

Chapter One

The Attack of the Kirghizes

“Master, what is that cloud coming towards us?” Arsalan, the Mongol who served as the caravan’s guide, pointed his bony right hand towards the south.

The handsome young man who was obviously the expedition’s leader took his binoculars from their leather case and carefully examined the mysterious phenomenon. It didn’t take him long to ascertain that it was made up of yellow dust and was rapidly approaching.

Doctor Francis Ardan was a striking figure. In his late twenties, unusually good-looking, with a well-defined forehead and patrician nose, he was impossible to miss in a crowd. His jaw was firm and square; his hair was a deep gold, his skin a burnished bronze and his eyes, yet another shade of amber.

He glanced at his little band of followers. There weren’t enough of them to fight off an attack in this God-forsaken Koko Nor desert. Besides Arsalan, his crew consisted of four other Mongols perched on top of worn-out camels.

Their only weapons were rifles that were already good for scrap in that year of 1927, and would hardly be an asset in the event of a fight.

Ardan blamed himself for having put his trust in the information that he had received from the French Legation in Beijing. The *chargé d’affaires* had been completely unaware of the fact that, despite the Chinese claims to the contrary, the high plateaus of Qinghai weren’t any safer than they had been 50 years earlier. When the 25-year-old Ardan had introduced himself to the diplomat, he had been cordially received, but the assistance he had received for his present quest to reach the source of the Huang He, the Yellow River, had been, in hindsight, woefully insufficient.

Ardan felt a deep sense of frustration. He had wanted to be one of the first men to map the Kunlun, that great mountain range of central Asia, cross the Koko Nor, the largest salt lake in China, and find out if the Yang Tse and the Huang He were linked by any affluents, as several old Mongol traders had told him. If that last fact proved true, it would have important consequences for the exploitation of the region’s vast, untapped mineral resources.

Ardan knew that the journey would be daunting, with many unforeseen obstacles thrown in his path, but he had an iron will, and intended to complete his mission, whatever the cost.

He had complete faith in Arsalan, who was his friend, and characteristic of the Mongols he had met, loyal, fiercely committed and extremely resourceful. On top of that, the native spoke fluent French and English, having traded in Beijing for many years.

Now there was no longer any doubt as to the origin of that yellow dust cloud.

“The Kirghizes!” shouted Arsalan.

The Kirghizes! The very mention of that name caused peaceful caravans bringing their wealth towards China on the Silk Road to quake in fear and turn tail. Rather a prompt merciful death than to fall alive into the hands of the dreaded Kirghizes, it was whispered around the campfires of Kansu.

Ardan quickly suppressed a shudder when he noticed, barely 300 meters away, 20 Kirghize horsemen all armed with modern carbine rifles.

He barely had time to reflect on their predicament or ponder their next course of action, when a first salvo tore through the air. He felt an immediate sharp pain in his right shoulder.

He fell brutally to the ground, and saw that two of his companions had been hit at the same time.

The pain caused Ardan to pass out. Because he appeared to be dead, he was luckily spared the grisly fate suffered by his companions.

The Mongols cried out for mercy, but were nevertheless shot in cold blood by the Kirghizes. The bandits, not wanting to waste precious bullets, then laughingly bashed the heads of the two men who had been wounded with the butts of their rifles. They methodically searched through their victims' possessions, taking everything they deemed worthwhile, then leaving in another cloud of dust, ready to slaughter and rob their next victims.

An hour or so after their departure, Ardan came to. He tried to sit up, but the horrible pain in his shoulder reminded him of what had happened. He sighed and looked around him.

His five companions were laid out on the ground, unmoving.

"They're all dead."

The situation was grave. Night was falling rapidly, and in the Kunlun, without blankets and supplies. That spelled certain death. Also, there was no spring near the wounded man where he could quench the thirst which was now devouring him.

"I may be done for." He smiled grimly. "So much for the sources of the Huang He."

He moved his hand to touch his wound, then remembered in time that tetanus was rampant in the Mongolian soil, and managed to stop himself.

Slowly, indomitably, Ardan began to crawl while lying on his left side. He used his legs to propel himself north, using the night sky to find his way.

Two days before, he and his companions had crossed the Great Wall of China. Arsalan had shown him a valley where there were several villages. Hoping that the valley continued for a long distance, he thought he might be able to reach it and find help amongst the friendly natives.

In spite of his terrible exhaustion, and the heavy blood loss, Ardan continued his snail-like progression until a couple of hours after dark, when the seeping cold began to turn his limbs into what felt like solid blocks of ice. Still, he persevered, knowing that he had no other choice.

He crawled forward, barely awake, moved by some automaton-like reflex. Suddenly, his consciousness was shaken by the horrendous cacophony of dozens of strange instruments. He briefly wondered if he had lost his mind and was delirious.

He didn't have long to ponder his state of mind, as a man dressed in outlandish clothing suddenly appeared before him.

The odd-looking person was obviously on his way to some kind of celebration heralded by the raucous music, but stopped when he noticed the wounded man crawling in front of him.

"Why are you writhing on the ground like a snake?" The Mongol's voice held a note of censure in his voice. "A man above reproach stands on the two good legs that the Buddha gave him."

Ardan spoke Mongolese well enough to understand his questioner. Before he could phrase a polite answer as required by custom, however, he became so overcome with the agony of his injury that he cried out in pain. The eyes of the Mongol grew wide with surprise. He rubbed his chin and appeared to be thinking, revising his initial estimate of the crazy white man who crawled like a snake in the night. The man knelt down next to the wounded explorer.

"I am Gelong. Let me see what torments you."

Gelong took the wounded man's wrists in his hands. He rubbed at the arteries and nodded his head from time to time.

Finally, he seemed satisfied. "There's a devil tormenting you. You will not be well until he is cast out."

Ardan sighed. "I have a bullet in my right shoulder."

Gelong was unfazed. "Exactly! Evil takes a variety of forms to enter the human body. But it will be forced to leave you and run away, because your good star has directed you to one who is friend with the holy Lamas, whose principal occupation is chasing demons."

The young scientist was convinced he had come across one more madman in a region that seemed overrun by madmen.

Gelong stood up and blew on a wooden whistle which produced a mournful sound. In barely 30 seconds, a strange company approached Ardan and his rescuer. After performing an odd

religious dance around the wounded man, they carefully lifted him and placed him on a litter made of woven bamboo. They began to walk towards the direction where, only minutes ago, the cacophonous symphony had been playing.

“Let’s hope that their cure for demons doesn’t involve burning me at the stake.”

It didn’t take him long to discover that he had been wrong to misjudge the Mongols.

Ardan was set down in front of a man who wore the same garb as the first person who had found him: a red robe decorated with religious signs. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of enormous spectacles. Ardan was told that this was Tashi, a holy Lama wise in the ways of ritual medicine.

Tashi sat in front of an immense copper basin which contained a burning liquid that seemed to be made of some kind of alcohol. The reflection of the flames conferred upon him a rather diabolical allure. He chanted as he read from a large book written in characters that Ardan did not recognize.

The ceremony lasted for a half-hour. As the young Doctor had begun to wonder when it was going to end, he saw two men approaching, bearing a mannequin. Tashi ordered them to set it on fire. The crowd began to sing that the Chutgur would soon leave the patient.

A Chutgur was nothing more than the kind of demon that would enter the human body in the form of a projectile. After Ardan’s was expunged, he would be able to heal. At least, that was what Tashi told him as he plunged a long needle into a clay jar that held a viscous liquid.

The Lama carefully examined the bullet wound. He poked the needle into Ardan’s shoulder and the young explorer passed out. The liquid in the clay jar had contained a large quantity of opium, and the Mongols, like the Chinese, had long known of its abilities as an anesthetic.

Tashi grabbed a pair of pincers and thrust their rusted ends into the flames of the copper basin. Then, he inserted them into the wound. He operated not in the silence of a western surgery, but accompanied by tambourines, cymbals and gongs, which made an almost deafening sound.

It was all part of the effort to scare away the Chutgur and prevent him from wanting to stay inside Ardan’s body. Legend said that evil demons could hide even in the tiniest of places.

With a cry of satisfaction, the Lama-physician held the bullet aloft, then placed it in a box held out to him by one of the other Lamas. The spell was broken and the wounded man saved.

To awaken his patient, Tashi heated an iron rod in the flames, then held it to the open wound to seal it. Ardan jumped up with a loud cry.

“You’re saved.” The Lama was pleased at his patient’s reaction. “The Chutgur has abandoned your body. I’m now placing you in the care of an old shepherd who will help you to permanently banish the demon and prevent his return.”

He then lit a small paper lantern and rose. He signaled that his patient should also stand, but Ardan found that he was still unable to walk without suffering terrible pain. So, Tashi had him returned to the litter.

A silent cortege set out.

They soon arrived at a fenced compound. Through the grilled door, a light allowed the young explorer to spy the silhouette of a man with long, braided hair, dressed in a blue robe.

“Lord Tashi!” He was delighted to see his visitor. “My home is yours!”

“Brother Tiglath, the spirit of the hunting clan is large and generous, but that of the shepherd clan is clean and pure. I have need of you to return life and happiness to this stranger.”

Tiglath the shepherd bowed in respect, then raised his lantern high to light the narrow pathway leading to his small home.

It consisted of a single room, approximately 12 feet square. It contained two hard, wooden stools and a simple, open fireplace that was burning the dried animal dung called *argol* by the Mongols who used it as common fuel.

The shepherd unrolled a thick, felt rug on which he placed a small pillow. Ardan was carefully laid on it.

The scientist was overwhelmed by the warm hospitality of the Mongols. He knew that they had been a great warrior race in the days of the legendary Kublai Khan, but was astonished that their nature also included this kindly, peaceful side. During their gatherings, they still liked to sing songs celebrating the glories of the great Khan, but they were also as fiercely loyal and hospitable as any tribe he had ever encountered in his peregrinations around the world.

After Tashi and the litter-bearers had left, Tiglath began to prepare dinner. He baked small, succulent loaves of bread on the cinders of the fire, and made the traditional tea, without which no Mongolian meal was ever complete.

In this welcoming atmosphere, Ardan began to feel himself coming back to life. The failure of his mission caused him more pain than the wound in his shoulder.

He began to think about how he could complete it without running into further danger from the Kirghizes. Securing more resources in Beijing would mean a year's delay, but it was probably the only solution. Soon, however, he was fast asleep, completely worn out by the day's events.

Several days passed. The young adventurer improved quickly and could soon get up and explore his new home. He discovered that, during his convalescence, the countryside had changed drastically. Where a few days before there had been only sand, there were now swamps. In the distance, he could see some compact clouds only a few feet above the ground.

He turned to Tiglath and pointed at the phenomenon. "What is that?" he asked.

"It's the mist rising over the Yellow River," the shepherd replied. "The river lies directly beneath the clouds." He nodded his head and continued, "When we see the mist, it means that the spirit of Huang He is angry and must be appeased. We have to burn incense so that the waters don't overrun the houses."

"Haven't you erected a dike?"

"Yes, but sometimes the spirit knocks it down."

The explorer didn't want to argue with Tiglath. It was clear that, to his host, the moods of the Huang He were closely linked to the capricious behavior of its tutelary gods, as was the case with all the other rivers of China.

Time was passing. If Ardan wanted to return to Beijing without having to make a long detour, he needed to leave soon, before the first snows of winter set in. He decided he would go the following morning.

That night, he couldn't fall asleep. It felt as if an extraordinary chill surrounded him. He watched as the shepherd burned incense before a small idol and prayed to the river spirit to not drown his sheep. Eventually, Ardan drifted off.

The Huang He seemed to have maliciously ignored the shepherd's earnest prayers for, around four o'clock in the morning, Tiglath woke his guest from a deep sleep.

"Get up, honored guest! The dike has ruptured!"

Ardan jumped up.

The Mongols were fleeing in boats made of buffalo hide and bamboo. Occasionally, one of the little embarkations looked as if it was ready to capsize, when some underwater turbulence caught hold of it. But the boatmen knew what they were doing, and were always able to right their fragile craft.

Hastily, the old shepherd gathered up his flock and began to move the terrified beasts north.

"I've decided that the time has come for me to go," Ardan told him.

"Then head for that small pagoda over there. A ferryman will take you across the river while it's still possible. Farewell, and may Buddha protect you, stranger."

"I am grateful for all your kindness, Tiglath. I hope I'll see you again in good health when I return next spring."

The young explorer turned and rapidly crossed the rising swamp. The flood was quickly destroying the trails that had been created by the feet of camels and peasant alike. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but a vast lake of water, broken here and there by stalks of tall grass, looking like small, isolated islands.

At last, Ardan saw the old ferryman, who greeted him politely.

“Welcome, stranger. You seek to cross the Huang He? You have come to the right place. Step aboard the ferry of Yao Chang without fear. I’m the best ferryman in the land. But hurry, because once the Moon rises, it will be too late.”

The scientist quickly got into the boat, which immediately turned and headed out into the raging river. Rapids pulled at the vessel, which nevertheless made good progress, steered by Yao Chang’s competent hand. Suddenly, there was a violent shock.

Unnoticed by the two men, a tree trunk had slammed into the lightweight hull and torn a huge hole in its side. Water began pouring in.

Within seconds, Doctor Ardan and Yao Chang were thrown into the turbulent, raging waters.

The young scientist felt himself inexorably dragged towards a deadly whirlpool, and realized that if he didn’t escape fast, he was doomed.