

A Complete Novelette of "Captain Trouble," an American Adventurer in the Orient Who Becomes a Symbol of Power and the Answer to a Prophecy



The Red Road to Shamballah

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I

ALTHOUGH he was American—related on his father's side with Daniel Boone and on his mother's side with Nathan Hale—somewhere in the makeup of Pelham Rutledge

Shattuck there was a strong streak of the Oriental as well. There must have been.

For all the time he sat his horse there in the blackness of the great desert and looked at the strange blue flame in front of him he could feel the two currents at work in him.

The American part of him was telling him that the flame was natural—it was magnetic, electrical, or just some new form of luminous gas. But almost equally strong was his Oriental feeling that this was ghostly.

The little war-horse he rode was taking that blue light for no ordinary fact at any rate. The animal had reared back on its haunches. Shattuck could feel it tremble between his knees.

At first, there had been just that blue flame. It flickered in mid-air perhaps twenty paces in advance. Its evolution was swift. It became a pillar of blue light resting on the earth. This expanded. And now, in the center of the blue radiance, Shattuck saw the figure of a man.

Shattuck stared.

From the time of that childhood of his, passed at treaty ports up and down the Chinese coast, generally in the company of Chinese servants, he had been in contact with various sorts of magic.

What was this then—a *ro-long*?

Many were the tales he'd heard of *ro-longs*—those unfortunate dead brought back to life—boys, girls, men and women—to serve the unholy will of some vicious master.

Were such things possible? Sure they were possible!

But, even while this speculation, with a crowd of others, was racing through his mind, his eyes were telling him that this apparition, whatever it was, would be unable to hurt him if he only kept his nerve.

He quieted his horse. He took a mental survey of his surroundings.

He was in the midst of the Kara Kugen—the Black Hills of the Gobi. It was a region with such an evil reputation for ghostly dangers that even the wildest of the fighting nomads gave it a wide berth.

BACK of him was Kara Koto, that “Black City” he had come to find. Ahead of him there had been a battle in progress between rival factions of this lost city of the desert.

There was nothing to do but—face it out!

He could see now that the apparition before him—luminous, ghostly still—was that of a high-class lama. The head was shaven. The expression of the face was pensive.

THE nobility of this head and face gave Shattuck his first inkling as to the identity of this ghostly visitant. It was a surmise almost instantly strengthened when he saw the stranger's robe emerge from the blue light-haze that enveloped it and become what looked like a tissue of woven gold.

“The Living Buddha!” Shattuck cried, with reverential awe, and he swung down from the pony's back.

There were many “Bogdos,” Living Buddhas, or Great Holy Ones, scattered throughout Central Asia. There was the old Bogdo of the Soaring Meditation, for example, whom Shattuck himself had met. It was that old holy man who had recommended that Shattuck make this pilgrimage to the great lost city of the Gobi—the Black City, Kara Koto.

Now Shattuck was beginning to guess why. The old man had wanted him to meet “the Shining One.” The almost killing pilgrimage thus far into the region of the black sands had been a sort of test, an initiation.

“You are—He?” Shattuck gasped.

His excitement was such that he'd spoken in English. It was in English he heard the reply.

“I am He.”

All languages were said to be alike to the Great One.

“I was sent here,” said Shattuck, “by the Bogdo of Samding—the Lamasery of the Soaring Meditation.”

“I know.”

“Just now, here in the desert, I and my two companions met a Chinese lady. She called herself Miao Chen, the Goddess of Mercy.”

“She was but an illusion, sent to test you.”

“I killed a man. He called himself Kuan Yu, the War Lord.”

“He also was but an illusion—to test your courage.”

Awe is a peculiar thing—half fear, half exultation. Shattuck felt a surge of awe sweeping over him.

“But these others I saw,” said Shattuck—“the band of warriors who followed Kuan Yu, and the Lang, those human wolves!”

“Illusions all. They've frightened others away from this place. They've not frightened you—nor your two companions, Juma, the Kirghiz robber,

and Champela, the lama, whose father came from America.”

“Holy One,” Shattuck avowed, “you know, then, everything.”

“Even to that title given you, my son, of ‘the Fighting Fool.’”

ALL the time that the conversation had been carried on, thus far, Shattuck had continued to fit it in with all that he’d ever known. This was an apparition in front of him. He was certain of that. Yet the Gobi itself was real enough. He could feel the sand under his feet. So were his fatigue, hunger, thirst—and dirt!—real enough.

He’d been for so long without a bath that he could have passed for a “dokpa”—a fighting black lama, the sort who never washed.

The Living Buddah—or the apparition of the Living Buddah—who stood there almost within reach of his hand, looked at him for a while without word or movement.

He seemed to furnish his own light. Shattuck himself was standing in the fringe of this light—a blue radiance, soft but penetrating.

To test the light, Shattuck put out his soiled hand and looked at it. He straightened and doubled his fingers. He could see the callouses. He saw the smudges ground in from many campfires.

Ever since entering the region of the black sands, water had been at a premium. He and his two friends had suffered. The camels had suffered.

Yet—Shattuck also remembered this as he stood there now—each time the crisis seemed to mean death or defeat, a well had been found, a bit of marsh, even a live spring, and these in regions marked on all maps as having no water.

“Illusions!” said Shattuck.

“Illusions, my son!”

“I must have got into a state,” said Shattuck, “where I can’t tell what’s real and what isn’t real.”

“You’ve stood the test so far,” said the Living Buddah.

Shattuck felt that he was being studied—examined outside and in. Anyway, he was up against something that he’d been hearing about off and on practically ever since he could remember.

I HAD a dream,” said Shattuck, “that even a Fighting Fool might be useful in the world just now. I told my dream to the old holy man of the

Soaring Meditation. It was by his wish I was given the sword of Kubla Khan. With it I fought a battle and was almost killed. But I seem to have won great wealth—a string of camels, three hundred camel-loads of machine-guns and ammunition—”

“Wealth for yourself?”

“No, to fight with.”

“To fight what for?”

“I don’t know. I hope—for Shamballah.”

“What do you know about Shamballah?”

“Only what I have heard—the empire of Maitreya, the coming King of the World.”

The Shining Lama had continued to look at Shattuck quietly.

“Trouble,” said the Shining One, “already casts a shadow over the face of the world. It is a sign of the end of the old world, the approach of the new. They call you Captain Trouble—Shadak Khan! And the road to Shamballah will be long and red, Shadak Khan. Are you sure you are ready to take it—with your sword of Kubla Khan?”

“Yes!”

“We’ll meet again, Captain Trouble.”

II

A SECOND later—and for a period after that—Pel Shattuck, alias Shadak Khan, wondered if he wasn’t again a victim of illusion. Asia—all Asia—was the original Land of Illusion. There were shamans, fakirs, lamas of the old Red Sect, everywhere, who were not only master hypnotists but who dealt with even stranger powers.

Shattuck wondered what had happened.

A second ago he had been talking to that ghostly apparition of the Living Buddah—the greatest of all Living Buddahs. There came to Shattuck the impact of an idea that this might have been the original Buddah Himself—the great Gautama.

Now, even more suddenly than the apparition had shown itself, it was gone again.

Shattuck put out his hand. He couldn’t see it. The darkness of the desert night was blacker than ever. The sudden inrush of this blackness brought a sort of suffocation with it. It was like a blackness of utter despair.

But Shattuck pulled himself together. He still had the sword in his hand. He’d continued to hold

it against his breast, in an attitude of respect.

He turned and groped for the little war-horse. The pony was gone. He remembered now. The pony was supposed to have been the one ridden by Kuan Yu, the great warlord. Kuan Yu had been an illusion. So, then, had the horse itself been an illusion.

Shattuck thought of that vision of a girl—Miao Shen, painted, covered with silks and jewels, calling herself the Goddess of Mercy.

And the words of the Living Buddah, the Shining One, came back to him:

“She was but an illusion, sent to test you!”

Shattuck would have laughed, but his caked lips hurt. Still, his heart was throbbing with a sort of exhilaration. He’d stood some tests, even if they were illusions. He’d fought a war-lord. He’d resisted the blandishments of a Chinese goddess—and one, at that, with the highest reputation for beauty and sweetness.

He thought of his friends.

What had happened to them? He’d left them and the camels inside the ruined wall of the ancient, ruined city of Kara Koto—home of magic, home of a thousand legends, gateway—it was said—to the mysteries of Shamballah!

HAD they also been the victims of strange devils and gods during his absence?

As he stood there in the blackness he could hear nothing, see nothing except the stars overhead. Weren’t the stars themselves nothing but illusions?

He pulled himself together. He raised his head and let out a call that he and his friends used:

“Ki-ho-ho!”

It couldn’t have been very loud, but the cry slithered off into the vastness of the Gobi like a meteor of sound, the silence was such.

IT seemed as if a full minute must have passed before a reply came back. It came faintly, like an echo, and from a quarter opposite to the one from which he had been expecting it.

He tried it again.

This time there were two replies. From opposite directions! That was easy—Shattuck told himself. Juma and Champela had gone out to look for him. They’d taken opposite directions.

But the absurdity of this explanation occurred to him instantly. They wouldn’t have gone out

looking for him in the dark and made no sound. They wouldn’t have left the camels unguarded. They wouldn’t, that is, unless they also had been led away as he had been led away.

As he stood there in the almost solid black of a trough between two rolling dunes, a breath of air came in from the further blackness. It brought with it a scent that was unmistakable and unforgettable—musky, aromatic, a smell of temple incense that had somewhere, somehow, burrowed its way into the very depths of Shattuck’s soul.

Illusion or no illusion, he started to trace it.

There was no difficulty in that. The faint breeze held steady, it strengthened.

Shattuck had traveled perhaps a hundred yards along the winding trough of the dunes when he was aware that it was no longer so dark as it had been. Dawn, he guessed, could not be far off. Even now the sun, most likely, would be striking the high crests of the Tien Shan—the Heavenly Mountains of the Chinese—and reflecting its light out across the vast stretches of the Gobi.

He’d barely made this notation in his mind when he saw, dimly, a drift of shadows ahead of him, he heard a faint grind and shift of camel feet and gear. There could be no doubt about it.

A caravan was coming this way—a caravan strangely silent—a caravan traveling without bells, without other unnecessary sound of any kind.

III

SHATTUCK stooped and ran. It took but a few steps to take him around the curve of a dune. He stood there for a while in thought—measuring each second that passed, crowding into each second all that he could of planning, deduction, foresight.

Presently he crawled up the slope of sand to the top of the dune. It was still so dark that there was small chance of his being discovered, but he was as careful as any Apache on the scout.

He could see the caravan again—the camels moving nimbly as if urged to make speed. Each camel was heavily loaded. The mere contour of their shadowy forms and their movement was sufficient to advertise that.

In this part of the desert such a caravan could be headed for but a single place—that black and ruined city of Kara Koto.

Shattuck surveyed the dark horizon. He made out a black mass of different conformation than that of the undulating dunes. That would be Kara Koto with its crumbling walls.

Once Kara Koto had been one of the great cities of the world. The sands had buried it. It had lain buried for so many centuries that the mere existence of it had become a legend. Now, after all these centuries, the winds had shifted it out of its grave again.

WHY should this strange caravan be making for the dead city now?

There was only one answer. Kara Koto was not so dead as it seemed.

Why should the caravan be moving with such haste?

Manifestly to reach cover before daylight.

There came to Shattuck all that he had ever heard of or dreamed about in connection with Shamballah. Kara Koto, according to the gossip of half the world, was, in some way, the gateway to Shamballah.

More clearly and insistently yet, there came to Shattuck that strange conversation he'd had a little while ago with the spirit-presence of the Living Buddha. But this was no fresh illusion. Illusions were past.

He could foresee for himself and his friends all sorts of complications if he delayed where he was too long. Even now there was barely time for him to reach the ruined city before the caravan got there. If he failed in this, harm might come to old Juma and the mystic Champela.

Again he was running. He had chosen a direction that would bring him to the crest of a dune under which the caravan would have to pass.

It was almost day—*torang*, as they called it back in the hills—a white tail of light flaunting across the sky. It reminded him of a white-tailed horse he'd ridden, and the thought somehow gave him an extra dash of courage. It was like a good omen.

He straightened up with the sword of Kubla Khan held aloft. Suddenly the dark was shot full of golden mist as the sun came up.

"Halt, down there!" he shouted. He managed to laugh.

At his first glance he saw that the camels were the finest he had ever seen. How many there were of

them he couldn't even guess. Here among the dunes the trail wound round out of sight.

Both the camels and the men in charge of them, and then the dogs that swarmed along, were different from those of the Southern Gobi and the great caravan trails between China and Turkestan.

The camels were almost white and heavily woolled. The dogs were white. The men in charge and those who walked were dressed in white.

There was a strong prejudice against white animals and white clothing all through the Gobi. White was the color of Chinese mourning. Shattuck could imagine what sort of an impression a caravan like this might make on a superstitious native when glimpsed at night.

The caravan had halted. There were looks of fear, but more of wild amazement on the faces that Shattuck saw which were turned his way.

The faces were lean and brown. They were neither Chinese nor Mongolian. For the most part they were as aquiline as old Juma's face. Many of them were bearded.

SUDDENLY a name had flashed into Shattuck's thought.

These were the Agharti—the "subterranean people," as they were sometimes called; or the people of the Chud, meaning the "Wonder People," the "Miracle People"—one of the Lost Tribes, the people of Solomon, who'd kept alive through centuries the magic of Solomon, so some of the legends ran.

While their amazement still held them, Shattuck spoke again:

"Make ready a camel. I am to ride at your head."

There was some sort of a confab going on among those near the head camel. It was a splendid beast. There was hardly any load on it at all. Such as there was might have been mere personal equipment of sorts.

SOMEONE stepped a few paces from the others and called back:

"Duke, who are you?"

"Lo, he who speaks to you," he called back, "is Shadak Khan, the new War Lord of the World. It is he who shall clear the long red road to Shamballah for the coming of the King Maitreya. He has but now spoken to the Wearer of the Shining Robe!"

If it had started out to be a bluff it hadn't ended as one.

Before Shattuck had spoken half a dozen words, it was as if the words had taken possession of himself. It was as if his "genius" were speaking for him. It was always the "genius" that possessed him when he had a fight on hand, when he was in a corner.

He was in a corner now—in a jam.

There was a swift whistle and a soft thud in the sand near his feet. He looked down and saw an arrow vibrating there, half-buried in the sand. A glance told him the direction it had come from. It meant that there could be no retreat.

He came closer to the halted caravan. Like that, at least, he had the brow of the sandhill back of him. He wouldn't be potted from behind. But, even so, he could hear the movement of runners back of him.

Not only that, he could see a gathering tenseness of the caravan men below. With every step he took he could see fresh details. There were other weapons in evidence than spears and bows and arrows. Here and there a modern rifle gleamed. Rifles, as if carelessly, were pointed in his direction. These men were neither ignorant Mongolians nor superstitious Chinese. They were men to call a bluff.

"You hurry to your holes at sunup like white rabbits," he said. "You need a leader."

It was a reference to the riderless camel that led the caravan.

Not a word was spoken in reply.

Shattuck slowly turned and looked at those who had run up back of him. They were all young men, tall and slender, black-eyed, black-haired, but of a color almost fair.

There was no hint of the Mongol about them, nothing Chinese. Most of them carried bows and arrows of an antique fashion. He met their concentrated glance and looked them over.

He knew his danger, but his thought was that with men like these a man with the will, the imagination, and—the "genius!"—might set about the conquest of the world.

He smiled at them slightly, but his teeth were set and his eyes were narrowed.

Once more he turned and started down the hill.

IV

WE have come into a land of spells and enchantment," said old Juma, softly. "But you also know powerful spells, Lamachi."

It was a way he had of addressing Champela. It was like calling him little old lama—Lamachi.

"I know powerful spells, Juma-la," Champela answered gently.

It was as if he'd called the old Kirghiz, "Mr. Juma," which was also a form of affectionate address. The two men, so different in other ways as well as that of their respective ages, had a profound admiration for each other. It was a comradeship based on dangers shared, on something even of mystery.

If Champela, a mystic follower of "the Path," admired and loved this old warrior and robber, somewhat as a force in nature, like a tiger, like a turbulent mountain-stream, Juma, the bearded warrior, admired the young lama somewhat as he admired some distant, incomprehensible star.

They sat on the sand inside the ruined wall of Kara Koto. They'd come at last to the lost city of the Gobi. What next?

They'd been sitting here all the latter part of the night. How they'd come here neither was quite certain.

Juma held to the belief that they'd been led here by jinns. The jinns had appeared as an army of people with a beautiful Chinese maiden in their midst.

Even Shadak Khan—just "Dak" to Juma—had been bemused. He'd left them in charge of the camels and the maiden while he went back into the desert to settle some fight that seemed to be going on out there. He had not returned. It was almost dawn.

"Ai-ya-ya!" moaned Juma. "If Dak be lost—"

He beat his breast three hard knocks with his bony fist.

CHAMPELA sat very still. His shaven head of a lama was bare. He was as if unconscious of the penetrating desert cold. He'd let his heavy lama robe of red wool and even his silk undergarment slip from his shoulder. Both shoulder and right arm were bare. In the faint dawn-light his finely modeled face shone composed and white. On it was

a look of satisfaction almost like that of someone who has had a happy death.

"Lamachi," Juma whispered, "what do you see?"

"A long white caravan," the mystic answered.

"A long white caravan," moaned Juma, "is a sign of death."

"There has been a death."

"Who?"

"The leader of the caravan."

"Dak?"

"No!"

JUMA snarled a laugh. "There'll be deaths enough—one for each of his fingers and toes—by Satan I swear it!—if they've murdered Dak—though I have to follow them to hell—"

The lama, half-American as he was, faintly smiled as he put out a hand to quiet the old man. The hand stayed where it was on Juma's knee, the fingers tightened.

"Juma," Champela whispered, "the caravan is near. And so is Shadak Khan. I can hear his thought. He is calling us. He is telling to get the camels ready. We are to join him ..."

It was a prophecy, but, like most prophecies, it contained an element of the tragically unexpected.

Barely had they roused the camels and flung the light packs to their thinning backs when there was a rush and a howl like that of a rising wind. It was just at the point of day, and through that thin cold light Juma and Champela saw a mob of apelike creatures swing into sight.

They were men, all right, but nearly naked, covered with hair. There was an animal quality also in the way they herded. There was little sign of individual movement among them. They ran in a compact mass.

"The Chud!" cried Juma.

His eyes had brightened. He was shaking a little, but it was the tremor of a hound in the presence of game. From the pack of the nearest camel he'd slipped out a rifle.

"Hold!" said Champela.

It wasn't his opposition to killing that made him try to restrain the old warrior. It was a keener recognition of the danger involved. He also had heard of this tribe of the two so-called "subterranean peoples" living in the secret expanses of the Gobi—survivals of the inhabitants of the Gobi's buried cities.

There were two such peoples—the Chud and the Agharti. Under almost the same conditions the two peoples had drawn apart, although the old records had given them a common origin. The Chuds had gone down in the scale of evolution—down and back. While the Agharti had risen.

Even the camels seemed effected by the sudden apparition of the Chud. The animals had begun to moan, they tossed their heads and gnashed their teeth.

AT first it had seemed as if this swarm of subhuman people were making for the open desert through a breach in the wall. Then something, it may have been the scent of the camels, brought them round. In an instant they'd all turned at once, were looking through the dim light to where the two companions and their four camels stood in the shadow of the city's ruined wall.

The Chud horde let out a sort of moaning howl that took on volume.

They charged.

The Chud were armed. The arms they carried had come down from some long past age, but they were none the less effective for that—spears, maces, swords, knives of queer design. But, even in that breathless excitement of their charge, it could be seen that they were unused to the weapons.

Some brandished their weapons clumsily. Some even flung them away as if this were a race instead of a battle-charge.

Juma fired five shots into the thick of the swarm as fast as he could pump the modern rifle he held. With an oath—when he discovered that the magazine was empty—he clubbed the weapon and ran a few steps forward to meet the rush.

BUT Champela was even faster. Champela had rushed ahead of the old Kirghiz warrior with his bare arm raised. He shouted some plea or command. He went down under a dozen blows.

He would have been trampled to death—or torn to death—by that infernal pack, if it hadn't been for Juma. Juma was like a giant among the gnomish Chud. He reared twice their height. He swung his clubbed rifle and there was a swath like that cut by a scythe. Only, the bloody harvest wouldn't stay down.

It writhed. It screeched. It rose again.

Even now, Juma, old warrior that he was, could tell that he and Champela were not the chief

object of the attack. It was, perhaps, all that had saved them in this first rush.

The camels were what the Chud were after.

Juma, having fought his way free enough to lift Champela from the red welter at his feet, himself turned toward the camels.

The animals were in agony already—sprawling, roaring, choking—as the Chud swarmed over them, devouring them alive.

Champela revived as from a dash of cold horror. He flung himself at the uncanny butchers with bare hands. Juma was at his side. From some fallen enemy Juma had snatched an iron mace.

But the two of them were dragged down—strangled, blinded.

The last that either of them knew, just then, was the sound of a familiar voice.

V

AS Shattuck came down toward that white caravan standing in the early morning light of the desert he suffered from a single fear. Was this, after all, some other illusion that had been thrown up before his eyes?

There was enough about the appearance of everything he saw to make him believe that such might be the case.

The darkness had now turned to a sparkle of gold—a gold that was tinged with pink. In this glamorous light the camels were like creatures dreamed of by Sinbad. They were huge beasts. Their heavy coats were like a golden fleece. They had fine small heads and luminous eyes. Their trappings were of the finest—in polychromed leather, set with rough gems and some dark wood that was richly carved and polished.

No less extraordinary was the appearance of the men. Some of these had been riding as he started down the slope. These had slipped down from their mounts and now stood waiting.

Even the footmen, the camel-pullers, generally the lowest slaves of the desert, had a distinguished look about them, like high-class Arabs, but lighter. The general complexion was that of pale gold.

They were all dressed alike in cloaks of a general Mongolian cut, but white—evidently hand-woven from wool of their camels; and on their heads tall conical caps, also of wool, with earlaps,

but no decorations, no jewels.

IN comparison with the meanest of these men, Shattuck knew that he himself must look like a tramp.

But something was beating inside of him, holding possession of him—his genius, some higher self, call it what you will.

“Who speaks the language of Shadak Khan?” he asked, in the Northern dialect of China. It was the dialect he’d learned best as a child.

A group had formed about the lead camel. There was silence.

Thrust through the girth or pack-rope of this camel there was the usual spear with a flag attached such as the leaders of all caravans carry—one of the most ancient rites of the Gobi. The flag shook out in the breeze.

ON it Shattuck saw the symbol that he recognized. It was as if he’d swallowed a draught of some magic elixir.

“Who speaks the language of Shadak Khan?” he demanded again

One of the elders of the group near the lead camel answered him:

“Sir, I do—if you be he—”

“If I be he! Do you know your banner?”—he pointed at the flag.

“That banner has been carried by our people,” the old man said, “for more than half a thousand years. It’s the banner of the great Chi Tsu!”

“Who rides the camel?”

“Chi Tsu—when he comes again!”

“He has come again,” said. Shattuck—or the genius that was speaking for him. “You shall know him by his sword!”

And he thrust the carved hilt of the sword he carried toward the group. But he wouldn’t advance. Neither would he let them touch it. The group strained forward.

“Lo! Lo!”

It was almost a sob.

“The sign! The sign!”

From around the curve of the dunes other white-robed camel men came running. There was a rising shout.

“It’s the sign of Chi Tsu!”

Now the cries and most of the speech were in some ancient dialect of Mandarin Chinese—the

Kuan-hua—that Shattuck could understand. And also he could understand that reference of theirs to the sign of Chi Tsu.

For the sign on the flag and that on the hilt of his sword were the same and Chi Tsu was the old Chinese name of Kubla Khan.

“I am here!” Shattuck cried.

There was something about him—that genius of his that was shining out—shining through his rags and his dirt—that told all those who saw him and heard him that he—or his genius at least—was speaking the truth.

Some of those nearest him were already falling to their knees and bumping their heads against the sands.

“I am here!” Shattuck repeated. “No more as Kubla Khan. But as Shadak Khan! Come to clear the long red road—”

Through the tumult of sound about him he caught that swift staccato bark of Juma’s rifle.

VI

IT was as if he’d been plucked by a spur. He went as tense as a bucking horse before its first leap, and in a moment he had leaped. He’d made a spring for the lead camel of the caravan.

“Follow me!” he shouted. “And victory to the Gods!”

“*Lha-gyal-lo!*”

That wasn’t Chinese. It was a phrase he had picked up somewhere in the hills. But he knew what it meant. So, evidently, did a good many of those in this great white caravan.

They were repeating it like a battle-cry:

“*Lha-gyal-lo!*”

It was a cry that was to be repeated up and down the length and breadth of Asia as the battle-cry of Shadak Khan.

Lo, Kubla Khan—Gesher Khan—Shak Khan—Captain Trouble!—he was back again in the Gobi, and his battle-cry was this:

“*Lha-gyal-lo!*”

IT was only later that Shattuck learned that the lead camel of the caravan was one that had never before been ridden. It was a lordly beast, young and powerful and proud. Its name was Shen Lung—as one might say, “Dragon of the Winds.”

Like the winds it ran now, all right—at the feel of that living weight on its back. It ran with the speed of the wild camels of the Gobi. Under that deceptive caparison of white wool there was a body as lean and tough as that of a bull moose.

Shen Lung was making a hurricane of his own as he shot his great weight forward.

There was a wind in Shattuck’s face that almost stopped his breath. But, somehow, he had found the saddle. Still, he knew that it was by the grace of God—no less!—that the camel was on a familiar track. It was a track that led him over a high breach—banked up with sand—in the ruined walls of Kara Koto.

Almost from the first giddy slip into speed, Shen Lung had left the rest of the caravan far behind him.

Shattuck heard a diminishing shout in the wind. That shout was barely gone when he was hearing another. It was a different and complex roar that reached him from the ruined city.

The camel ran up a slope and had pitched down the other side. Shattuck was thrown, but as luck—or Destiny—would have it, he’d landed on his feet. He’d clung to his sword—as every nerve of him would have clung to an arm or a leg.

And there before him he saw such a spectacle of slaughter that a shock of sickness hit him. It came with a stench of blood. He saw dead men lying about—wounded men crawling about like scotched baboons. But the thing that had really slugged him was the spectacle of a red feast in progress over his slaughtered camels.

It was the fear that smote him.

ONE glance had been enough for him to recognize these people. He’d heard a thousand weird and grisly tales of the Chud. These were the Chud. In their ravenous appetite for meat the Chud were cannibals. So many of the campfire tales of the Gobi had it—tales of travelers lured into lonely places and there torn to bits—eaten alive.

But who had ever seen the Chud and lived to tell of them afterward?

Once in a Chinese village Shattuck had seen what he’d taken to be a hairy idiot displayed like a bear in a cage. A Mongol with a horribly scarred face was exhibiting the wonder.

“The only Chud in captivity!”

Curious the memories that spin through the

brain of a man in crowded moments.

The words of the Mongol barker came back. The Chuds ate human flesh. The Chuds lived in caves. The Chuds were a cross of bears and bats.

Shattuck caught the Chud nearest him by the hair and snatched him backward. He saw a grimace of insane rage and terror. Shattuck's sword was at the creature's throat. But the man was old.

"Where are the white gods, my friends?" Shattuck panted. There was no answer. Some delayed band of the Chud came racing from among the ruins—fifty or a hundred. They made straight for Shattuck with a sort of gibbering shriek. The shriek sounded like wild laughter.

They were on him almost before he had time to fling the old man aside and he was caught in a turmoil of stench and demoniac riot that momentarily maddened him. From this he fought himself clear with the mad energy of a man caught in a whirlpool. Covered with blood he staggered clear.

All this an affair of seconds.

But seconds ago Shen Lung had swept over the wall with him into this stinking hell.

Where was Champela? Where was Juma? Had they been the first victims of this orgy?

He could see what had passed with the camels. He could tell by the way they had fallen—the way they looked even under this living cloak of human vermin squirming over them now. The beasts had been literally torn to pieces on their feet.

The sight and the smell—and also the fact, perhaps, that again he was free of an unaccustomed rider on his back—had brought Shen Lung, the great white camel, to a stand. Shen Lung stood there, sprawling, swaying slightly, a little stricken with the panic of what he perceived and this sudden separation from his mates.

All this was happening with a speed like that of an avalanche—deceptive, seemingly slow, but shrieking toward new catastrophe like a high-powered shell.

AT sight of the great white camel a mob of the Chud who'd been crowded from the earlier feast sprang at him with a howl of glee. One was quicker than the others—covered with blood, armed with an antique scimitar.

Shattuck met him on the run and cut him just above the eyes. He sliced at others. He was horrified, raging. But he would no longer kill unless

he had to. These weren't men. They were animals. They were the degenerate children of men.

He bawled that battle-cry of his—"Victory to the Gods!"—like a prayer, like a mantram, a word of power.

"*Lha-gyal-lo!*"

It must have been a mantram like that.

His heart leaped as he saw two red shapes lying close together. Some way or other he cleaved a clear space about them.

"Champela!" he cried. "Juma!" He was kneeling in the blood and slime at the side of his friends—he made a curious picture with something symbolic in it, half-Mercy, half-Murder, like the great Pan Ku, the Maker of the World Himself—when reinforcements got there.

There were other fast camels in the Agharti caravan, and the men to ride them, too, when the new incarnation of Kubla Khan was there.

THEY came over the ruined wall of Kara Koto in a white stampede—the camels, as was their wont, crazy to follow where their leader, Shen Lung, had already showed them the way.

The Agharti fighting men fell to work.

The Chud were beginning to scatter like sated rats. They were heavy with blood and filth. Most of them had abandoned their weapons.

"Don't kill!"

It was curious that the first order Shadak Khan ever gave to these new followers of his should be precisely that.

"Herd them!" Shattuck shouted. "Get them together! Pen them up!"

He turned again to his battered companions.

Shadak Khan or no Shadak Khan, he would have given all he'd dreamed of or ever hoped for to know that they'd still live.

VII

IN every victory some shadow to maintain the old balance of light and shadow, high and low, of *yin* and *yang*!

Shattuck meditated on *yin* and *yang* in the hours that followed. Now, "yin," according to Chinese philosophy, is the dark female principle, that fumes up from the depth of the earth; "yang" the bright male principle of the sunlight.

Yet now the Agharti, who were a fine, brave people, were apparently headed for the center of the earth.

They'd made two litters, at their new Khan's direction, and on these they'd placed with infinite care his two followers, the warrior-chief and the lama-chief, Juma and Champela.

The Agharti's handling of the Chud had been exceeding swift. At that order of Shadak Khan's to spare the creatures it had become an affair of staves and camel-whips. Only the badly wounded of the Chud were dispatched, and these swiftly.

The remainder of the horde—all those who hadn't got away to the desert—were corralled like goats. Like goats they would be driven later into some rock-fortress of the Agharti far down under the ruins of Kara Koto.

Even in those first few minutes, while Shattuck was more occupied with the care of his friends than the wonders of these two lost tribes he'd somehow brought under his dominion, he was learning much about the Chud and the Agharti. Both were, in fact, descendants of some early race. Both had become what the outside world had come to know as a "subterranean" people.

But only the Chud were truly subterranean. They subsisted on bats. They herded them. They followed the bat swarms in their mysterious migrations from cave. to cave. The Chud did this as other nomads followed their flocks across the scant grasslands of desert and mountain.

THE Agharti, on the other hand, while keeping alive the secret cult of the ancient race, had maintained a connection with the outside world. There were emissaries of their race scattered everywhere throughout the world—watching, waiting for the return of the King of the world. They sent an annual caravan to some place they called by the Russian name of "Belavoyde"—a name that meant "White Waters"—where they met some wandering division of their people who lived in the outside world. ...

"These two we must save," said Shattuck—Shadak Khan. "With them—and the sword of Kubla Khan—the road to Shamballah lies open."

"They may live," said an elder of the Agharti, "if we can get them to the Temple."

The elder had the name of Li Ko-liang. It sounded like an incantation to Shattuck. In Li Ko-

liang's pale-gold face he saw some quality of a benediction. He felt a breath of cleansing hope.

"Where is the Temple, Li Ko-liang?"

"The Temple, Khan, is in the Home of the Dragon, far down in the great cave."

"Far down in the earth, Father Li, will there not be too much *yin*?"

"Khan, where there is *yin* there is also *yang*."

"Let us make haste, then, but softly, to the Temple, Li ko-liang."

They would have made a litter for Shattuck himself, if he'd have permitted it, and carried him, since he wouldn't ride. He wouldn't ride because he wanted to walk beside those two litters in which his friends were carried.

And, once more the great white camel, Shen Lung, hereafter the camel of Shadak Khan, took up the march.

They passed through the drifted ruins of Kara Koto to where a great rift opened under a tilted ledge of rock. The rift was the mouth of a cavernous descent that zigzagged downward into darkness.

Here, either from the camel-packs or from some secret hiding-place, a score or more of flambeaus were produced, and Shattuck caught the familiar odor of burning crude oil, although the smell had been disguised somewhat—and the flame also quickened, it seemed—by some other oil, the oil of sesame, perhaps.

The camels knew the place. They did not seem to mind the bobbing flames. For that matter, so far as Shattuck could judge, over half of the caravan must have been moving, easily, swiftly, in the dark.

The way down followed a descending ledge, smooth but often at a dizzy pitch. On one side there was a drop into darkness, on the other a wall of rock.

AND sometimes, after a shifting turn, the wall and the abyss had changed sides. The ceiling of this causeway to the "Home of the Dragon," as Li Ko-liang referred to it, had disappeared long ago not to appear again.

No one spoke. The white camels padded softly. The white dogs, that had never barked since Shattuck had first seen them, trotted as if along a familiar lane.

One by one Shattuck saw the flambeaux disappear, and still there seemed to be no loss of light.

Then he saw, as they rounded another turn,

what looked like a vast tapestry of woven fire against an expanse of wall. It looked like a tapestry in the course of being woven—the play of a thousand shuttles of clear flame playing back and forth, up and down. A lacelike pattern would be formed. It might hold for the time of a dozen breaths, then start to shift and play again.

He'd heard rumors about these "fire-halls" and "fire-writings" of the old sacred caves in various parts of Asia, but this was the first he had ever seen of them. His engineering mind was telling him that here was a seepage of oil or gas, probably mixed with water or something more volatile still.

"We are near the Temple, Khan," said Li Ko-liang, softly.

"Has the Temple a holy man, Father Li?" Shattuck asked.

"Yea, Khan," the elder whispered; "the holiest of all, even he of whom you spoke—He of the Shining Garment."

VIII

SHATTUCK had the sensation of having entered the greatest temple in the world. It was—the Temple!

They'd come into a cavern that seemed immeasurable, yet it was but one of a series of chambers through which they had passed. There'd been other fire-tapestries. Here and there a twisting column of flame as if flowered against the roof.

In the Temple there was a lake of fire. It was, Shattuck judged, about a hundred yards in length and a half of that in breadth. But neither was this a mass or a solid sheet of flames. The water of the lake was visible. Across this, back and forth, now rising into thin spirals and again sinking out of sight, twining and gliding like ten thousand luminous skaters, the fire played in a myriad of blue flames.

The lake lay against a wall that rose straight up and lost itself in the shadows overhead. This wall had been carved into a series of deep recesses or niches, and in each of these a god smiled down at the eternal fire.

The gods were colossal. But they were small attendants to the great central figure, that of Maitreya, the future King of the World.

Shattuck heard a whisper, at his side:

"Him, O Shadak Khan, for whom you have

come to prepare the way!"

He thought that it was Li Ko-liang who had whispered to him. But as he swiftly turned he discovered that for the moment he was standing alone. Then the memory in his brain told him that he'd heard the whisper in English.

He spoke aloud in English, careless of what those who heard him might think of it.

"That's right," he said. "I have come to prepare the way."

The great image of Maitreya also was smiling as the light flared up. Shattuck took it as a sort of promise as he turned to his friends. The promise was fulfilled.

WITHIN a week, both Juma and Champela were up and about again.

Sometimes by the sacred lake of fire and sometimes up in the sun, where the chastened Chud were now working to clean up the ruins of Kara Koto, Shadak Khan sat with his two friends during their convalescence and talked about the coming regeneration of the world.

Throughout the world there was trouble. Captain Trouble would clear it away. After Captain Trouble had done his work—or maybe before that time—the King of the World would appear, and the world would know peace and plenty again.

But there were things closer and just as vital to talk about.

First, there was the rebuilding of Kara Koto.

"We've found a capital," said Shadak Khan. "And we've found a people. Also we've found a thing worth fighting for."

The three of them sat together one day by the sacred lake of fire while a cold Gobi storm made the great Temple more than ever a desirable place to live in, when they were aware that a fourth had joined them.

"You've made a good start, Captain Trouble," said a quiet voice in English.

They looked up quickly.

They saw, dimly, the shape of the Living Buddha standing there.

"Great friend," said Shattuck softly, clutched by a sudden fear, "is all this also illusion?"

The Presence smiled. Just then he looked like the vast stone image of Maitreya. He shook his head.

"You've stood the test of illusion, Shadak Khan," he said. "And your work has just begun."