



THRILLING ADVENTURES

Vol. XII, No. 2

J. S. WILLIAMS, Editor

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The Trail of the

The Breath-Taking True Experience Story of An Intrepid Adventurer Balked by Grim Treachery!

By LIEUT. JONATHAN DALY

CHAPTER I

The Chinese Officer

I FIRST ran across the trail in a hospital, two months after leaving the Grand Chaco behind me. As souvenirs of that continual war I had collected two bullet-holes and a case of malaria, and I was certainly in no condition to go racing off to China the way I did.

The doctors told me so and my friends threw up their hands in horror, but that didn't deter me. The urge was too strong. I felt that if I didn't go, I'd be eaten up by the gnawing determination to find the red diamonds of Kubla Khan.

I had come across an original manuscript of Marco Polo's. The man that lent it to me did not know its value. And even when I told him, he laughed at me. I had plenty of money and I didn't need his help, but even so, I had him lined up for a cut in the event of success.

Most copies of Marco Polo's Trav-

els leave out a great deal. They have to because it is difficult to decipher, and even more difficult to translate. But, for my own amusement, I had been working on it for almost a month, while laid up.

Halfway through the volume I read a paragraph about a chest of fabulous red stones which glittered "like the sun through red stained quartz." Stones which would cut even metal. At first I thought he meant rubies. Then, on further description, I understood that he could mean diamonds and only diamonds. Red diamonds.

The things were worth millions! Many millions!

My appetite for the unusual was whetted by that paragraph. I made a note of it for later reference, and it was a good thing that I did. Otherwise I might never have connected it with another, later, item.

Further on in the book, the famous traveler stated that the beliefs of the Asiatics were scarcely understandable to Western minds. He



The advertisement which started it all. An answer to it uncovered Lieutenant Jonathan Daly—and the remarkable story he tells here

A Fateful Expedition into the Depths of China

Red Diamonds

*Truth is
Stranger
Than Fiction!*



*I fired between my pony's
ears at a man who
blocked the way*

to Unearth a Fabulous Fortune of Ancient Days!

stated further that his host, the Emperor of Asia, Kubla Khan, had requested that a chest of glittering red stones be buried with him to light his way to heaven and to serve as offerings to the gods.

Marco Polo, in his painstaking way, had covered years in the writing of his book. The two remarks were far apart in inscription—months, perhaps.

Suddenly I saw the light. I sat up straight in bed, gripping the tattered pages in both hands, shivering with excitement. I was wholly unconscious of my weakened condition, wholly forgetful of the Chaco. I saw only one thing. A chest of red diamonds buried in the grave of Kubla Khan!

I threw the covers back and yelled for my clothes. If Kubla Khan's grave were still intact, it meant that a fortune in rare stones had lain untouched for centuries! And I meant to be the first man there, whether I was sick or well.

AN hour later I was in a telegraph station writing a cable to Jim Lange in China. I used a code book that five of us carried. Jim Lange and the other three had been with me in South America, and we had promised when we separated that when anything good turned up, we would let the one nearest to the scene know. As luck would have it, Jim Lange was in Peiping.

I had no qualms about setting the whole thing down baldly. No one else would ever know what I wrote. Besides, the code was so condensed that the entire message, including the address, only took eight words.

I told Jim to get a caravan of camels together and to assemble a company of soldiers, and I knew that he would.

Bolstered by excitement, I flew across the continent and sailed from Seattle. Eighteen days later, I was

in Kobe, Japan, negotiating a passage on a tub of rust across the Yellow Sea. Five days after that, I was in the Gulf of Campechi, watching the squat concrete forts loom up on the horizon. That evening, I stood outside the railway station at Taku, awaiting the doubtful arrival of a train to Peiping, China.

A COLD bitter wind was sweeping down from the Gobi, hundreds of miles to the north. Curls of yellow dust swooped around the station's brick corners. Beggars tugged at the skirt of my trench coat, whining for pennies. Soldiers lounged against their baggage, stoically waiting for the train.

I asked the station agent, a wizened Chinese, when the train would come.

"Right away," he said glibly. "Maybe tomorrow morning. Maybe next month. Bandits bad near Tientsin." That was all I could get out of him.

If you've ever been in that hole they call Taku, you'll understand what I was up against. I was racked with excitement. In spite of the wind I was sweating. And in spite of the sweat I felt that someone was pouring ice water down my spine. Malaria leaves you that way.

There were no hotels. The station was so filthy that a man couldn't find a place to lie down, but even so, at midnight, I was so tired that I was almost ready to flop in the middle of the platform, coolies and beggars notwithstanding.

It was then that the young Chinese officer in the grey overcoat approached me. It was dark and I couldn't see his face. But by the light from the station window he could see that I was an American.

He asked me if I wanted to go to a hotel. He said that he had just received word from up-country that the train would not be there until

late the next afternoon. He looked at me more closely.

"Whassa matter? You blong sick?"

"I'm all right," I said. "Where's your hotel?"

I let him lead me across the tracks toward a cluster of lights which appeared to be the main part of the ten-house town. When we were a hundred yards away from the station, I could see him only by the green light of a switch.

Then he whirled on me. His stature seemed to double. His hand darted out and caught at my trench coat. I should have been prepared for that, but I was not. Weak and cold and tired, it took me an instant to collect my wits. And that instant was enough for him. His right hand snapped toward my shirt pockets. Something thin and flat and square came away with a rending of cloth.

His left fist smashed me in the mouth, and I staggered back, trying to keep my balance, tripping over the ties. The whole thing took place in a split second. Then he was running, a vague, flitting shadow in the night.

I DROPPED to my knees and clawed at the side pockets in my artillery boots. Two .25 automatics were there. I jerked both of them out and emptied them as fast as I could pull the triggers.

But I knew I hadn't hit him. I knew he'd gotten away and that there was little use in following. I knew also that I'd meet him some other place.

Crouching in the dark, I felt of my pockets to see what was gone. I searched slowly at first. Then faster. Then frantically. My code book! He had gotten it!

The wind was cold on my teeth. I was swearing in four languages. In a few minutes I heard running feet and saw the sweep of lanterns coming toward me.



I emptied the two automatics at the fleeing man

The French colonial troops were swarming down from their barracks, called out by the fourteen shots I had fired. I didn't want to meet the French, and I had been a fool for firing at all.

Another sound clashed with the voices and pounding boots. The train was whistling through the yards down the track on which I stood. I ran toward it. An officer with a flashlight howled at me to stop, but I kept on. The engine clattered past me. Then a car. The train slowed for the station, and I swung aboard.

In a compartment I reloaded the

guns and shoved them into my boot pockets. I drew up my coat collar and slumped down in the seat. If they saw me through the windows, they didn't come in. They knew that it was useless to search that train, and, besides, the railway is touchy about foreign troops. I sent a porter out after my luggage before we pulled out.

At dawn I was watching my ricksha boy negotiate the traffic through the great north gate of Peiping.

CHAPTER II

The Dead Priest

MY space is limited here. I can only cover the high points. Accordingly, then, I must pick up the thread of narrative five days after my arrival in the red-walled, dust-carpeted Peiping.

Jim Lange was at the Hotel du Nord. The du Pekin and the Wagon-Lit were preferable, perhaps, but they were too much in evidence. And in the Orient one can never tell who watches.

Jim Lange was about forty, but he looked like a youngster. His hair was grey around his temples, giving the only clue to his age. He was eternally smiling, ever polite, always the Continental gentleman—and he was faster on the draw than any other man I have ever known.

He was upset by the theft of my code book, because it coincided with the theft of my cablegram from his own room. It was evident that someone had guessed our mission and was determined either to stop us or to get there first.

It was quite possible that the man who had looted Jim's room and the one who rifled my pockets were one and the same. I favored that idea. Just how anyone could have gotten wind of the thing was beyond me.

But our expedition was suddenly common knowledge. The fact amazed

us not a little, and it amazes me even yet. News travels fast in the Orient. There is something like an underground telegraph which carries its tidings far. Peiping, of all the Oriental cities, is probably the worst in that respect.

FIVE days, then, after my arrival at the du Nord, I was surprised to receive a card from the blue-gowned bellboy. There was nothing on the linen rectangle but a number. That was all. Just "1."

I nodded to bring the caller up. There was nothing else to do. This mysterious number was certainly there on a mission of importance.

In a few seconds, "1" was standing in the hallway, rapping on my door with the handle of his cane. He was a thin, small man with a smooth, unmoving face. He was young, but he looked older than he was. Only his eyes, blue and twinkling, gave him away.

He came in and sat down, but he did not speak until I had poured out a Scotch and soda for him. Holding this before him, he lifted it.

"To your expedition," he said, smiling.

I slapped my glass down on the table and stared at him.

"Don't be alarmed," said "1," sipping his drink. "I'm not after Kubla Khan's grave, and I don't indulge in coffin robbing. If you are surprised that I know of your mission, let it suffice to say that everyone in Peiping knows."

If everyone in Peiping knew—I should have called the thing off. I should have quit hands down. But I guess I'm too bull-headed for that.

Studying him further, I leaned forward.

"You're British Intelligence. That right?"

"Right-ho," said "1."

"Then what business of yours is my expedition?"

He laughed, evidently pleased with his role.

"Don't be alarmed, Daly." He pulled a pile of identification papers out of his pocket and spread them out like a hand of cards before my eyes.

"All right," I said. "I guessed it."

"My business with you is prompted by a desire to be of help. And also—well, one must have a little something in return for service."

"You mean," said I, "that you want me to bribe you?"

"I beg your pardon, Daly, but the British Intelligence does not accept bribes."

"Sorry."

"Quite all right, old chap. Quite. The matter I had in mind was of a rather secret nature, but your reputation with the British has always been of the highest."

"Always." I smiled.

"For that reason, I'm giving you help because I want help. Do we understand each other?" When I had nodded, he continued. "We want information from the other side of the Wall. Not very much. Just enough to keep us informed of the movements of the Mikado's troops above Jehol. It is a rather simple task, but, unfortunately, the last three men we sent up there have failed to return."

"YOU are a good blind, that's all," continued "I." "I would like to send an Intelligence officer with you. He will guide you across the country, and he will help you if you should happen to cross the paths of any war lords up there. He would have complete authority to grant you anything the British have to offer. He would do his own work on the side, and you need never bother with it."

"All right," I said. "Send him over to the hotel tonight with credentials. We are leaving rather early in the morning. All our camels are in line and we have about thirty

fighting men who are to meet us outside the city. It's agreed."

He left, then, and it was the last I ever saw of him.

AT three o'clock, Jim came in and I told him what had happened. But he didn't seem to be listening to me. His blue eyes were restless, and he kept staring out into the alley below our window as though he wished I'd hurry up and finish what I had to say so that he could get his word in.

"I was up to the Hall of Classics this afternoon," Jim merely said, when I had finished.

Something in the way he said it told me that he had found a clue. The Hall of Classics is not a hall at all, but a large courtyard filled with obelisks or something of that sort on which the sayings of Confucius have been written.

"I found an old Chinaman," continued Jim.

"He was in there studying to get a higher clerk rating."

Jim always liked to do the dramatic thing and so he left his remarks hanging in mid-air while he poured and downed a drink to wash the Peiping dust out of his throat.

"This old Chinaman was wise," continued Jim. "And for no reason at all, he turned around to me and told me that the chart I sought would be found in the Lama temple."

"It's a trap," I stated.

"No. I don't know why, but it isn't. This whole town knows what we're up to and the old fellow was just fishing for a good-sized tip, which I gave him."

"You're crazy," I snapped. "That's the only sure way they could get us!"

"Keep calm," replied Jim, unruffled. "I've been in the country longer than you have and I speak the lingo. I know a straight Chinese when I see him, and this old boy

was one. He was a clerk and they can't afford to lie. One fib and their heads go off."

"One slip and our heads disappear, too," I said.

"Admitted," agreed Jim Lange. "But it's worth the chance. After all, our leads are pretty sparse."

"They are that. All right, as long as you say so, I'll go over to the Lama temple with you and—say! The Lama temple is closed and has been closed for the last three years. Am I right?"

He nodded, knowingly. "That's the point. We'll have to scale the wall and get in somehow. But if I were you, I'd stay here. It's liable to be—"

"Forget it! I'm as well as you are." Which, of course, was a lie.

AT five o'clock we left the hotel and took rickshas down toward the Forbidden City and Coal Hill. Under any other conditions, I would have drawn the line. But the red diamonds were blazing magnets which drew us into incredible complications. They robbed us of our caution and stilled whatever misgivings we might have felt. We were ready to do anything to gain the possession of those stones.

Anything!

The Lama temple was grey and foreboding through the dusk. The grimy walls were frowning and rough and the gates were barred shut, nailed by the order of authorities. Too much evil and unrest had exuded from this place before it had been closed. Too many mysteries had surrounded it. And it was whispered that strange rites were still conducted behind those bars—that there were secret tunnels underneath the walls, entered from the grave mounds on Coal Hill.

We stopped before the gates. Venders tried to catch our eyes, but they would not come close to us—would

not approach those high, dull gates before which we stood. I thought I caught a furtive movement in the shadows across the street, but I was not sure. Besides, my nerves were jumpy.

If this were a trap, we would have to fight out of it with lead. And in that case Peiping would be too hot for us. But I was amazed at the certainty of knowledge which was suddenly seeping through me. I seemed to know that this was the place our quest should start.

And then Jim was pulling at my sleeve and we were hidden in a jog of the wall, pressing back against the grey stone, waiting. No one came after us. The sounds on the street were the same. Assured, I dug my fingers into the crevices of the wall and started up. Jim helped me by shoving on my bootsoles.

At the top, I did not linger. A man makes a plain silhouette even against a black sky. I threw myself over like a pole-vaulter. I seemed to fall for a hundred feet. But when my boots jarred against the stone, I knew it had been fifteen at the most. Jim thudded down beside me and we stood there in the blackness, peering through the darkness of the courtyard.

THE silence was tense. This place, supposed to be deserted, was filled with moving shadows. Perhaps they were caused by the waving of trees in the wind, but however that might be, my heart was pounding with a dull, throbbing beat. Death waited there across the yard. I could feel it.

We walked forward on cat feet, watching every movement. My boots sounded like cannon shots across the stone. Ahead of us something which was neither wind nor shadow moved.

I sprinted ahead. The movement was quick. Soft footfalls hurried away. I dived off in pursuit. Jim

was behind me, starting off in another direction, but I was so intent on my quarry that I did not notice. If this were a Lama priest, then, perhaps, I could persuade him to divulge the information I craved. If it were another—perhaps the soldier of Taku—then I had a score to settle. The big butt of a .45 was solid against my palm.

JIM was lost in the maze of buildings. My lungs felt like hot coals in my chest. The man I followed suddenly turned and stood calmly waiting for me. I could not see his face, nor more than the outline of his body, but I sensed a smile on his lips.

I slacked my pace, juggled the gun and came nearer.

"Whassa matter?" squeaked my quarry. "You allasamee loco, huh?"

I stopped. The muzzle of my gun traveled down. I felt that this must be a priest. Then suddenly I remembered the voice. It was that of the soldier of Taku!

I jumped aside. But he did not shoot. Instead, he whirled and ran toward a blank wall.

"Stop!" I shouted.

But he kept on. I threw the gun up waist high and sent a snapped shot after him. The report rolled through the courtyard like mighty thunder.

The flash of powder had blinded me for an instant. When I could see again, I sprinted forward.

Where the blank wall had been there was a ray of light. Then it was gone! The courtyard, bound in by solid stone, was empty save for myself!

I gasped. Approaching the wall I felt of the rock. There were no holes which might betray a hidden door. Nothing but blank stone. My soldier friend had been swallowed up!

Then I heard Jim yelling for me and I went back. It was a long

way, and I was surprised that I had run so far. But I found Jim.

He was standing over a bundle of something, looking down at it.

"We were a little too late," he said, simply.

I looked at the bundle. It was a man—a dead man. A Lama priest whose robes were drenched with warm blood and whose hands were stretched out in front of him, clutching at unyielding stone. From his back protruded the handle of a knife—a bayonet.

"Too late," Jim repeated. "If we had been here a little sooner, we might have—"

"Wait," I said. "This was a trap. But they expected that only you would come. Two was one too many for them. They thought to put you out of the way so that they could deal with me alone—and they know that I'm not in exactly top-notch physical condition. That man I chased was waiting for you."

Jim nodded and then kneeled down beside the corpse. Gingerly he rolled the thing over on its back. The greasy yellow robes were wet and sticky. I saw something shiny in the priest's left hand. In an instant I had recovered it.

"A Buddha," I said. "He died with his idol."

Jim nodded again and took the thing from me. It was small, exquisitely carved, from ivory stained brown by countless ages. Jim handed it back. But I was shaking with exhaustion and excitement. I dropped it to the stone.

THERE was a dull pop. I stared down at it. "Why—why, my God, Jim, the thing's hollow!"

He scooped it up once more and felt of the base. He shoved his fingernails into every conceivable crevice, into the creases which outlined the fingers and the toes, into the eyes and nose and mouth. But

the image was still smiling, still fat, still intact. In his anxiety, Jim crushed it between his thumb and index finger.

Abruptly, the bottom dropped out of it and—across the flagged yard rolled a thing which was as bright as blood, as brilliant as flame. A red diamond!

CHAPTER III

The Death of a Spy

AT the hotel we went immediately to our room. The Buddha in my pocket felt as though it weighed a thousand pounds—every pound white hot. When I entered the room I was so busy with my own speculations that it took me two or three seconds to realize that another man was there.

He was thin, short, pink-cheeked. He was young, and from his clothes and expression one would have judged him to be a casual tourist. I had scarcely taken in his build and expression when I saw something else. A thin line of red across the side of his throat.

He got up off the bed and set down his glass.

"Oh, hullo there. You're Daly, aren't you?"

"Yes," I nodded. "And you're—?"

"The man Number One sent." He reached into his coat pocket and brought out a packet of papers, from which he extracted a note.

"This," said the note, "is Greg McDonald. He will help you." It was signed with the numeral one.

I shoved out my hand and he took it. His eyes were level and coolly appraising, for all his young smile. I glanced over his other papers and then introduced him to Jim.

It was Jim who noticed the blood on the floor.

"Where the devil did that come from?" he demanded.

The visitor glanced at it and

shrugged. Then he pointed at my hands which were stained red. He grinned.

"I might do well to ask you chaps about it also."

"A dead priest," I said.

"A dead spy," replied Greg McDonald. He went over to the window, threw it wide open and stepped back, pointing down at the cobblestoned alley.

We were only about five feet from the ground and I swung through and dropped beside the huddled form. The man had landed on his face and the sight was not pleasant. The skin was yellow, the eyes black. The man wore a grey overcoat and carried a small saber. I had a feeling that it was my soldier from Taku.

GREG McDONALD, leaning from the window, shrugged again when I looked up.

"He was here, hiding when I came," he explained. "He tackled me and scratched me with his nails. Sorry, but I had to kill him, and after he fell out the window, I was darned if I'd lift him back through again. You know how it is."

I climbed back.

"This means we'll have to get out of the city, tonight. If we wait until tomorrow, the authorities will get on to it."

"Oh," said McDonald, "you needn't hurry. I'm sure I can straighten it out with the powers that be."

"No," I demurred, "we can't risk that. We've found the clue we wanted." I took the Buddha out of my pocket and threw it on the bed. Then I pulled the red diamond out of my pocket and let it blaze in the light.

"My heavens!" cried McDonald, jostled out of his British calm. "You—you—where did you get that?"

"That would be telling," said Jim, softly.

"But—" stammered McDonald, "I—I never saw anything so beautiful as that thing. You mean to tell me you know where there are others?"

"Perhaps," said Jim. "And I agree with John. We've got to get out of here tonight. There's no time for delay. Somebody else is on this trail. They killed the priest and searched him. And they missed the Buddha in their rush. We found it. And—" he stopped, staring at the back of the small, grinning idol.

Jim scooped it up, devouring it with his eyes. Then he sighed and looked up at the ceiling as though he prayed.

"Not only a red diamond," he murmured. "Not only a red diamond, but also a chart." He passed it to me. "See that series of lines on the back? That one is the Great Wall. You can guess at the others."

I forgot about McDonald. I forgot about the dead man outside the window. I forgot everything except the grave of Kubla Khan. Except the chest of stones which would have lit the Emperor's path to heaven.

The red diamonds were waiting for us. Up across the wall, across the plains, through the lines of warring armies, across mountains. In my palm, the Buddha smiled.

CHAPTER IV

The Stolen Buddha

OUR camels were waiting for us outside the Hataman Gate. The North Gate was, of course, the obvious point of departure, but I felt that we would stand a better chance of getting away unobserved if we used the Hataman, which was but three or four blocks from the du Nord Hotel.

The number of our beasts was great. Twenty of them. But the very number excused us from secrecy. Ostensibly we were a trading

expedition moving north toward the Gobi.

My horse was a Mongolian pony and I think the breed deserves some slight mention. His nose was a sledgehammer and his eyes, small and evil, were hidden under a gigantic cowlick. His entire body was covered with long hair. He came almost to my shoulder, but my weight was nothing to him.

A month before he had been utterly untamed, but now he was fairly docile. He would only bite when your back was turned.

The saddle was of Cossack design. Two crosstrees in tandem with a leather pillow buckled down between them. The strap across the pillow is the secret of a Cossack's ability to ride standing up. He hooks his toes through the belt and the possibility of falling off is slight.

WE swung out toward Nankuo, a long line of grunting, grumbling beasts and sleepy men. The soldiers fell in on either side of us, carrying their guns in every conceivable position. They were late of several bandit armies and their weapons were everything from Manlichers to Springfields. We had nothing heavier or faster than a rifle, but with thirty-two men, we felt fairly safe from attack.

That was a mistake. A man who sells his services to the highest bidder feels no qualms about changing flags on short notice—especially when the side he first chose is losing.

Everything went smoothly for the first three days. We crossed the Wall through Nankuo Pass and struck out ahead. But on the evening of the fourth day, just after we had made camp in a slight depression of ground, I scented trouble.

Two sentries stood just on the rim of camp. They were talking in a loud sing-song and they held their rifles at port. I watched them. They

seemed to become more angry with each passing moment. Suddenly one of them struck out with a rifle butt and felled the other. The victim bounced to his feet, bayonet shimmering wickedly.

I JUMPED UP and started to run toward them. A hand restrained me. It was Jim Lange. I stopped and turned angrily, trying to shake him off.

"Don't approach them," said Jim. "That's an old ruse. They want to get you near them and then, while you're separating them, they'll turn on you and pick your pockets."

A moment later they stood back from each other and shot nervous glances in my direction. They looked sheepish. Presently they resumed their posts without a word.

That night I performed an operation in my tent. I took an indelible pencil and traced the map of the Buddha on my thigh. Then I took a jackknife and scratched the marks until they bled. It hurt like the very devil, but I knew that it was necessary. I knew also that I risked infection.

After I had finished I took a ten percent solution of iodine and smeared the square. It completely hid the lines. I knew that a little alcohol would remove the iodine so that I could read the map. It was the only thing I could do.

After that I scraped the original off the Buddha, put it back in the accustomed pocket and went to sleep. During the night I thought I heard a furtive movement in my tent, but I paid it little heed. I would have been wide awake had anyone come within three feet of my cot.

In the morning, the Buddha was gone!

But I had the map. I still have it and I will always have it until they blow taps over my six square feet of real estate. But the map is only in

symbols. I alone know the meaning of the lines, know which is north, know just what the scale is. Twice, since I left China, I have been attacked. But I do not think it will happen again. It takes more than fire to bring out the scale, the orientation, and the proper lettering.

I didn't tell Jim and McDonald about it. They had enough to worry about. But I did tell them to watch the two sentries. For three days, nothing else happened. And then we reached the pass in the mountains.

CHAPTER V

Precipice of Death

ON referring to my somewhat bedraggled diary, I find that we sighted the pass at about four in the afternoon. McDonald identified it for us. He seemed to know his way through this country. He told me that it had an L twist in the middle and that tallied with my chart.

He also told me that he thought it would be better if he took a side trip that he had in mind. He didn't say what he wanted to do. Some Japanese soldiers were quartered about fifteen miles away and I expected that McDonald would gather some information there. He was very nervous as he dressed, and I didn't blame him. It isn't the pleasantest thing in the world to have to walk into a Jap encampment after dark.

He put on a brown dye and a wiry-haired wig and donned a red-tabbled, mustard-colored uniform. Then he turned his saddle blanket over and I saw that the insignia of a Jap regiment was embroidered on the reverse side.

He wanted to know where he could pick us up if he lived to tell the tale and I informed him that we would probably push right on through that night.

Young McDonald was plainly aghast.

"But, Daly! I say, old chap, but you know something might happen in there. It's bad, very bad. Some of the trail goes along the side of a precipice and the drop is better than a thousand feet in one place. You might lose several of your camels. I strictly would not advise it."

I SHOOK my head. "If anyone wants to ambush us, this is the place for it. They'd have to make an open order charge on the plain. This is the last pass we go through. And I don't want the sun up there showing us up as targets. Get it?"

"You mean you'd rather be attacked in the dark?" gasped McDonald.

"Why not? Only sound will tell them that we're coming and the precipice won't make any difference. They'll think twice—whoever they are—before they go rough-and-tumble along a five foot ledge. It will all be volley fire and that isn't so effective."

"Why, you speak as though you really thought you would be ambushed," said McDonald.

"I think we will be. Some of these soldiers aren't shooting square with us." I jerked my thumb at a grizzled Tartar sergeant. "Among others, I think he's against us. That would be very bad—a mutiny in the pass. But at night—well, you see, they'll think of their own hides, too."

"And another thing. Men have been hanging around our fires who do not belong to us. They thought I did not see them, but I did."

Greg McDonald sighed, threw a foot into his stirrup and went up. The Mongol pony snorted and side-stepped quickly. McDonald, a perfect Japanese officer, raised his hand to us in salute, drove home the spurs and became a dwindling swirl of dust across the plain.

We camped there, resting and waiting for the moonlight I knew would

come. We made camels' dung fires and boiled water for tea. The Mongolians in the party added butter to their steaming cups. I tried it and found it good.

The moon came up, twice as big as it should have been. At first it looked like a fire over the horizon's rim and then it was with us, making the plain fill itself with shadows. The pass looked like a gunsight ahead of us. At the first glimmer we started to move off.

When we had gained the entrance of the pass, I went ahead on the scout. McDonald had not told me wrong. Less than a thousand yards from the mouth, the bed of a river started to drop away like a falling bomb. At half a mile, the cut was merely a deep black hole. The path went up because our way and the river's course parted at the L.

We started moving the camels through, and their grunted protests must have reached far. The ponies' hoofs struck fire from the flinty debris which cluttered the trail. Above us the moon filled half the gorge with light. We were in the lighted half.

A QUARTER of a mile before we got to the L, Jim worked his way up beside me.

"I don't like this a bit," he said. "They can sit over there and snipe us off. I wish we'd thought about it before."

"Too late now. Whoever it is that's messing into our business would hardly pass up such a chance as this. Even if he's just one man, he wouldn't find it hard to muster a company of loose soldiers. They'd do it for the loot alone."

I spurred ahead of the caravan. Jim dropped far behind it, urging the stragglers. That move saved our lives.

The first bullet came just as I rounded the L. It smacked stone

above my head and went whining on down the trail into the thick of the camels. Instead of drawing up, I dug in my rowels. The pony leaped ahead. At my right I could see the dark abyss. I did not know what lay ahead.

I did not know the exact plan, but before long I understood. In fact, within the next ten seconds.

Stone grumbled high up on our wall. A vague, sighing sound, doubling, tripling into crescendo until it threatened to blast me out of my already precarious saddle.

They had started an avalanche above us. Tons of rock crashed and roared down the hillside. Camels bawled. Men screamed. Bedlam broke loose behind me. I drew in and flung myself down behind my horse. There was nothing I could do. I did not know whether or not Jim was still alive and the anxiety of it made me a little sick. But I gripped the .45 and watched for another rifle flame.

LOOKING back, I saw a camel teetering near the edge. A soldier had hold of his halter, tugging at it. The shower of rocks thickened. For an instant I could see nothing for dust. Then I saw the camel start to fall. His hind quarters went first. He scrambled to regain his footing. The soldier fought to free himself of the rein. The camel rocked back. Darkness and the sound of hammering rocks swallowed them and their screams.

A gun flared yellow-white ahead. I shot straight into the blaze. A man pitched out from the cover and fell, turning over and over through a thousand feet. A .45 slug takes them that way.

The avalanche quieted to a fitful rumble. The moon was higher now and I could see that the trail, wonder of wonders, was still intact. Most of the debris had bounced off an

overhang, but not high enough to miss men and camels.

I did not care so badly about the camels. They were becoming excess baggage. They had served their purpose as a blind. And after the traitorous tricks the men had pulled, I could not feel too badly about them. But where was Jim?

AT last I saw him. Running low, leading his terrified pony, he sprinted across the cleared zone and came up to me.

"They're all gone!" he cried.

I knew it before he told me, but the utterance of the knowledge gave me a far worse shock than the witnessing of it had.

"Get on and ride!" I yelled. "They're all around us!"

We could have been clearly seen in the moonlight. But we were going fast along that precarious ledge and we were a difficult target to hit. The thunder of hoofs drowned the sounds of shots behind us. Once I caught the splinter of a bullet against rock above me. They were shooting at us, then.

Someone stood on the trail before us. Without checking our pace, I yanked out the .45 and held it ready. I saw a rifle whip up to the level of my eyes. I fired between my pony's ears. A shadow tumbled through space, glittering when the moon struck the rifle.

Headlong down the trail we plunged, with death whispering in our ears and with death tugging at us from below. The trail leveled out under us and led away to a plateau. We were far out on the plain before we stopped. I sat with my head on my chest, breathing harder than my horse.

Jim came up and threw himself off his mount.

"Pretty tough," he said. I nodded. "Do you suppose they'll hit us again?" he asked.

I knew he merely wanted to be reassured. But I felt all gone inside.

"Sure they will. They did that just to get rid of our equipment and our armed forces. Now, they'll be able to take us without much of a fight. All we can do is to push on hard and get there before they do."

"But what about McDonald?"

"I guess he'll get along. We can't do anything for him now. Let's ride."

Jim mounted and we rode.

When dawn came we were near our destination; and when the light was good enough I took a pair of field glasses and went to a high point of land to study the plateau we had just quitted.

Everything was yellow. The mountains were craggy and harsh even in the distance, and the wind moaned through the cleft in which I lay. Never before have I seen such desolate, utterly wasted country.

FAR to the east I could see a horseman coming. Behind him, about two miles, I could see a swirl of dust which soon became a racing cavalry troop. But the troop could not see their quarry as I could.

I studied the man in the lead. At last I made out a set of red tabs and a yellow face. I knew then that it was McDonald. His eyes were set and his mouth was tight. He was riding for his life, from the looks of things.

In a few minutes he swung down into a gulch and ran along the hard rock bottom, losing his trail. When the cavalry came to the place, they galloped onward in a straight line.

Going down, I told Jim to saddle up once more. I buckled my own cinch and we rode out to the end of the gully and found McDonald. He looked about done in.

"They found out who I was," he wheezed, tiredly. "You can't fool those little devils. They were going to skin me alive, but I got away."

Somehow, that remark about skinning him alive grated on me. I carried a tattooed chart on my leg; and for the first time it occurred to me that to get that chart, a man would have to rip off my hide.

CHAPTER VI

The Human Sacrifice

I'M sorry I cannot set down the exact formation of the land about the burial temple of Kubla Khan. If I did that, I am afraid that a topographical study of the ground would reveal the exact location. But I can tell you how it looked.

We found it with ridiculous ease, setting at the far end of a big gully. Why Kubla Khan had wanted to be buried in such a place, I did not know. I was not well enough acquainted with his history. But I believe that, in that day, the bodies of rulers were extremely valuable. So much so, in fact, that armies invaded territories to exhume and steal the coffins of kings. For one king to possess the body of another was much like possessing his scepter.

Accordingly, Kubla Khan had so decreed, I suppose, that his grave would never be molested. He had caused himself to be buried in the most hidden part of his kingdom. And a man as great as Kubla Khan could be sure that his wishes would be carried out even after death.

I had expected a pagoda of some sort, but instead we found that the hut had a flat roof. It was all of stone, and the men who built it had been certain that their work would endure for centuries.

But they did not build the entire tomb above the ground. Most of it lies far below. I doubt if it would even be noticed from an airplane, for it is the color of the terrain—yellow.

I'm afraid that the sight of the

place made me a little crazy. I jumped off my horse and raced pell-mell for the low, open door, pulling at the flashlight which hung from my belt. Jim called to me to wait, but I dashed on ahead, completely disregarding him. The thought of red diamonds—a chest of red diamonds—was too much for me.

Ahead of me there might lie an ambush. Ahead there might be age-old traps. I'm not especially a daredevil, but I didn't seem to care. I plunged through the opening and shot on my light.

I HAD expected to see a room, perhaps a crypt, but all I saw was a black tunnel stretching into the bowels of the earth. My feet carried me down, but I felt as though I floated in mid-air.

The place was odorous with age and as I went down the passage I could hear the ceaseless drip of water ahead of me. The walls became damp, covered with a green slime. I traveled far. There were two tunnels there, and at the fork I hesitated long enough to realize that Jim had not followed me. But I supposed that he would be along as soon as he had hidden the horses.

Taking the right branch I found that I was once more going down. Steps had been cut into the stone and the descent was easy, though steep. Abruptly I found myself on the threshold of a large room.

My flashlight played over the walls and then came to rest on the portion farthest away from me. Chills raced up and down my back as I saw that sight. The thing was too utterly real, too terrible, too gruesome.

It was an idol, a war god, squatting on massive stone haunches, watching me out of glittering red eyes. He looked as though he were about to speak. His jaw was loose, as though it could be moved. Before

him lay a platform of stone, with grooves running diagonally down its sides.

I knew what that was. I had seen blocks like that in the Naya country, in Ankor Vat, in the South Pacific. It was a sacrificial altar and the grooves were made for the hot, running blood of human victims.

At last I tore my eyes away from the war god. A passage lay to the idol's left and I took it, continuing to travel down. How far this lies below the surface, I have no way of knowing. It would require a better civil engineer than I am to determine its twisting depth.

The darkness seemed to thicken. Silence reigned. The clanking of my boot heels on stone seemed a desecration of the tomb. Then another, larger room opened before me. Its ceiling was high, almost beyond the range of my flashlight. The floor was level and moss grown.

In the center of the stones sat a rectangle of stone. I knew then that I had found the tomb of Kubla Khan, lost to the world for centuries!

PERHAPS the crypt had at one time been decorated with crossed swords, a shield, spears. But these were only piles of black rust now. Nothing was left but the imperishable stone.

With trembling hands I tore at the head blocks. They came away with surprising ease. I threw them aside. I dislodged the slabs, unconscious that I ripped the nails from my fingers. But I did not have far to go.

A coffin had lain there at one time, but it was gone. The body of a mighty Emperor had been there, but dust had claimed it back. Save for a few bands of copper and a golden ring, the vault was empty!

At first I thought that the red diamonds might lie beneath the crypt, but the floor was obviously undisturbed. It was solid rock. I searched

along the walls, looking for a niche, but there was none.

I stopped in the center of the room, staring at the vault, completely baffled. This, certainly, was going to be more than a one-man job. I thought that I had better find McDonald and Jim. Suiting action to thought, I sprinted up the ramp toward the room of the war god.

It is difficult to write about what I found there. Even the thought of it still makes me feel sick and weary. I remember that I stood for some minutes, unable to take my eyes from the gruesome spectacle.

Jim Lange lay there. On the sacrificial altar. His throat had been cut; his shirt was tattered and soggy where the killer had plunged a savage knife innumerable times. The blood ran down the grooves to the floor and collected there in black puddles.

I had no idea how it had happened. Perhaps the Japs had been there, waiting for us. Perhaps the tomb had guards, after all these centuries. Perhaps—well, there was no use speculating about it. Jim Lange was dead on a sacrificial block and all the deduction in the world could not bring him back to life.

I GUESS I went a little crazy then. I don't know what I said. I only know that I dragged Jim's body from that terrible bed and that I found the red diamonds!

They were concealed in the altar. Any slight movement of the top caused the entire surface to raise up as though on springs. My flashlight hammered into a cauldron of red, glowing diamonds.

I laid Jim Lange on the floor and crossed his arms over his chest. Then I went back to the altar and ran my hands through the glittering wealth. I was stunned, out on my feet. But the diamonds did not seem to represent money or any of the things that

a man can buy. They had meant the death of Jim Lange.

I scooped up a double handful and threw them from me. They scattered out like seeds, rolling drops of red along the floor. Some of them were sticky where the blood had leaked through the cracks.

Everything must have gone blank at that point, for I remember nothing more until I got outside. McDonald was standing by the horses.

CHAPTER VII

Before the War God

BRACING myself against the stone doorway, I stared at him. The sight of his familiar face jerked me out of a period a thousand years old and brought me back to the twentieth century. He steadied me. "What's happened?" he asked.

"Jim is dead," I said as calmly as possible.

"Dead? But—but how can he be dead? He left me just a moment ago."

"He's dead, all right," I repeated, dully. "And I found the diamonds. Do you want to see them?"

His eyes lit up. He walked quickly toward me, past me and down the tunnel. I pointed the way for him with my flashlight and walked slowly after him. He took the right-hand bend and then stopped. I threw my flash on the war god and he gasped.

"They're over there in the altar," I said almost without interest. "They must have been set there as a sacrifice to their god."

McDonald did not seem to notice Jim. Somehow, the lack of interest in the body of my friend enraged me. It was like a blow, somehow. I might have argued that McDonald was used to such things, but I was almost past the point of reason.

McDonald knelt quickly beside the altar and ran his fingers through the

glittering mass. He seemed to be talking to himself—or perhaps talking to the diamonds. He looked up at me—and in that instant I was jerked out of my lethargy by the sudden knowledge that McDonald was utterly mad!

"They're mine," he drooled. His face was no longer boyish. It was hard and old and vicious.

"Snap out of it!" I shouted. "We're two white men alone in this confounded country. We'll never get out alive unless we stick together! For God's sake, man, don't look at me that way!"

"They're mine," he said and then he repeated it over and over with the monotonous intonation of a chant. Behind him the war god's red eyes were glowing coals. There was a similarity between the two. The droop of the mouth—McDonald turned his back on me and stared into the mass of brilliance.

And then the war god spoke! The jaw moved and the eyes seemed to increase their fire.

"They're his! Go before you die!"

I STEPPED backward. I could feel the hair raise on the back of my neck. I was stripped of every civilized vestige in that instant. I was a savage standing before a powerful, ancient god. And the god's word was law!

But the trick was not destined to work. My flashlight sagged and, in sagging, caught and held a blue glimmer of steel in McDonald's hand. I shot my fingers to the automatics in my boot tops, but I was not quick enough. Flame lanced out from McDonald's waistline. The slug caught me in the left side, just under the heart. But I was conscious of no pain. Only a terrifying numbness.

My fingers found the automatic butts. I straightened. The flashlight rolled along the floor, forgotten, but it did its work well. It rested the

icy beam square on McDonald's twisted face, blinding him.

I did not know that he was blinded, then, though I know it now. I only knew that I had found the killer. Firing with a slow, deliberate speed, I blotted out his face. Left gun, right gun, left gun, right gun. I suppose it would be called murder, but he was the man who had killed Jim.

McDonald sagged, dead at the first shot. Limply he sprawled across the grooves, pouring his own life's stream into them. Above him the war god's eyes were thin and brittle. Left gun, right gun. The dead body leaped and quivered under the impact of slugs.

Then my magazines were empty and the click of the empty chambers was my signal to crumple. But even after I fell flat on my face, I managed to inch forward to make sure that McDonald was dead. I can remember how his face looked to this day.

After that everything was blurred. I must have bandaged the hole in my side, though I do not remember doing so. I must have dragged myself out to a pony and somehow I must have mounted. Later I found three diamonds in my pockets. That surprises me, because I could hardly have realized that I would need their wealth back in civilization.

One scene will always be with me. I wake at night to find that it hovers above my face. The scene of that room, drowned in powder smoke, with the war god's red eyes glaring through the curling haze!

WHAT I knew instinctively then, I know for certain now. McDonald was Jim's murderer.

McDonald was not McDonald at all, but some renegade. In some way he had caught word of Jim's activities in hiring troops and buying camels. He had evidently followed Jim

back to his hotel and had then rifled the room, finding and taking the code message.

Knowing that he had to have a key, he found out who I was—probably in Jim's correspondence—and then came down to Taku to wait for my arrival. When I came, he had no great difficulty in picking me out. Americans are few at that port and one can spot a tourist.

This renegade had disguised himself as a Chinese officer. He had attacked me solely for the purpose of getting the code key which he knew I must carry. Why he did not take Jim's I don't know. Maybe Jim kept his in a safer place than I did.

But my main reason for knowing it was "McDonald," came from the fact that the Chinese officer struck me with a fist. Chinese never use their fists.

McDonald was also the old Chinaman at the Hall of Classics. He wanted Jim to go to the Lama temple because he thought that Jim would go alone and that he could be killed there. Evidently, "McDonald" had but very little money. He had obviously contracted with the Lama priest to obtain the Buddha.

Unable to pay for it in cash, "McDonald" killed the priest and then tried to find the Buddha. But the statue in the priest's hand was not easily seen and we had come upon "McDonald" as he started to look for it. He made his getaway through a passage which I could not find.

WHEN we got back to the hotel, "McDonald" was waiting for us. He had found the real British agent there, had killed him, and had thrown the body out of the window, after dressing it in the Chinese uniform and coloring the face. Of course, the renegade had taken the officer's papers. The scar on "McDonald's" throat had been made by my bullet earlier in the evening.

Then, "McDonald" left us just before the attack. Wanting us to believe that he was a real agent, he dressed himself as a Japanese officer. He had stolen the Buddha, discovered that the map had been erased from it. He knew, therefore, that he had to kill us to get it, and he did not want to fight fairly. Hence, the ambush by which he rid himself of his agents among our men that he could no longer use.

But, unfortunately for "McDonald," he had run across a patrol of Japanese cavalry and had had to ride for his life.

He had killed Jim while I was below ground, and he had intended to kill me just as soon as he was led to the red diamonds. He tried to scare me out by making the idol talk—a ventriloquist's trick—but, failing that, he had had to shoot me.

Well, no matter now. My only regret is for the real McDonald. We left him, unknowing, cursing him, stabbed to death in a filthy alley of Peiping.

I ARRIVED at a port of the Yellow Sea with the aid of two peasants. I don't know how they kept me alive during the trip, but they did, and I paid them well for it. I stayed there in a hospital, getting well.

At first the British were hostile. They tried to hang the murder of the real McDonald upon me; and I could not send them to the temple of Kubla Khan. I wanted to go back there myself. They compromised by sending me out of the country.

It's all patched up now, and I can go back. Perhaps Number "1" had something to do with it.

Most of the money I received for the three red diamonds has been spent, now. I shall go back this year, winter though it is. But this time I am not trusting Chinese soldiers. I have already recruited a company of fighting Americans!