

The Song of the Cakes

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Published: 1931

in »Oriental Stories«



A vivid tale of the Manchu conquest of China, and the fulfillment of the old Ming prophecy, when blood ran red in Peking

*„As the Manchus began in Chung Kuo with a child in arms, so,
with a child in arms, shall their dynasty pass from the memory of man.”*

—An ancient Chinese prophecy embodied in what was known as
The Song of the Cakes.

AS THE great gate swung reluctantly open between the white-battlemented earthen walls, Mangu ran forward with a great shout. Close at his heels poured in multitudinous flood the conquering horde of the Chin Tatars. The iron discipline of the march, the toil and danger of many battles, was forgotten. These lean, hard-bitten warriors from the frozen plains of the north

saw before them only the incredible loot to be taken in this greatest city of the world.

Peking—it was a name to conjure with! All Asia resounded with tales of its splendid palaces, the bazars piled high with gleaming silks, with soft sheened rugs from Ispahan, sandalwood, myrrh and frankincense from Ind, gold and precious gems that came by caravan from Samarkand.

For this they had marched and fought, these Manchu nomads, under their great Lord, the mighty T'ai Tsung. The city of Kubla Khan, the vast shining city, lay open before them, weakly abandoned by the eunuch-ridden Mings. Mangu spat his scorn as he thought of those womanish rulers.

The fierce warriors scattered through the crooked narrow streets. Bales of silken stuffs came tumbling out of windows, the shrieks of the hapless inhabitants rose high above the shouts of the loot-maddened soldiery.

But with clenched teeth and eager eyes Mangu ran steadily along through the narrow ways. Not for him the petty plunder that satisfied his rude command. Shaggy untaught fighters to whom the sweepings of the bazars seemed untold wealth.

Was he not Mangu, captain of a thousand men, whom the mighty Khan himself had deigned to favor with approval at the last great battle at Shanhaikuan? Greater spoil awaited him. His eye gleamed at the thought.

As he burst into the great open square, the Tatar's curved sword leaped like a live thing into his hand. Ahead, down the straight vista, rose the lofty palace of the Mings, the king's treasure-house that was his goal.

But in front of the huge entrance gate massed a group of men, and the sunlight glinted on their weapons—Ming soldiers, barring the way into the sacred domain of their Emperor, Ts'ung Ch'eng. Mangu grew furious at the sight. „Chinese dogs,” he shouted, „dare you dispute with arms the passage of a Manchu warrior? Know you not the city has yielded to the might of our great Khan, T'ai Tsung?”

There was no answer, but the hundred men ranged threateningly into battle order. Mangu, Captain of a Thousand, glanced behind him. Of the great company that had broken through the outer walls, only a handful, a bare dozen, had kept pace with him. The confused shouting from the conquered city, the piercing shrieks of tortured women, the cries of loot-maddened soldiery, told their dread tale.

But neither fear nor caution had ever once disturbed the recklessness of the Manchu captain. He plunged forward shouting. „Ho, men of the Chin Tatars, follow me to crush these weak-kneed eunuchs.” The brawny nomads from the frozen tundras of the north, nostrils dilated, threw themselves after their leader. In an instant the battle was joined. Great curved swords clashed in midair, the contestants fought with bared teeth and fury-distorted faces. The square resounded with the shrieks of dying men.

Mangu felt the blood coursing through his veins like heady wine. A great exultation seized him. Ha! this was living! Good sword in hand, to cut and slash and parry, to feel the bite of his steel in yielding flesh, to glare one moment into the hate-crazed eyes of his enemy, the next to see them dulled in death!

As he laid about him, cutting a wide swath through the heaving mass, he sang a song that breathed the fierceness of his race. And still the blood-red weapon bit and slew!

The fight was over. The scattered remnants of the Mings fled aghast from this Tatar demon. Regretfully he turned, to marshal his men. The shout of victory died on his lips. Of his comrades, not one was alive. Mingled with the heaps of Chinese dead, sprawled their corpses. Unknowing, he had fought alone at the end, and won!

Mangu shrugged his shoulders. Once more his face turned to the great gate. His long sword battered on the portals.

„Open, ye spawn of misbegotten fathers!” he roared. „Open, or I’ll rip the steaming entrails out of your womanish bodies, and throw them to the birds of heaven.”

The threat was effective. The watchers in the blue-tiled towers had witnessed the fierce prowess of this northern devil. The gate swung slowly open, the trembling people cast themselves prostrate before the arrogant captain. „Have mercy, Oh Lord of a thousand moons,” they cried in gray fear; „have mercy on us, who eat the dust beneath your all-conquering feet. We are but the most insignificant of earth’s creatures.”

Mangu glanced contemptuously at the groveling figures, spurned with his foot the nearest, but did not deign an answer. They were not worthy even of death at his hands.

Before him stretched a fabulous vista of flowery delights. His eye passed it over impatiently. A figure dangling from a ginko tree caught his eye. It swung idly in the breeze, dressed in royal robes. His lips curled. So the Ming Emperor had taken the easy way out! And still his eye roved on. It settled on a huge fantastic structure, topped by three yellow-tiled curving roofs. That was it—the Temple of Heaven! In its depths, he knew, was secreted the incalculable wealth of the Mings. No lesser treasure would be his. Before the riotous, looting soldiers could penetrate thus far, he would have reaped the reward of his daring.

HE RACED up the great stone steps, flung into the dim lit portals. Through corridor after corridor he went, from one vast room to another, seeking the hidden treasure. No sign of it anywhere. He fumed and raged. At any moment the lustful hordes would be pouring in, and the great chance gone. If only he could find some lurking courtier, to force the secret from his unwilling mouth! But the great temple was deserted.

Suddenly he whirled. A faint shrieking came to him, queerly strangled. He dashed through door on door, following the sounds. They were gurgling now, gasping throaty noises. A jade-green door intervened. It was bolted. With a heave of his shoulders, it crashed, and Mangu was precipitated into a scene of horror.

Sunk on the ground, in a cowering shapeless mass, was an ancient priest, his claw-like hands raised in trembling supplication, his incredibly wrinkled parchment face a mask of terror. Over him bent grimly, threateningly, three nobles of the Chinese court. So wrapped were they in the business at hand that they did not notice the interruption of the Manchu warrior.

A brazier of charcoal glowed fiery red. The point of a dagger was buried among the embers. One of the nobles bent an evil brow upon the terror-struck old priest. „Oh T’ai Lung, our patience is nigh exhausted. We know you have the talisman hidden. Deliver it to us, or else what has been done to you is but the merest taste of what is yet to come.”

The old man's hands fluttered feebly. „I have it not, I tell you. I know not where it is.”

„You lie. The Emperor himself, before he went to his heavenly ancestors, told us that you, the Priest of the Temple, were its sole guardian.”

The answer came in a feeble whisper. „It is not true.”

„Very well then, on your own head be it.” The noble snatched the heated dagger out of the flame, raised it.

The shriek of the tortured man brought Mangu to his senses. Out flashed his sword, and with the dreaded Tatar cry on his lips, he launched forward to the attack. The startled conspirators had no chance for their lives. In a trice they were weltering in pools of blood.

The withered priest raised his eyes to his unexpected deliverer in an ecstasy of thankfulness. What he saw caused him to cower in the extremity of despair. For the dreaded Manchu who towered over him transfixed him with cold, piercing eyes. Mangu had not been actuated by feelings of pity or mercy when he had rescued this worthless carcass from his torturers. What mattered one member of the accursed race, more or less?

But he had heard enough to convince him that this old man could divulge the hiding place of the wealth he was convinced reposed somewhere in the temple.

„Well, old man,” he said harshly, „some miserable years of life have been saved to you. Where is the hidden treasure of the Mings? Tell me quickly, or it will be the worse for you.”

The wretched priest shrank from his new tormentor. „No, no,” he moaned, „I do not know. I swear it.”

Mangu set his teeth with a snap. „By the demons of the underworld, if you do not speak, and speak now, I know a way to loose that useless tongue of yours.” He lifted the glowing dagger significantly. „Now will you tell me the secret place where the royal gems are stored?”

The set, obdurate face of the ancient one underwent a surprising transformation. „The gems, say you? I thought you meant—“ Abruptly he ceased.

„Meant what, food for crows?” the Tatar asked curiously.

„Nay, they were but idle words, O magnificent Lord. The jewels, said you?” He was fawning slimily on Mangu. „Grant me but my few remaining years, and I shall deliver undreamt-of riches into your noble hands.”

„Do as you promise, and I shall not harm you.”

Under the Manchu's watchful eyes, the old priest tottered to his feet, staggered slowly, painfully to the smooth surface of the wall. Bending over, he pressed something, and a great panel slid silently open.

„Behold, O mighty one, the royal jewels of the Mings. You and all your descendants shall loll in luxurious ease.”

Even in the gloom of the recess, Mangu saw the lambent glow and sparkle of the heaped-up gems. Joyfully he thrust his hands in, brought out great handfuls of the glittering stones. A fierce emotion swept him. In his grasp was wealth beyond all avarice; blood-red rubies large as pigeons' eggs, green emeralds like the unfathomable sea, diamonds that flashed and coruscated, curiously carved amethysts and smooth jade.

The Manchu captain stuffed the folds of his garments to the bursting point. He could carry no more. „Close the hidden chamber,” he ordered, „and beware, lest you tell any other of its secret.”

The priest hurried to obey, watched the burly figure with crafty, enigmatic eyes. Mangu cast a hasty glance around, and moved to the door.

It was time to go. Already could be heard the shouts of the invading soldiery, hot on the scent. The old priest stiffened at the noise. Terror seared him as he harkened. He ran after the retreating warrior, grasped him by his garment.

„Most noble one,” he panted, „you promised me my life.”

The Manchu shook off the feeble clutch. „That I did, and I have kept my promise. I have not slain you.”

„Nay, protector, but I hear your comrades in the distance. Soon they will be here, and they will kill me.”

„What business is that of mine?” Mangu responded indifferently. „I but promised not to harm you, and that I shall not.”

The old man was beside himself with fear. „Do not abandon me. Mercy, mercy!” he shrieked.

MANGU stared curiously at this ancient creature who clung so tenaciously to life. Life was only for the young and lusty who could enjoy it to the full, not for dotards. He shrugged and moved on.

The shouts came nearer, mingled now and then with shrill screams. The priest was palsied. Animal moans burst from him; he glared wildly about.

Ah, a thought struck him. The crafty look crept back into his eyes. He ran with amazing speed after the retreating Manchu, caught up with him.

„Great captain,” his cracked voice trembled in its urgency, „take me to your leader, the Lord of all the Manchus. I have word for him that is of the greatest purport.”

Mangu stopped abruptly, stared at the Ming in bewilderment. „What is this thing that the most high T'ai Tsung needs must hear it?”

„It is for his ears alone.”

The Manchu was impatient. „Harken, old man, you impose upon my good nature. The great Khan grants no audience to the idle vaporings of such as you. If you do not cease from troubling me with your foul clamor, I shall be tempted to forget my promise, and myself separate your worthless head from its scrawny neck. Begone, ere it be too late!” he concluded sternly.

But the old man was not to be thus thrust aside.

The cries of the looting soldiery were approaching dangerously near. In his terrible fear, he clung to this one ray of hope in spite of threats of violence.

„Most noble captain, I beg you—hear me!” His voice rose to a thin shriek. „The life of your Lord, the very fate of your people, depend on what I have to say. I, only I, can save you all! Take me to him safely. He shall reward you greatly, I promise you.”

Mangu, in spite of himself, was impressed by the desperate urging of this strange creature. Perchance there was something in what the old fool said.

As he stood there musing, the door burst open mid a great clamor and shouting, and a mob of drunken soldiers poured through the gap. They were staggering under silken robes, golden goblets helmeted their heads, precious ornaments of jade dangled from their persons.

The foremost of the rioters beheld the ancient Ming priest. With joyous cries, they pounced upon him, seized him with ungentle hands. „O outlived reptile of accursed lineage, give us your hidden treasures, or we slit your wizened throat.”

The priest struggled feebly in his captors' grasp, crying feebly on the Manchu captain. „Save me, the Emperor will reward you,” he gasped.

Mangu strode forward with naked weapon. He thrust his way vigorously through the reeling mob, sent the priest's tormentors spinning with the flat of his sword. „Hence, men of the Chin Tatars! This man is my prisoner. I take him to T'ai Tsung. Stand aside and let him be.”

Angry growls arose from the sobered soldiers, mutterings that needed only a spark to translate into action. But Mangu faced them haughtily, eyes flashing fire. Someone recognized him as a Captain of a Thousand. Terrible would be the wrath of their Lord if they attacked an officer.

So they stood aside with hate-filled eyes and let the proud captain pass. The Ming slunk by, hugging closely the burly form of his rescuer.

T'AI TSUNG, Lord of the Chin Tatars, conqueror of Chung Kuo, the Middle Kingdom, sat in state on a throne in the great royal tent pitched in front of the battlemented walls.

A great burly figure, his huge knotted muscles bulged incongruously in the flowered silks of the despoiled Mings. The high slant cheekbones, the generous spacing between the coal-black eyes that could flash terribly on occasion, the bold aquiline nose with flaring nostrils marked him as of the race of Timur and Jingis. The broad forehead, the proud, haughty pose of the head, the black wiry beard proclaimed one accustomed to command, whose least whim was law. But the great fleshy lips that gleamed redly under the short curling mustache, the feeling of exuberant life that emanated from the vigorous body, were proof enough that he shrank not from the flesh-pots.

A hard rider, a warrior to whom the fierce clash of weapons was as the breath of life, a mighty feaster and drinker after the swink and toil of battle—such was the great Khan.

Even now he was lolling on his throne, a goblet filled with the pale rice wine of the Chinese gurgling down his throat, while two huge bronzed slaves waved great fans rhythmically before the royal presence. Already was he aping the luxuriousness of the conquered race.

An interminable string of weeping, frightened Chinese maidens passed in review before him. Those who pleased his fancy he designated by a nod. They were immediately hurried to the women's quarters of the royal tent.

The sturdy gruff Manchu nobles saw, and liked it not. „Methinks,” grumbled one to his comrade, „our Lord forgets the simple virtues of our race. He would become as one of these degenerate Mings. Look at him being fanned like a very woman, and mincing with perfumed water. Pah.” The indignant chieftain spat his honest wrath.

His comrades gazed apprehensively around. „Ssh,” he whispered, „it would not be healthy to be overheard. I care not for such pretty danglings myself, but rest assured, our Khan is no milksop. When the occasion arises, he will once more prove himself the mighty warrior he has been in the past.”

The other shrugged his shoulders skeptically.

A sudden commotion at the entrance to the great silken tent brought the grumbling to a halt. A cowering, decrepit figure was dragged into the sacred presence by one attired in the trappings of a Captain of a Thousand.

Mangu prostrated himself deeply before his dread Lord. The priest, half dead with fright, groveled with outstretched arms in the dirt.

„Hear, oh mighty one, greater than Timurlane and Jingsis Khan. This vile carcass I have brought to you is a priest of the Ming women, who pretends he has news of great import, touching your most sacred life. It was for this I saved him from the death he merited. I know not whether he in full sooth knows aught, or if he be a rank impostor.”

T'ai Tsung bent a black brow on the groveling wretch. „What have such as you to say that concerns me, the Son of Heaven? Speak, and wo betide you if it be idle chatter.”

The Chinese priest raised himself, trembling. „All-powerful one, whom Heaven itself protects, my story is for your ears alone. When told you would not wish it to be in others' memories.”

Mangu sprang forward. „Nay, oh Lord, heed him not,” he clamored; „this misbegotten shape of evil may be possessed of magic powers, and seek to work unholy enchantments on your sacred self.”

„Stop!” The Emperor's voice was terrible. „Think you that I, a descendant of the Sky, need fear his feeble powers? Old man, it shall be as you wish. Let one remove himself from our presence at once, except my Nubian mutes, and Mangu, who shall keep the door of the tent.”

With backward steps and numerous bows, the Manchu nobles hastened to go, lest their ruler's wrath blight irrevocably. Only Mangu remained to guard the door, and the giant slaves ranged on either side of the throne, great curved swords on ebony shoulders.

The Khan frowned blackly. „You have gained your audience. If your story meets not with my approval, you will curse the day that you were born. Speak!”

The shrunken Chinaman had somewhat regained his confidence. He fumbled in the folds of his garments. Mangu watched with hawk-like eyes, his hand on the hilt of his sword, his body tensed to spring at the slightest untoward sign.

The priest drew out a small object, held it in the palm of his bony hand. Mangu stared at it from his vantage-point.

A carved bit of jade the size of a robin's egg. The soft satiny sheen of its green, the infinite delicacy of its carving, awakened covetous desires in the captain's breast. „The old scoundrel,” he raged inwardly, „to have tricked and bemocked me thus! Had I but known this rare ornament was on his worthless person, I had slit his throat from ear to ear.”

Once more his fascinated eyes strayed to the splendor and glory of it. A magnificent throne, on which, in divine majesty, sat a child, clad in the resplendent robes of an Emperor of the Celestial Kingdom. Around the dais on which the throne was set, could be descried, deep graven, a train of marvelously minute Chinese characters. The whole was encircled by a sinuous dragon, its scaly body seemingly instinct with life.

T'ai Tsung had half arisen from his throne, staring strangely at the palely glowing gem. Even the giant mutes held unwonted gleams in their mask-like faces.

The Emperor's voice was queer, hoarse, when he spoke. „Give it to me—at once.” He stretched out an imperious hand.

THE PRIEST of the Mings hastened to obey. The Manchu Lord held the precious thing in a hand that shook. Long he gazed into the green depths, as into a crystal ball that mirrors the future darkly. He seemed in the grip of a mighty emotion, as if the bit of jade held in its translucence a powerful magic, a magic that could sway his destiny, and the fate of nations.

„What inner meaning holds this strange device? What secret power does it contain?“ he demanded, half in awe.

The withered priest prostrated himself once more before the feet of the conqueror.

„Great Son of the Morning,“ he intoned, in the voice of one long dead, „in your all-wisdom you have felt the spell. Now I see the prophecy was true, though I mocked it when first it was revealed to me. Know then, oh Chosen One, this curiously carved jade was given me many, many years ago, by an aged lama from Tibet, whom I succored when he was weary with travel and the harsh burden of life.

„Before he departed to his ancestors, he entrusted it to my care, and told me of an ancient prophecy. Some day, he said, a race of conquerors would come out of the north like a cloud of locusts, and the fair land of Chung Kuo would be harried with fire and steel. If, perchance, the jade Throne and Child should come into the hands of the conqueror, then the prophecy would be fulfilled. ‚Let but a Child, a babe of their race, be seated on the Dragon Throne, and he and his descendants shall be Emperors of China. The dynasty he founded,‘ so ran the prophecy, ‚shall blossom as the lotus blooms, and be mighty rulers in the land, but only as long as the magic jade is safely held. Should it ever pass out of their hands, then calamity shall come to pass. The great dynasty shall end, and Chung Kuo be wrested from their dominion.‘

„Long years I held it secretly, nor said aught to anyone. But yesterday, when your victorious army was hammering at the gates, and the city was surrendered, I lost what little wits I had. In my utter folly, I spoke of it to Ts’ung Ch’eng, who has since gained the peace beyond. I recited the tale, unthinking. He demanded of me the jade, vowing that he would break it into a thousand bits, even as he would dash your power to the ground.

„I dared not say nay to my Emperor, but I knew the truth. Heaven had spoken, and it were sacrilege to defy its decrees. Nor I nor the Emperor himself could change unalterable fate.

„Quickly I thought what I must do. Pretending utter submission, I promised to bring it immediately. Instead, I hastened to my chamber, secreted the precious amulet on my person, and hid in a place I alone knew of, from the wrath of Ts’ung Ch’eng.

„This morning I ventured forth, to bring the jade to your august self, deeming the Mings fled and the temple deserted. But a band of courtiers, to whom Ts’ung Ch’eng had delegated the search for me, waylaid me unawares. I refused to talk, and I was being put to the torture when your captain rescued me.”

Mangu leaned forward anxiously. Was the old devil going on to tell of the cache of jewels, and his rifling of it? But the priest had ceased, and Mangu relaxed in great relief.

Again with fascinated eyes, T’ai Tsung gazed into the jade’s green depths. To Mangu it seemed as though a subtle emanation irradiated through the great yellow tent.

The great conqueror pondered long the curious prophecy. The wine goblet dangled in his hand, the spilled amber fluid formed little pools beside the throne. Mangu watched with bated breath. When the silence had lain so long in the tent that speech seemed a thing forgotten, T'ai Tsung raised his head. There was that in the black-bearded countenance that sent queer little shivers through the bowels of the Manchu warrior.

„Old man,” he said to the bearer of the jade, „you have spoken truly. The ancient prophecy is now fulfilled.” Mangu started. „Nay,” he told himself excitedly, „the Emperor is mistaken. A child in arms must sit on the throne, so ran the prophecy. Has he forgotten, or heeded not?” He was on the verge of blurting out, when he stopped, in cold sweat at his narrow escape. T'ai Tsung followed a very simple method in disposing of annoying interruptions. The captain shrank back hastily, but the Emperor had not heeded the gesture. He was still speaking. „The Throne and Child is in our hands, and no power on earth, no demon of the air, shall wrest it from our grasp. Forever shall it stay with us, and forever shall the dynasty of T'ai Tsung reign in the land of Chung Kuo.

„Aye,” his voice was vibrant with curious emotion, „my race, the issue of my loins shall rule this land. None other, do you understand?”

There was that in his glance that bespoke a desperate resolve. Mangu wondered.

„As for you,” he bent a strange look on the bowed figure before him, „it is but meet that you be fitly rewarded for your devotion. I promise you your wildest desires shall be more than quenched. The Manchus are not niggardly in their bounty.”

He clapped his hands. „Ho, Mangu, call in my nobles. Inform my treasurer to bring in caskets of gold and jewels—yea, many of them, and cause my infant son, Shun Chih, to be escorted into my presence.”

The burly Manchu hastened to obey, the while gritting his teeth in an ecstasy of bitterness and rage. Curse the lying dog! He, Mangu, had been tricked like a very child. The precious jade would have been his, had he but wit enough to search the cunning priest. Then his would have been the rewards from a grateful Emperor! Yet no sign of his inner turmoil was betrayed by his impassive countenance as he gave the required orders.

MANGU reentered, and bent low before his lord. The priest stood a little to the side, absorbed in thought. „Oh Heavenly One, it has been done even as you have commanded. In but a little while, the nobles of our realm shall gather here.”

T'ai Tsung eyed him keenly. „Come hither,” he ordered, „I have somewhat to say to you.”

Mangu, startled out of his bitterness, hesitated, moved forward uncertainly. Had the devil spawn then betrayed him, and the stolen treasure? Already he felt the keen edge of the executioner's ax cold against the nape of his neck.

T'ai Tsung searched him with eyes that seared. Mangu dared not look up.

The voice of doom was in his ears. „Come closer.” Mechanically he approached until only inches separated him from his sovereign.

What were these words, whispered low so that only he could hear? Hardly could he grasp the full import—yet as he harkened, every nerve a-tingle, a vast relief flooded o'er him.

„And so,” concluded the Khan in barely audible whisper, „I make you custodian of the Jade Throne and Child, token of a mighty dynasty. No one but you knows its secret. Guard the talisman with your life. Let not the slightest whisper of its purport escape you. Your line and lineage shall be its hereditary protectors. Take it.”

In his bewilderment, the Tatar captain felt the cool silky jade in his clenched palm. Without knowing what he did, he slipped it into the pouch of his leather garment.

The Emperor stepped back. „Go back to your post,” he spoke loudly.

Mangu was conscious of a great elation. His head was high. His Lord had singled him out for signal honor. He would prove worthy of the trust!

While this passed, the great tent had slowly crowded with the warrior Manchu nobility. They were buzzing with excitement at the unwonted summons. The set, strained look on their ruler’s face was proof enough of the importance of the occasion. Before the throne were open caskets, heaped with flashing gems and gold coins, a princely ransom. And who was that strange figure, that incredibly old Chinaman, standing humbly in the cleared space, yet with a crafty smirk on him. Shun Chih, a grave little lad of six, wide-eyed in childish bewilderment at sight of the crowded tent, sat next his father. The great Khan’s arm encircled him with a caress that was tight in its intensity. At least some few remembered the fierce clutch when they thought afterward.

When the buzz of expectancy had risen to fever heat, T’ai Tsung rose proudly from his throne. The haughty eagle of the North was in the grip of some strong emotion, yet no one could detect a tremor in the cold, even voice.

„Hear me, ye nobles of an ancient race. Our task is ended. All Chung Kuo lies prostrate under our conquering tread. We are the Lords of the World, and what we have conquered, we shall hold. The race of T’ai Tsung shall rule forever from the frozen ocean to the heated waters of the south.”

The fierce Manchus clashed their weapons and shouted approbation.

„Today,” he continued, a great exaltation transfiguring the strained features, „I have received news of the happiest augury.”

All eyes turned curiously, wonderingly to the bowed figure of the Ming.

„And now this priest, this servant of the Mings, shall receive his reward for the great service he has done me. Let it not be said that T’ai Tsung does not show liberality.

„O priest of the Mings, here are caskets of jewels, of golden coins and ornaments. These are yours for your tale. Take them!”

The shrunken face lit up with a covetous leer as it beheld the great treasure. „Lord of Lords,” he cackled, „for your munificence to this poor unworthy creature your name shall resound through the ages.” A murmur passed through the assemblage. Glorious indeed must have been the news borne by the ancient to have merited such largess!

The Emperor gazed at the old man strangely. „You have your reward. You have well earned it. And now,” a peculiar note crept into the passionless tones, „lest you disclose the secret you have unfolded to me, you must—die!”

As the fatal words penetrated the old man’s consciousness, the smirk of satisfied greed gave way to deathly terror. „Mercy!” he gasped.

At an imperceptible gesture from the Emperor, one of the giant slaves stepped forward. The huge sword curved flashing through the air. The skull-like

head bounded across the hall; the shrunken bloodless body collapsed gently into a shapeless mass.

The Manchu nobles murmured audible delight. They could not grasp the full purport of the drama, but the sight of an enemy's discomfiture was pleasing to robust tastes.

Once more T'ai Tsung spoke. „Manchus!” his great voice vibrated. „Behold my son, Shun Chih!” He raised the little boy high in his arms. „Do you swear to hold him as your ruler, and his son after him, on my death?”

Instantly the great enclosure was filled with leaping swords, while a thousand lusty voices swelled the great shout. „We do, we do. Long live T'ai Tsung, and Shun Chih, after him!”

The Emperor waited for the clamor to subside, his hawk face cold and impassive as ever. His thoughts were his own.

„You have sworn. On my death, Shun Chih is to be Emperor of Chung Kuo, and I, T'ai Tsung, shall sire a mighty dynasty. So is it written.” A moment's silence. The fierce face of the Khan was convulsed with some inward strife. He hesitated. The nobles leaned forward. They sensed impending drama. They saw their Lord gather himself together with a mighty effort. Turning to the child, he thrust out his hand dramatically. „Behold, O nobles of the Chin Tatars, your Emperor. Protect and follow him! The prophecy is fulfilled!”

What happened then occurred with such lightning rapidity that no two of the startled onlookers could ever afterward agree on the details.

A sword flashed out of nowhere into T'ai Tsung's hand. Before anyone could stop him, it had sunk deep into his vitals. As the dark blood welled out, the Emperor sank to the ground, a smile of contentment on his placid face.

Instantly the tent was a turmoil of rushing, shouting men, but above the clamor was heard the thin piercing shriek of the little boy, Shun Chih. „Father! Father!”

A child in arms was Emperor of the Middle Kingdom!

Long years afterward, Mangu, old and bent and hoar, General of Ten Thousand, told his son the story as he reverently placed the soft green Jade in his hand. „Ah, that was a man—our Emperor. There is not his like on earth today.” And he sighed wistfully.

