

Necklace and Calabash



ROBERT VAN GULIK

A JUDGE DEE
MYSTERY

NECKLACE AND CALABASH

A Chinese Detective Story

by

ROBERT VAN GULIK

*With eight illustrations
drawn by the author in Chinese style*

The University of Chicago Press

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NECKLACE AND CALABASH

Due to its proximity to the Water Palace, the summer residence of the Emperor's favourite daughter, River-town lies within a Special Area administered by the military. To Judge Dee, returning to his district of Poo-yang, the peaceful riverside town promises a few days' fishing and relaxation.

But it is not to be. A chance meeting with a Taoist recluse, a gruesome body fished out of the river, strange guests at the Kingfisher Inn, a princess in distress—before long the judge is facing one of the most intricate and baffling mysteries of his career.

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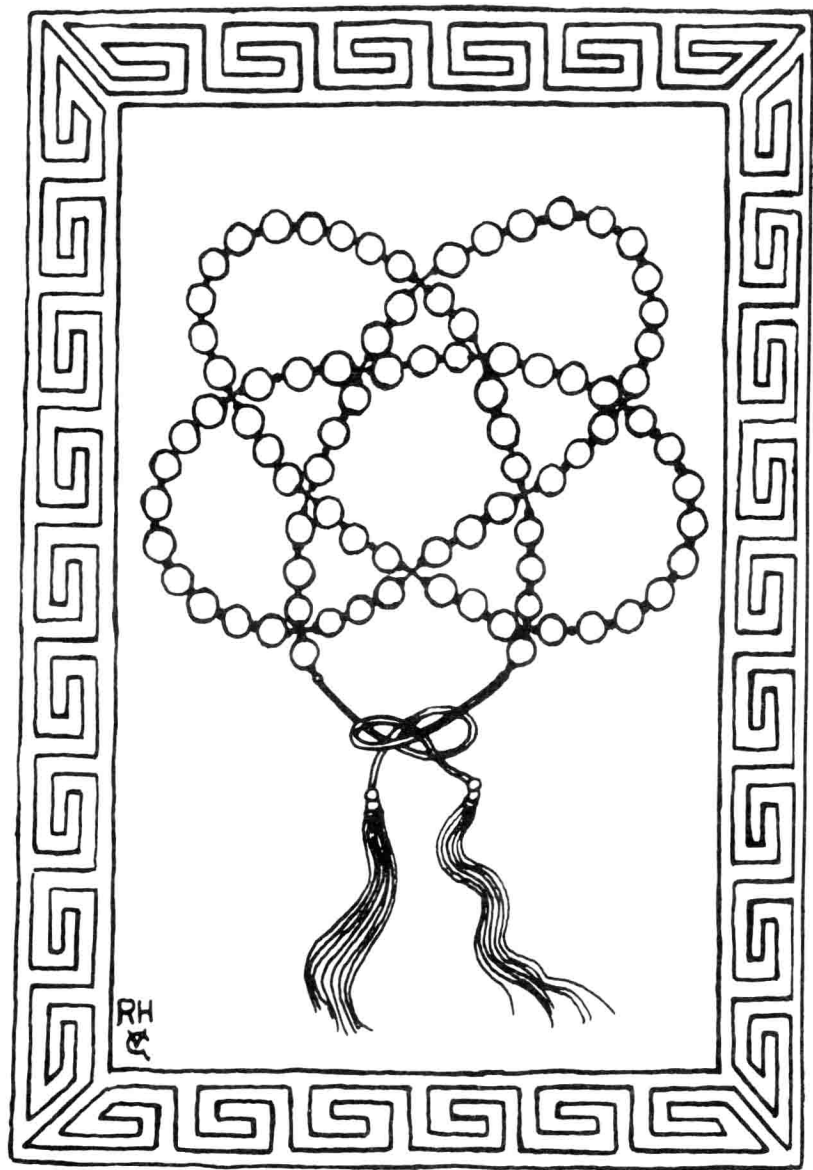
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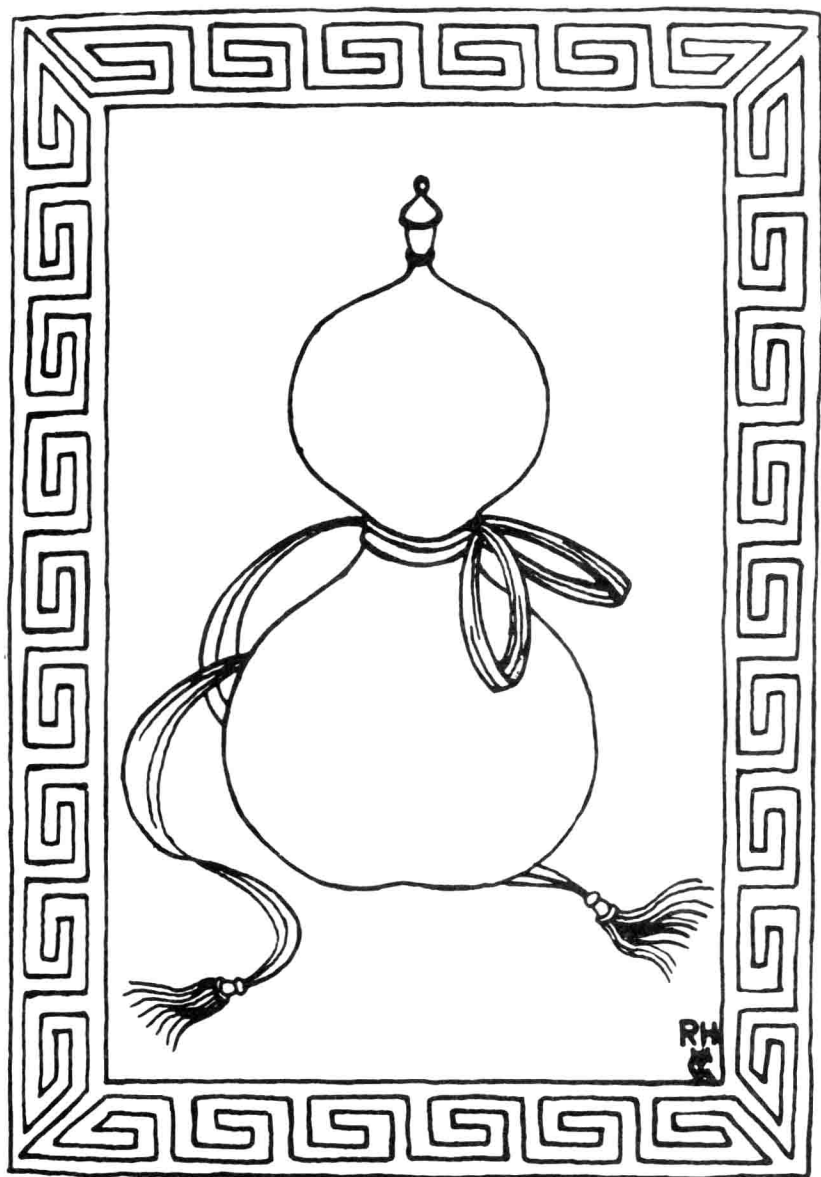
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The Red Pavilion

The Willow Pattern





DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Note that in Chinese the surname—here printed in capitals—precedes the personal name.

Judge DEE	Magistrate of the district of Poo-yang, who is staying two days in Rivertown while returning to his post
The Third Princess	the Emperor's favourite daughter, who resides in the Water Palace, east of Rivertown
Hydrangea	Chief Lady-in-waiting
LEI Mang	Chief Eunuch of the Water Palace
WEN Tung	Superintendent of the Water Palace
Colonel KANG	Commander of the Imperial Guard
Captain SIEW	his assistant
WEI Cheng	host of the Kingfisher Inn
TAI Min	cashier of that inn
Fern	Wei Cheng's niece
LANG Liu	a wealthy silk merchant
Master Gourd	a Taoist monk

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I

When Judge Dee had ridden for another hour through the hushed, dripping forest he halted his horse and cast a worried look at the dense foliage overhead. He could see only a small patch of the leaden sky. The drizzle might change into a summer shower any time; his black cap and black-bordered brown travelling-robe were wet already, and moisture glistened on his long beard and side-whiskers. When he had left the village at noon he had been told that if he took a right turn at each fork in the road through the forest he would arrive in Rivertown in ample time for the evening rice. He must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, for he estimated he had been riding for about four hours now, seeing nothing but the tall trees and the thick undergrowth, and meeting no one. The birds had stopped singing in the black branches, and the odour of wet, rotting leaves seemed to cling to his very clothes. Wiping his beard and whiskers with the tip of his neck-cloth, he reflected dismally that it would be awkward if he were really lost, for dusk was falling and the forest spread for miles on end along the south bank of the river. The chances were that he would have to spend the night out in the open. With a sigh he uncorked the large brown calabash hanging by a red-tasselled cord from his saddle, and took a draught. The water was lukewarm and tasted stale.

He bent his head and wiped his eyes. The sweat from his moist brow was hurting them. When he looked up he suddenly stiffened, and stared, incredulous, at the hulking shape riding towards him on a horse that trod noiselessly on the soft moss. His perfect double: a man with a long beard and whiskers, wearing a square black cap and a black-bordered brown travelling-robe. Hanging from his saddle by a red-tasselled cord was a large brown calabash.

Again he rubbed his eyes. When he looked a second time he

sighed with relief. The uncertain light and his sore eyes had deceived him. The other's beard and whiskers were streaked with grey, and he rode an old, long-eared donkey. Then the judge was on the alert again. Two short pikes were lying across the donkey's rump. His hand moved to the hilt of the sword hanging on his back.

The man pulled up in front of Judge Dee's horse and glared at him, a brooding glint in his large eyes. His broad face was wrinkled, and though he carried himself well his bony shoulders stood out under the worn, patched robe. What the judge had taken to be pikes now proved to be a pair of crutches with crooked ends. He let go of his sword and asked politely:

'Is this the road to Rivertown, venerable sir?'

The other did not reply at once. His eyes had strayed to the calabash hanging from Judge Dee's saddle. Then he smiled. Fixing the judge with his strange, lacklustre eyes, he said in a surprisingly sonorous voice:

'Yes, eventually it'll take you to Rivertown, Doctor. By a detour.'

The old man was taking him for a physician, evidently because the judge was travelling all alone, and because of the gourd, which is commonly used by doctors to carry their potions. Before he could set the other right, he had resumed:

'I just left town by the short cut, a little further on. I'll gladly show you the way, for it'll take only a quarter of an hour.' Turning his donkey round, he muttered, 'We'd better see about the man they found in the river. He might need your attention, Doctor.'

Judge Dee was going to say that he was the Magistrate of Poo-yang, the district in the northern part of the province, but he reflected that he would then have to explain at length to his casual acquaintance why he was travelling in such simple attire, and without official retinue. So instead he just asked:

'What is your honourable profession, sir?'

'I have none. I am just a vagrant monk. Of the Taoist creed.'

'I see. I had taken you for a colleague. What have you got in that calabash?'

'Emptiness, sir. Just emptiness. More valuable than any potion you might carry in yours, Doctor! No offence meant, of course. Emptiness is more important than fullness. You may choose the finest clay for making a beautiful jar, but without its emptiness that jar would be of no use. And however ornate you make a door or window, without their emptiness they could not be used.' He drove his donkey on with a click of his tongue, then added, as an afterthought, 'They call me Master Gourd.'

The fact that the other was a Taoist monk, and therefore indifferent to all normal civilities, absolved the judge completely from telling him his real name and profession. He asked:

'What were you saying about a person found in the river?'

'When I was leaving town I heard that a man had been brought ashore by two fishermen. This is the short cut. I'll ride in front.'

The narrow forest path led to a cultivated field where, hunched in his straw raincoat, a farmer was digging up weeds. A muddy track took them to the road that ran along the riverfront. The drizzle had stopped, and now a thin mist was hovering over the wide expanse of brown water. Not a breeze stirred in the hot, damp air that weighed down from the low sky. Neat-looking houses lined the road, and the passers-by were well dressed. There wasn't a single beggar about.

'Looks like a prosperous town,' the judge remarked.

'It's a small town, but it profits from the traffic on the river, the good fishing, and the custom from the Water Palace. That's one of the imperial detached palaces, to the east of the town, over on the other side of the pine forest. This western part of the town is the poorer section. The well-to-do live in the east quarter, beyond the fish-market over there. I'll show you the two best inns, the Kingfisher and the Nine Clouds. Unless you are planning to stay with a relative or friend. . . .'

'No, I am a stranger here, just passing through. I see you carry a pair of crutches. What's wrong with your legs?'

'One is lame, and the other isn't too good either. Nothing you could do anything about, Doctor! Well well, the authorities are on the spot. Alert as ever! That means that the man they fished

out of the river won't need your assistance, Doctor ! But let's have a look anyway.'

On the broad quay in front of the fish-market, by the ferry-house, a small crowd had gathered. Over their heads the judge saw the erect figure of a horseman. The gilt, red-plumed helmet and red neckcloth proclaimed him a captain of the Imperial Guard.

Master Gourd grasped his crutches, climbed down from his donkey and hobbled towards the crowd. The donkey let one ear hang down, and began to search for scraps of garbage among the cobble-stones. Judge Dee alighted from his horse and followed the old monk. The onlookers made way for him; they seemed to know him well.

'It's Tai Min, the cashier of the Kingfisher, Master Gourd,' a tall fellow said in a low voice. 'Dead as a doornail, he is.'

Two guardsmen in their long coats of mail held the crowd at bay. Judge Dee looked over Master Gourd's shoulder at the man sprawled on the ground right in front of the captain's horse. He winced involuntarily. He had often been witness to violent death, but this corpse presented a particularly sickening sight. It was a young man, clad only in a long-sleeved jacket that stuck to his stretched-out arms. Long strands of wet hair clung to his bloated, horribly distorted face. His bare legs and feet had been badly burnt; his hands were mangled. His belly had been slit and the pale intestines were hanging out. A lieutenant was kneeling by the side of the corpse, his back very broad under the curving, gilt shoulder-pieces.

'There's a flat package in his left sleeve !' a hoarse voice spoke up. 'Must be my silver !'

'Shut up !' the lieutenant barked at the gaunt man with the beaked nose and ragged beard who was standing in the front row.

'That's Wei Cheng, the owner of the Kingfisher,' Master Gourd whispered to the judge. 'Always thinks of money first !'

Judge Dee gave the lanky innkeeper a cursory look. Then his eyes fell on the girl standing by his side. He put her at about seventeen, small and slender in a long blue robe with a red sash, her glossy black hair done up in two simple coils. She had turned

her head away from the dead man, her handsome face chalk-white.

The lieutenant righted himself. He said respectfully to the captain:

'The condition of the body does indeed point to its having been in the water for a day, sir. What are your orders?'

The captain didn't seem to have heard him. The judge could not see his face well, for he had pulled the red neckcloth up over his mouth. His heavy-lidded eyes were fixed on the riding-whip in his tightly closed, mailed fist. He sat there, slim in his gilt cuirass, immobile as a bronze statue.

'What are your orders, sir?' the lieutenant asked again.

'Have the body taken to headquarters,' the captain said in a muffled voice. 'With the fishermen who found it. And the innkeeper who employed the victim.'

The captain swung his horse round, so abruptly that the on-lookers behind him had to jump aside to avoid being trampled down. He rode towards the broad street leading away from the quay, the hoofs of his horse clattering on the wet cobble-stones.

'Stand back, all of you!' the lieutenant barked.

'A despicable murder!' Judge Dee remarked to Master Gourd as they walked back to their mounts. 'The man was a civilian, though. Why do the military deal with the case instead of the magistrate of this district?'

'There's no magistrate in Rivertown, Doctor. Because of the Water Palace, you see. The town and its surroundings are what is called a Special Area, administered by the Imperial Guard.' He climbed on his donkey and laid the crutches across its rump. 'Well, I'll say good-bye here. You just ride down the street the captain took; it's the town's main thoroughfare. You'll find the two hostels a little beyond the Guard's headquarters. The Kingfisher and the Nine Clouds face each other across the street there. Both are comfortable—take your choice!' He clicked his tongue and rode off before the judge could even thank him.

Judge Dee walked his horse over to the blacksmith at the corner of the fish-market. The animal needed a good rest. He gave the blacksmith a handful of coppers and told him to give the horse a

rub down and feed it. He would come to fetch it the next morning.

Entering the main street, he suddenly realized that his legs were stiff from the long ride, and his mouth was parched. He went into the first tea-house he saw and ordered a large pot of tea. Half a dozen citizens were gathered round the larger table in front of the window. They were talking animatedly while cracking dried melon-seeds. Sipping his tea, Judge Dee reminded himself that, since he was here in a Special Area subject to strict security regulations, he was required to register at the Guard's headquarters as soon as he had arrived. He would do that on his way to the hostels, for according to the old monk they were located a little way beyond the headquarters. Since the cashier of the Kingfisher had been tortured and killed in such an abominable manner, everybody there would, of course, be upset. He had better take a room in the other hostel, the Nine Clouds. The name Kingfisher sounded attractive, though; he had actually planned to do some fishing during his two days in Rivertown. In Poo-yang he could never find time for it. Stretching his legs, he reflected that the military would probably catch the murderers of the cashier soon enough. The military police were very efficient as a rule, although their methods were considered crude compared to those of the civilian authorities.

More guests came drifting inside. Judge Dee caught some fragments of their conversation.

'Wei is talking nonsense,' an elderly shopkeeper said. 'Tai Min was no thief. I used to know his father, the old grocer.'

'Highwaymen would never have attacked him if he hadn't been carrying a lot of silver,' a young man remarked. 'And he sneaked out of town in the middle of the night. The blacksmith told me so himself. Tai rented a horse from him. Had to go and see a sick relative, Tai said.'

They settled down in the far corner.

The judge poured himself another cup of tea. He wondered about the antecedents of Master Gourd. The old monk seemed a cultured gentleman. But he knew that since Taoist monks are not bound by any monastic rules, many elderly scholars who find themselves alone and disenchanted with the world adopt their

vagrant life. The tea-house was getting crowded now; there was a confused babble of voices. A waiter began to light the oil-lamps, and their smoke mingled with the smell of wet clothes. The judge paid and left.

A drizzling rain was coming down. He bought a sheet of oiled cloth at the street-stall opposite and, draping that over his head and shoulders, he quickly walked down the busy street.

Two blocks farther on, the main street broadened out into an open square. In its centre stood a large, fortress-like building of three storeys. A red-and-blue banner hung down limply from the pointed, blue-tiled roof. On the awning over the red-lacquered gate was written in large black letters: 'Imperial Guard. Second Regiment of the Left Wing'. Two guardsmen stood at the top of the greystone steps, talking with the burly lieutenant whom Judge Dee had seen on the quay. Just as the judge was going to ascend the lieutenant came down and told him in a clipped voice:

'The captain wants to see you, sir. Please follow me.'

Before the astonished judge could say a word, the lieutenant had disappeared round the corner of the building. Quickly unlocking the narrow door of the watch-tower, he pointed up a flight of steep, narrow stairs. While the judge was going up, he heard the lieutenant put the iron bar across the door below.

II

In the half-dark corridor on the second storey the lieutenant knocked on a plain wooden door. He ushered the judge into a spacious, bare room, lit by a tall candle on the simple writing-desk at the back. The squat young captain who was sitting behind it jumped up and came to meet the judge.

'Welcome to Rivertown, Magistrate Dee!' he said with a broad smile. 'I am Captain Siew. Please be seated!'

Judge Dee gave him a sharp look. He had a full, intelligent face, adorned by a small black moustache and a stiff, jet-black chinbeard. He couldn't place him at all. Pointing at the armchair by the desk, the captain resumed:

'You were kept far too busy to notice me, sir, two years ago! It was in Han-yuan, when you were winding up the lake murders there. I was on the staff of the Imperial Inquisitor, you know.' And to the lieutenant, 'That's all, Liu! I'll look after the tea myself.'

Judge Dee smiled faintly, thinking of that hectic day in Han-yuan*. He laid his sword on the wall-table and took the chair the captain had offered him. 'You recognized me on the quay, I presume?'

'Yes, sir. You were standing beside our good Master Gourd. Didn't like to address you then and there, because you seemed to be travelling incognito. Knew you'd be coming to my office to register anyway, sir, and told my assistant to be on the look-out for you. You are on a special mission, I presume, sir? Travelling all alone . . .' He let the sentence trail off, poured a cup of tea, and sat down behind his desk.

'Oh no. I was summoned to the prefecture ten days ago, to assist the prefect in dealing with a smuggling case affecting my

* See the novel *The Chinese Lake Murders*.