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# Orders Is Orders

GALAXY  
P R E S E N T S

# Chapter One

THE doomed city of Shunkien poured flame-torn billows of smoke skyward to hide the sun. Mile after square mile spread the smoldering expanse of crumbling walls and corpse-littered streets.

And still from the Peking area came the bombers of the Rising Sun to further wreck the ruins. Compact squadrons scudding through the pall of greasy smoke turned, dived, zoomed, leaving black mushrooms swiftly growing behind their racing shadows.

Along a high bluff to the north of town, a line of artillery emplacements belched flame and thunder, and mustard-colored men ministered to their plunging guns.

Japan was pounding wreckage into ashes, wiping out a city which had thrived since the time of Genghis Khan, obliterating a railhead to prevent further concentration of Chinese legions.

Down amid the erupting shambles, three regiments of Chinese troops held on, bellies to dust behind barricades of paving stones, sandbags and barbed wire, shoulders wedged into the embrasures of the cracking walls, intent brown eyes to antiaircraft sights in the uprooted railway station.

They fought because they could not retreat. Two hundred

miles and two Japanese army corps stood between them and the sea. Somewhere out in the once-fertile plains two Chinese armies groped for the enemy. But the battle lines were everywhere, running parallel to nothing, a huge labyrinth of war engines and marching legions. There was no hope for Shunkien. Once proud signs protruded from the rubble which overlaid the gutters. The thoroughfares were dotted with the unburied dead, men and women and children. Thicker were these ragged bundles near the south gate where lines of refugees had striven to leave the town, only to be blasted down at the very exit.

The cannonading was a deafening monotone. The smoke and dust drifted and entwined. Walls wearily slid outward, slowly at first, then faster to crash with a roar, making an echo to the thunder of artillery along the ridge.

War was here, with Famine on the right and Death upon the left and Pestilence riding rear guard to make the sweep complete.

In the center of the city, close by a boulevard now gutted with shell holes and clogged with wrecked trolleys and automobiles and inert bodies, stood the United States Consulate.

The gates were tightly closed and the walls were still intact and high above, on a tall flagstaff, buffeted by the concussion of shells, Old Glory stood brightly out against the darkness of the smoke.

The building was small and the corridors were jammed with the hundred and sixteen Americans who had taken refuge there. Without baggage, glad enough to be still alive, they sat in groups and nursed their cigarettes and grinned

and cracked jokes and made bets on their chances of being missed by all the shells which came shrieking down into the town.

It was hard to talk above the ceaseless roar, but they talked. Talked of Hoboken and Sioux City and Denver and argued the superior merits of their towns. Though their all was invested in and about Shunkien, though most of them had not been home for years, Frisco and Chi and the Big Town furnished the whole of their conversation.

A baby was crying and its white-faced mother tried to sing above the cataract of sound which beat against the walls outside. A machinery salesman tore his linen handkerchief into small bits and stuffed fragments of it into the child's ears. Thankfully, it stopped whimpering and the mother smiled and the salesman, suddenly finding himself caught, moved hurriedly away before he could be thanked.

Within the consular office, the consul, Thomas Jackson, moved to the side of his radio operator. Jackson was white-haired, small, nervous of face and hands. He looked at the expanse of gleaming dials as though trying to read hope in their metal faces.

The operator, a youth scarcely out of his teens, leaned over a key and rattled it. He threw a switch and pressed the earphones against his head. He lighted a cigarette with nicotine-stained fingers and stuck it in his mouth. He pulled a typewriter to him and began to write.

"I've got Shanghai again, sir," said the operator. "They want to know how we're holding out."

"Tell them we're all right so far, and God knows we've been

lucky.” Jackson leaned close to the operator and then glanced around to see that no one else in the room could hear. “Tell them for the love of God to get the cholera antitoxin to us if they expect to find any of us alive after this is over. Tell them Asiatic cholera is certain to follow, has already begun. And then tell them that we’ve got to have money—gold. Our checks and paper are no good and the food is running low.”

The young operator precariously perched his cigarette on the already burned edge of his table and began to make the bug click and quiver.

A few minutes later he beckoned to the consul. “They say the USS *Miami* is already proceeding down the coast with both the serum and the money.”

“Damned little good that will do us,” moaned Jackson. “A cruiser can’t come two hundred miles inland.”

“They said they’d try to get it through to us, sir. They want to know how long we can hold out.”

Jackson ran bony fingers through his awry white hair and looked around him. He singled out a fat little man whose eyes were so deep in his head they could not be seen at all.

“Doctor,” said Jackson, loud enough to be heard above the cannonade but not loud enough for anyone else to overhear, “Doctor, how long do you think we can last without the cholera shots?”

“With corpses strewn from Hell to Halifax?” puffed the doctor. “Now, tomorrow, next week, maybe never.”

“Please,” begged the consul, “you’re not staking your reputation on this. How long will it take?”

“The reports are,” said the doctor, “that it is just now

starting to spread. I'll give it five days to reach here because, in five days, we'll have to start going out to buy food—if we can find the gold with which to buy it. Otherwise, we stay here bottled up, boil our water and starve to death. We all had cholera shots before we came into this area, but they won't prove effective unless bolstered with secondary, epidemic shots. If we get that serum here before Saturday, there's a chance of our living—as far as disease is concerned—through this mess. But mind you, now, you can't quote me. Anything is liable to happen.”

“Thanks,” said Jackson gratefully.

The consul went back to the youth at the key. “Tell them it's got to be here by Saturday, Billy. Not a day later. Though how they'll get it here, only God himself can tell.”

He looked out through the office door into the outside passageway where a hundred and more Americans tried to take it calmly. The floor of the consulate was shaking as though a procession of huge trucks rumbled deafeningly by.