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The Trail of the Red Diamonds

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

The Chinese Officer

I first ran across the trail in a hospital, two months after leaving the Gran Chaco behind me. As souvenirs of that continual war I had collected two bullet holes and a case of malaria, and I was certainly in no condition to go racing off to China the way I did.

The doctors told me so and my friends threw up their hands in horror, but that didn't deter me. The urge was too strong. I felt that if I didn't go, I'd be eaten up by the gnawing determination to find the red diamonds of Kublai Khan.

I had come across an original manuscript of Marco Polo's. The man that lent it to me did not know its value. And even when I told him, he laughed at me. I had plenty of money and I didn't need his help, but even so, I had him lined up for a cut in the event of success.

Most copies of Marco Polo's *Travels* leave out a great deal. They have to because it is difficult to decipher, and even more difficult to translate. But, for my own amusement, I had been working on it for almost a month, while laid up.

Halfway through the volume I read a paragraph about a chest of fabulous red stones which glittered "like the sun through red-stained quartz." Stones which would cut even metal. At first I thought he meant rubies. Then, on further

description, I understood that he could mean diamonds and only diamonds. Red diamonds.

The things were worth millions! Many millions!

My appetite for the unusual was whetted by that paragraph. I made a note of it for later reference, and it was a good thing that I did. Otherwise I might never have connected it with another, later, item.

Further on in the book, the famous traveler stated that the beliefs of the Asiatics were scarcely understandable to Western minds. He stated further that his host, the emperor of Asia, Kublai Khan, had requested that a chest of glittering red stones be buried with him to light his way to heaven and to serve as offerings to the gods.

Marco Polo, in his painstaking way, had covered years in the writing of his book. The two remarks were far apart in inscription—months, perhaps.

Suddenly I saw the light. I sat up straight in bed, gripping the tattered pages in both hands, shivering with excitement. I was wholly unconscious of my weakened condition, wholly forgetful of the Chaco. I saw only one thing. A chest of red diamonds buried in the grave of Kublai Khan!

I threw the covers back and yelled for my clothes. If Kublai Khan's grave were still intact, it meant that a fortune in rare stones had lain untouched for centuries! And I meant to be the first man there, whether I was sick or well.

An hour later I was in a telegraph station writing a cable to Jim Lange in China. I used a code book that five of us

carried. Jim Lange and the other three had been with me in South America, and we had promised when we separated that when anything good turned up, we would let the one nearest to the scene know. As luck would have it, Jim Lange was in Peking.

I had no qualms about setting the whole thing down baldly. No one else would ever know what I wrote. Besides, the code was so condensed that the entire message, including the address, only took eight words.

I told Jim to get a caravan of camels together and to assemble a company of soldiers, and I knew that he would.

Bolstered by excitement, I flew across the continent and sailed from Seattle. Eighteen days later, I was in Kobe, Japan, negotiating a passage on a tub of rust across the Yellow Sea. Five days after that, I was in the Gulf of Campechi, watching the squat concrete forts loom up on the horizon. That evening, I stood outside the railway station at Taku, awaiting the doubtful arrival of a train to Peking, China.

A cold bitter wind was sweeping down from the Gobi, hundreds of miles to the north. Curls of yellow dust swooped around the station's brick corners. Beggars tugged at the skirt of my trench coat, whining for pennies. Soldiers lounged against their baggage, stoically waiting for the train.

I asked the station agent, a wizened Chinese, when the train would come.

"Right away," he said glibly. "Maybe tomorrow morning. Maybe next month. Bandits bad near Tientsin." That was all I could get out of him.

If you've ever been in that hole they call Taku, you'll understand what I was up against. I was racked with excitement. In spite of the wind, I was sweating. And in spite of the sweat, I felt that someone was pouring ice water down my spine. Malaria leaves you that way.

There were no hotels. The station was so filthy that a man couldn't find a place to lie down, but even so, at midnight, I was so tired that I was almost ready to flop in the middle of the platform, coolies and beggars notwithstanding.

It was then that the young Chinese officer in the gray overcoat approached me. It was dark and I couldn't see his face. But by the light from the station window he could see that I was an American.

He asked me if I wanted to go to a hotel. He said that he had just received word from upcountry that the train would not be there until late the next afternoon. He looked at me more closely.

"Whassa matter? You blong sick?"

"I'm all right," I said. "Where's your hotel?"

I let him lead me across the tracks toward a cluster of lights which appeared to be the main part of the ten-house town. When we were a hundred yards away from the station, I could see him only by the green light of a switch.

Then he whirled on me. His stature seemed to double. His hand darted out and caught at my trench coat. I should have been prepared for that, but I was not. Weak and cold and tired, it took me an instant to collect my wits. And that instant was enough for him. His right hand snapped toward

my shirt pockets. Something thin and flat and square came away with a rending of cloth.

His left fist smashed me in the mouth, and I staggered back, trying to keep my balance, tripping over the ties. The whole thing took place in a split second. Then he was running, a vague, flitting shadow in the night.

I dropped to my knees and clawed at the side pockets in my artillery boots. Two .25 automatics were there. I jerked both of them out and emptied them as fast as I could pull the triggers.

But I knew I hadn't hit him. I knew he'd gotten away and that there was little use in following. I knew also that I'd meet him some other place.

Crouching in the dark, I felt of my pockets to see what was gone. I searched slowly at first. Then faster. Then frantically. My code book! He had gotten it!

The wind was cold on my teeth. I was swearing in four languages. In a few minutes, I heard running feet and saw the sweep of lanterns coming toward me.

The French colonial troops were swarming down from their barracks, called out by the fourteen shots I had fired. I didn't want to meet the French, and I had been a fool for firing at all.

Another sound clashed with the voices and pounding boots. The train was whistling through the yards down the track on which I stood. I ran toward it. An officer with a flashlight howled at me to stop, but I kept on. The engine clattered past me. Then a car. The train slowed for the station, and I swung aboard.



*Two .25 automatics were there. I jerked
both of them out and emptied them as fast
as I could pull the triggers.*

In a compartment I reloaded the guns and shoved them into my boot pockets. I drew up my coat collar and slumped down in the seat. If they saw me through the windows, they didn't come in. They knew that it was useless to search that train, and, besides, the railway is touchy about foreign troops. I sent a porter out after my luggage before we pulled out.

At dawn I was watching my rickshaw boy negotiate the traffic through the great north gate of Peking.