

Where Terror Lurked

Captain Trouble series

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I

„*SHAMBALLAH!*“ It was a whisper that Shattuck had heard a thousand times, always with some hint of mystery and dread about it, ever since Michmander, the Afghan, had first led him into forbidden territory. Here on the face of the desert it was absolutely dark. All that could be seen of the earth was the floating blackness of the surrounding dunes. Yet the stars shone—they shone with a sort of blinding light. They dazzled the eyes. The earth absorbed this light like black velvet. No wonder that the desert people gave this whole country the go-by. „Shamballah!“ That was Juma’s whisper now.

Shattuck also had seen that quavering shaft of green light over the contour of the nearest dune. He put out his hand in the darkness and touched Juma to let him know that he had heard and seen. He needed no such contact to let him know that Champela, his only other companion on this crazy adventure, had also seen and heard.

So far, in his intimate acquaintance with Champela—that mystical John Day, half American, half Tibetan—Shattuck had never seen any evidence at all that Champela ever slept. Champela would sit motionless with his eyes closed. He might even lie down with his eyes closed—in the „tiger attitude“, as it was called, on his right side and a hand under his face to serve as a pillow. But that was as far as he ever went, it seemed, so far as sleep was concerned.

DAY or night, that finely organized brain of Champela's resembled some delicate machine, ever ready to respond to the slightest vibration.

It must have been like that now. From Champela also had come a whispered breath:

„Shamballah!“

The three friends lay there in silence staring off into the blackness toward the thing that had attracted them.

The mystery of the desert lay thick about them. For days they had been traveling through a part of the Western Gobi, shunned even by the nomad Mongols.

Back in the hills they came from, the tribesmen sometimes talked of Shamballah about their campfires. There were records of Shamballah in the secret books of that Lamasery of the Soaring Meditation where Champela had been serving his initiate at the time he and Shattuck had found each other.

Two Americans—one of them a mystic, sworn to peace, the other a fighting fool, Captain Trouble—brought together in the heart of Asia, members, without knowing it, of some secret fraternity set up by Fate! One, the future fighting captain of the world, the other, his prime minister! They'd talked of these things together as some men talk of whisky and cards.

Champela on one side, Juma on the other, Shattuck lay there in the black sands of the Gobi and stared at the wavering light. It was a ghostly beacon leading him on to he knew not what strange shore.

They were like mariners, the three of them, in an uncharted and haunted sea. But their ships were those beasts that poets had called „ships of the desert“. As silent as ships the camels lay in the near dark. They also would be staring, perhaps—wondering, dreaming.

NOT for many days now had Shattuck and his two friends seen a living soul; yet there had always been that feeling of a presence, a lurking danger. Others had entered these wastes. None had returned.

Juma, the old robber chief, crept a little closer to Shattuck, making no more noise in doing so than a sand-adder. Juma was a Kirghiz—he had the sense of ghostly things like all wild nomads. His bearded lips were within an inch of Shattuck's ear.

„I go?“ A pause. „I scout ahead.“

It was a plea.

It stirred Shattuck to hear a plea of any kind from old Juma. Rajas, kings, governors of any kind—these had always been merely so much ornamental

vermin in Juma's free life. But here was the old mountain hawk acknowledging the leadership of Shadak Khan, Captain Trouble.

„Guard the camels,“ Shattuck conveyed in a husky breath. „I go myself.“

And a moment later he was creeping forward into the blackness.

He and his two companions had been on the trail now for almost a month. A month ago the three of them had left that Little Valley of the Soaring Meditation back there in the Hou-Shan—the Country Beyond the Mountains, as the Gobi people called it—where Pelham Rutledge Shattuck, sometimes of the U.S.A., had become Shadak Khan, Captain Trouble.

But even before that—long before, so it seemed to Captain Trouble now in the sudden solitude and dark isolation as he pulled himself forward through the sand—that earlier Shattuck that was himself had died. All that had remained of that earlier self was a nickname—the title of honor that Michmander, the Afghan, had conferred on him, that title of a Fighting Fool.

Now Michmander was dead, as that earlier Shattuck was dead.

SHADAK KHAN—that had become Shattuck's name. The name meant Captain Trouble. Shattuck, Shadak—Chinese for „Trouble“. He was Captain Trouble—that's who he was: „Captain Trouble—Shadak Khan“, just like Kubla Khan, whose sword he'd come by.

Captain Trouble, the Fighting Fool, thought of these things as he crept through the sand. His thoughts went up to the brilliant stars and back, swept over the length and breadth of Asia, but not for a single instant did any part of his fighting self forget the necessity for silence.

The silence was like something immense and yet immensely fragile. It was like a bubble of silence, blown up and now enclosing in suspense all this part of the world. They'd been feeling the spell of it for days and nights. Even the camels had felt it. The camels had gone as silent as camel-ghosts, perpetually on the alert for other camel-ghosts.

„Shamballah!“

Ask anyone who knew, from Roum (Constantinople) to Urga, on the northern rim of the Gobi, and he'd tell you that Shamballah was the land of ghosts.

Maybe it was, at that. Over the rim of blackness that formed the skyline not more than fifty yards ahead there had again appeared that weird apparition of faint green light. It was a wavering shaft such as might come from an open door. In any other direction it might have passed for a trick of moonrise.

BUT tonight there was no moon. And the light lay in the north—the Quarter of the Dark Warrior, as the Chinese call it. Would there be some warrior there now, Captain Trouble silently asked himself, to defend the entrance to the fabled gates of Shamballah?

This was that country of the Black Hills—the Kara Kerugen, as the Mongols called it. Somewhere in the heart of the Kara Kerugen was a Kara Koto---the Black City, the City of Night.

Kara Koto guarded the one known entrance to that lost empire of Shamballah about which everyone had heard and which no one had ever seen—and lived.

Shattuck was drawing himself up the yielding slope of the last dune—he was doing this as slowly and silently as a death-stricken lizard—when he saw the figure of a man stealthily appear directly ahead of him. The figure, now

standing there on the crest of the dune and silhouetted against the faint green light back of him, was that of a gigantic warrior.

It was that of a warrior dressed in some barbaric costume such as Shattuck had never seen before among any of the desert or mountain tribesmen he had thus far known. There was something of the Cossack about him—something of the Turki. All that Shattuck could make out—and that dimly—was a headdress suggesting a tall helmet or turban, a long cloak belted at the waist; and then that the man was armed, aroused and ready for trouble.

THE man stood with feet wide apart. Across his lower body, from hand to hand, he carried a sword of great length.

Shattuck's thoughts were racing.

His action was almost as swift—and as silent. He was on his feet. He had his own sword bared and ready as he came to his feet.

„Stand!“ he said in English.

He had no idea that he would be understood. But experience had taught him that a strange word often carries more power than a familiar one. The figure stood—it made no more response in word or movement than if it had been an image of stone or an unsubstantial shadow.

It was this that might have added to the fearfulness of it to anyone less schooled than Shattuck happened to be just then in the mysteries of this heart of Asia. But Shattuck, after what he'd been through, was feeling that he himself was something of a ghost—at least, there was some sort of ghostly blessing on him.

Saving his energy—saving his breath—for some sort of ordeal he knew instinctively was now at hand, he slowly advanced up the slope of the dune.

II

TWO could play at this game of silence, Shattuck decided. He'd quartered a little. He'd come to the top of the dune half a dozen sword-lengths from that shadowy sentinel. The crest was but a yielding ridge—one of the traveling dunes of the Great Sands. He could feel it crawling beneath his feet as he stood there now—certainly no place for a stand-up fight, if it came to that.

But, at least, he could now see where the green light came from.

Somewhere off in the middle-distance—how near or far he couldn't tell—he saw a shimmering green half-disk. It might have been the mouth of an illuminated well, for all he could judge by the appearance of it.

He gave it but a passing glance, for he was afraid to dazzle his eyes as the stars had dazzled them when he looked at them too long, back there in the dense blackness of the desert where Juma and Champela lay.

Hereabouts, for uncounted miles, all the earth was black—black sands piled into black hills, the Kara Kerugen. There even was a Kara Nor—according to the Mongols; a Black Lake on which the black city of Kara Koto reared its dark towers. And according to Mongols, the citizens of Kara Koto sang—or they sometimes howled—but they never spoke.

Secretly, these tales had always made Shattuck smile, even while he'd listen to them with interest. For back of most of these stories, however wild, he suspected that there was a basis of truth. Just now, though, there came to him

a disturbing sense that the tales might have been truer than even he had been willing to concede.

„Who are you, friend?“ he asked softly, in the Kirghiz dialect that Juma had taught him.

There was no answer.

That tall shadow of a man he could make out had faced him. There was an air of tenseness about him—an impression felt rather than seen.

Shattuck approached him.

A TALL, tall man with a wolfish face dimly seen; and there was something more than wolfish in that tense silence of his. He looked like a man who, sure enough, might never speak but—howl! He'd released the tip of his sword with his left hand and he'd raised the blade, still parallel with the ground, to a peculiar „guard“ on a level with his shoulders.

Spoken or not, it was a challenge.

Shattuck advanced his own blade slowly until the point of it rested on the stranger's weapon. He pressed it down.

This was the devil of a place for a fight. Shattuck had not the slightest desire to fight. But to flinch at the prospect of a fight might be the surest way of starting one.

„Who are you?“ he repeated in Kirghiz. „What are you?“

There was a dangerous lull.

Through that straining silence there came to Shattuck the sound of rushing feet, padded in the sand. They were coming in his direction—from back of him and all around.

But he didn't turn. He couldn't turn.

Quick as light he'd twisted down the blade of the human specter in front of him and closed in with his shoulder as a buffer. Curiously, the thing that struck him most as he closed with the giant was an odor of incense—a sort of peppery musk.

It was a smell that carried his memory back to some great cave he'd known—but whether in dream or waking, he couldn't tell. It was a sort of dream memory set to a clang of ghostly gongs, of dim lamps burning at the feet of great stone gods.

Out of that memory had come a name:

„Mi-leh-fuh!“

He'd panted it aloud almost at the moment of the clash.

From the position he was in, Shattuck could have killed his man with a single slash. He'd kept his sword hand free. But he knew that this part of the battle was over from the moment he'd uttered that potent name.

„Mi-leh-fuh!“

It was the name of the Buddha of the Future—Maitreya, as he was also called.

The effect was instantaneous.

The warrior with whom Shattuck had grappled now gave a whining yelp. It was half bark, half howl. It was answered by others. He who had uttered the first howl stood still and limp.

ONLY when Shattuck released him did the gaunt wolf of a man make any further move at all, and then it was to slink away. As he did so, other black

shapes were appearing out of the darkness. They formed a circle there. They were wolflike even in that. Shattuck had seen wolves like that in a circle around some cornered ram.

But all of them were gaunt and tall, so far as he could see. That they were armed as that howling companion of theirs was armed he could only guess—not only armed, but with a shirt of mail under their long cloaks. That also was something he had guessed, from the moment his shoulder had butted into his recent adversary.

Shattuck spoke softly. He spoke in the Mandarin dialect, so-called—the „Kuan-hua“ that his own Chinese amah had taught him as a child.

„I, like you,“ he said to the silent pack, „am a servant of Mi-leh-fuh.“

Even now a breath of that peppery musk was reaching him. He remembered. Once, long ago, he had been in a great battle. It was in that battle where Michmander, the Afghan, had been killed with a long-handled hatchet and he himself had been nearly killed. After that he'd been cared for in a great cave-temple. That was where he'd smelled an incense like this and where he'd heard the name of Mi-leh-fuh.

„And what way is this,“ he added, „to treat a servant of Maitreya?“

To this a strange voice unexpectedly answered. It came exceedingly soft and seemingly remote, as if the whole desert had become a whispering gallery. And the language, while clearly Chinese—clearly enough, at any rate, for Shattuck to understand it—the accent and cast of it was such as he had never heard before.

It said:

„And what is this servant of Maitreya doing in these Black Hills?“

THE voice had come from somewhere back of him, but Shattuck didn't turn. He kept his eyes on that shadowy half-circle of black shapes in front of him. And he was thinking of Juma and Champela, his companions. He knew that they must have responded to the alarm and would be drawing near.

„I look for the Black City in these Black Hills,“ he replied. And he shouted in English: „And you, Champela, keep Juma quiet, whatever happens.“

The same strange voice answered, without haste but without delay:

„Your companions are already in our hands.“

III

SHATTUCK heard that announcement as he might have received a knock-out blow. It staggered him—body, mind and soul. Juma, the old robber chief, had become a father to him; more than a father, a companion-in-arms, a friend. Champela was more than a brother.

„Juma! Champela!“ he barked.

There was no answer. Their silence gave Shattuck an added shock of horror and rage—not hot but cold—that brought him back to fighting trim as a dash of cold water might have done.

„Ma-lai!“

„Out of the way!“—and he'd sprung toward that lurking dark circle with his sword playing left and right. The shadowy pack fell away.

The way was down hill. Even in the dark the slope gave Shattuck his direction. He'd have to find his friends again. He knew he couldn't be so widely out...

He couldn't even locate the camels—four of them. Nor their packs. He called softly. He groped about wildly, blindly, in the sand.

All the time he was doing this he was remembering a thousand graces of that old robber, Juma. It was Juma who'd taken him in and cared for him when he was lost and out of his head, and as one condemned to death as a result of that battle in the Afghan hills.

Even more poignant were his thoughts of Champela—the mystic, the American lama, John Day.

Juma, at least, could fight. To die fighting, that would have been an end as natural to Juma as flight to an eagle. But Champela's courage was of a different sort. To save a friend's—or even a stranger's—life, Champela would brave anything. He'd already proven that. But to save his own life he'd strike never a blow.

SHATTUCK came up at last breathless, baffled, blinking at the stars.

They were gone, both Juma and Champela.

As he stood there in the absorbent blackness staring up at the sky, he was conscious—as if by some other sense than those of sight and hearing—that the enemy pack had again drawn a cordon about him.

Should he fight.

Again he heard that quiet voice calling out in its strange Chinese. It was such Chinese, he figured it, as might have been spoken a thousand years ago.

It was a phrase that China had been repeating for many times a thousand years, no doubt—that old, old formula of China's resignation:

„Mei yu fatzu!“

It meant: „There is no way out!“

„There is a way out,“ he shouted back. „There is a way of the sword. Give me word of my friends or I'll start to kill!“

„Hold!“

„How long?“

„As long as you hope to see your friends alive again!“

Shattuck went limp. There was no answer to that but to yield.

A feeling closed in upon him that he'd felt before. He was up against the Gobi—that great desert that stretched its length and breadth throughout the heart of Asia. The Gobi was the abyss of Asia. It had swallowed cities, empires. Could one man stand up against the Gobi, even when armed with the sword of Kubla Khan?

„He might,“ came the breath of a thought, „if he's fated to do so!“

Shattuck spoke aloud:

„Listen, you, O child of the Dragon!“

„I'm listening, you friend of Maitreya who yet would kill!“

„Show me my friends alive and I'll barter with you.“

Shattuck had been getting back his breath. At each exchange with that invisible spokesman he'd drifted closer to the point from which the voice came. He could tell by the sound of it that the unseen owner of the voice was about on a level with where he stood. The voice was coming to him through the trough between two dunes. He was ready for one last desperate play.

There was this one sure thing to guide him—the Gobi had never liked a coward.

„Barter with what?“ came the challenge.

Shattuck hurled himself forward through the darkness. Between the dunes the floor of the desert had been scooped out almost down to the underlying clay. He sprinted blindly. Fingers were snatching at him like the fangs of wolves.

But he wouldn't—he couldn't—strike.

These others weren't trying to kill him. They might have done that long ago, Shattuck knew. They were trying to take him alive.

In the dark he collided with what he took to be a box.

The box went over in the midst of a din that was like that of a thousand devils let loose. He was sprawling in a tangle of wood and silk.

AGAIN memory was helping him even as he fought. This was a carrying chair. He'd seen them and he'd ridden in them, alone and with his father, during his childhood in China. There'd even been an affair something like this when the coolie porters of the chair he was in had been upset by a mob. Then also he'd fought, with all the strength of his eleven years, as he was fighting now.

Powerful bodies had added their weight to the tangle. But even here and now he could tell that the enemy, felt but unrecognizable in the black confusion, was at a loss just how to proceed—that some mortal terror was paralyzing their attack and that this fear was not of himself.

In the midst of the tumult—it had been an affair of timeless seconds—Shattuck's free hand found a throat. The throat was small and smooth.

„You fool,“ he shouted in Chinese through the din; „stop them! And why didn't you tell me you were a woman?“

IV

SHE hadn't told him, perhaps, that she was a woman because she'd forgotten or had never known that she was one. She'd been treated so long as a divinity that she'd accepted the fact that such she was—a goddess—the goddess Miao Shen.

The knowledge of who she was and what sort of a situation he'd got himself into came to Shattuck by swift degrees.

There'd been no struggle. A girl! Scented! Jeweled! Here in the Gobi!

From the moment the truth flashed upon him that this was a woman's throat his hand had found, he'd released his hold and groped instead for her wrist. If he was still in doubt, the doubt was gone. He had to push a weight of bracelets aside before he found another grip. And by that time Miao Shen had confessed herself and cried a command to her people.

It was a command that stifled the din as a struck match kills darkness.

„Shadak Khan!“

Shattuck had heard that name of his pronounced by his captive even before the din was finished.

„Where'd you get that name?“ he panted.

There was a faint laugh.

IN the darkness, Shattuck was trying, cautiously, to set the wretched palang to rights. But he was careful not to lose contact with his mysterious captive. As for that, he was on his guard against the possible prick of a dagger.

He was on his guard against a thousand perils, defined and undefined. He'd reached the outer gates of that mysterious Shamballah he'd heard so much about. Of that he was certain. The mere thought of that brought a riot of elation to his straining nerves. At the same time over his racing thoughts brooded that other—none who'd seen Shamballah had ever returned—except perhaps as a wandering lunatic.

„Only Shadak Khan,“ came the soft voice, „would dare lay hands on Miao Shen.“

„Miao Shen is the Goddess of Mercy.“

„I am Miao Shen!“

There were living gods in and about the Gobi. One of the greatest—the greatest of all—was said to live in Shamballah. If living gods, why not goddesses?

„Miao Shen, I and my men were on a peaceful embassy to Shamballah,“ said Shattuck. „We come from the Lamasery of the Soaring Meditation.“

The incarnation of Miao Shen had a laugh in her voice.

„You tell me old news, Shadak Khan. I ran away from Shamballah to find you. I have looked at your face.“

Shattuck was dazed by the unreality of all this, but he clung to reason.

„Let me see yours,“ he said briefly.

SHATTUCK lit a match. By the light of it he looked at her, seated there in the wreck of her palang. The pajang, or palanquin, was itself like a throne—but a throne that was wrecked: a lacework of carved and gilded wood, a cloud of richly embroidered silks. And, in the midst of this, Miao Shen herself.

She was not very large. She was so painted and decorated in other ways, with silks and jewels—she was so still—that she might have been, in fact, a goddess of ivory and jade.

Only her eyes were alive--brilliant, limpid.

„Too much light,“ she said.

And Shattuck tossed the match away.

He was filled with wonder. In the swift darkness, which had left himself blind again, he'd knelt in the sand and again taken her by the wrist. He wasn't sure, even yet, that this was a real person and not one of those curious spirits—sometimes incarnate and sometimes not—with which a thousand stories, older than time, people the Gobi.

These were the Black Hills, the Kara Kerugen; the home place of the Black City on the Black Lake; gateway to Shamballah, the earthbound ghost of an empire.

In that rush of thought that followed the going—out of his match, a swift flood of ideas swept over Shattuck's mind—things he had heard, dreamed of, thought out for himself, patched together. Shamballah itself was a ghost. But, like the ghost of a man, this ghost of an empire might be getting ready—it was ready—to be born again.

Then, the name of this creature he had seen, whose wrist he held:

Miao Shen! She was the Chinese Goddess of Mercy. Out of Shamballah—when that ghostly empire again came back to rule the earth—would come the prophet of mercy, Mi-leh-fuh, Maitreya.

OUT of this tidal wave of imagination, Shattuck was snatched by a fresh excitement. It came first like the moan of a rising storm—a hooting boom, not very loud, but ominous. „What is it?“ he asked Miao Shen.

A movement of her thin round wrist had brought him closer.

„Kuan Yu!“—there was a note of terror in her voice.

„Who’s he?“

„My guardian! He comes with his warriors.“

„You fear him?“

„On your account!“

The answer was so unexpected that Shattuck was silent, trying to reason it out.

In the interval, the booming grew louder. He recognized the sound as that of gongs. Gongs were the voice of Asia. There were times he remembered from his childhood when the gongs had roared for weeks at a time—never stopping, booming to a crash, resuming again, whanging and moaning to another peal like that of heavy cannon.

Gongs again at midnight in Buddhist temples:

„Om—om—om—om mani pehme hum!“

But this was no temple chant about the jewel in the sacred lotus!

The gongs suddenly broke into a booming bellow like that of a typhoon. Around a black slope of sand there appeared what looked like the beginning of a torchlight parade. But instead of torches there were paper lanterns.

Suddenly Shattuck noticed that he and Miao Shen were alone.

„Where are your men?“ he asked.

„They’ve gone back into the dark,“ she gasped. „They also fear Kuan Yu.“

A VISION of those gaunt giants who’d harried him in the darkness returned to Shattuck. If they feared the guardian called Kuan Yu, then what sort of a man was Kuan Yu?

Shattuck had but little time to wait.

In the light of the bobbing lanterns he saw approach a whale of a man seated on a horse. He didn’t have to be told. This was Kuan Yu—the image of an old-time Manchu warlord come back to life.

Kuan Yu must have weighed as much as that horse he rode, a Mongol pony, small but tough. And there was nothing of sagging fatness about Kuan Yu, either.

Even the voluminous cloak he wore—his terlik of quilted satin—couldn’t disguise the lithe and heavy bulk of him or the proud way he held himself.

He was surrounded by a score of bodyguards with antique helmets on their heads and sickle halberds in their hands.

All this was revealed in prismatic flashes—a flashing moving picture on the dense black screen of the desert, set to the overwhelming music of the gongs.

„Run!“ cried Miao Shen.

Feet apart, his left hand holding the hand of Miao Shen, the sword of Kubla Khan—his own sword now, the sword of Shadak Khan, Captain Trouble—in his right hand, Shattuck stood his ground.

V

LATER he was to find out that those first warriors he'd encountered—those men who could run in the dark and who howled instead of talked—were called wolves by the people of Shamballah themselves.

They were the Lang, the Wolves. They lived in the black desert of the Kara Kerugen. For days they had been spying on Shattuck and his two companions.

The reports they'd brought back to the Black City had troubled both Miao Shen and that ferocious guardian of hers, Kuan Yu.

Back—far back in the very Holy of Holies of Shamballah—lived also one who knew all things, who could see all things, and to whom a thousand years were but as a day. Long ago he'd reported the coming of a new warlord to the troubled world. Trouble would be his name: Shadak!—Scourge of God—the Flail of the Five-Clawed Dragon!—Shadak Khan!—Captain Trouble! And Kuan Yu had sensed the advent of a rival. Shattuck didn't know this.

All he knew, or thought, or felt, as he stood there watching that ambulating menace bear down upon him was that he and Kuan Yu were enemies. It was as if a fiery dragon approached him out of the black night.

The spectacle looked like that with all its glitter and shine of lanterns and arms.

Nor was this dragon the Heavenly Dragon, either. This was the Deep Earth Dragon—the terrible Fu Tsang Lung, guardian of buried treasure—and Kuan Yu was its head.

The thought persisted in Shattuck's mind all the time that the glitter and din drew closer. The din was now shaking the sand. After the intense darkness the light was like that of a house afire.

Suddenly the din had stopped—stopped as if by a stroke of magic. It was a shock of silence, as shaking as the explosion of a bomb.

In this silence the first voice heard was that of Miao Shen.

Shattuck heard her voice. He wondered now how he'd ever believed it to have been the voice of a man. But many Chinese women have that voice of a strong and low-pitched vibration. Shattuck could understand what she said:

„He is here!“

Also he could understand something of that growling roar that came back from her guardian, the man on the horse. Instantly the bodyguard had begun to deploy, with their sickle-halberds ready to stab or cut.

„Stop!“ Shattuck called. „I didn't come here to fight!“

„Who are you, then, and what are you doing here?“ Kuan Yu growled.

It was Miao Shen herself who replied. Perhaps she was afraid of some wrong answer that Shattuck might make.

„He's the new warlord foretold by the Living Buddha,“ she cried.

Kuan Yu's answer to this was a snarl of contempt, a coughing command, and the bodyguard began to close in on the point where Shattuck stood with Miao Shen.

SHATTUCK couldn't stand his ground. To have done so would be to endanger the girl. He couldn't retreat. Back of him lay darkness and—those

lurking wolves. He'd heard that declaration of Miao Shen's—it was still singing in his brain like a strange, intoxicating portent.

There was to be a new warlord in the world. His coming had been told by a Living Buddha—the Living Buddha of Shamballah—the greatest of all Living Buddhas.

„I am he,“ Shattuck cried aloud. „I am here. Behold, I am Shadak Khan!“

He said this partly to the intent of the warriors with the halberds. He wanted to stave off a mass attack. In a mass attack he'd go down before a mob like this and never a chance. But the words were addressed principally to Kuan Yu.

At the same moment he'd started toward Kuan Yu.

Kuan Yu stared in rage and surprise. He was in such a sudden fury—mingled perhaps with some swift poison of a premonition, a superstitious fear—that his normally growling voice broke into falsetto.

He squeaked his command:

„Cut me this dog down!“

WATCHING his chance, Shattuck ran forward. There'd been a half-dozen flashes of halberds in his direction, but the bodyguard was half-hearted. They were in the presence of Miao Shen. For all they knew, they were in the presence of a being even greater, the new warlord foretold by the Living Buddha.

Great also was Kuan Yu, it was true, but mortal—they'd had proof of that: a man of wine and women!

Before they could come to rights Shattuck was at Kuan Yu's side.

„You question who I am?“ Shattuck asked.

What followed came so fast that not even Shattuck himself could have told at once how it came about. Only a little later could he tell.

But Kuan Yu had leaned toward Shattuck with a gesture for him to approach. One would have said that the great man wanted to say something privately to Shattuck.

Then, those watching saw Kuan Yu make a grab at Shattuck with one hand, while in his other a long poniard flashed. But before the poniard could strike, they saw the point of Shattuck's sword slip out of sight under Kuan Yu's ear.

VI

THE affair had happened so swiftly that the pony Kuan Yu rode was pawing the air before the big man's bodyguard rushed in to save their chief.

Kuan Yu slumped and fell, dragging the pony to a stand by the dead hand that still clutched the rein. The tough little animal, sheeted to its fetlocks with trappings of heavy silk, was as good as a wall at Shattuck's back as he whirled to defend himself.

The advantage was with him at first, even if he was one against a score. The long pikes with their sickle blades that the guardsmen carried were not meant for such close fighting. There were too many of them. They were getting in each other's way.

But Shattuck knew that his advantage couldn't be for long. A pikestaff caught him across the left shoulder. He opened the cheek of the man who'd struck him. He was fighting hands, arms, faces—not hearts. This was no time to kill unless he had to.

The pony itself was helping him.

He felt it lunge.

He had just time to turn and catch it by the mane as it jerked loose from the dead hand that was holding it. He scrambled to its back and raised his sword.

„Way for Kuan Yu’s master!“ he shouted.

„Way for Shadak Khan!“

The old intoxication of battle was on him.

It was a queer, exalted sort of drunken joy—keen as the wind, always with some tincture of prophecy in it that outran common sense. The animal between his knees seemed to have caught something of this—as animals will, in contact with men.

The pony had whirled and was rearing again, striking out at the nearest warriors with its small sharp hoofs.

The thing was so nearly related to a miracle that confusion was turning to panic.

There was other aid on the way.

The Lang—those human wolves—who’d been the escort of Miao Shen, were coming back. They were like sure-enough wolves closing in at the smell of blood. They were no longer afraid, now that Kuan Yu was dead.

In the midst of the tumult Shattuck found Miao Shen.

She would have protested, but he caught her hand and drew her up before him onto the pony’s back.

„Where are my men?“ he panted.

„In the Black City,“ she told him, while the pony plunged.

„Show me the way.“

He was holding her close. He had to, while he fought the pony’s fright. It gave Shattuck a little shot of unearthliness to think that he was here in the middle of the Gobi at night with a captured goddess in his arms.

„I don’t want to go back there,“ she answered.

„Show me the way,“ Shattuck roared. „I want my men.“

„SHATTUCK KHAN, carry me away. I came out to find you. The Lang—they brought in reports of you. They would have killed you if I hadn’t kept them from it—“

„Where are my men?“

The pony, still fighting the strange rider and its double load, had reared and circled off into the shadows away from the battleground. Over there, where Kuan Yu had fallen, the wolves were fighting—they were fighting Kuan Yu’s men, they were fighting among themselves. There was a scattering of lanterns. Above the clash and howls there was the occasional boom and clamor of a struck gong.

Then, suddenly, the pony had bolted.

Shattuck had been forced to drop the rein he held as Miao Shen turned and caressed his face in some ultimate plea that he carry her off.

The pony bolted.

Straight through that whirling tumult of fighters, swords and halberds, gongs and lanterns, it went. It went like a small black hurricane—first through that riot of color and noise—then into a zone of dark with a shimmering green light ahead.

From where Shattuck had first seen that green half-moon it looked like the opening of a well. Such are the illusions of the desert night.

Before him Shattuck saw that the opening was the long, low archway of a gate in a vast old wall. The wall, he saw even then, must have been the wall of one of the lost cities of the Gobi.

Like this, after all, he'd come to the Black City—Kara Koto, outpost of that haunted empire of Shamballah that he'd come to find.

VII

THROUGH that same archway—as Miao Shen had indicated—old Juma, the Kirghiz robber chief, and Champela, the mystic lama, had already passed. Scarcely had Shattuck left them, back there in the black desert, when the green light had begun to shine, before they were set upon by a ghostly army. So it had seemed—an army silent and invisible.

Of such stuff are the legends of the Gobi made—based on fact, yet with enough of the weird in the actual happening to make anything seem real.

The Lang—those human wolves of the Black Hills—had stifled and paralyzed Juma and Champela before either of them had been able to utter a sound, or make a movement in self-defense. And that might have been the end of them if the Lang hadn't received their orders from the little Goddess of Mercy, Miao Shen, who'd always shown mercy to them...

Shattuck found both of them, together with his camels, just inside the archway. His two friends looked like corpses in the green light. The green light was smoking up, coldly, from a pool of phosphorus. It was some secret of cold fire that had been preserved over from the time when Shamballah had been a kingdom of the living and not of the dead.

IN that green light the population of the Black City—such as it was—came streaming out like the dead on the day of the Great Resurrection. Like dead they seemed to emerge from their graves. The whole great city of Kara Koto itself had been buried for long ages. These people who lived there still were tenants of the buried houses and temples. And now it was the great portent of the presence of gods that was bringing them out.

First, Miao Shen—the living incarnation of the Goddess of Mercy. They'd heard of her. They'd known that she was living somewhere near them. Yet not in the swarm of men, women, children, now milling about in the weird green light, was there one who had ever seen her.

Greater than she was that other—was the Lord of Tumult, Shadak Khan, Captain Trouble.

Hadn't it been foretold that he'd come with Mercy in one hand and a sword in the other?

The wild pony had come to a halt by that pool of green fire.

Shattuck had recovered the rein. He still held Miao Shen in the hollow of his bridle-arm. She was his hostage—and making strangely light of it, anyone would have said. And Shattuck was keeping his sword-arm free—still too raw from slaughter to believe that peace was near.

„Juma!“ he shouted. „Champela!“

They raised a shout of their own at sight of him. But they couldn't move. They were trussed up like living flies in a spider-web. They'd been waiting their fate. Their fate was to have been decided when Kuan Yu came back. Shattuck they'd believed to have been already dead.

NOW it was Kuan Yu who was dead, and Shattuck—Shadak Khan—that Fighting Fool of a Captain Trouble who was there, after all, instead.

The people of Kara Koto were humming like a swarm of bees.

Something of wonder arose from that humming. More and more it was like that day of final judgment when the dead shall rise from their tombs. The green light flared. It rose in tides of ghostly radiance and fell again. The humming murmur rose and fell.

At that first shout of recognition that had passed between Shattuck and his friends, a hundred green hands had begun to pluck at the silk strands with which Champela and Juma were bound. The old chief and the young lama were free and stumbling toward Shattuck before he could bring his pony around.

„Lo,“ old Juma chanted above that infernal humming, „you've brought us even to Gehenna. See, these people are like the long-time buried. God send them vultures!“

Champela raised his eyes of a mystic to Shattuck.

„Who is the girl?“

IT was the prime minister of Shadak Khan who spoke.

„Don't worry, John Day,“ Shattuck answered, calling Champela by his American name. „She tempted me out there in the desert. But what's any woman—even a goddess—when a man has work to do!“

He came to his decision swiftly—that remark of John Day, prime minister to Shadak, helping him no doubt. There might still be fighting out there in the desert. Where fighting was, there he belonged.

He consigned Miao Shen to the keeping of his friends. He knew that so long as she was with them they'd be safe. And if he didn't come back, he told them, they could go on to Shamballah and await him there.

„Ai, ya!“ old Juma moaned. „I'd rather see you this side of Shamballah!“

„I have a feeling that you will,“ Shattuck consoled him. „Isn't it written that Captain Trouble will rule the world?“

The last they saw of him—this night, at any rate—was as he rode away, back through that tunneled gateway, into the black mystery of the desert where there might be more fighting to do.

