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# PAYMENT FOR JIGMET'S TALE

By ROBERT B. EKVALL

As he sat in the guest room of the mission compound, drinking tea and eating hot boiled mutton, Jigmet seemed swollen with importance, bursting with a secret all his own. Half a dozen times it seemed as if he were about to say something, but instead he remarked how tasty the meat was. It was tasty. I was using my knife almost as industriously as he. We were in no sense strangers, Jigmet and I. In fact he was one of my earliest friends in the turbulent tribe of Rzach-dum-ba. He called himself my first friend, but there were others whom I had known as long and trusted far more fully. Even as I pushed the trencher of meat closer to him I remembered the elusive rumors that had whispered his name when my horses were stolen. But there had been nothing definite that one could buy and use as testimony. Perhaps those that started the whisperings had been afraid; for Jigmet had had a turbulent and eventful past and was still hale and hearty, though less inclined to all-night riding than formerly.

Finally he pushed back the platter of meat, wiped his hands on the leather of his sheepskin cloak and cleared his throat. "I have something to tell you," he whispered, "but not in the house." His brief gesture supplied each knot-hole in the paneled wall with a listening ear, and we moved outside. But the courtyard wasn't empty; so we finally found a spot to ourselves on the hillside near by.

"You like your new place away from the trading post village?" he quizzed, pointing to where the twelve-foot wall of the compound rose on the point that overlooked the stream. "You like to be alone?" I thought I did. Indeed, after we had finally settled on the point our nights had been quieter than when we lived in the noise and fierce alarms of the trading post. And, whenever the barking of dogs and sound of shooting came to us, I thought with satisfaction of the twelve-foot walls of the compound, remembering that the pounded earth of the wall was ribbed with hidden timbers to frustrate any one who might attempt to dig through. Living at

Tahktsang Lhamo, center of the worst robber region of Northeast Tibet, one had to think of things like that. But Jigmet was speaking.

"Things are different in Lhamo from the time when you came here over three years ago. Some lamas have read curses and tell the people to drive you out. Of course you have many friends—good ones like me—but one must always act with a small heart [that is, be careful] and your place is far away from neighbors."

Conditions were different from the time, over three years before, when we had come to Lhamo. I had a host of friends in the district on whom I could depend and had gradually won a reputation that gave some assurance as far as the danger from robbery and the violence of the trail were concerned. In the natural course of events we should have been much safer than three years before. But other factors had entered in. In our work the first triumphs of the faith we preached had roused a fierce hostility in some quarters where before there had been only careless indifference and a certain contemptuous tolerance. Both friendliness and hatred were keener; so I merely nodded, wondering what was to come.

Quickly Jigmet broke the news. Rumors had come to him of a robber clan within his own tribe that was banding together to raid and wipe us out. He did not know just how true it was, but his source of information was trustworthy and he would find out further details. In the meantime, I was to be careful and trust to my friends—those who had my interest at heart like himself. The seed sown, Jigmet gathered his cloak about him and we walked back to the compound, where he mounted his horse and rode off.

It was still early in the afternoon; so I strolled on up to the lamasery and stopped in to see the priest Jamtzen, my sponsor friend and mentor-in-chief. As we looked through the latticed window we could see my place barely two hundred yards away and I asked him, "Jamtzen, is my place so far away from neighbors that I should fear attack?"

He did not answer the question but merely asked why; so I related all Jigmet had said. And as, partly in answer to the question in his eyes, I went on to tell him of my own deep suspicions of Jigmet, his head nodded in agreement, though he cautioned: "It may be true, all true. What would you do if it were true? Would you stay or would you take Do-rje-mtso [my wife's Tibetan name] and Da-hwei down to Chinese country for a while?" His eyes bored into mine with fierce intentness, and I felt that the test of travel and residence in Northeast Tibet might well be in that moment.

"Even if it is true, I stay," I declaimed firmly, or at least I hoped it was firmly. "The walls are the height of a horseman's spear, my servants are brave and I have seven rifles. You know even Do-rje-mtso and Da-hwei, though he is but a child, can shoot."

His face cleared with startling suddenness—almost he looked gay and astonishingly friendly. "Ah, wild one of a true Tibetan, foreigner though you are! Nothing can happen until Jigmet comes again. When he does come—and he will come to get payment for information—send for me and I will talk Tibetan logic for you. Tell him I am your spokesman."

Thus it happened that the next time Jigmet rode in with a face full of portent and secrecy I held up his story until Jamtzen could join us in our secret conclave. If he were disconcerted at the priest's presence, he did not show it, seeming to take it as a matter of course that my friends would give their counsel and advice. The tale he brought was complete in every detail.

Thirty men had taken an oath to have a part in the raid; for wasn't there much loot to be had from my place? All was arranged except the time, and that would be decided only after the sorcerers had found a lucky date. But we could buy definite notice even of that by giving good *gtam-dzan* (report-payment) in time to get the warning, and then, if need be, Jigmet himself would come up and help us. He went on to say that the information as to time could very easily be checked by the occurrence itself—the attack taking place on the stated night would be proof of its worth—and we could then pay the informant through him.

There was no opportunity to speak to Jamtzen privately. I had introduced him as my spokesman, and what would be must be.

"Gtam-dzan is good Tibetan custom of which Shes-rab may not know, yet he has told me all his mind and I will speak for him, even to the fixing of the amount," declared Jamtzen. "In an affair of such magnitude it is futile to

talk of merely a few ounces of silver or even a shoe of fifty *taels*. This is a matter involving thousands of *taels*. So we will pay accordingly."

I could hardly believe my ears. What was Jamtzen letting me in for in the matter of cash payments? Yet now was no time to stop the rolling periods of his oratory.

"Bring us the names and the number of the raiding party, let us know the night the attack is to take place, and we will pay according to the great custom. And that is, the *gtam-dzan* will be half the value of everything involved. If the house is burned, we will pay half the value of the house. If Shes-rab loses everything he possesses, we will give half the value of all lost. And if he and his family are killed, I still remain to pay half—half the value of his house, half the value of his things and half the value of his life-money—all in *gtam-dzan* for true information of a real result-producing raid. You know here in Lhamo there is shooting almost every night and thieves are around almost any time. Anything could be called a raid. But a real raid that produced results would have to be something; for Shes-rab-brdzon-grus' walls are high and he is well armed as you know. You tell us of thirty horsemen. I think he would hardly consider thirty horsemen worth shooting at."

If ever there was a poker face Jigmet had it. Gravely he pondered the proposition and finally nodded. "It is a good offer, but such information is hard to get. However, I will do my best. Act with a small heart always, Shes-rab, and your friends—Akku Jamtzen and I—will do the very best for you." With that remark he was gone.

Jamtzen snorted enigmatically after he had left and said: "Shes-rab, your foreign thought and my Tibetan thought were alike, but just the same it may be all true. Always act with a small heart and be prepared."

So we placed a watch each night and all slept with firearms within reach. Stations along the walls were assigned to each one in case of attack and our nights were a bit more wakeful, in uneasy suspense, though Da-hwei, as he stood a tiny .22 at his bedside each night, worried childishly for fear he would sleep through the excitement.

As the days passed I became increasingly conscious that, in all the casual contacts of life, all with whom I came in contact seemed to regard me with a curious intentness. My friends were especially friendly, assuring me of their interest, though no one ever mentioned the matter that was changing the mission compound into a sort of fort as we strengthened the gates



and arranged convenient firesteps at the corners of the wall. Then Jigmet again came to see me, and this time he asked that Jamtzen should join us.

"I have further word about the raid. Over eighty men are now involved, and they only wait for a lucky date to be in the dark of the moon. But the matter of getting correct information on the basis of your offered gnam-dzan is most difficult. However, I have a special message from one of your Rzach-dum-ba friends, Jamtzen. He says why should you risk your life for the foreigner? Be his friend and all that, but there is no cause for you to take your rifle and go down to sleep in his place every night. There is no need that you be killed; for all will surely be killed in an attack by so large a force. And there is a rumor that some one in the compound has been bribed to open the gates. Even I, who have been in many fights, am afraid to stay here overnight lest that be the night of the raid. But I hope I can get the information as to the exact night; for then Shes-rab can at least be ready."

Jamtzen spoke shortly—even a bit derisively, I thought. "I wouldn't come down here if Shes-rab asked me to, but he hasn't asked. He isn't afraid. He has plenty of men and weapons. Even his wife and child can shoot. A hundred men couldn't climb over his wall. Why should I sleep in his place to protect him? But of course if in the night shooting sounded here I would come down with my rifle just as all his other friends in Lhamo—and he has many—would come to help him. It would take an army to attack him when he is so near the lamasery; for the lamas would be involved."

It seemed to me that Jamtzen and Jigmet were having a duel within the four walls of the guest room; for, since the matter was no longer a secret, we stayed in the guest room and ate boiled mutton while we talked. And Jigmet seemed to have grown a bit weary. "Well, I must go, Shes-rab," he finally remarked. "I will do the best I can in the matter of the information, and now have you any dried onions left from the load you brought back from Chinese country? I liked the taste of them."

What mattered a few onions between friends? I filled his hands and went back into the guest room to hear Jamtzen muttering: "Yes, they do taste good. I think I need a few too." And so I filled his hands till he could carry no more.

He still advised caution, but as I set the watch for the night my heart was lighter than it had been for some time. Even the events of the

next few days seemed in the nature of an anticlimax; for I was somehow sure that the affair had been settled in my guest room as Jigmet, Jamtzen and I ate boiled mutton and drank innumerable cups of tea.

First the authorities of the Sechu Lamasery in Lhamo finally took cognizance of what they had known since the beginning and officially announced that there had been too much wild talk against the foreigner, because if anything happened to him the lamasery would smart in the face for eighteen generations, and so at the first sound of trouble on any night all were to rally to his place, without even bothering to pull their boots on and kill without mercy whoever made the trouble.

Then the Rzach-dum-ba chief came to see me. He was riding a big gray horse—a new purchase of which he seemed extremely fond; so I tied a congratulatory scarf in the animal's mane, saying all the appropriate words for such an occasion. Jamtzen, who had come with him, grinned impishly while that was going on, and then we had tea and a big meal together in my guest room. Nothing was said of the matter of rumors, but after the chief had ridden away Jamtzen told me to discontinue the watch at night—there would be no attack.

"Would there ever have been one?" I questioned in response. "Wasn't it all in Jigmet's desire for gnam-dzan?"

"No one knows but Jigmet," he answered, "and he is your friend. You can never know for sure in Tibetan country; for anything can happen. I didn't know. No one knew. Now we think we know, but it may have been all true. Yet even eighty men attack a walled home only when the owner is scared. Were you scared, Shes-rab-brdzon-grus, speaker of religion?"

That I did not answer, yet Jamtzen furnished an answer. "If you were, Jigmet at least does not know it. Yes, you are getting to be a good Tibetan—a Tibetan wild one, by the Sacred Books you are. And those who have believed your religion are safer, too, because Jigmet did not scare you away or collect gnam-dzan. The lamas' curses have not worked as yet and you still live in Tahktsang Lhamo in a house that has no neighbors—a house that is set up on a hill."

The last phrase sounded vaguely familiar, and I wondered whether Jamtzen had been reading the writings I had given him, but forbore to question further.

*The third of Robert B. Ekvall's "Tales from the Tibetan Border" will appear in an early issue.*