

L. RON HUBBARD



GOLDEN HELL

GALAXY
PRESENTS

CHAPTER ONE

ONE night in the Hotel du Pekin, a man uttered a statement which was to sentence me to more hardship and privation than I had ever before known, and to more danger, and to more high adventure than I had thought possible in this commonplace world.

Leaning on the bar and looking at me bleary-eyed, Charlie Martin said, “*All* Mongolians are rich.”

Not much, but enough. Why were they rich? Certainly it wasn't commerce and it wasn't agriculture. That nomadic people, now that I came to think of it, had no visible means of support and yet—THEY WERE ALL RICH.

I am not what you'd call a romantic adventurer, neither an adventurer nor romantic. I don't happen to like the sound of either. What I've done has come under the head of experience and perhaps exploit and sometimes conquest. You might even call me hardheaded, determined to get what I want where I want it—and that, to my everlasting sorrow, is not a fitting or a fit code for any man.

I know all these things now and I didn't then. I know entirely too much how wrong I was. I've seen things since that night in the Hotel du Pekin which even now I can't believe I have seen. But the mental scars are there.



*I am not what you'd call a romantic adventurer,
neither an adventurer nor romantic.*

Had you asked me, there at the bar, “Do you believe in God?” I would have replied, “Well, yes and no,” and in a bigoted way I would have explained a very complex conception to you. Now, to the same question, I would say, “I don’t know. I’ve never had any great proof of God. But I know there’s a hell. LOST UP THERE IN THE GOBI, I FOUND IT!”

In a careless way, you’ve heard men say, “I went to hell and back to get that.” They didn’t mean hell, really.

But I do.

This gold beside me, that diamond in this ring. I went to hell and brought them back.

Up there, lost in the Gobi, there’s a mountain with a name so sacred to Mongols that even here I dare not write it. Why? Because that mountain has a festering wound in the craggy side, and through that wound, men pass on their journey to hell.

Charlie Martin knew a lot about such things. He was an archaeologist attached to a museum and he looked at all things in a sober, academic light. He went on to expound his theory of why Mongolians were all rich and it was too common for repetition.

As I parted with him that night, my mind was already dwelling on a wild idea which had come to me. I said, in a careless sort of way, “I think I’ll take a run up to Kalgan and maybe beyond in a few days.”

“Country’s pretty wild right now,” said Charlie. “Watch yourself.”

I would have done very well to have heeded his advice, but I didn’t. I was too immersed in this idea of mine.

All Mongolians were rich and they didn’t have mines. But

the Gobi was a big place and who knew what you could find in those flat-topped scarps which rose like a child's blocks out of the gravelly waste.

Two days later I was on my way. Thanks to Charlie, I had a letter to the Prince of East Sung, a man very influential in the country, and I anticipated no difficulties.

You see, simple fool that I am, I thought that there would be gold up there, and if there was, what would hinder my scouting around, finding it and staking out a claim? I had a small gasoline-driven, dry panner with which to test those gravelly washes where no water ever flowed.

Gold is a driving force. It had taken me on a wild trek through the country of the ancient Mayas until the Yucatán Indians had driven me out. It had taken me through the upper forgotten mountains of Ecuador, and through the endless wilderness of northern Canada. I knew gold, but little else. I had a degree in mining, but the soberer jobs left me cold. I always managed to make my stake and keep going, nothing terribly rich, but enough. A mining engineer, when he takes the prospector's trail, doesn't experience very much difficulty. He can pass the old sourdoughs with their odd ideas and he can guess at things the so-called practical miner never suspects exist.

Young and confident, full of plans and enthusiasm, I arrived at the palace of the Prince of East Sung. The place was imposing, as yellow as the great plains and the Golden Mountains, built like a fort, ancient beyond the count of years. You had the impression of frowning dignity.

At the gate I was met by a cavalry officer, a fellow who bulked in his bursting furs like some overstuffed sack and whose head sat upon that mountain of flesh like some pagoda upon a mountain peak. He was slit-eyed, well greased, yellow and watchful. His fingers itched for the bribe I gave him. His name was Yang T'ang, a crazy singsong thing.

He escorted me into the presence of the Prince.

The Prince of East Sung was a very young man with a smooth yellow complexion, more Chinese than Mongol. He wore a beautifully embroidered blue gown and a small round cap and a pair of cavalry boots with golden spurs. He leaned back in his massive blackwood chair as though too weary to even think about moving.

"You have come," he said in a bored voice, "for my protection. You cannot have it."

I had not spoken and his refusal of a request I had not thought to make took me off balance.

"I am here," he continued in Oxford English, "because my ancestors were here. But my subjects desert me and join me at will. I have a personal bodyguard but the cavalry you have seen is not mine; the cavalry only wishes my protection for the moment and attaches allegiance to me only as long as they think they need my support. So do not ask for aid, *Tou-kie.*"

He was not being encouraging. He had called me "foreign dog." But it sounded so odd, those drawling broad A's coming from that mouth, I could not help but smile. "So doah not ahwsk foah aid."

From my pocket I produced a hundred dollars in Bank of Taiwan notes. I laid it respectfully upon the dais. He glanced at it and then at the captain who had brought me in. The captain was licking fitfully at his gross lips.

“That is better,” said the Prince. “Since you request nothing, I will give you the escort. The country, I might add, is dangerous. But what do you want? Old bones?”

Incautiously, I said, “Gold.”

He sat up stiff as a poker, staring. “Gold? Here in Mongolia? *Tou-kie*, you are a fool among fools. Go back to Peking and forget about this thing.”

“No, you do not understand,” I insisted. “I merely wish to try out the old streambeds of the region, to prospect that which has not been touched before. I take no wealth from the people, but from the land where it has lain forgotten.”

“Escort him out, Yang T’ang,” said the Prince with a disgusted wave of his hand. “Think well about this, *Tou-kie*, or you may find gold.”

That was not encouragement, as I found out later. That was a threat, a threat more ugly than any I would ever hear again. He had, with that remark, sentenced me.

Yang T’ang led the way outside. “I am going north,” he said in broken English. “My men and I will ride with you.”

“I will pay you well,” I replied.

“Think nothing of the pay,” said Yang T’ang. He was being big-hearted. He wanted it all in a lump when we got beyond the ridges which surrounded the palace.

Did I find gold? Yes, of course I found it, but under conditions

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different than anything I had ever before encountered, and in a setting which Dante might have envied.

Gold? A river of it, certainly.

But I did not suspect these things. My mind was too orderly to even dream of them. I rode, that morning, with Yang T'ang.