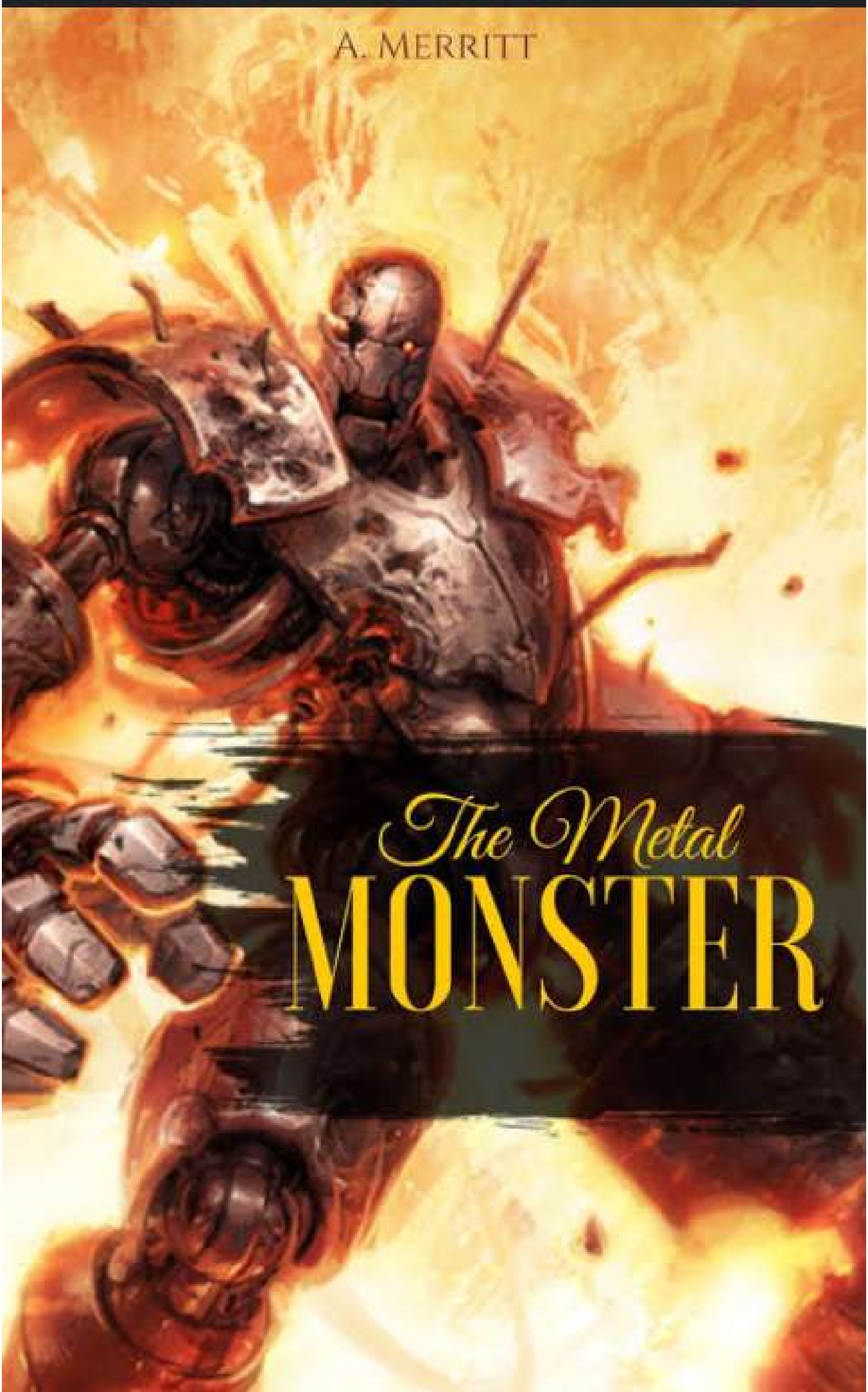
A. MERRITT



The Metal MONSTER

CHAPTER I

VALLEY OF THE BLUE POPPIES

IN THIS great crucible of life we call the world—in the vaster one we call the universe—the mysteries lie close packed, uncountable as grains of sand on ocean's shores. They thread gigantic, the star-flung spaces; they creep, atomic, beneath the microscope's peering eye. They walk beside us, unseen and unheard, calling out to us, asking why we are deaf to their crying, blind to their wonder.

Sometimes the veils drop from a man's eyes, and he sees —and speaks of his vision. Then those who have not seen pass him by with the lifted brows of disbelief, or they mock him, or if his vision has been great enough they fall upon and destroy him.

For the greater the mystery, the more bitterly is its verity assailed; upon what seem the lesser a man may give testimony and at least gain for himself a hearing.

There is reason for this. Life is a ferment, and upon and about it, shifting and changing, adding to or taking away, beat over legions of forces, seen and unseen, known and unknown. And man, an atom in the ferment, clings desperately to what to him seems stable; nor greets with joy him who hazards that what he grips may be but a broken staff, and, so saying, fails to hold forth a sturdier one.

Earth is a ship, plowing her way through uncharted oceans of space wherein are strange currents, hidden shoals and reefs, and where blow the unknown winds of Cosmos.

If to the voyagers, painfully plotting their course, comes one who cries that their charts must be remade, nor can tell *why* they must be—that man is not welcome—no!

Therefore it is that men have grown chary of giving testimony upon mysteries. Yet knowing each in his own heart the truth of that vision he has himself beheld, lo, it is that in whose reality he most believes.

The spot where I had encamped was of a singular beauty; so beautiful that it caught the throat and set an ache within the breast—until from it a tranquillity distilled that was like healing mist.

Since early March I had been wandering. It was now mid-July. And for the first time since my pilgrimage had begun I drank—not of forgetfulness, for that could never be—but of anodyne for a sorrow which had held fast upon me since my return from the Carolines a year before.

No need to dwell here upon that—it has been written. Nor shall I recite the reasons for my restlessness—for these are known to those who have read that history of mine. Nor is there cause to set forth at length the steps by which I had arrived at this vale of peace.

Sufficient is to tell that in New York one night, reading over what is perhaps the most sensational of my books—"The Poppies and Primulas of Southern Tibet," the result of my travels of 1910-1911, I determined to return to that quiet, forbidden land. There, if anywhere, might I find something akin to forgetting.

There was a certain flower which I long had wished to study in its mutations from the singular forms appearing on the southern slopes of the *Elburz*—Persia's mountainous chain that extends from Azerbaijan in the west to Khorasan in the east; from thence I would follow its modified types in the Hindu-Kush ranges and its migrations along the southern scarps of the Trans-Himalayas—the unexplored upheaval, higher than the Himalayas themselves, more deeply cut with precipice and gorge, which Sven Hedin had touched and named on his journey to Lhasa.

Having accomplished this, I planned to push across the passes to the Manasarowar Lakes, where, legend has it, the strange, luminous purple lotuses grow.

An ambitious project, undeniably fraught with danger; but it is written that desperate diseases require desperate remedies, and until inspiration or message how to rejoin those whom I had loved so dearly came to me, nothing less, I felt, could dull my heartache.

And, frankly, feeling that no such inspiration or message could come, I did not much care as to the end.

In Teheran I had picked up a most unusual servant; yes, more than this, a companion and counselor and interpreter as well.

He was a Chinese; his name Chiu-Ming. His first thirty years had been spent at the great Lämasery of Palkhor-Choinde at Gyantse, west of Lhasa. Why he had gone from there, how he had come to Teheran, I never asked. It was most fortunate that he had gone, and that I had found him. He recommended himself to me as the best cook within ten thousand miles of Pekin.

For almost three months we had journeyed; Chiu-Ming and I and the two ponies that carried my impedimenta.

We had traversed mountain roads which had echoed to the marching feet of the hosts of Darius, to the hordes of the Satraps. The highways of the Achaemenids—yes, and which before them had trembled to the tramplings of the myriads of the godlike Dravidian conquerors.

We had slipped over ancient Iranian trails; over paths which the warriors of conquering Alexander had traversed; dust of bones of Macedons, of Greeks, of Romans, beat about us; ashes of the flaming ambitions of the Sassanidae whimpered beneath our feet—the feet of an American botanist, a Chinaman, two Tibetan ponies. We had crept through clefts whose walls had sent back the howlings of the Ephthalites, the White Huns who had sapped the strength of these same proud Sassanids until at last both fell before the Turks.

Over the highways and byways of Persia's glory, Persia's shame and Persia's death we four—two men, two beasts—had passed. For a fortnight we had met no human soul, seen no sign of human habitation.

Game had been plentiful—green things Chiu-Ming might lack for his cooking, but meat never. About us was a welter of mighty summits. We were, I knew, somewhere within the blending of the Hindu-Kush with the Trans-Himalayas.

That morning we had come out of a ragged defile into this valley of enchantment, and here, though it had been so early, I had pitched my tent, determining to go no farther till the morrow.

It was a Phocean vale; a gigantic cup filled with tranquillity. A spirit brooded over it, serene, majestic, im-

mutable—like the untroubled calm which rests, the Burmese believe, over every place which has guarded the Buddha, sleeping.

At its eastern end towered the colossal scarp of the unnamed peak through one of whose gorges we had crept. On his head was a cap of silver set with pale emeralds—the snow fields and glaciers that crowned him. Far to the west another gray and ochreous giant reared its bulk, closing the vale. North and south, the horizon was a chaotic sky land of pinnacles, spired and minareted, steepled and turreted and domed, each diademed with its green and argent of eternal ice and snow.

And all the valley was carpeted with the blue poppies in wide, unbroken fields, luminous as the morning skies of mid-June; they rippled mile after mile over the path we had followed, over the still untrodden path which we must take. They nodded, they leaned toward each other, they seemed to whisper—then to lift their heads and look up like crowding swarms of little azure fays, half impudently, wholly trustfully, into the faces of the jeweled giants standing guard over them. And when the little breeze walked upon them it was as though they bent beneath the soft tread and were brushed by the sweeping skirts of unseen, hastening Presences.

Like a vast prayer-rug, sapphire and silken, the poppies stretched to the gray feet of the mountain. Between their southern edge and the clustering summits a row of faded brown, low hills knelt—like brown-robed, withered and weary old men, backs bent, faces hidden between outstretched arms, palms to the earth and brows touching earth within them—in the East's immemorial attitude of worship.

I half expected them to rise—and as I watched a man appeared on one of the bowed, rocky shoulders, abruptly, with the ever-startling suddenness which in the strange light of these latitudes objects spring into vision. As he stood scanning my camp there arose beside him a laden pony, and at its head a Tibetan peasant. The first figure waved its hand; came striding down the hill.

As he approached I took stock of him. A young giant, three good inches over six feet, a vigorous head with unruly clustering black hair; a clean-cut, clean-shaven American face.

"I'm Dick Drake," he said, holding out his hand. "Rich-

ard Keen Drake, recently with Uncle's engineers in France."

"My name is Goodwin." I took his hand, shook it warmly. "Dr. Walter T. Goodwin."

"Goodwin the botanist—? Then I know you!" he exclaimed. "Know all about you, that is. My father admired your work greatly. You knew him—Professor Alvin Drake."

I nodded. So he was Alvin Drake's son. Alvin, I knew, had died about a year before I had started on this journey. But what was his son doing in this wilderness?

"Wondering where I came from?" he answered my unspoken question. "Short story. War ended. Felt an irresistible desire for something different. Couldn't think of anything more different from Tibet—always wanted to go there anyway. Went. Decided to strike over toward Turkestan. And here I am."

I felt at once a strong liking for this young giant. No doubt, subconsciously, I had been feeling the need of companionship with my own kind. I even wondered, as I led the way into my little camp, whether he would care to join fortunes with me in my journeyings.

His father's work I knew well, and although this stalwart lad was unlike what one would have expected Alvin Drake—a trifle dried, precise, wholly abstracted with his experiments—to beget, still, I reflected, heredity like the Lord sometimes works in mysterious ways its wonders to perform.

It was almost with awe that he listened to me instruct Chiu-Ming as to just how I wanted supper prepared, and his gaze dwelt fondly upon the Chinese busy among his pots and pans.

We talked a little, desultorily, as the meal was prepared—fragments of traveler's news and gossip, as is the habit of journeyers who come upon each other in the silent places. Ever the speculation grew in his face as he made away with Chiu-Ming's artful concoctions.

Drake sighed, drawing out his pipe.

"A cook, a marvel of a cook. Where did you get him?"

Briefly I told him.

Then a silence fell upon us. Suddenly the sun dipped down behind the flank of the stone giant guarding the valley's western gate; the whole vale swiftly darkened—a flood of crystal-clear shadows poured within it. It was the

prelude to that miracle of unearthly beauty seen nowhere else on this earth—the sunset of Tibet.

We turned expectant eyes to the west. A little, cool breeze raced down from the watching steeps like a messenger, whispered to the nodding poppies, sighed and was gone. The poppies were still. High overhead a homing kite whistled, mellowly.

As if it were a signal there sprang out in the pale azure of the western sky row upon row of cirrus cloudlets, rank upon rank of them, thrusting their heads into the path of the setting sun. They changed from mottled silver into faint rose, deepened to crimson.

"The dragons of the sky drink the blood of the sunset," said Chiu-Ming.

As though a gigantic globe of crystal had dropped upon the heavens, their blue turned swiftly to a clear and glowing amber—then as abruptly shifted to a luminous violet. A soft green light pulsed through the valley.

Under it, like hills ensorcelled, the rocky walls about it seemed to flatten. They glowed and all at once pressed forward like gigantic slices of palest emerald jade, translucent, illumined, as though by a circlet of little suns shining behind them.

The light faded, robes of deepest amethyst dropped around the mountain's mighty shoulders. And then from every snow and glacier-crowned peak, from minaret and pinnacle and towering turret, leaped forth a confusion of soft peacock flames, a host of irised prismatic gleamings, an ordered chaos of rainbows.

Great and small, interlacing and shifting, they ringed the valley with an incredible glory—as if some god of light itself had touched the eternal rocks and bidden radiant souls stand forth.

Through the darkening sky swept a rosy pencil of living light; that utterly strange, pure beam whose coming never fails to clutch the throat of the beholder with the hand of ecstasy, the ray which the Tibetans name the *Ting-pa*. For a moment this rosy finger pointed to the east, then arched itself, divided slowly into six shining, rosy bands; began to creep downward toward the eastern horizon where a nebulous, pulsing splendor arose to meet it.

And as we watched I heard a gasp from Drake. And it was echoed by my own.

For the six beams were swaying, moving with ever

swifter motion from side to side in ever-widening sweep, as though the hidden orb from which they sprang were swaying like a pendulum.

Faster and faster the six high-flung beams swayed—and then broke—broke as though a gigantic, unseen hand had reached up and snapped them!

An instant the severed ends ribboned aimlessly, then bent, turned down and darted earthward into the welter of clustered summits at the north and swiftly were gone, while down upon the valley fell night.

"Good God!" whispered Drake. "It was as though something reached up, broke those rays and drew them down—like threads."

"I saw it." I struggled with bewilderment. "I saw it. But I never saw anything like it before," I ended, most inadequately.

"It was *purposeful*," he whispered. "It was *deliberate*. As though something reached up, juggled with the rays, broke them, and drew them down like willow withes."

"The devils that dwell here!" quavered Chiu-Ming.

"Some magnetic phenomenon." I was half angry at myself for my own touch of panic. "Light can be deflected by passage through a magnetic field. Of course that's it. Certainly."

"I don't know." Drake's tone was doubtful indeed. "It would take a whale of a magnetic field to have done *that* —it's inconceivable." He harked back to his first idea. "It was so—so *damned* deliberate," he repeated.

"Devils—" muttered the frightened Chinese.

"What's that?" Drake gripped my arm and pointed to the north. A deeper blackness had grown there while we had been talking, a pool of darkness against which the mountain summits stood out, blade-sharp edges faintly luminous.

A gigantic lance of misty green fire darted from the blackness and thrust its point into the heart of the zenith; following it, leaped into the sky a host of the sparkling spears of light, and now the blackness was like an ebon hand, brandishing a thousand javelins of tinseled flame.

"The aurora," I said.

"It ought to be a good one," mused Drake, gaze intent upon it. "Did you notice the big sun spot?"

I shook my head.

"The biggest I ever saw. Noticed it first at dawn this

morning. Some little aurora lighter—that spot. I told you—look at that!" he cried.

The green lances had fallen back. The blackness gathered itself together—then from it began to pulse billows of radiance, spangled with infinite darting swarms of flashing corpuscles like uncounted hosts of dancing fireflies.

Higher the waves rolled—phosphorescent green and iridescent violet, weird copperous yellows and metallic saffrons and a shimmer of glittering ash of rose—then wavered, split and formed into gigantic, sparkling, marching curtains of splendor.

A vast circle of light sprang out upon the folds of the flickering, rushing curtains. Misty at first, its edged sharpened until they rested upon the blazing glory of the northern sky like a pale ring of cold flame. And about it the aurora began to churn, to heap itself, to revolve.

Toward the ring from every side raced the majestic folds, drew themselves together, circled, seethed around it like foam of fire about the lip of a cauldron, and poured through the shining circle as though it were the mouth of that fabled cavern where old Aeolus sits blowing forth and breathing back the winds that sweep the earth.

Yes—into the ring's mouth the aurora flew, cascading in a columned stream to earth. Then swiftly, a mist swept over all the heavens, veiled that incredible cataract.

"Magnetism?" muttered Drake. "I guess *not!*"

"It struck about where the *Ting-pa* was broken and seemed drawn down like the rays," I said.

"Purposeful," Drake said. "And devilish. It hit on all my nerves like a—like a metal claw. Purposeful and deliberate. There was intelligence behind that."

"Intelligence? Drake—what intelligence could break the rays of the setting sun and suck down the aurora?"

"I don't know," he answered.

"Devils," croaked Chiu-Ming. "The devils that defied Buddha—and have grown strong—"

"Like a metal claw!" breathed Drake.

Far to the west a sound came to us; first a whisper, then a wild rushing, a prolonged wailing, a crackling. A great light flashed through the mist, glowed about us and faded. Again the wailing, the vast rushing, the retreating whisper.

Then silence and darkness dropped embraced upon the valley of the blue poppies.

CHAPTER II

THE SIGIL ON THE ROCKS

DAWN CAME. Drake had slept well. But I, who had not his youthful resiliency, lay for long, awake and uneasy. I had hardly sunk into troubled slumber before dawn awakened me.

As we breakfasted, I approached directly that matter which my growing liking for him was turning into strong desire.

"Drake," I asked. "Where are you going?"

"With you," he laughed. "I'm foot loose and fancy free. And I think you ought to have somebody with you to help watch that cook. He might get away."

The idea seemed to appall him.

"Fine!" I exclaimed heartily, and thrust out my hand to him. "I'm thinking of striking over the range soon to the Manasarowar Lakes. There's a curious flora I'd like to study."

"Anywhere you say suits me," he answered.

We clasped hands on our partnership and soon we were on our way to the valley's western gate; our united caravans stringing along behind us. Mile after mile we trudged through the blue poppies, discussing the enigmas of the twilight and of the night.

In the light of day their breath of vague terror was dissipated. There was no place for mystery nor dread under this floor of brilliant sunshine. The smiling sapphire floor rolled ever on before us.

Whispering little playful breezes flew down the slopes to gossip for a moment with the nodding flowers. Flocks of rose finches raced chattering overhead to quarrel with the tiny willow warblers, the *chi-u-teb-tok*, holding fief of the drooping, graceful bowers bending down to the little

laughing stream that for the past hour had chuckled and gurgled like a friendly water baby beside us.

I had proven, almost to my own satisfaction, that what we had beheld had been a creation of the extraordinary atmospheric attributes of these highlands, an atmosphere so unique as to make almost anything of the kind possible. But Drake was not convinced.

"I know," he said. "Of course I understand all that—superimposed layers of warmer air that might have bent the ray; vortices in the higher levels that might have produced just that effect of the captured aurora. I admit it's all possible. I'll even admit it's all probable, but damn me, Doc, if I *believe* it! I had too clearly the feeling of a *conscious* force, a something that *knew* exactly what it was doing—and had a *reason* for it."

It was mid-afternoon.

The spell of the valley upon us, we had gone leisurely. The western mount was close, the mouth of the gorge through which we must pass, now plain before us. It did not seem as though we could reach it before dusk, and Drake and I were reconciled to spending another night in the peaceful vale. Plodding along, deep in thought, I was startled by his exclamation.

He was staring at a point some hundred yards to his right. I followed his gaze.

The towering cliffs were a scant half mile away. At some distant time there had been an enormous fall of rock. This, disintegrating, had formed a gently-curving breast which sloped down to merge with the valley's floor. Willow and witch alder, stunted birch and poplar had found roothold, clothed it, until only their crowding outposts, thrusting forward in a wavering semicircle, held back seemingly by the blue hordes, showed where it melted into the meadows.

In the center of this breast, beginning half way up its slopes and stretching down into the flowered fields was a colossal imprint.

Gray and brown, it stood out against the green and blue of slope and level; a rectangle all of thirty feet wide, two hundred long, the heel faintly curved and from its hither end, like claws, four slender triangles radiating from it like twenty-four points of a ten-rayed star.

Irresistibly was it like a footprint—but what thing was there whose tread could leave such a print as this?

I ran up the slope—Drake already well in advance. I paused at the base of the triangles where, were this thing indeed a footprint, the spreading claws sprang from the flat of it.

The track was fresh. At its upper edges were clipped bushes and split trees, the white wood of the latter showing where they had been sliced as though by the stroke of a scimitar.

I stepped out upon the mark. It was as level as though planed; bent down and stared in utter disbelief of what my own eyes beheld. For stone and earth had been crushed, compressed, into a smooth, microscopically grained, adamantine complex, and in this matrix poppies still bearing traces of their coloring were imbedded like fossils. A cyclone can and does grip straws and thrust them unbroken through an inch board—but what force was there which could take the delicate petals of a flower and set them like inlay within the surface of a stone?

Into my mind came recollection of the wailings, the crashings in the night, of the weird glow that had flashed about us when the mist arose to hide the chained aurora.

"It was what we heard," I said. "The sounds—it was then that this was made."

"The foot of Shin-je!" Chiu-Ming's voice was tremulous. "The lord of Hell has trodden here!"

I translated for Drake's benefit.

"Has the lord of Hell but one foot?" asked Dick, politely.

"He bestrides the mountains," said Chiu-Ming. "On the far side is his other footprint. Shin-je it was who strode the mountains and set here his foot."

Again I interpreted.

Drake cast a calculating glance up to the cliff top.

"Two thousand feet, about," he mused. "Well, if Shin-je is built in our proportions that makes it about right. The length of this thing would give him just about a two thousand foot leg. Yes—he could just about straddle that hill."

"You're surely not serious?" I asked in consternation.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed, "am I crazy? This is no foot mark. How could it be? Look at the mathematical nicety with which these edges are stamped out—as though by a die—

"That's what it reminds me of—a die. It's as if some

impossible power had been used to press it down. Like—like a giant seal of metal in a mountain's hand. A sigil—a seal—"

"But why?" I asked. "What could be the purpose—"

"Better ask where the devil such a force could be gotten together and how it came here," he said. "Look—except for this one place there isn't a mark anywhere. All the bushes and the trees, all the poppies and the grass are just as they ought to be.

"How did whoever or whatever it was that made this, get here and get away without leaving any trace but this? Damned if I don't think Chiu-Ming's explanation puts less strain upon the credulity than any I could offer."

I peered about. It was so. Except for the mark, there was no slightest sign of the unusual, the abnormal.

But the mark was enough!

"I'm for pushing up a notch or two and getting into the gorge before dark," he was voicing my own thought. "I'm willing to face anything human—but I'm not keen to be pressed into a rock like a flower in a maiden's book of poems."

Just at twilight we drew out of the valley into the pass. We traveled a full mile along it before darkness forced us to make camp. The gorge was narrow. The far walls but a hundred feet away; but we had no quarrel with them for their neighborliness, no! Their solidity, their immutability, breathed confidence back into us.

And after we had found a deep niche capable of holding the entire caravan we filed within, ponies and all, I for one perfectly willing thus to spend the night, let the air at dawn be what it would. We dined within on bread and tea, and then, tired to the bone, sought each his place upon the rocky floor. I slept well, waking only once or twice by Chiu-Ming's groanings; his dreams evidently were none of the pleasantest. If there was an aurora I neither knew nor cared. My slumber was dreamless.

CHAPTER III

RUTH VENTNOR

THE DAWN, STREAMING into the niche, awakened us. A covey of partridges venturing too close yielded three to our guns. We breakfasted well, and a little later were pushing on down the cleft.

Its descent, though gradual, was continuous, and therefore I was not surprised when soon we began to come upon evidences of semi-tropical vegetation. Giant rhododendrons and tree ferns gave way to occasional clumps of stately *kopek* and clumps of the hardier bamboos. We added a few snow cocks to our larder—although they were out of their habitat, flying down into the gorge from their peaks and table-lands for some choice tidbit.

All that day we marched on, and when at night we made camp, sleep came to us quickly and overmastering. An hour after dawn we were on our way. A brief stop we made for lunch; pressed forward.

It was close to two when we caught the first sight of the ruins.

The soaring, verdure-clad walls of the canyon had long been steadily marching closer. Above, between their rims the wide ribbon of sky was like a fantastically shored river, shimmering, dazzling; every cove and headland edged with an opalescent glimmering as of shining pearly beaches.

And as though we were sinking in that sky stream's depths its light kept lessening, darkening imperceptibly with luminous shadows of ghostly beryl, drifting veils of pellucid aquamarine, limpid mists of glaucous chrysolite.

Fainter, more crepuscular became the light, yet never losing its crystalline quality. Now the high overhead river was but a brook; became a thread. Abruptly it vanished.

We passed into a tunnel, fern walled, fern roofed, garlanded with tawny orchids, gay with carmine fungus and golden moss. We stepped out into a blaze of sunlight.

Before us lay a wide green bowl held in the hands of the clustered hills; shallow, circular, as though, while plastic still, the thumb of God had run round its rim, shaping it. Around it the peaks crowded, craning their lofty heads to peer within.

It was about a mile in its diameter, this hollow, as my gaze then measured it. It had three openings—one that lay like a crack in the northeast slope; another, the tunnel mouth through which we had come. The third lifted itself out of the bowl, creeping up the precipitous bare scarp of the western barrier straight to the north, clinging to the ochreous rock up and up until it vanished around a far distant shoulder.

It was a wide and bulwarked road, a road that spoke as clearly as though it had tongue of human hands which had cut it there in the mountain's breast. An ancient road weary beyond belief beneath the tread of uncounted years.

From the hollow the blind soul of loneliness groped out to greet us!

Never had I felt such loneliness as that which lapped the lip of the verdant bowl. It was tangible—as though it had been poured from some reservoir of misery. A pool of despair—

Half the width of the valley away the ruins began. Weirdly were they its visible expression. They huddled in two bent rows to the bottom. They crouched in a wide cluster against the cliffs. From the cluster a curving row of them ran along the southern crest of the hollow.

A flight of shattered, cyclopean steps lifted to a ledge and here a crumbling fortress stood.

Irresistibly did the ruins seem a colossal hag, flung prone, lying listlessly, helplessly, against the barrier's base. The huddled lower ranks were the legs, the cluster the body, the upper row an outflung arm and above the neck of the stairway the ancient fortress, rounded and with two huge ragged apertures in its northern front was an aged, bleached and withered head staring, watching.

I looked at Drake—the spell of the bowl was heavy upon him, his face drawn. The Chinaman and Tibetan were murmuring, terror written large upon them.

"A hell of a joint!" Drake turned to me, a shadow of a grin lightening the distress on his face. "But I'd rather chance it than go back. What d'you say?"

I nodded, curiosity mastering my oppression. We stepped over the rim, rifles on the alert. Close behind us crowded the two servants and the ponies.

The vale was shallow, as I have said. We trod the fragments of an olden approach to the green tunnel so the descent was not difficult. Here and there beside the path upreared huge broken blocks. On them I thought I could see faint tracings as of carvings—now a suggestion of gaping, arrow-fanged dragon jaws, now the outline of a scaled body, a hint of enormous, batlike wings.

Now we had reached the first of the crumbling piles that stretched down into the valley's center.

Half fainting, I fell against Drake, clutching to him for support.

A stream of utter hopelessness was racing upon us, swirling and eddying around us, reaching to our hearts with ghostly fingers dripping with despair. From every shattered heap it seemed to pour, rushing down the road upon us like a torrent, engulfing us, submerging, drowning.

Unseen it was—yet tangible as water; it sapped the life from every nerve. Weariness filled me, a desire to drop upon the stones, to be rolled away. To die. I felt Drake's body quivering even as mine; knew that he was drawing upon every reserve of strength.

"Steady," he muttered. "Steady—"

The Tibetan shrieked and fled, the ponies scrambling after him. Dimly I remembered that mine carried precious specimens; a surge of anger passed, beating back the anguish. I heard a sob from Chiu-Ming, saw him drop.

Drake stopped, drew him to his feet. We placed him between us, thrust each an arm through his own. Then, like swimmers, heads bent, we pushed on, buffeting that inexplicable invisible flood.

As the path rose, its force lessened, my vitality grew, and the terrible desire to yield and be swept away waned. Now we had reached the foot of the cyclopean stairs, now we were half up them—and now as we struggled out upon the ledge on which the watching fortress stood, the clutching stream shoaled swiftly, the shoal became safe, dry land and the cheated, unseen maelstrom swirled harmlessly beneath us.

We stood erect, gasping for breath, again like swimmers who have fought their utmost and barely, so barely, won.

There was an almost inperceptible movement at the side of the ruined portal.

Out darted a girl. A rifle dropped from her hands. Straight she sped toward me.

And as she ran I recognized her.

Ruth Ventnor!

The flying figure reached me, threw soft arms around my neck, was weeping in relieved gladness on my shoulder.

"Ruth!" I cried. "What on earth are *you* doing here?"

"Walter!" she sobbed. "Walter Goodwin—Oh, thank God! Thank God!"

She drew herself from my arms, catching her breath; laughed shakily.

I took swift stock of her. Save for fear upon her, she was the same Ruth I had known three years before; wide, deep blue eyes that were now all seriousness, now sparkling wells of mischief; petite, rounded and tender; the fairest skin; an impudent little nose; shining clusters of intractable curls; all human, sparkling and sweet.

Drake coughed, insinuatingly. I introduced him.

"I—I watched you struggling through that dreadful pit." She shuddered. "I could not see who you were, did not know whether friend or enemy—but oh, my heart almost died in pity for you, Walter," she breathed. "What can it be—*there?*"

I shook my head.

"Martin could not see you," she went on. "He was watching the road that leads above. But I ran down—to help."

"Mart watching?" I asked. "Watching for what?"

"I—" she hesitated oddly. "I think I'd rather tell you before him. It's so strange—so incredible."

She led us through the broken portal and into the fortress. It was more gigantic even than I had thought. The floor of the vast chamber we had entered was strewn with fragments fallen from the crackling, stone-vaulted ceiling. Through the breaks light streamed from the level above us.

We picked our way among the débris to a wide crumbling stairway, crept up it, Ruth flitting ahead. We came out opposite one of the eye-like apertures. Black against it, perched high upon a pile of blocks, I recognized the long, lean outline of Ventnor, rifle in hand, gazing in-

tently up the ancient road whose windings were plain through the opening. He had not heard us.

"Martin," called Ruth softly.

He turned. A shaft of light from a crevice in the gap's edge struck his face, flashing it out from the semidarkness of the corner in which he crouched. I looked into the quiet gray eyes, upon the keen face.

"Goodwin!" he shouted, tumbling down from his perch, shaking me by the shoulders. "If I had been in the way of praying—you're the man I'd have prayed for. How did you get here?"

"Just wandering, Mart," I answered. "But Lord! I'm sure *glad* to see you."

"Which way did you come?" he asked, keenly. I threw my hand toward the south.

"Not through that hollow?" he asked incredulously.

"And some hell of a place to get through," Drake broke in. "It cost us our ponies and all my ammunition."

"Richard Drake," I said. "Son of old Alvin—you knew him, Mart."

"Knew him well," cried Ventnor, seizing Dick's hand. "Wanted me to go to Kamchatka to get some confounded sort of stuff for one of his devilish experiments. Is he well?"

"He's dead," replied Dick soberly.

"Oh!" said Ventnor. "Oh—I'm sorry. He was a great man."

Briefly I acquainted him with my wanderings, my encounter with Drake.

"That place out there—" he considered us thoughtfully. "Damned if I know what it is. Thought maybe it's gas—of a sort. If it hadn't been for it we'd have been out of this hole two days ago. I'm pretty sure it must be gas. And it must be much less than it was this morning, for then we made an attempt to get through again—and couldn't."

I was hardly listening. Ventnor had certainly advanced a theory of our unusual symptoms that had not occurred to me. That hollow might indeed be a pocket into which a gas flowed; just as in the mines the deadly coal damp collects in pits, flows like a stream along the passages. It might be that—some odorless, colorless gas of unknown qualities; and yet—

"Did you try respirators?" asked Dick.

"Surely," said Ventnor. "First off the go. But they

weren't of any use. The gas, if it is gas, seems to operate as well through the skin as through the nose and mouth. We just couldn't make it—and that's all there is to it. But if you made it—could we try it now, do you think?" he asked eagerly.

I felt myself go white.

"Not—not for a little while," I stammered.

He nodded, understandingly.

"I see," he said. "Well, we'll wait a bit, then."

"But why are you staying here? Why didn't you make for the road up the mountain? What are you watching for, anyway?" asked Drake.

"Go to it, Ruth," Ventnor grinned. "Tell 'em. After all—it was *your* party you know."

"Mart!" she cried, blushing.

"Well—it wasn't *me* they admired," he laughed.

"Martin!" she cried again, and stamped her foot.

"Shoot," he said. "I'm busy. I've got to watch."

"Well"—Ruth's voice was uncertain—"we'd been hunting up in Kashmir. Martin wanted to come over somewhere here. So we crossed the passes. That was about a month ago. The fourth day out we ran across what looked like a road running south.

"We thought we'd take it. It looked sort of old and lost—but it was going the way we wanted to go. It took us first into a country of little hills; then to the very base of the great range itself; finally into the mountains—and then it ran blank."

"Bing!" interjected Ventnor, looking around for a moment. "Bing—just like that. Slap dash against a prodigious fall of rock. We couldn't get over it."

"So we cast about to find another road," went on Ruth. "All we could strike were—just strikes."

"No fish on the end of 'em," said Ventnor. "God! But I'm glad to see you, Walter Goodwin. Believe me, I am. However—go on, Ruth."

"At the end of the second week," she said, "we knew we were lost. We were deep in the heart of the range. All around us was a forest of enormous, snow-topped peaks. The gorges, the canyons, the valleys that we tried led us east and west, north and south.

"It was a maze, and in it we seemed to be going ever deeper. There was not the *slightest* sign of human life. It was as though no human beings except ourselves had

ever been there. Game was plentiful. We had no trouble in getting food. And sooner or later, of course, we were bound to find our way out. We didn't worry.

"It was five nights ago that we camped at the head of a lovely little valley. There was a mound that stood up like a tiny watch-tower, looking down it. The trees grew round like tall sentinels.

"We built our fire in that mound; and after we had eaten, Martin slept. I sat watching the beauty of the skies and of the shadowy vale. I heard no one approach—but something made me leap to my feet, look behind me.

"A man was standing just within the glow of firelight, watching me."

"A Tibetan?" I asked. She shook her head, trouble in her eyes.

"Not at all." Ventnor turned his head. "Ruth screamed and awakened me. I caught a glimpse of the fellow before he vanished.

"A short purple mantle hung from his shoulders. His chest was covered with fine chain mail. His legs were swathed and bound by the thongs of his high buskins. He carried a small, round, hide-covered shield and a short two-edged sword. His head was helmeted. He belonged, in fact—oh, at least twenty centuries back."

He laughed in plain enjoyment of our amazement.

"Go on, Ruth," he said, and took up his watch.

"But Martin did not see his face," she went on. "And oh, but I wish I could forget it. It was as white as mine, Walter, and cruel, so cruel; the eyes glowed and they looked upon me like a—like a slave dealer. They shamed me—I wanted to hide myself.

"I cried out and Martin awakened. As he moved, the man stepped out of the light and was gone. I think he had not seen Martin; had believed that I was alone.

"We put out the fire, moved farther into the shadow of the trees. But I could not sleep—I sat hour after hour, my pistol in my hand," she patted the automatic in her belt, "my rifle close beside me.

"The hours went by—dreadfully. At last I dozed. When I awakened again it was dawn—and—and—" she covered her eyes, then: "*two* men were looking down on me. One was he who had stood in the firelight."

"They were talking," interrupted Ventnor again, "in archaic Persian."