an arched passage across the street connected the second floors of the houses on either side. Chiao Tai was still in such a cheerful mood after the wine that he forgot to check whether he was being followed.

When he had entered a deserted alley, he suddenly found a bearded Chinese walking by his side, who asked curtly :

'Aren't you a guardsman called Kao or Shao, or something like that, eh?'

Chiao Tai halted. In the uncertain light he scrutinized the stranger's cold face with the long sidewhiskers and greying beard, taking in also his torn brown robe, well-worn cap and mud-covered boots. The fellow looked shabby enough, yet he had the natural poise of a person of consequence, and he had spoken with the unmistakable accent of the capital. He said cautiously :

'My name is Chiao.'

'Ha, of course ! Colonel Chiao Tai ! Tell me, is your boss, His Excellency Dee, here in Canton too?'

'What if he were?' Chiao Tai asked truculently.

'None of your lip, my man!' the stranger snapped. 'I have to see him, urgently. Take me to him.'

Chiao Tai frowned. The fellow did not seem to be a crook. And if he were, so much the worse for him! He said :

'It so happens that I am on my way to my boss. So you can come along with me right now.'

The stranger quickly looked over his shoulder at the shadows behind him.

'You walk ahead,' he said curtly; 'I'll follow. It's better that we aren't seen together.'

'As you like,' Chiao Tai said, and walked on. He had to be careful now, for there were many deep

holes among the stone flags, and the only light came from an occasional window. There was no one about; the only sound was the heavy tread of the stranger's boots behind him.

After Chiao Tai had turned yet another corner he found himself in a pitch-dark street. He looked up to verify whether he could see the top of the minaret, in order to orientate himself. But the high houses on either side were lurching towards each other; he could see only a narrow strip of starlit sky. He waited till the other had come up behind him, then said over his shoulder :

'Can't see a thing here. We'd better turn back and look for a litter. It's still quite some way along the main street.'

'Ask the people in the house round the corner there,' the stranger said. His voice sounded hoarse.

Chiao Tai peered ahead, and now saw indeed a glimmer in the darkness. 'The old geezer's voice is a bit off, but his eyes are all right!' he muttered, walking towards the faint light. After he had rounded the corner, he saw that it came from a cheap oil lamp, placed in a niche high up in the forbidding blank wall on his left. A little further on he saw a door, embossed with copper ornaments. Over his head was another cross-passage connecting the second floor of the house with the one opposite. He stepped up to the door. As he knocked hard on the shutter of the peephole, he heard his companion behind him stop. Chiao Tai called out to him:

'There's no answer yet, but I'll rouse the bastards!'

He knocked vigorously for some time, then pressed his ear against the wood. He heard nothing. He gave the door a few kicks, then rapped against the peephole till his knuckles hurt.

'Come on!' he shouted angrily at his companion. 'We'll kick this blasted door in ! There must be someone at home, else that lamp wouldn't be burning.'

There was no answer.

Chiao Tai turned round. He was all alone in the alley.

'Where could that bastard...' he began perplexedly, then broke off. He saw the stranger's cap lying on the stone flags, under the cross-passage. With an oath Chiao Tai put his bundle on the ground, reached up and took the oil lamp from the niche. As he stepped forward for a closer look at the cap, he suddenly felt a soft tap on his shoulder. He swung round. There was nobody. But then he saw a pair of muddy boots dangling close by his head. With another curse he looked up, holding the oil lamp high. His companion was hanging by his neck from the other side of the cross-passage, head at an unnatural angle, arms stiff by his side. A thin cord ran over the sill of the open passage window.

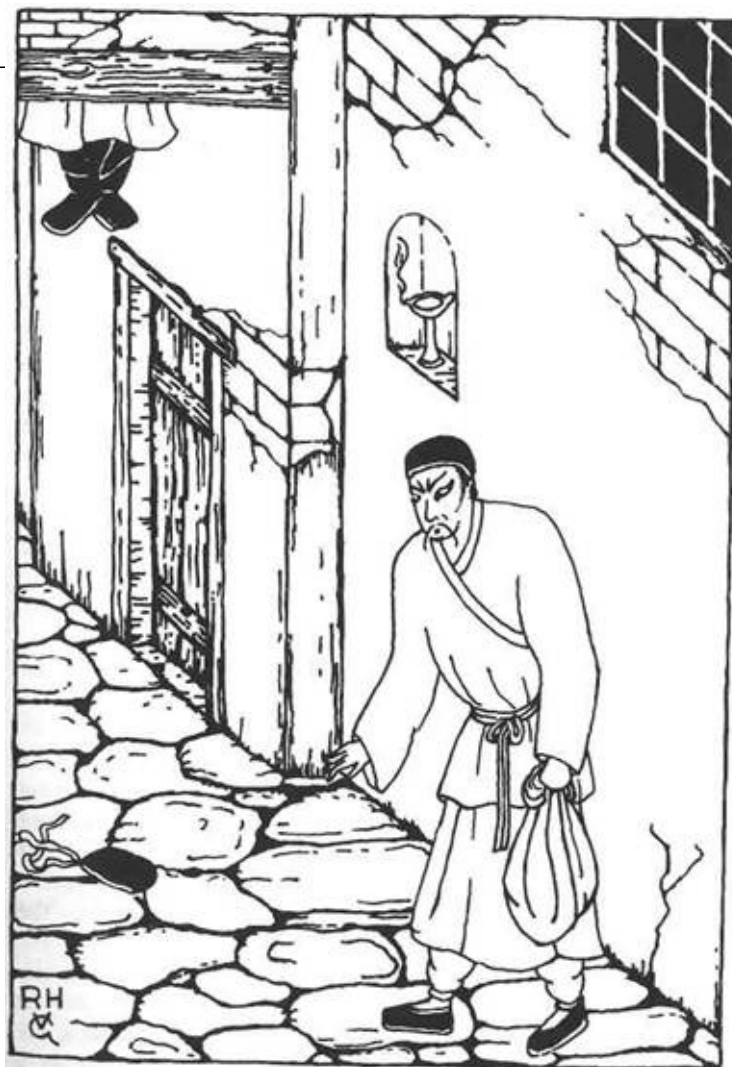
Chiao Tai turned to the door directly under the passage and gave it a violent kick. It swung inside and crashed against the wall. He quickly climbed the flight of narrow, stone steps that went up at a sharp angle, and so reached the dark, low passage crossing the street. Holding the lamp high, he saw a man clad in an Arab gown sprawling in front of the window. He was lying quite still, clasping a short spear with a long, needle-sharp point in his right hand. One look at his bloated face and protruding tongue sufficed to show that he was dead-strangled. One of his bulging eyes had a cast in it.

Chiao Tai wiped the sweat off his forehead.

'Just the sight for a fellow who has been drinking happily!' he muttered. 'If this isn't the worst way to sober up ! It's the bastard I saw in the wine-house. But where's that ugly dwarf?'

He quickly let the light of the lamp fall on the opposite end of the passage. A dark staircase led down from there, but everything was as quiet as the grave. He put the lamp on the floor, stepped over the body of the dead Arab, and began to tug at the thin cord that was fastened to an iron hook under the sill. Slowly he hauled the bearded man up. His horribly distorted face appeared in the window, blood trickling from its grinning mouth.

Chiao Tai dragged the still-warm body inside and laid it on the floor, next to the Arab's. The noose had bitten deeply into its scraggy throat, and the neck appeared to have been broken. He rushed down the steps at the other end of the passage. Half a



CHIAO TAI LOSES A COMPANION

dozen steps down there was a low door. Chiao Tai gave it a thunderous knocking. When there was no answer, he threw himself against it. The old, wormeaten planks broke, and he tumbled into a semi-dark room, amidst a clatter of plates and pots and getting entangled with pieces of wood.

He was on his feet again in a flash. An old Arab hag, huddled in the centre of the small room, looked up at him, her toothless mouth open in speechless fright. The light of a brass oil lamp hanging from age-blackened rafters shone on a young Arab woman squatting in the corner, feeding the baby at her breast. With a piercing scream of terror she covered her bare bosom with part of her ragged cloak. Chiao Tai was about to address them, but then the door opposite swung open and two gaunt Arabs rushed in brandishing curved daggers. They stopped abruptly when Chiao Tai ripped the lapels of his jacket apart, revealing his golden badge.

As the Arabs stood there hesitating, a third one, much younger, pushed them aside and stepped up to Chiao Tai. He asked in halting Chinese :

'What do you mean by forcing your way into our women's quarters, mister officer?'

'Two men were murdered in the passage outside,' Chiao Tai barked. 'Speak up! Who did it?'

The youngster gave the battered door a quick look. Then he said sullenly, 'What happens in that

passage across the street is no concern of ours.'

'It connects with your house, you son of a dog!' Chiao Tai growled. 'There are two dead men there, I tell you. Speak up, or I'll have all of you arrested and questioned on the rack!'

'If you would kindly take a closer look, sir,' the young Arab said contemptuously, 'you'll see that the door you battered in hasn't been open for years.'

Chiao Tai turned round. The pieces of wood he had become entangled with were the remains of a high cupboard. One glance at the dusty spot in front of the door-opening and the rusty lock he had shattered, proved that the man was right. The door leading to the passage had indeed been out of use for a long time.

'If someone was murdered in the passage over the street,' the youngster resumed, 'any passer-by could have done it. A staircase leads up to it from the street on either side, and the doors below are never locked, as far as I know.'

'What is that passage used for, then?'

'Until six years ago, my father, the merchant Abdallah, also owned the house opposite. After he had sold it, the door at the other end was walled up.'

'Did you hear anything?' Chiao Tai asked the young woman. She made no reply, looking up at him in uncomprehending fear. As the youngster quickly translated, she shook her head emphatically. He said to Chiao Tai :

'The walls are thick, and since the cupboard was standing in front of that old door...' He raised his hands in an eloquent gesture.

The two other Arabs had put their daggers back into their belts. As they began a whispered conversation, the old hag came to life and began to deliver a long harangue in shrill Arabic, pointing at the shards on the floor.

'Tell her she'll be compensated!' Chiao Tai said. 'Come along, you!'

He stooped and passed through the door-opening, followed by the youngster. When they were standing in the passage, he pointed at the dead Arab and asked :

'Who is this man?'

The youngster squatted by the dead body. After a casual look at the distorted face he pried loose the silk scarf that had been knotted tightly round the dead man's throat. Then he felt with his nimble fingers in the folds of the turban. Righting himself, he said slowly :

'He did not carry any money or papers. I have never seen him before, but he must be from South Arabia, for they are expert there at throwing the short javelin.' Handing the scarf to Chiao Tai, he went

on, 'It was no Arab that killed him, though. Do you see that silver coin tied to the scarf's corner? It weights it, thus enabling the strangler to swing it round the victim's neck from behind. It is a coward's weapon. We Arabs keep to our spears, swords and daggers-for the greater glory of Allah and his Prophet.'

'Amen,' Chiao Tai said sourly. He looked thoughtfully at the two dead bodies. He understood now what had happened. The Arab had meant to murder not only the bearded stranger, but also him. He had been lying in wait for them, at the window. He had let him pass underneath, but when his companion followed and stood waiting there while Chiao Tai knocked, he had thrown the noose over his head and hoisted him up with a fearful jerk. Then he had tied the end of the noose to the hook and taken his javelin. But when he was about to push open the window opposite in order to throw the javelin into his second victim's back, a third person had strangled him from behind with the scarf, then fled.

Chiao pushed the window open and looked down into the street.

'As I was standing there knocking on that blasted door, I must have made a perfect target!' he muttered. 'And that thin point would have gone right through my coat of mail too ! I owe my life to that unknown benefactor.' Turning to the young Arab, he said gruffly, 'Tell someone to run to the main street and rent a large litter!'

When the youngster had shouted something through the broken-down door, Chiao Tai searched the corpse of the bearded Chinese. But there was nothing to identify him by. He shook his head disconsolately.

They waited in an uneasy silence till they heard lusty shouts in the street below. Chiao Tai leaned out of the window and saw four litter bearers, carrying smoking torches. Slinging the dead Chinese over his shoulder, he ordered the youngster :

'Stand guard here by the body of your countryman till the constables come to fetch it. You and your entire family will be held responsible if anything should happen to it!'

Carrying his burden, he carefully trudged down the narrow staircase.

III

Tao Gan had walked back to the custom-house. Having passed underneath its high archway, he watched for a while the clerks who were still busily sorting out piles of bales and boxes. There was a pungent smell of foreign spices. He left by the back door, cast a brief glance at his dismal inn, then entered the city by the south gate.

Strolling along in the teeming crowd, he noticed with satisfaction that he was able to identify most of the larger buildings he passed. Evidently Canton had not changed much in the twenty odd years since he had been there last.

He recognised the large temple that rose on his right; it was dedicated to the God of War. He detached himself from the crowd and walked up the broad marble steps to the high gatehouse, its double doors flanked by two huge stone lions, each crouching on an octagonal pedestal. As usual the

male lion on the left scowled down with tightly closed mouth, while the female on the right kept its large head raised, her jaws wide open.

'She can never keep her blasted mouth shut!' Tao Gan muttered sourly. 'Just like that wretched former wife of mine!'

Slowly pulling at his frayed moustache, he reflected wryly that for twenty years he had hardly thought of his adulterous wife. It was revisiting this city where he had lived a few years in his youth, that suddenly brought it all back to him. The wife he had loved had basely deceived him, and had tried to bring about his ruin, so that he had had to flee for his life. He had then sworn off women and, determined to get his own back on a world that disgusted him, had become an itinerant swindler. But later he had met Judge Dee, who had made him reform and had taken him on as his assistant, thus giving him a new interest in life. He had served with Judge Dee in his various posts as district magistrate, and after the judge had been promoted to his present high office in the capital, Tao Gan had been made chief secretary. A twisted smile lit up his long gloomy face as he told the lioness complacently :

'Canton is still the same, but look at me! I am not only a ranking official now, but also a man of means. Of considerable means, I should say!' He adjusted his cap with a jerk, nodded haughtily at the ferocious stone face and entered the temple compound.

Passing the main hall, he cast a quick look inside. In the flickering light of the tall red candles a small group of people were adding new incense sticks to those already in the large bronze burner on the high altar. Through the thick blue smoke he vaguely saw the towering gilt statue of the bearded war god brandishing his long sword. Tao Gan sniffed, for he hardly admired military prowess. He lacked the bulk and strength of his colleague Chiao Tai, and he never carried any arms. But his utter lack of fear and quick wit made him nonetheless a dangerous opponent. He walked on and circled the main hall to the back gate of the compound. Remembering that the city's largest market was directly to the north of the temple, he thought he might as well have a look around there before taking the main street leading up to the Governor's Palace, in the northern part of the city.

The quarter behind the temple consisted of poor wooden houses, noisy with shouting and laughter. A smell of cheap frying fat hung in the air. Further along, however, it suddenly became very quiet. Here stood only abandoned houses, many in ruins. The piles of new bricks and big jars filled with mortar that stood about at regular intervals proved that a building project was in progress. He looked behind him a few times, but he saw no one about. He went on at a sedate pace, keeping his caftan close to his bony body despite the stifling heat.

When he was rounding the corner of another alley, he heard the noise of the market ahead. At the same time he saw a commotion at the farther end. Under the lantern that hung from a dilapidated doorpost two dishevelled ruffians were attacking a woman. As he quickly ran to them, Tao Gan saw that the one behind her had his arm crooked round the lower half of her face, while his other hand held her arms together behind her back. The second ruffian, standing in front of her, had ripped her robe apart and was now fondling her shapely bare bosom. As he began to tear loose the sash round her waist, she frantically kicked his legs. But the man behind her jerked her head farther back, and the other hit her a hard blow in her exposed midriff.

Tao Gan took quick action. With his right hand he picked up a brick from the nearest pile, and with the other scooped a handful of quicklime from the jar next to it. Tiptoeing up to the men, he struck the one holding the girl a sharp blow on the shoulder with the edge of the heavy brick. The man let go of her and clasped his crushed shoulder with an agonized cry. The other ruffian turned on Tao Gan, groping for the dagger in his belt. But Tao Gan threw the quicklime into his eyes, and the man put his hands to his face, howling with pain.

'Arrest the bastards, men!' Tao Gan shouted.

The ruffian with the crushed shoulder grabbed his yelping comrade's arm. Dragging him along, he ran down the alley as fast as he could.

The girl was pulling her robe close to her, gasping for air. He vaguely saw that she was quite handsome; her hair was gathered at the nape of her neck in two coils, the hair-do of an unmarried girl. He put her age at about twenty-five.

'Come along to the market, quick!' he addressed her gruffly in Cantonese, 'before those two fellows discover I bluffed them.'

As she seemed to hesitate, he took her sleeve and pulled her along towards the noise of the market.

'Walking alone in such a deserted quarter is asking for trouble, miss,' he said reprovingly. 'Or did you know those two scoundrels?'

'No, they must be vagrant bullies,' she replied in a soft cultured voice. 'Coming from the market, I took this short cut to the Temple of the War God, and met those men. They let me pass, then suddenly grabbed me from behind. Thanks very much for your timely help!'

'Thank your lucky star!' Tao Gan growled. When they had stepped out on the crowded street that ran along the south side of the brilliantly lit market place, he added, 'Better postpone your visit to the temple till broad daylight ! Good-bye.'

He wanted to enter the narrow passage between the market stalls, but she laid her hand on his arm and asked timidly :

'Please tell me the name of the shop in front of us. It must be a fruit shop, for I can smell the tangerines. If I know where we are, I can find the way by myself.'

So speaking, she took a thin bamboo tube from her sleeve and shook several thinner joints from it. This was a collapsible walking-stick.

Tao Gan quickly looked at her eyes. They were a dead, opaque grey.

'I'll see you home, of course,' he said contritely.

'That's quite unnecessary, sir. I am thoroughly familiar with the quarter. I only need a starting point

'I should have killed those cowardly bastards!' Tao Gan muttered angrily. And to the girl, 'Here, this is the tip of my sleeve. If I guide you, you'll get there quicker. Where do you live?'

'You are very thoughtful, sir. I live near the north-east corner of the market.'

They walked along, Tao Gan pushing his way with his bony elbows. After a while she asked :

'You are an officer temporarily attached to the city administration, aren't you?'

'Oh no ! I am just a merchant, from the west city,' Tao Gan replied quickly.

'Of course. Excuse me!' she said meekly.

'What made you think I am an officer?' Tao Gan asked, curious.

She hesitated for a moment, then replied :

'Well, your Cantonese is fluent, but my sense of hearing is very acute, and I detect the accent from the capital. Secondly, when you were bluffing those two men, your voice had the genuine ring of authority. Thirdly, in this city everybody strictly minds his own business. No ordinary citizen would dream of tackling alone two ruffians who assault a woman. I may add I have a distinct feeling that you are a kind and considerate man.'

'Good reasoning,' Tao Gan commented dryly. 'Except for your last statement, which is wide of the mark indeed!'

Giving her a sidelong glance, he saw that a slow smile lit up her still face. Her wide-set eyes and full mouth gave her a slightly outlandish appearance, yet he found her uncommonly attractive. They walked on in silence. When they had arrived at the north east corner of the market, she said :

'I live in the fourth alley, on the right. From now on you'd better let me guide you.'

The narrow street became very dark as they went on, the girl lightly tapping the cobblestones with her stick. On either side stood decrepit, two-storeyed wooden houses. When they had entered the fourth side street, everything was pitch-dark. Tao Gan had to tread warily so as not to stumble on the uneven, slippery ground.

'In the tenement houses here live several families of market vendors,' she said. 'They don't come home till late at night, that's why it's so quiet here. Well, here we are. Mind the stairs, they are very steep.'

This was the moment to say good-bye, but he told himself that since he had come as far as this, he might as well find out more about this strange girl. Thus he followed her up the creaking, dark staircase. On the landing she guided him to a door, pushed it open and said :

'You'll find a candle on the table directly to your right.'

Tao Gan lit it with his tinderbox and surveyed the small, bare room. The floor consisted of wooden

boards; three walls were covered with cracked plaster, but the front was open. There only a bamboo balustrade divided the room from the flat roof of the adjoining house. In the distance the curved roof of higher buildings stood out against the evening sky. The room was scrupulously clean, and a faint breeze had dispelled the stifling heat that still hung about in the streets. Next to the candle stood a cheap tea-basket, a cup of earthenware, and a platter bearing a few slices of cucumber and a long, thin knife. In front of the table was a low stool of plain wood, and against the side wall a narrow bench. At the rear he saw a high bamboo screen.

'I haven't much to offer, as you see,' she said gravely. 'I took you here because there's nothing I hate more than incurring debts. I am young, and not too bad-looking. If you want to sleep with me, you may do so. My bed is behind that screen.' As he stared at her in speechless astonishment, she added placidly, 'You need have no qualms, for I am not a virgin. I was raped by four drunken soldiers last year, you see.'

Tao Gan looked sharply at her still, pale face. He said slowly :

'You are either thoroughly depraved, or else utterly, unbelievably sincere. Whatever it is, I am not interested in your offer. I am interested, however, in human types, and yours is a new one to me. So a brief talk and a cup of tea will nicely settle the debt you think you owe me.'

She smiled faintly.

'Sit down ! I'll change, this torn robe.'

She disappeared behind the screen. Tao Gan poured himself a cup from the pot in the basket. Sipping his tea, he looked curiously at the row of small boxes that hung by bamboo hooks on a pole suspended under the eaves. There were about a dozen of them, each of different size and shape. Turning round, he saw on the shelf above the bench four large pots of green earthenware, with tight-fitting covers of woven bamboo. He listened intently, with a perplexed frown. Above the confused noise of the city he heard a persistent, whirring sound that he couldn't place at all. It seemed to come from the small boxes.

He rose and went to stand by the balustrade, scrutinizing them. Every box was perforated with small holes, and the noise came from there. He suddenly understood. They contained crickets. He himself was not particularly interested in those insects, but he knew that many people love to listen to their chirruping, and keep a few of them about the house, often in costly small cages of carved ivory or silver wire. Others are addicted to cricket-fighting. They match their champions in wine-houses and in the market place, putting a pair of these bellicose insects in a tube of carved bamboo and tickling them with thin straws to urge them on. Considerable bets were laid on these fights. He now noticed that each cricket made a slightly different sound. All were dominated, however, by the clear, sustained note coming from a tiny calabash hanging at the end of the row. It began low, then gradually rose to a high pitch of astonishing clarity. He took the calabash down and held it close to his ear. Suddenly the vibrating note changed into a low buzz.

The girl came out from behind the screen, now dressed in a simple, olive-green robe with black borders and a thin black belt. She came up to him quickly and frantically groped in the air for the

small cage.

'Be careful with my Golden Bell!' she cried out.

Tao Gan put the calabash into her hands.

'I was just listening to its nice sound,' he said. 'Do you sell these insects?'

'Yes,' she replied, hanging the calabash back on the pole again. 'I sell them either on the market, or directly to good customers. This is my best one; it's very rare, especially here in the south. The experts call it the "Golden Bell".' Sitting down on the bench and folding her slender hands in her lap, she added, 'In the pots on the shelf behind me I keep a few fighting-cricket. They are rather pitiful; I hate to think of their sturdy legs and beautiful long feelers getting broken in fights. But I have to keep them in stock, for there's a steady demand for them.'

'How do you catch them?'



TAO GAN MEETS THE GOLDEN BELL

'I just walk at random along the outer walls of gardens and old buildings. I recognize good crickets by their song and use sliced fruit as bait. The tiny creatures are very clever; I even think they know me. When I let them loose in this room, they always come back to their boxes as soon as I call them.'

'Is no one looking after you?'

'I don't need anyone, I can look after myself quite well.'

Tao Gan nodded. Then he looked up sharply. He thought he had heard the stairs creak outside.

'Didn't you say that your neighbours here come home only late at night?'

'They do indeed,' she replied.

He listened intently. But now he only heard the singing of the crickets. He must have been mistaken. He asked dubiously :

'Is it all right for you to be all alone in this building most of the time?'

'Oh yes ! You can speak your own language, by the way. I am quite familiar with it.'

'No, I much prefer to practise my Cantonese. Do you have no family here in the city?'

'I have. But after the accident with my eyes I left the house. My name is Lan-lee, by the way. And I still think you are an officer.'

'Yes, you are right. I am a sort of clerk, a member of the suite of an official from the capital. My name is Tao. Do you earn enough from these crickets for your daily needs?'

'Enough and to spare ! I only need money for an oil-cake in the morning and at night, and for a bowl of noodles at noon. The crickets cost me nothing, and they sell at a good price. Take that Golden Bell for instance. He is worth one silver piece, you know ! Not that I'd ever think of selling him, though ! I was so happy this morning when I woke up and heard him sing.' She smiled, then went on, 'I got him only last night, you see. It was a wonderful piece of luck. I happened to walk along the west wall of the Hwa-ta ... do you know that Buddhist temple?'

'Of course. The Temple of the Flowery Pagoda, in the west quarter.'

'Exactly. Well, I suddenly heard his voice there; it sounded frightened. I put a slice of cucumber at the foot of the wall and called him, like this.' She pursed her lips and made a sound that curiously resembled the chirruping of a cricket. 'Then I squatted down, waiting. At last he came; I heard him munching the cucumber. When he had eaten his fill and was quite happy, I coaxed him into that hollowed-out calabash I always carry in my sleeve.' Raising her head, she said, 'Listen ! Now he sing very nicely again, doesn't he?'

'He certainly does!'

'I think that you too might become fond of them, in course of time. Your voice sounds kind; you can't be a bully. What did you do to those two men who assaulted me? They seemed to be in great pain.'

'Well, I am not a fighter. I am an elderly man, you know. About twice your age. But I have been around a lot and have learned how to take care of myself. I hope you'll learn to do so too, Lan-lee, from now on. The world is full of nasty persons who are out to take advantage of a girl like you.'

'Do you really think so? No, I have found people rather kind-hearted, on the whole. And if they are nasty, it's mainly because they are unhappy or lonely, or can't get the things they want; or have got too many of the things they want, perhaps. Anyway, I'll wager that those two men didn't even have enough to buy themselves a square meal, let alone a woman ! They frightened me, because I thought they'd beat me senseless after they were through with me. But now I realize that they wouldn't have done that after all, because they'd know that I, being blind, could never denounce them.'

'Next time I meet them,' Tao Gan said crossly, 'I'll present each with a silver piece, as a reward for their kind intentions!' He emptied his cup, then resumed with a contented grin, 'Speaking about silver they'll need that badly, I suppose! For one will never use his right arm again, and the other will try to wash the lime from his eyes and be crippled for life!'

She sprang up.

- **[download online Practical Maya Programming with Python](#)**
- [read online Windows 8 and Office 2013 For Dummies here](#)
- [download online Atmosphere: A Scientific History of Air, Weather, and Climate \(Discovering the Earth\) here](#)
- [The Night the Angels Came book](#)

- <http://www.shreesaiexport.com/library/Practical-Maya-Programming-with-Python.pdf>
- <http://metromekanik.com/ebooks/Nut-Butter-Cookbook--100-Delicious-Vegan-Recipes-Made-Better-with-Nut-Butter.pdf>
- <http://qolorea.com/library/The-Cambridge-History-of-Twentieth-Century-Music.pdf>
- <http://aneventshop.com/ebooks/Living-Vegetarian-For-Dummies--2nd-Edition-.pdf>