

Spider Tong

Captain Trouble series

by Perley Poore Sheehan, 1877-1943

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Chapter I

IT WAS while he was still far back in the Gorge of the Grasping Fist passes leading from China into Tibet—that Captain Trouble first heard of the Spider Tong. The man who told him about it was a Chinese gentleman named Mr. Wang. An elderly gentleman dressed in a long coat of gray silk, with purple-black silk trousers neatly tied at the ankles over spotless white socks. Then the long-one of the old cue, and a mandarin cap „A tsung-ping,“ the captain remarked to himself—meaning a „red button.“ It took nerve on the part of a Chinaman nowadays to wear the regalia of the old empire, no matter where he was.

And Mr. Wang not only wore the mandarin cap with the red button on it; there was a ceremonial fan sticking from the back of his neck.

He himself, Captain Trouble, in such a presence, felt like a tramp. He was just returning from the wild Hou-Shan—„the Country Back of the Mountains,“ meaning this end of Tibet, where, as successor to Kubla Khan, he was establishing another capital. It had been rough going—and fighting—more or less all the way. He was dressed in nondescript riding clothes.

EXCEPT to bathe and shave, which he did every morning, hot or cold, safe or not safe, he'd hardly been out of his boots for a month.

Captain Trouble, Shadak Khan, the Fighting Fool; otherwise, Pelham Rutledge Shattuck, of the U.S.A., the rising war-lord of China and perhaps the world.

Except for the long clean sword across his knees, there was no sign of royalty about him at all. Mr. Wang kept looking at the sword—first at Shattuck, then at the sword.

Kubla's sword! Scepter of the Grand Mogul! All Asia was beginning to whisper and sing about it.

„You risk your life to save mine,“ said Shattuck. „Why?“

„The Spider Tong has already bereft me of family and fortune,“ Mr. Wang explained.

They were speaking the Mandarin dialect, rich in various compliments unnecessary to report.

„There was a Spider Tong I knew of as a boy,“ said Shattuck. „The members of it put up bamboo scaffolding when my father was building his warehouses at Shanghai.“

Mr. Wang's face gave the hint of a smile. It was like a face carved from old ivory; and some of its tone, Shattuck guessed, had been given it by opium.

„These Spiders,“ said Mr. Wang, „are different. They also build. But a web. In which they catch all who are not spiders. And drain their victims to an empty husk.“

The interview was taking place near the entrance of the Fur Girl Cave, a vast grotto containing, among other wonders, a boiling spring. The place, largely on account of that flow of hot water, was becoming more and more like home to Shattuck. A home that was huge; and still, remote from the filth and blood of battle; and also with secret roads in the Seven Directions—East and West,

North and South, Down and Up, and Nowhere, the direction you take when you die.

Shattuck was sitting cross-legged on a pile of saddle-blankets.

From where he sat he could look out of the opening of the cave—as high and wide as a triumphal arch—to a filmy waterfall beyond the gorge, less than a quarter of a mile away. Only when he listened could he hear the murmur of the falling water. It was like the hum of a great wheel. Long before the water reached the bottom of the gorge it had turned to mist.

To the left and right of the waterfall, wherever there was footing, there were dancing sheets of green where vines and ferns were swinging in the breeze.

CHINA, hard hit in a thousand places, was still beautiful. This after all, was his second Fatherland. He loved it.

„Now they are talking of forming the One Great Tong,“ said Mr. Wang. „The Tong of the Spiders, who will web the Empire back into a single fabric again. If that should come to pass, he who rules the Spider Tong may rule the world.“

Shattuck, seated on his throne of saddle blankets, didn't know whether he should dismiss the old gentleman, or let him go on with his talk. He was so tired he could scarcely keep himself awake. Yet he had to be tireless. Discipline had made him nearly so. Discipline and something else.

There were times when he felt as a ship might feel, with all sails set and a favoring wind, bound for some port still beyond the horizon—a city of shining domes and minarets—a new capital in a new world—ruled by the Maitreya.

HE looked at Mr. Wang and saw that the old gentleman was again looking at the sword that lay across his knees.

„No one will rule the world except with this for a scepter,“ Shattuck said.

„The sword of Kubla,“ said Mr. Wang. „Is it the real one?“

Shattuck stared. „It is.“ The old man was foolish.

While he was still back in the Blue Lake country—country of the Kokonor—whispers had reached Shattuck in various ways that fresh trouble was brewing in Minchow.

A wandering lama of the Red Cult, they who are magicians to a man, had cast a handful of finger-bones into the air one night at the side of the campfire, then informed him that „the Cloudy Garden,“ as the wide Minchow Valley was called before the Great Sorrow hit it, was again fast becoming „Feng-ti-Yu,“ which is to say, the Valley of Hell.

To that Captain Trouble, Khan Shadak, had replied, that most of China was a Valley of Hell and that Tibet was even worse. There'd been work to do in Tibet. There were ten thousand men up there now working to restore the ancient capital of Kubla Khan. The dream of empire was taking on reality.

But as soon as he could, he'd started back again for Minchow, leaving Juma, the old Kirghiz bandit, who was to be his Minister of War, in the new dispensation, and Champela, the half-American Tibetan mystic, who was to be Minister of Peace, when there would be peace, to see that the work went along and that the workers were fed.

Shattuck had a hundred Arghati with him.

The Arghati themselves were magicians to some extent. Their long life of seclusion in the depths of the Gobi had made them so. Dwellers in the dark, as they'd called themselves. Developing in themselves, or keeping alive at any rate,

the faculties that all men had when the world began but which now most of the world had forgotten.

The world, the Arghati said, was swinging around to another dawn—another cycle; and he who carried the sword of Kubla Khan would use that sword to smooth the way for the new King of the World, the King of Peace. The Maitreya! Mi Leh Fu, as the Chinese called Him. In Tibetan Rigden-jyepo.

Shattuck brought his attention back to the fine old Chinese gentleman in front of him.

It occurred to him that the Arghati had warned him to be careful about one who would appear before him in the guise of a friend during the third phase of the moon.

BUT Shattuck had lost track of time. He had too much else to think about, too much to do.

When he did take note of time, it was generally in terms of split seconds—everything happening so fast.

He was thinking about that mysterious scientific magic of the Arghati. They had a way of saying that there was no future and no past. Not in the usual sense of the word. Past and Future were „part of the same landscape“—a sort of East and West of time, so to speak—and you could see in one direction as easily as you could in another.

There were not many Arghati in the world. Strange how that prophecy of theirs about the Maitreya had spread through the world. The coming Buddha!

Something like that.

And Shattuck motioned the nice old Mr. Wang to come near and make himself comfortable.

Mr. Wang, he had been informed, had been carried up into the Gorge of the Grasping Fist in an elegant sedan chair. There were a dozen bearers who spelled each other, six on and six off, because the climb was steep.

Besides the chair-porters, there had been about twenty other coolies; altogether a good deal of style for a man who claimed that he'd been ruined.

But all millionaires, Shattuck reflected, were like that—claiming that they were paupers if they had only one million left.

MR. WANG had a light step for a man of his apparent age. Shattuck vaguely reflected that he would have been more comfortable if he'd kept a bodyguard near him. But his men were tired, after traveling all night. He'd ordered them into another part of the cave where they could sleep in peace.

„Ai-ya!“ breathed Mr. Wang. „The Spider Tong. The new one. Has not my lord, Shadak Khan, heard that the world is in for a fresh deal of some sort?“

He tittered a little, and drew the ceremonial fan from the back of his neck. As Mr. Wang opened the fan, with a graceful and ceremonial movement, it seemed to Shattuck that he saw a glint of bright steel.

Chapter II

THE thing was impossible, and he dismissed it from his mind. He'd been mixed up in so much fighting for the past many months that he was seeing

death and the threat of death every way he looked. Besides, he was tired. He felt as if he could go to sleep and sleep for a month.

Mr. Wang had remained standing. He appeared to have a doubt in his mind as to how he should act in the presence of this great one. The great one was not only a foreigner, a man with pale eyes. He was a great war lord.

There were very few in China, now, even among the educated classes, who hadn't heard that Kubla Khan was back on earth in the person of a white man.

„The Spiders,“ Mr. Wang murmured, apologetically, „declare that even my lord, the successor of Kubla Khan, is back of their movement.“

„Hell's in their belly, and they're belching lies,“ said Shattuck.

„So I was certain,“ Mr. Wang declared. „Else why should they be taking council to have you murdered before you get back to Minchow? They have entered Minchow. They are worse than the bandit known as General Jade—Yu, the Green Shiver—he whom you killed. The Spiders say, ‘Why should anyone go hungry when there is so much meat walking about?’“

„You mean—“

Mr. Wang nodded, with his ivory smile.

„Women and children,“ he murmured. „To each lodge of the Spider Tong a feast every night. And in these times of want, the Tong grows swiftly.“

As Shattuck listened, with a growing rage and horror to the story that Mr. Wang was telling him, a number of the Arghati came ghosting into the far part of the cave.

The soft voice of one of them came to Shattuck.

„Pardon, Great One; but we have a feeling that you are running into danger.“

„Be at peace,“ said Shattuck. „I have just been warned.“

IT was queer that these people should have got word of the murder plot against him. But he was accustomed to the mysteries of the Arghati by this time. He'd given them but a glance. He'd given them a gesture of dismissal.

For a time they still lingered there, lean and dark. They looked like neither Mongols nor Chinese. They might have belonged to some early Aryan tribe—the noble race, as they were called in India; forerunners of all the white people in the world.

„How'd you know where to find me?“ Shattuck asked Mr. Wang.

He'd been keeping his movements secret to some extent. There were enough enemies on his trail without advertising for more. Russians, Japanese, Chinese Communists, the Nationalists also; then any number of independent bandit chiefs who knew that they were doomed unless Shadak Khan met his own doom first.

„Prince,“ said Mr. Wang, „I may be merely old-fashioned and a little crazy. But I went daily to the Sublime Mount and there questioned the Goddess of the Wind.“

„Go on,“ said Shattuck. „But suppose the Spiders did the same. Then they would know that I was on my way. As no doubt they do, if they're planning to kill me.“

„May the Lord of the Sky protect you.“

The Arghati, Shattuck reflected, could foresee a man's fate; but not even they could prevent that fate being carried out.

Mr. Wang was kneeling now, comfortably enough, on another saddle-blanket just in front of him.

„By what sign,“ Shattuck asked, „are these Spiders known?“

„By the sign of the Bite,“ said Mr. Wang. „But many of us have taken the Bite: merely to save our lives. May I show you what it looks like, O Lord of the World?“

And the fine old Chinese gentleman drew back the overhang of one of his silk gray sleeves exposing an ivory wrist. The wrist was encircled with a bracelet of pure green jade, so tight that it must have been put there while the slender hand was smaller yet. Then, just above the bracelet, three curious red marks.

Mr. Wang leaned forward. So did Shattuck.

As Shattuck did so, it was as if he'd been struck at by a striking snake. And the snake was Mr. Wang. Then, with the sting of fangs still in his shoulder, Shattuck felt as if the snake had thrown a coil about his neck.

Nowhere! Meaning Death! That also was one of the directions of the roads leading off from the Fur Girl Cave—a tradition so old that the place had been left deserted practically since the original Kubla Khan had passed this way.

INSTEAD of being the fine old gentleman he'd appeared to be, Mr. Wang was showing himself to be a first-class demon. He wasn't ivory any more. He was red-hot steel.

He'd aimed a blow with a razor at Shattuck's jugular. Missing that by inches, he'd slipped his arm about Shattuck's throat and was trying to sever his windpipe.

At the same moment, a clamor had filled the cavern—multiplied by ten thousand echoes. Shattuck thought of the hundred faithful who were his only escort when he'd reached this place. He'd led them—and himself—into an ambush. Were they also being murdered?

Chapter III

EVEN as Shattuck struggled, with that sense of a nearness of death upon him, his fighting mind was telling him pretty clearly what had happened.

The Red Sect lama who'd thrown the finger-bones for him across the divide in Tibet was a part of the plot, putting into his mind the thought that he was needed back in Minchow. The plotters would have guessed that he would leave the bulk of his growing army at Kokonor, there where he planned to make his headquarters for the conquest of Tibet.

Minchow was to have been another center. From Minchow as a capital, he'd bring this wild province of Kansu into line. He'd organize the untamed brigands into the best soldiers in the world, make their country—with its piled-up mountains and fertile valleys—into another Switzerland.

With Kansu and Tibet back of him, he'd be ready to overrun Mongolia and free Manchuria...

All this while he was fighting—fighting to free his sword arm, fighting to keep that razor from his throat, fighting for air.

At the same time, his ears were bringing him evidence of what was happening elsewhere. The corridor into the inner cave, where the Arghati had established their quarters, must have been blocked. Above and below the main

entrance to the cave, through which he had looked just now, there had been sentinels posted.

They must have been ambushed immediately following the arrival of their chief. Mr. Wang was their chief. His arrival in state, his old-fashioned manner, had been a blind. Room in the cave to have concealed a thousand—or ten thousand—men.

Now at their bloody work of slaughter.

The Arghati had warned him. They would be dying now on his account.

Whether they were or not, their strength came thrilling into him. Up from the sword in his hand there came a shock of mysterious electricity at high tension. He had freed himself.

Bleeding! He knew the feel. There was still a riot of noise and echoes about him as if the cave were filled with thunders trying to escape.

„You die anyway,“ shrilled a voice. „The bite of the Spider is poisoned.“

And there stood the enemy who'd passed himself off as the fine old Mr. Wang. The mandarin cap and the cue of long hair were gone—the polished head looked like a skull. Gone also the gray silk coat, revealing a sinewy torso and wiry slim arms.

On the breast of the fellow Shattuck saw a repetition of those red marks he'd seen on the wrist—magnified now, and recognizable; a skull and bones, tattooed in red.

„Tzuren!“

The word meant „poison-doctor.“

„One of the greatest,“ came the sneering reply. „Head of the Spider Tong!“

AND the Spider Chief made a sliding jump to one side, swift as a shadow, when Shattuck lunged. Swift as a hunting spider. He'd bitten—as he himself would have said; he had only to wait for the poison to take effect.

Shattuck's knees went limp. With an obvious effort to right himself he went into a reeling fall. This time the Spider Chief was taken off his guard. The sword of Kubla flashed and the poison knife went spinning, taking a hand along.

At the loss of his hand, the Poison Chief went into a sort of delirium—cursing, dancing, staring.

Shattuck felt no slightest touch of pity.

„Ai-ya!“ he shrilled softly, in imitation of one of the cries the tzuren had uttered.

And with his left hand he snatched at the amputated wrist and gave it a twist that brought the poison doctor to the floor of the cave. It was a twist of pa-shih, the old Chinese system from which the Japanese took their jiu-jitsu.

The man was on his back and Shattuck was ready to flay his breast of that poison brand.

„Quick,“ said Shattuck. „Death—or stop the action of your men!“

„I lack the breath,“ said the poison doctor.

„Then tell me the word!“

And it was like that that Shattuck came into knowledge of the password and various other gems of wisdom concerning the Spider Tong.

Chapter IV

SHATTUCK had shouted „Dzuk!“—a camel-word, really used by camel-drivers when they want their beasts to lie down. A hiss and a click that carried as no other word might have carried; and he was conscious that it had been heard and understood.

He'd dragged his victim next to the stream that flowed away from the hot spring. The water was hot, all right; but it wasn't boiling. And there were salts in it worth a fortune to a man with an open wound and in danger of bleeding to death.

He threw the Spider Chief face down and knelt on him. He laved his own wound. The shock of that hot and salt-impregnated water was like a fresh stab—only worse as it struck his open ground. Sometimes—often—pain was good.

He jerked the bleeding wrist of the Spider Man forward and thrust it into the healing stream.

He listened. There was less noise. From his own shirt he ripped a linen strip and made a tourniquet for his enemy's severed wrist.

KILLING an enemy in a fight was one thing; Kneaving him to bleed to death was another.

But the act of mercy was one of those that cause some men to forswear good actions for the rest of their lives. As he turned from his task of tightening the makeshift bandage, he discovered that his precious sword was gone—the sword of Kubla Khan—the hope of Asia—the hope of the world!

But if someone had been bold enough, and deft enough, to steal the weapon from his side during the minute or so that his back was turned, laving his own wound and that of the Spider Chief, why hadn't the thief killed him with it?

He'd been unarmed. He'd been kneeling as if predestined to execution.

He guessed the answer—all this in the racing time of thought. The man who'd taken the sword had believed that he and the Spider Chief had struck up an understanding. The man hadn't dared kill them both, nor yet kill one without the other.

There'd been that cry to cease action. Yet here the thief had seen the head of the Spider Tong, the enemy, and the sword of Kubla Khan.

He had taken the sword and fled.

For a reeling second, while the nightmare truth of this flared in his brain, Shattuck longed for death. Then in a frenzy of action, he was his fighting self again. He'd scrambled toward the pile of blankets where he'd eased himself of his belt and holster when preparing to rest.

BEFORE he could cover a tenth of the distance, he saw a dozen strangers lurch into the cave through the arched entrance. Blind instinct was all that could have made him stoop and seize the thing that lay on the floor of the cave at his feet—a dead hand still gripping the razor-edged knife with his own blood on the blade.

„Dzuk! Dzuk!“ he howled at them. „Kneel, you camel spawn!“

And as he howled this at them he rushed at them with that ghastly weapon raised.

They were bandits of the sort now swarming over China, especially in wild Kansu—two or three of them almost naked, here and there a uniform, a general

flutter of rags, all sorts, but all of them armed with rifles, even a bayonet or two in place. And all of them quick of eye, as with animals long used to hunt or starve.

There was a clatter and a falling back as they saw what must have appeared a devil bearing down on them with a dead man's hand as a weapon, and that hand armed.

„Dzuk!“ Shattuck howled. „I'm your new chief! I'm the Dragon Spider!“

There was one who doubted this—a thick-set man, pock-marked and military. He uttered something incoherent. He lifted his rifle with its fixed bayonet and made a lunge. As he did so, Shattuck flung hand and knife into his face.

The man let out a stifled yelp and tilted back.

On the instant, Shattuck was on him and had his rifle. With a sideswipe he knocked the fellow the rest of the way.

But that show of resistance on the part of their leader had been enough, brief and weak as it had been, to set the others in action. There was a shot that went wild.

Shattuck stabbed the man who fired, and the bayonet held. There was no time now for parley. A moment more and he would have been surrounded, unarmed. He was almost surrounded as it was, but his fighting eye had shown him a possible hole—a recruit just to the side of him, still so goggle-eyed at what he had seen—was seeing still—that he'd forgotten what his gun was for.

Shattuck jumped sideways, as he had seen the Spider Chief leap; and brought the recruit a jolt with his shoulder.

They went down together; but of the two of them Shattuck alone knowing what it was all about.

Before either the recruit he'd bowled over or anyone else divined his purpose, he'd scrambled to the pile of blankets and thrown himself behind it.

Safe harbor, this was. In another fraction of time he'd jerked out his gun.

Chapter V

THIS part of the battle was over. In quick succession, Shattuck fired three shots. The pock-marked man had come up with a screaming curse—practically from the moment he'd touched the floor, events had been racing so fast. He was the first to drop. There'd come an echo of the screaming curse from the far side of the cave, and there was the Spider Chief frothing forward telling his men to kill this foreign devil—this yang-kwei-tzu, with trimmings about the foreign devil's mother. He was the next to drop. Then a third, who made the mistake of taking too much time to aim his rifle.

„Chiu ming!“

And that was a cry from the recruit Shattuck had bowled over, asking Shattuck to save his life. It was no more than the chirp of a sparrow in the blood and thunder of this hole in the hills, but Shattuck heard it.

„So be it!“ he called.

IT looked like more war as a dozen more bandits came stampeding into the cave from the outer trail. But they were on the run and brought panic with them.

Shattuck caught the message they were trying to tell even before their comrades did. The Arghati were coming.

Coming they were, in fact, from two directions—from the outer trail and from the back of the cave.

That cry Shattuck had let out a while ago—the one he'd bled from the Spider Chief—had done its work, after all. It had checked the rush of the Spiders, given a chance the Arghati needed to get away by an inner passage and come to Shattuck's relief from another direction.

Shattuck took his chance. He clambered from cover, with his automatic ready for action.

„Down guns and up hands!“ he said.

There was a herding backward, and Shattuck followed up. But guns began to drop and hands went up. There were three dead men on the floor, each with a bullet through the center of his forehead.

That wasn't a detail to escape these hunter-eyed bandits either. Brave as starving tigers in their way. But superstitious.

The Arghati came in. They looked like an army, although a dozen of them had been killed or wounded in their first attempt to rush the corridor that separated them from Shattuck—Shadak Khan to them, the Trouble Khan, heir of Kubla.

Shattuck singled out the recruit who'd asked for quarter.

„What's your name?“ he asked, while the Arghati troops were rounding the bandits up against the wall.

„They call me,“ the boy answered, „the *One-Eyed Cat*.“

One eye was missing. But he had a „do“ name also. Some fond mother had suggested it probably in a past that now must have seemed remote. The name was Meisun, the only possible, translation of which was Sweet Gentleness.

„Meisun,“ Shattuck asked, „are you a Spider?“

There was fright in the boy's eye as he showed the marks of the „bite“ on his arm.

Shattuck clapped him lightly on the shoulder. „You belong to me,“ he said, and he had the melancholy comfort of seeing the fright fade from Meisun's single eye.

Chapter VI

IT was what the people of Kansu called the Season of Greater Heat, about the middle of July. But the night was cool enough as Shattuck and the boy, Meisun, found their way down the dark gorge to a cove where the bandits had herded their ponies.

Luck was with them. An attempt had been made to stampede the herd—what was left after the bulk of the Spiders had made their getaway. Four ponies were left in the dark. Shattuck and Meisun were mounted and each with a pony to spare for the long gallop across the plain to Minchow.

Shattuck knew why the Spiders had left. It wasn't because they'd been routed. It was because they'd got what they'd come for. His own life also would have been acceptable to them. Perhaps they would have liked to use him at one of their „feasts.“ He might have furnished them amusement, at any rate, as he squirmed under torture.

BUT the real object of their ambush had been the sword of Kubla Khan.

Shattuck tried to master his melancholy, his despair. He was bereft. Something had been taken from his life—the purpose of his life—all his dreams. Life had stopped. Not stopped but had gone blind and crazy, like a rudderless ship in a gale.

He must regain the treasure else he die.

The Big Dipper was low in the sky—the „Bushel“ it was called, here in China: the Tou. The North Star was a goddess: Tou Mu.

Good enough to pray to, anyway—that star he'd looked at as a kid, here in China, over there in the United States. Tou Mou was on their left. They were headed East, the Blue Dragon direction.

It was very late. The plain was dark.

Shattuck had given orders. To Paspas, his Arghati captain, he had explained what he intended to do. And Paspas, at least, had made no objection. There was a grain of hope in that.

Meisun, the One-Eyed Cat, was going to be useful. The gallop, the night, and perhaps some animal or juvenile intuition for Shattuck's friendliness, was helping the boy to talk.

Wang was the real name of the Spider Chief—Wang Chung, as one might almost say Mr. Faithful King. But in the Dragon Tong, of course he'd always been known as the Number One Dragon Spider.

The Wangs lived in a large house in the Tung Ma Lou, otherwise East Horse Street. And Meisun knew the house well and could get Shadak Khan into it—if they weren't shot before they could pass the city gates—because Meisun had a sister who was a „forked-head“ working in the place.

„What's that, a *forked-head*?“ Shattuck asked.

It was, Meisun explained, another word for a servant girl, because servant girls wore their hair in two cues instead of one.

The thing that interested Shattuck most was that the Spider Chief had left an heir, a youth named Kien-chang, who would be the nominal head of the Spider Tong, now that his father was dead, until a new Dragon, or chief, should be elected.

Shattuck hadn't changed his clothes nor made any attempt to disguise himself. This was a desperate adventure on which he was engaged. He was staking his life on it. If he failed, he might as well die anyway.

And he cast another look at the goddess Tou Mu as she began to fade from sight in the early dawn.

Early dawn, and already such market people of the Cloudy Valley as hadn't been frightened to death by bandits or otherwise killed, were making their fatalistic way to Minchow to sell what they had to sell.

Shattuck bought a melon and split it with Meisun.

IN the dawn light, he led the way, still mounted, and Meisun following close with the two lead ponies, under the high walls of the ancient city and into

the crowded slime of the main gateway. Here a couple of tax-collectors were for stopping them. But Shattuck gave them a glare and whispered a Spider word that turned them polite and almost white.

The same thing happened when they came to the large black gateway of the big house in East Horse Street. When a sleepy major-domo finally opened.

Shattuck, followed by the now thoroughly frightened Meisun, slanged the fellow and pushed on in.

„I would see the master of the house,“ said Shattuck.

„He is not here,“ the steward answered.

„Are you sure you know to whom I refer?“ Shattuck asked.

„My lord Wang Chung.“

„Wrong,“ said Shattuck. „The old man is flying now with the Yellow Stork. I would see your new master, Kienchang.“

Chapter VII

THE big house was coming visibly to life as Shattuck followed the steward through court after court. Servants everywhere, men and women, and all of them, even the women, looking as if they'd be quick to murder if they got the signal.

But this was no ordinary Foreign Devil. Devil, maybe. He had killed a bandit king. Was he bent on another killing now? Shadak Khan. Captain Trouble. King Trouble. They knew him. But evidently in league with the Spiders.

The word had gone round. Shadak Khan had sent in a word by the steward that had caused a reply to be sent back at once that the visitor be admitted.

Kienchang was the young master's name. It was also a word that meant „luxuriant.“ Shattuck recalled this as he surveyed the man he'd come to see.

Kienchang hadn't left his couch. He was dressed in white silk. There was a bright red kerchief about his head, also silk; and the front of this was drawn into a turban effect by an emerald the size of a pigeon's egg.

Shattuck walked straight toward him.

Kienchang quailed and made a movement to protest, to express a sense of outrage. Shattuck stopped him, speaking softly.

„Keep quiet. Don't move. Life may still be sweet for you.“

They were about of an age, Shattuck surmised. There were two ways of looking at this thing called luck, it flashed upon him. To be born lucky—rich and handsome, for example—might not be so good.

„Send the steward away,“ Shattuck ordered. „Tell him to see that my man and horses are fed.“

There was a heartbreaking mirth in that. Shadak Khan, he who was to be the fighting lord of the new dispensation, reduced to a one-eyed boy and four stolen Mongol ponies.

In any case he had the whip-hand over the master of this palace—all gilt and lacquer, mirrors and carved blackwood.

„What if I refuse,“ Kienchang proposed without much spirit.

Shattuck's eyes danced.

„Then,“ he said, „I'll be forced to kill you as I have just killed your father.“

Kienchang paled.

„You killed my father?“

„BECAUSE he almost killed me first. Because he came to me disguised and struck me unawares. You see this surgical dressing about my neck. Yet I would have spared him. Even while I was taking care of him, one of his men—one of your men now—since you are the Dragon—stole my sword.“

Kienchang gave a start.

„Hold on,“ said Shattuck. "I see that you are happy, that this was something that you counted on. Are you your father's only son?“

„Yes!“

„Then, that accounts for it. The sword was meant for you. And I am justified in what I intend to do.“

„What do you intend to do?“

„Kill you at the setting of the sun unless the sword is in my hand.“

There was a long pause. Then Kienchang found breath and courage to ask: „And in the meantime?“

„I hold you hostage.“

„Where?“

„Here in your own house. In this room.“

„Where do you get the authority for this?“

„I carry it with me,“ Shattuck said, putting the flat of his hand on his holster.

„I'll have to send out word,“ said Kienchang.

„As many as you wish,“ said Shattuck. „I'm in as great a hurry to leave you as you are to have me go.“

He knew when he said this—he could read it through the shallow transparency of Kienchang's face that the heir of Wang would use this means to have him killed. It merely made him smile—gave him a feeling of exaltation. There is an exaltation in daring, when heart and soul are in charge, that thrills like music.

Chapter VIII

KIENCHANG, with a hand that shook, struck Ka gong that hung near the head of his couch with a metal hammer. The steward appeared.

Kienchang ordered three things: Breakfast, writing materials, and his opium.

Shattuck let him do the ordering. But his ears and eyes were alert. So far there was nothing wrong. He studied the room. From now on he would see that Kienchang would be between himself and any possible sniper. That wouldn't be so hard. The couch was set in a deep niche. He himself would lie down and rest, in a little while, with the heir of Wang in front of him.

Not much after dawn, and the day was going to be long. He'd have to watch himself as well as this prisoner of his. The earlier fatigue that had plagued him in the Cave of the Fur Girl had left him. All his nerves were taut, as if he would never sleep again.

THE steward returned with a wide tray. On the tray were tea and rice, fruit and sweetmeats, seeded cakes and pao-tzu—steamed tarts, these were filled with chopped meat and vegetables.

Manifestly, there was no famine in the house of Wang.

But Shattuck would neither drink nor eat. He'd had his half a melon. That would have to do him until the sun went down, if the vigil had to last that long.

His last day on earth, perhaps. There were better men whose death-hour was striking now. Around the world, the souls of the known and the unknown would be going up like morning mist. Then it would be the turn of Shadak—

Before he could complete the thought, there was a muffled explosion, a shattering of glass, and a bullet whined sharply as it passed his ear. He'd been fired at through a mirror.

There were many Chinese mirrors arranged like that, arranged for the convenience of an unseen watcher.

Before the whine of the bullet was silent, it seemed, Shattuck had shot out a hand and drawn Kienchang toward him, a hand on his collar. Kienchang must have thought that this was death, for he let out a sharp high cry, then, with an unexpected savagery had flung himself at Shattuck and was fighting.

Kienchang wasn't fighting like a man. He was fighting like a wildcat, clawing, trying to bite. His dark eyes seemed to have taken a greenish tinge.

Shattuck gasped with disgust. Would he have to kill this fool, too, as he'd killed the elder Wang? For now, with a ferocity and cunning generally attributed only to the insane, Kienchang was clawing at the bandages about Shattuck's neckband shoulders.

ANOTHER shot banged through—very wild this time. It wasn't likely that the marksman, whoever he was, would take a chance of wounding the new master of the house.

But neither was Shattuck willing to take a chance. He tilted an arm under Kienchang's chin and nearly broke his neck.

Now Kienchang was trying to speak. But when he did speak, it was a squeaking command to the hidden marksman to fire!—fire!

A bullet came in from another direction. Another mirror had been shattered. Then another!

Still the marksmen were wild. But this couldn't go on very long. If they killed the son of Wang it would be as bad for Shattuck as if he himself stopped the bullet.

Shattuck could have wept. He could have cursed. If he could only fight!—fight for what he wanted!—like a man!—against men, whatever the odds!—if he could only have the great sword again in his hand!—the sword of Kubla Khan!

He was panting to control the human wildcat in his arms—this Spider Man. Even as he did so, his thought shot out and upward to the North Star goddess.

He brought his prisoner over with him onto the couch where Kienchang had been lying at the moment of his arrival. Kienchang was fighting still.

A satin coverlet was scuffled aside, and there, before his eyes, Shattuck saw the sword of Kubla. His sword! The world-saver!

Chapter IX

EVEN so, the discovery was almost the end of him. He was dazed, stricken. He let out a shout. In an instant he had released his hold on the

squirming, cursing, punishing heir of Wang and seized this heirloom of the great Kubla instead. He was thrilled through by a pang of gratitude that was almost an ache, an ache to drive his soul from his body, give it wings.

But freed, Kienchang had seized the teapot and hurled it at him. Shattuck didn't know until later that he'd been scalded on the hand.

Having hurled the teapot, Kienchang, screaming orders all but incoherent, made a dash to leave the room. For a moment, Shattuck stood exposed to fire from all directions. From all directions, it seemed, came the fire. At point—blank range, it must have been.

Yet the hurry and the confusion must have gone to the heads of the marksman. That, or fear.

Suddenly Shattuck had jerked his gun and fired—twice, right and left. In each direction he'd seen a gust of smoke.

He caught Kienchang still fumbling at the door, and kicked him aside.

„You're lucky,“ said Shattuck. „I'm not wasting a bullet on you—yet!“

There was a sling on the sword, like that on a polo mallet, and he slipped this over his arm. His arm would be cut off, as he'd amputated Wang, before he lost that sword again. Or arm and sword would go together.

He seized Kienchang and made him lead the way, holding him, meantime, by his white silk collar.

From an inner court a little serving maid ran out. There was an expression in her face. She had two pigtailed instead of one. „Fork Head!“ The boy Meisun's sister.

She ignored her master. She made a signal to Shattuck. He followed her. She led him through mean ways of the big house, and, finally, through a small heavily timbered door, that opened on a public alley.

MEISUN was there with the four ponies, excitement shining in his single eye.

„Meisun,“ said Shattuck, „suppose you stay here. I'm headed for stormy weather.“

„Duke,“ said Meisun, „you said that I was your man.“

„You are,“ Shattuck decided. „Can you handle an automatic?“

„Yes.“

„Then take it,“ said Shattuck, „and get away with the ponies through the gate. If they try to stop you, abandon two of the ponies. If they try to stop you after that, shoot. But not unless you have to. Understand?“

„Yes.“

„Then meet me outside the wall where the big gingko tree leans over. Know where?“

„Yes.“

„There's a mob assembling. They're looking for me, not you. Good luck. So long.“

They exchanged a swift handshake. Meisun was on his way, taking his four ponies along.

All this time he'd been holding the son of Wang by the collar. Suddenly Kienchang slipped out of his upper garment and started to run. He ran like a hare. As he ran he screeched, and Shattuck heard him calling on the members of the Spider Tong. This was the new leader of the Spider Tong. His word was law.

„Kill! Kill!“ he shouted. „Kill! Kill!“

Shattuck wouldn't have followed him, but there was no other way to go. He'd have to move quickly, else he was trapped.

Other voices were taking up the cry. The excitement at the Wang house had already assembled a mob in front of the house. Around an angle of the compound men began to appear, some with knives, some, with clubs.

There was a responsive shout. There were words of the Spider Tong that reached Shattuck as he ran. He appeared to be running to certain death.

But now he had the sword in his hand. The crowd fell back. But a club came hurtling through the air, then a stone.

Kienchang, stripped to the waist and screaming his call for murder, turned, shouting for his men to kill. On his breast Shattuck saw the red skull and bones that had been on the breast of the elder Wang.

Someone passed Kienchang a heavy chopping knife. He whirled this up to throw it at Shattuck's breast. It was a movement never completed.

Chapter X

SHATTUCK had lashed in with a backhanded stroke, and Kienchang's head rocked as if jumped from its body. The body remained there curved, but upright for what seemed like a long moment, a fountain of blood, before it collapsed.

At sight of the blood, the mob surged and rocked like a single being, drunk on its own excitement.

With a swift movement, Shattuck stooped and picked up the head by the hair, and hurled it into the thick of the mob. „There'll be no more Spider Tong,“ he roared.

He saw his chance, where a cart was placed against the interior of the wall. He wasn't far now from the leaning gingko that he'd counted on to escalate the wall. This was better. He leaped to the cart. In a moment he had vaulted to the top of the wall.

The mob roared and surged closer—such a surf of sound as no man can ever hear and forget.

A broken old wall, with crevices and loose rocks sagging at a treacherous pitch, where he had to watch his footing every step he took.

BUT it looked like death now in one way or other.

The mob was bolder, growing larger with every passing second. Rocks and clubs were coming over in a steady, deadly flight.

Shattuck was struck. Once or twice he staggered. At each blow that struck him, the gale of mob-voices went an octave higher.

Meisun hadn't appeared. Would he ever appear?

Others had divined his purpose and were now running ahead and fighting for a chance to scale the wall by means of the gingko tree.

There wasn't much chance now even should he drop to the plain outside. The mob would follow him.

He stopped for a moment or so and threw rocks that he loosened from the wall. This helped a little.

There were two shots fired at him in quick succession. But this didn't suit the crowd so well. Who would try to spoil the sport by killing the quarry outright.

Now, all at once, as if the mob had a single brain as it had but a single voice, a dozen ladders were being raised against the wall. And the more courageous members of the mob, or the better armed, ex-soldiers among them—or soldiers of the tong, with bayonets on their rifles—were pushing up to stop him, maim him.

Swiftly as this occurred, there had come to Shattuck another thrill that was the joy of life. After all, he'd always been a Fighting Fool. Another Fighting Fool had told him so, another day of battle, in far Afghanistan. He charged the nearest enemy swinging his sword.

He fought with perfect nerve, perfect precision.

He was bleeding, bruised. But he had the sword of the great Kubla in his hand.

Just as he was beginning to be conscious that he was at the end of his powers, that at any moment now, some chance blow mighty send him into oblivion and allow the sword of Kubla to fall once more into unholy hands, he heard a shout behind him, and there was that One Eyed Cat, Meisun, with the four ponies below. Not only that, but Meisun had the automatic in his hand, and in his side of the wall the field was clear.

SHATTUCK spat at the crowd, and his voice rose even above that terrific surf of a mob bent on murder. „I'll see you again,“ he said. „I'll be coming back.“ He put a hand to the coping and dropped to the freedom of the plain. He was headed for the Gorge of the Grasping Fist, for the Fur Girl Cave, where there was work to do.

