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The Red Dragon

GALAXY
PRESENTS

Chapter One

MY dear Miss Sheldon, you must believe me when I say that Manchuria is no place for a lady!" Blakely patted a stray black hair in place and frowned for emphasis. "Even the thought of your being in that country alarms me."

Miss Betty Sheldon also frowned, though her eyes were more thoughtful than worried. Seated in the overstuffed armchair, she could look out over the roofs of Legation Street to the place where the Forbidden City gleamed red and yellow in the setting sun.

"Then," said Betty, in a low, vibrant voice, "I shall have to forego the pleasure of being a lady."

"You mean . . . you mean you're actually going to discard all my earnest advice and go along? Certainly you can't mean that! I understand, Miss Sheldon, that your father's death has left you greatly upset. You must place some faith in the judgment of others. You'd never be able to make the journey. The Japanese swarm over that country. There are bandits, and excessive hardships. There are long marches which are completely without water.

"I advise you once more, Miss Sheldon, to let me handle this. I will take the chart and go after the Black Chest. You need only to remain here in Peking while I make the journey.

Barring accidents, I should return within three months. After that, I am certain that you will have ample funds for your return to the United States.”

Betty Sheldon gave Blakely a cool stare. He was tall and gaunt, and his hair was a sheet of black oilcloth glued to his skull. His shirt bore a wing collar, clean and starched, but his fingernails were filled with ancient, dry dirt. His eyes were brittle things which stared behind you, and never straight at you.

“Now let me get this straight, Mr. Blakely. You are to take the chart and bring the Black Chest to me at Peking. Then—”

“Then you will reward me with ten per cent of the sale price of the contents of this mysterious Black Chest and we’ll call everything square.”

Betty Sheldon shook her head in perplexity. Her corn-colored hair shimmered under the impact of a ray of light and her eyes were as unfathomable, as blue as the deepest portion of the sea. She was very little more than five feet three, and when Blakely climbed out of his chair and paced the room, she felt like Gulliver in Brobdingnag—smaller, in fact.

Blakely shook a bony finger under her small, pert nose and his voice sounded like an off-key baritone horn. “Miss Sheldon, I was young once myself. In fact, I am still young.” He paused to brush imaginary dust from his black suit coat. “I know to what depths of folly the younger generation can stoop. This idea of yours is utterly ridiculous. You think—” he shook his finger again, and Betty thought she heard the bones rattle— “you think that you can saunter through Manchuria to

this what-ever-it-is, dig a hole, pull out the Black Chest, and then saunter back through Manchuria and arrive in Peking intact. You think you could make your way, unaided, through a seething country, while having in your possession probably no less than a million dollars.”

“I didn’t say that the Black Chest was worth a million dollars,” protested Betty from the depths of the chair.

“Well, no doubt it is. Perhaps it is worth more than that. I know it’s valuable, or that old fool Sheldon—”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Eh? Oh, pardon *me*. That is what the natives called him. Anyway, Miss Sheldon, your father would never have risked his neck twice and yours once to try to get it out unless it was worth plenty. I’m convinced of that. He blew your entire fortune looking for it, didn’t he?”

“That’s beside the point, Mr. Blakely.”

“Yes, to be sure. But once again, let me state that there are Japanese soldiers in that country. They are utterly lawless. They shoot on sight and kill for the sport of it. And then there are bandits who seek to wipe out every white person who arrives in their vicinity. Some of these bandits stand on rocks, like this.” Blakely raised his arms and pretended to sight along a rifle. “And when they even see a dust cloud, they fire into it before they know who it is.”

“Where are the sound effects?” asked Betty Sheldon.

“Sound effects! I am sure, young lady, that we were speaking of—”

“Never mind.” She stepped away from the chair. Even with high heels and cocky hat she failed to reach his shoulder.

“Never mind going over it again, Mr. Blakely. They sent me here from the US Legation. They told me you were a collector, a man schooled in these things. That you were in a position to give me valuable advice.”

“Of course I am!” cried Blakely, staring behind her and patting his hair. His mouth was slack, the lower lip protruding.

“But I find upon speaking to you that you are interested in only ten per cent of the Black Chest. You place your price at ten per cent. That was not clever of you—it is too little pay. Fifty per cent might have drawn me into a bargain. The ten only showed me that you had determined to cut me out completely. Please don’t trouble me further, and please do not mention this business to anyone.” She went to the door and placed her brown gloved hand on the knob.

“But where are you going?”

A small, wicked light came into being behind her eyes. “I think I shall ferret out the Red Dragon and see what he can offer me by way of a bargain.”

Blakely tottered. He clapped a hand over his forehead and fumbled for his chair, still staring at her, jaw slack. “The . . . the Red Dragon?”

She smiled, triumphantly. “Yes. The Red Dragon.”

“That devil? You’d . . . you’d actually trust your chart to the . . . the Red Dragon? But he’s no better than a thief! A white thief in a yellow land. He’s despicable!”

“Nevertheless, I am going.” She jerked the door open.

“But . . . but you’re not going to carry your chart about Peking with you?”

“It’s safest with me, Mr. Blakely.” Her heels clattered down the winding wooden steps as though a sergeant major sounded cadence for her. At the bottom she glanced back long enough to see Blakely’s blanched face peering out his door.

At the curb she stopped, tapping one trim slipper against the ancient stone. Several rickshaws were drawn up there, shafts resting on the curb. The Chinese boys, bare of foot and naked of chest, drew away from her. Betty Sheldon frowned. These boys usually tried to tear a possible fare apart.

“Pete!” she called sternly.

No one moved in the rickshaw line. Uneasily she scanned them, suddenly realizing that her own boy, nicknamed Pete and hired by the week, was among the missing. She glanced up at the building front and saw that Blakely was watching from his window.

A rickshaw was trundled up from the back of the structure. It was black, trimmed with red, and its human horse was a mighty-chested Tartar. He slammed the shafts down in front of her and jerked his thumb toward the seat.

Dusk was gathering, and all along this thoroughfare dim lights were being lit. It was a dismal time of evening, and the silence that broods over the dead Imperial City was intensified by twilight. She was the only white person in sight. The Tartar once more jerked his thumb at the seat.

“Where b’long?” he rumbled.

She could feel Blakely’s eyes boring into her slim, straight back. “Hotel du Pekin, and chop-chop. Savvy?”

“Uh-huh.” The Tartar started off without waiting to see

whether or not she was properly seated. As an afterthought he glanced back and then, with a rolling clang of the bell, headed off to the north.

A block away from the office building, he stopped again. This time he lighted the paper lantern and hung it higher on the dash.

“Wait!” cried Betty when he picked up the shafts. “You’re going the wrong way. Savvy? Hotel du Pekin that direction, east!”

He shook his head impatiently and headed north. Betty gasped and looked anxiously about her. The Tartar was almost seven feet tall, looming like a Percheron horse between the shafts. His stench was gagging.

Betty held a small swagger stick in her hand. For a moment she stared at it, and then, her eyes suddenly determined, she raised it and crashed a stinging blow into the Tartar’s back. He shrugged as though a fly had touched him and trotted serenely on, still heading north.

Glancing around her, Betty knew that she was already lost. She would have to walk in circles until she struck a familiar street or landmark. Nevertheless, she stood up and tried to step out.

Feeling the change of weight on the shafts, the Tartar whirled. One great hand, twice as large as her face, crashed against her forehead. She slumped back, her ears ringing.

Still holding the shafts, the Tartar watched her for further rebellion. When her head was clear again, she once more lifted the stick. Her face was as white as ashes and her hand shook.



“Wait!” cried Betty when he picked up the shafts. “You’re going the wrong way. Savvy? Hotel du Pekin that direction, east!”

The swagger stick, less than three ounces in weight, swished down at the Tartar's face. He caught it with a grunt and jerked it away from her. Using only one fist, he broke it neatly and cast it aside.

Resuming the shafts, the Tartar trotted serenely north. The streets were growing darker, as they had already gone beyond the civilized quarter into the dark alleys which lay hidden along the great outer wall.

In the darkest alley of them all, the Tartar stopped again and looked back at her. She remained quiet and composed, but her eyes were almost black with pent-up rage.

Setting down the shafts, the Tartar retreated a few steps and fished in his dirty open blouse for a cigarette. He started to apply the match.

Betty dropped from the rickshaw like a shot arrow. She hoped that she could at least make the larger street farther on before he caught up with her. Her high heels caught in the rough paving and hampered her. Sandals grated behind her. She heard the Tartar grunting as he ran.

Abruptly a filthy arm encircled her throat. She was lifted up bodily and planted against the wall. The Tartar grunted again, exhaling a sigh strong with garlic. His grip was unconsciously crushing her shoulder.

The sound of a motor came to them faintly and then grew in volume. Betty's heart began to hammer with hope. Perhaps the car would pass through this alley—and if it did, the traveler could see by the headlights that all was not well. Perhaps it would be an officer returning from the plains to Legation Street.

The headlights of the car blinded her, but she could see by the curved radiator that it was a Renault. Perhaps, then, it would be a French officer. She stared up into the Tartar's impassive face and a withering fear caught at her throat. The Tartar was not afraid. He merely stood there, waiting for the car to come up.

The brakes squealed and the car came to a halt beside her. A voice, dull like a rasp on wood, cut through the window. "Blindfold her, fool!"

The Tartar spun her about and grunted something in a Chinese dialect she did not understand. She heard footsteps on the running board and then on the pavement. Trying to turn her head, she felt the Tartar's grip tighten. She could not see who the newcomer was.

A rag was swiftly passed before her eyes and secured with unnecessary strength.

The white man rasped, "Search her! Thoroughly!"

Her words were like the twang of a fine steel blade. "You don't dare do that."

The Tartar's hand fastened on the back of her light dress. She felt his muscles tighten preparatory to a jerk.

The whiplash crack of a pistol rocketed through the alley. The Tartar's hand relaxed, then clawed at her shoulder. Betty stepped quickly aside. Something hot and wet was on her forearm. A hot, salty stench was in her nostrils. She ripped the bandage away from her eyes and whirled. The Tartar was writhing on the paving, spitting red fluid.

The white man behind her was suddenly a blur of action. He crouched. Something blue glinted in his hand. Before she

even recognized a gun, she struck it away. The shot crashed up against the stars.

The white man jumped back, swearing. He tried to direct the gun against her, but all the might in her two hands shoved up. The gun came free, but Betty knew that it was not her strength which had taken it.

Boot heels were pounding toward them. A crisp clear voice was shouting, "Drop that gun and stand up!"

The white man leaped for the running board. The engine roared and chattered as the gears went home. With a grinding squeal of tires the Renault shot away.

Two stabs of red flame came from the direction of the bootbeats. Glass rattled against the alley. The Renault went around a corner on two wheels and was gone from sight.

Betty leaned back against the wall, trying to catch her breath, suddenly weak and shaking. Everything was blurred for a minute. When she brought her chin up again, she saw that a slim gentleman, hazy in the starlight, stood before her, his head bared.

He bowed and clicked his heels. Even teeth glowed white as he said, "Pardon me, Miss Sheldon. I'm afraid my introductions are always abrupt."

She knew, then, that she was face to face with that almost legendary figure, the Red Dragon.