

THE ROBE OF THE RED VIRGIN

In Two Installments—Part II.

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WE SHRANK back against the damp wall and watched them. At the head of the throng was borne a palanquin of red wood. Eight tall men, clad only in white loin cloths, bore it upon their muscular shoulders. Between the scarlet curtains we caught a glimpse of an old white bearded man, with thin, transparent features, bright with the light of the torches. Behind, appareled in long white robes, marched scores of other men, some old, some young, but all with long, flowing hair and beards. And behind them, borne upon a second red palanquin, rode a sheeted figure. It was swathed to the eyes in a pure white robe.

It was borne by eight girls in white tunics, edged with scarlet. Upon their breasts and arms and foreheads glittered ropes of jewels that threw back the light of the torches in a million scintillant sparks. I surmised that the fierce visaged, ascetic old man was the Whispering Prophet, and that the white robed figure in the second palanquin was the Red Virgin. Behind them came the women and girls and children.

As they came upon the last spiral all chanting ceased. They were approaching the Temple of Silence. No sound was audible save the measured tread of hundreds of sandaled feet. The torches of cedar and sandalwood faggots sputtered, scattering showers of dying sparks. And

then with slow tread and stately silence the strange procession passed us and ascended to the front of the Temple of Silence. The red palanquins were borne within and the worshipers arrayed themselves in a great expectant arc just within the play of light. The old men ranged themselves in front and knelt with bowed heads.

Almost forgetful of my peril, I studied the fierce aquiline features of the remnant of the lost tribes. The brows were low and square and sharply defined by level black eyebrows meeting over the high-bridged noses. The stature was rather short and inclined almost to stockiness. The women were harder to see, but several of the children, pressing forward with childish eagerness, I observed to be red cheeked and chubby, with black curly hair.

Abruptly a sharp sybillant whispering sound broke the silence. The worshipers rocked back and forth, and at long intervals their lips moved in whispered responses. The Whispering Prophet hissed his utterances with a rasping vehemence that made even the words audible in our place of refuge. For probably twenty minutes he whispered. Then there was a shuffling and a stirring among the people, and the procession began to reform.

THE eight nearly nude palanquin bearers headed it, but without the palanquin or the prophet. The eight maidens with the short, scarlet edged tunics followed. Then

the old men, the young men and the women and children fell into the slow, swaying, rhythmic tread of the march. We watched their flaring torches grow dim and listened to the chant that they set up on withdrawing from the temple grow fainter. Then Lee Fu, beside me, stirred.

With his lean body inclined forward from the waist and his long queue swaying like a shadowy serpent in the starlight, we started around the Temple of Silence. The procession in the village below had dispersed. The lights on the flat roofs had smoldered to extinction. The light reflected in the areaway before us grew brighter. No doubt the Red Virgin was feeding the sacred flame with the green mineral oil.

I started around the opposite way, timing my steps so that I and the gaunt Mongol peered around the last carved pillar simultaneously. I shall never forget the spectacle.

A great vaulted dome of granite reflected the light of the sacred flame. Its groined arches were supported on huge pillars of green jade, inscribed with mystic symbols. Supported on four fluted columns of beaten silver was a great platform of green marble. Standing upon it with sprawling legs of hammer-welded gold ingots was the golden calf.

It but roughly counterfeited the appearance of the animal from which it took its name. Its blunt face was bearded and its great emerald eyes stared balefully out upon the star-bright heavens. Below, in a huge jasper bowl, ornamented with figures in bas-relief, the sacred fire burned brightly. On a graven throne of black basalt, just to the right of the golden calf, sat the Whispering Prophet.

HIS white-robed figure and high, thin features were as rigid as marble in the aged seer's hypnotic trance. His long arms were stretched out before him, palms upward, in an unvarying attitude of supplication. The fire from the jasper bowl illumined his fierce, harsh, transparent features and wide open blue eyes. They glowed like amethysts, and save for the fact that we had seen him before he had gone into his trance we might have mistaken him for a sculpturing in stone.

Before the jasper bowl, which reached to her waist, stood the slender figure of the Red Virgin. She had cast aside her white robes and the sacred flame glittered in reflection from the natural facets of a thousand uncut rubies. Upon her left shoulder, as white and shapely as if chiseled from alabaster, there rested a golden vase. She walked with measured tread toward the sprawling golden image.

But now like a great spectral shadow I saw him. He emerged into the light and was creeping up behind the Red Virgin.

