

A JUDGE DEE DETECTIVE STORY

THE CHINESE LAKE MURDERS

"Judge Dee is a Great Detective in the noblest tradition—perceptive, cryptic, wise, arbitrary, ever fascinating."

—New York Times

國生陽湖

ROBERT VAN GULIK

Author of The Chinese Nail Murders

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ROBERT VAN GULIK

*with thirteen plates drawn by
the author in Chinese style*



Perennial

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About the Author

ROBERT VAN GULIK was born in the Netherlands in 1910. He was educated at the Universities of Leyden and Utrecht, and served in the Dutch diplomatic service in China and Japan for many years. His interest in Asian languages and art led him to the discovery of Chinese detective novels, and to the historical character of Judge Dee, famous in ancient Chinese annals as a scholar-magistrate. Van Gulik subsequently began writing the Judge Dee series of novels that have so captivated mystery readers ever since. He died of cancer in 1967.

ALSO BY ROBERT VAN GULIK

The Chinese Bell Murders

The Chinese Gold Murders

The Chinese Nail Murders

PREFACE

The Chinese Lake Murders describes how Judge Dee solved three difficult cases in A.D. 666, shortly after he had been appointed magistrate of Han-yuan.

Han-yuan was a small old town, only sixty miles northwest of the imperial capital; but hidden among high mountains, it had always remained an isolated place and few people from outside had settled there. It lay on the shore of a mountain lake, the mysterious lake of Han-yuan, about which since olden times people told strange stories. The bodies of persons drowned there were never found, but their ghosts were said to have been seen walking among the living. At the same time, however, the lake was famous for its "flower boats," floating houses of assignation where the guests could feast with beautiful courtesans and stay overnight on the water.

In this strange old town Judge Dee is confronted with a cruel murder. Just when his investigation of that crime is getting under way, he is faced with two new baffling puzzles, and soon he finds himself in a maze of political intrigue, sordid greed and dark, forbidden passion.

At the beginning of this volume the reader will find a view of Han-yuan, and at the end a picture of the flower boat. The latter plate, and also the plan of that boat reproduced on page 35, were kindly drawn for me by my friend Hilary Waddington, former Superintendent of Monuments of the Archaeological Service, New Delhi, India.

The Postscript gives a brief description of the ancient Chinese judicial system, a few remarks about special subjects occurring in the present novel, and references to Chinese sources.

ROBERT VAN GULIK

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

It should be noted that in Chinese the surname—here printed in capitals—precedes the personal name.

Main characters

DEE Jen-djich, Magistrate of Han-yuan, a small mountain district sixty miles west of the capital. Referred to as "Judge Dee," or "the judge."

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

MA Joong, first lieutenant of Judge Dee.

CHIAO Tai, second lieutenant of Judge Dee.

TAO Gan, third lieutenant of Judge Dee, enters in Chapter Twelve.

Persons connected with "The Case of the Drowned Courtesan"

HAN Yung-han, wealthy landowner, leading citizen of Han-yuan.

Willow Down, his daughter.

Almond Blossom	}	courtesans of the Willow Quarter in Han-yuan.
Anemone		
Peach Blossom		

WANG, master of the Goldsmiths' Guild.

PENG, master of the Silversmiths' Guild.

SOO, master of the Jewellers' Guild.

KANG Po, a wealthy silk merchant.

KANG Choong, his younger brother.

Persons connected with "The Case of the Vanished Bride"

DJANG Wen-djang, a Doctor of Literature.

DJANG Hoo-piao, his son, a Candidate of Literature.

LIU Fei-po, a wealthy merchant from the capital.

Moon Fairy, his daughter.

KOONG, a tea merchant, neighbor of Dr. Djang.

MAO Yuan, a carpenter.

MAO Loo, his cousin.

Persons connected with "The Case of the Spendthrift Councilor"

LIANG Meng-kwang, Imperial Councilor, living retired in Han-yuan.

LIANG Fen, his nephew who acts as his secretary.

WAN I-fan, a promoter.

Others

MENG Kee, Grand Inquisitor.

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First Chapter

AN AILING OFFICIAL COMPLETES A WEIRD RECORD; JUDGE DEE AT- TENDS A BANQUET ON A FLOWER BOAT

*Only Heaven that wrote the scroll of human life
Knows where its beginning is, and where its end—
If end there be. We mortals can not read its writ,
We even know not whether the text runs down or up.*

*Yet when a judge is seated behind his scarlet bench
His is the power of Heaven, over life and death—
But not Heaven's knowledge. Let him—and us!—beware
Lest passing judgment on others, we ourselves be judged.*

NO ONE, I TRUST, WILL CALL TWENTY YEARS OF SERVING OUR ILLUSTRIOUS Ming Emperor a poor record. My late father, it is true, served fifty years, and when he died a Councilor of State, he had just celebrated his seventieth birthday. I shall be forty, three days hence—but may Heaven grant that I shan't be then still alive.

In the ever rarer moments that my tortured brain is clear, I let my thoughts go back to the years that have passed, the only escape now left. Four years ago I was promoted to Investigator of the Metropolitan Court, a signal honor for an official of only thirty-five. People predicted a great future for me. How proud I was of this large mansion assigned to me, and how I loved to walk in the beautiful garden, hand in hand with my daughter! How small she was then, only a child, but she knew already the literary names of every flower I pointed at. Four years—but how long ago that seems now. Like memories from a previous existence.

Now you, threatening shadow, again press close to me; shrinking in terror, I must obey you. Do you grudge me even this brief respite?

Didn't I do all you ordered me to do? Didn't I last month, after my return from that fey old city of Han-yuan by its sinister lake, choose at once an auspicious date for my daughter's wedding; and wasn't she married last week? What do you say now? My senses are numbed by the unbearable pain; I can't hear you well. You say that . . . that my daughter must learn the truth? Almighty Heaven, have you no pity? That knowledge shall break her heart, destroy her. . . . No, don't hurt me, please. I shall do as you say, only don't hurt me. . . . Yes, I shall write.

Write, as every sleepless night I write, with you, inexorable executioner, standing over me. The others can't see you, you say. But isn't it true that when a man has been touched by death, others can see its mark on him? Every time I come upon one of my wives or concubines in the now deserted corridors, she quickly averts her face. When I look up from my papers in the office, I often catch my clerks staring at me. As they hurriedly bend again over their documents, I know that they covertly clasp the amulets they have taken to wearing of late. They must feel that after I had come back from my visit to Han-yuan I was not merely very ill. A sick man is pitied; a man possessed is shunned.

They do not understand. They need only pity me. As one pities a man condemned to the inhuman punishment of inflicting on himself with his own hand the lingering death: being forced by the executioner to cut away his own flesh, piece by piece. Every letter I wrote, every coded message I sent out these last days cut away a slice of my living flesh. Thus the threads of the ingenious web I had been weaving patiently over the entire Empire were cut, one by one. Every thread cut stands for a crushed hope, a thwarted illusion, a wasted dream. Now all traces have been wept out; no one shall ever know. I even presume that the *Imperial Gazette* shall print an obituary, mourning me as a promising young official who met an untimely death by a lingering disease. Lingered, indeed, lingered till now there is nothing left of me but this bloodstained carcass.

This is the moment that the executioner plunges his long knife in the tortured criminal's heart, giving him the merciful deathblow. Why, then, do you, fearful shadow, insist on prolonging my agony, you who call yourself by the name of a flower? Why do you want to tear my heart to pieces, by forcing me to kill the soul of my poor daughter? She never committed any crime, she never knew. . . . Yes, I hear you, terrible woman; you say that I still must write,

write down everything, so that my daughter shall know. Tell her how Heaven denied me a quick, self-chosen end, and condemned me to a slow death of agony in your cruel hands. And that after having granted me one brief glance of . . . what could have been.

Yes, my daughter shall know. About meeting you on the shore of the lake, about the old tale you told me, all. But I swear that if there still be a Heaven above us, my daughter shall forgive me; a traitor and a murderer she shall forgive, I tell you. But not you! Not you, because you are only hate, hate incarnate, and you shall die together with me, die forever. No, don't pull away my hand now; you said "Write!" and write I shall. May Heaven have mercy on me and . . . yes, also on you. For now—too late—I recognize you for what you really are, and I know that you never come uninvited. You haunt and torture to death only those who have called you up by their own dark deeds.

This, then, is what happened.

The Court had directed me to Han-yuan, to investigate a complicated case of embezzlement of government funds; it was suspected that the local authorities were involved. You will remember that this year spring came early. A feeling of expectancy was vibrating in the warm air; in a reckless mood I had even thought of taking my daughter along with me on that trip to Han-yuan. But that mood passed, and I took Chrysanthemum, my youngest concubine, with me instead. I thus hoped to restore peace to my tormented soul, for Chrysanthemum had been very dear to me—before. When I had arrived in Han-yuan, however, I realized that it had been an idle hope. She whom I had left behind was more than ever with me. Her image stood between us; I couldn't even bring myself to touch Chrysanthemum's poor slender hand.

Feverishly, I devoted all my efforts to the case, trying to forget. I solved it within a week; the culprit proved to be a clerk from the capital, and he confessed. On my last night in Han-yuan the grateful local authorities gave a splendid parting dinner for me, in the Willow Quarter, the abode of the singing girls, of century-old fame. They were profuse in their protestations of gratitude and admiration for my speedy solution of the vexing case. They said they only regretted that they could not have Almond Blossom dance for me. She was the most beautiful and accomplished dancer of the quarter, they said, named after a famous beauty of bygone times. Unfortu-

nately, the girl had unaccountably disappeared, that very morning. If only I could prolong my stay in Han-yuan for a few days, they added wistfully, doubtless I would then solve for them that mystery too! Their flattery pleased me; I drank more wine than usual, and when late in the night I came back to the luxurious hostel that had been placed at my disposal, I was in an elated mood. All would be well, I felt; I would break the spell!

Chrysanthemum was waiting for me. She wore a peach-colored single dress that admirably set off her young figure. She was looking at me with her lovely eyes, and I would have folded her in my arms. Then, suddenly, the other, the forbidden one, was there, and I could not.

A violent shiver shook my frame. Muttering I know not what excuse, I ran out into the garden. I felt as if I were suffocating; I wanted air. But it was sultry and hot in the garden. I had to go out, to the lake. I tiptoed past the dozing doorman, and went out into the deserted street. When I had reached the bank of the lake, I stood still and looked out for a long time over the still water, deep despair in my heart. What would my carefully built-up scheme boot me? Who could rule men when himself not a man? At last I knew there was only one solution.

Once I had taken that decision, I felt at peace. I loosened the front of my purple robe, and pushed the high black cap back from my perspiring brow. I strolled along at a leisurely pace, looking for a place on the bank that would suit my purpose. I think I even hummed a song. Is not the best time for leaving the painted hall when the red candles are still burning and when the wine is still warm in the golden goblets? I enjoyed the charming surroundings. On my left the almond trees, laden with white blossoms whose scent hung heavily in the warm spring air. And on my right the silvery expanse of the moonlit lake.

I saw her when I turned a corner of the winding road.

She was standing on the bank, very close to the water, clad in a white silk robe with a green sash, and wearing a white water lily in her hair. As she looked round at me, the moonlight shone on her lovely face. Then I knew in a flash that here at last was the woman who would break the laming spell, the woman Heaven had destined for me.

She also knew, for when I had gone up to her there was none of the usual greetings and polite inquiries. She only said:



A MEETING ON THE SHORE OF THE LAKE

"The almond blossoms are out very early, this spring!"

And I said:

"It is the unexpected joys that are the greatest!"

"Are they always?" she asked with a mocking smile. "Come, I shall show you where I was sitting just now."

She went among the trees, and I followed her into a small clearing just off the road. We sat down side by side among the tall grass on a low ridge. The blossom-laden branches of the almond trees hung over us like a canopy.

"How strange this is!" I said, delighted, as I took her small, cool hand in mine. "It is as if we were in another world!"

She just smiled and gave me a sidelong glance. I put my arm round her waist and pressed my mouth on her moist, red lips.

And she took away the spell that had maimed me. Her embrace healed me, our burning passion cauterized the gaping wound in my soul. I thought exultantly that all would still be well.

When I was idly tracing with my finger the shadows cast by the branches on her beautiful body, white and smooth like the finest white jade, I suddenly found myself telling her about the spell she had broken for me. She leisurely brushed away the blossoms that had fluttered down on her perfect breasts. Sitting up, she said slowly:

"One time, long ago, I heard something similar." And then, after some hesitation: "Tell me, aren't you a judge?"

I pointed at my cap where I had hung it on a low branch, the moonlight shining on its golden insignia of rank. Then I replied with a wry smile:

"Even better than that, I am a Court Investigator!"

She nodded sagely, then lay back in the grass, folding her rounded arms under her shapely head.

"That old story," she said pensively, "ought to interest you. It concerns a clever judge, who served as magistrate here in Han-yuan many centuries ago. At that time . . ."

I know not for how long I listened to her soft, compelling voice. But when she fell silent a cold fear had gripped my heart. I rose abruptly, donned my robe and wound the long sash round my waist. As I placed my cap on my head I said hoarsely:

"You need not try to fool me by a fanciful tale! Speak up, woman. How did you come to know my secret?"

But she only looked up at me, her charming mouth trembling in a provoking smile.

Her utter loveliness swept away my anger. Kneeling by her side, I exclaimed:

"What does it matter how you knew! I care not who you are or who you have been. For I tell you that my plans are better laid than those you told about, and I swear that you and you only shall be my queen!" Looking at her tenderly, I took up her dress and added: "A breeze is blowing in from the lake; you'll be cold!"

She slowly shook her head. But I rose and covered her naked body with the silk dress. Then I suddenly heard loud voices nearby.

Several men came into the clearing. Greatly embarrassed, I stood myself in front of the woman reclining in the grass. An elderly man, whom I recognized as the magistrate of Han-yuan, shot a quick look past me. Then he bowed deeply and said in an admiring voice:

"So you have found her, sir! When tonight we searched her room in the Willow Quarter and found her message, we came to look in this direction. For there is a current in the lake that comes into this bight. It is indeed astonishing how you succeeded in finding out all this before we did! But you needn't have troubled to get her here from the shore, sir!" Turning to his men he ordered: "Bring that stretcher here!"

I swung round and looked. The white dress, clinging to her body like a shroud, was dripping wet, and slimy water weeds tangled with her tresses stuck to her still, lifeless face.

Dusk was falling as Judge Dee sat sipping a cup of tea on the open terrace, up on the second floor of the tribunal. Sitting straight in an armchair near the low, carved marble balustrade, he surveyed the scene spread out before him.

One by one lights went on in the town below, a solid mass of roofs. Farther down there was the lake, a wide stretch of smooth, dark water. The opposite bank was hidden by a mist hovering at the foot of the mountains over on the other side.

It had been a hot and sultry day that was changing now into an oppressive night. Not a leaf stirred in the trees in the street below.

The judge shifted his shoulders uncomfortably in his formal robe of stiff brocade. The old man who was standing silently by his