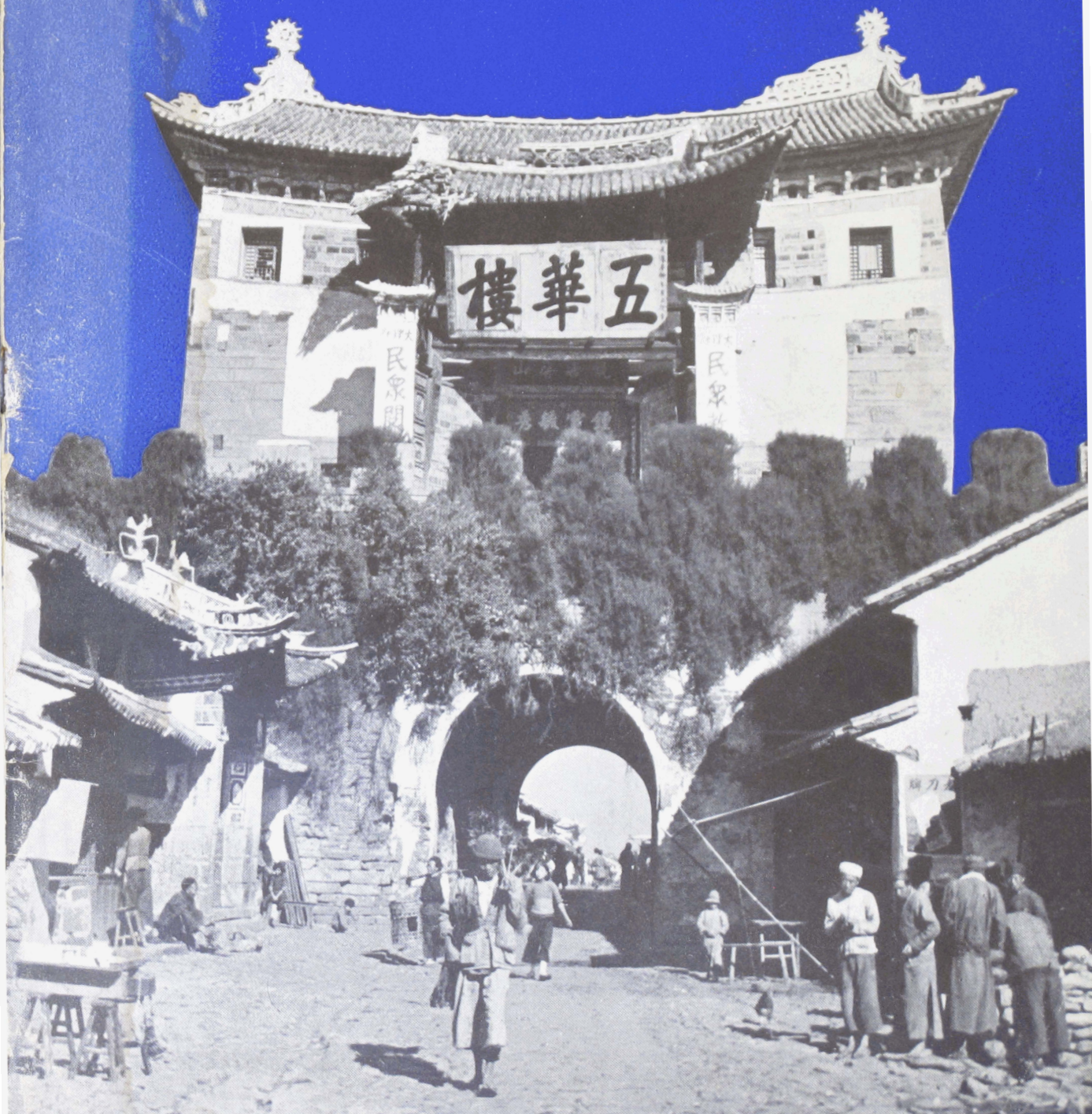


ASIA

TO SAVE DEMOCRACY IN CHINA
THE BRAVE FUTURE OF ARABIA
WHAT WILL THE NEW ORDER BE
ENTR'ACTE IN NEW GUINEA
IF THE DICTATORS WIN

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JUST OFF THE BURMA ROAD

SHOES OF SILVER AS REWARD

By ROBERT B. EKVALL

Editors' Note: We present herewith a new series of Tibetan tales by Robert B. Ekvall. A previous series appeared in 1937 and 1938.

The starless Tibetan night brought the horizon to my very eyelids. It was so dark that at intervals I stretched out my whip hand, moving it back and forth to press back the blackness and, if the motion would make a deeper blur, win an arm's length field of vision. The horse under me twisted slightly in his steady gait as he followed some sort of trail lost to my eyes ever since darkness had overtaken us just as we came down out of the mountains onto this great plain across which we had traveled—blindly, it seemed to me—for a couple of hours.

Then my horse stopped and I could feel him rub his nose against the horse ahead of him; for Jamtzen, my priest friend and companion from Lhamo, had pulled up short and now spoke in a deep guttural whisper. "Blackness of blackness everywhere—a good night for robbers and raids. Blackness of blackness everywhere—too dark for shooting. But you say that you shoot birds flying by pointing without aiming. Could you do that now with your rifle?"

The night reached with ghostly fingers for the back of my neck, and my scalp tingled vaguely. And then suddenly came the challenge, "*Arro*, who are you?" followed by the indistinct "whet" of quickly drawn swords.

Jamtzen's voice was a faint echo to be heard only a yard away—"Answer, Shes-rab. These may be Samtsa raiders and may know me."

So I spoke up with forced assurance, "Shes-rab-brdzon-grus—the outlander from Lhamo." And, as my voice gained timbre with use, I cleared it and added: "Don't come near. We have rifles."

"What are you doing so near the Bu tents at night—a night that is blackness of blackness? Whose tent do you visit? Whom do you know?"

I was spared the task of making an answer; for Jamtzen had recognized, if not the individual voice, at least the inflection of the Bu-wa tribe.

In response to the twitch of his bridle hand, his horse moved off as he answered with assurance: "And I am Akku Jamtzen. We are coming to visit Slab-face Rinchen. Can you show us the way? I was afraid we were getting too near the swamp or the river."

"We know where the road is. Never fear about the swamp or the river," voices answered, and the darkness deepened with a sudden blur as riders—we finally made out two—jostled us on the trail. "We too are going to Rinchen's and will take you there." One pressed his horse close to mine and a hand fumbled at my saddle. Then he spoke: "It's the outlander all right. His saddle isn't Tibetan, though his clothes are. Look, there is the Gar-ma encampment and Rinchen's tent is on the far side."

We had evidently come to the crest of a rise; for flashes of light gleamed in an irregular oval before us and through the night air the baying of the camp mastiffs reached us—a menacing roar that grew steadily in intensity as we rode on. Remembering that the post of danger is always in the rear, I hurried into line, knotting the lash of my antelope-horn whip handle to my tie-rope as I rode. The way to keep the dogs at bay is to ride at not too fast a pace, two by two, or if more in a rough half circle, swinging the weighted tether ropes in wide circles—one on each side—the riders keeping carefully within the safe area made by the whistling ropes. Many times I had watched Tibetan riders go through an encampment keeping perfect rhythm in their swing while a score or more of dogs yelped bitterly, waiting for the one mishap that would place the riders at their mercy. I had even ridden in with Tibetan companions, swinging my rope with the rest, only hoping that it would not get tangled under the horse's tail, around his neck or over the rifle on my back. But never before had I entered an encampment at night. It was a wild obstacle race among hobbled horses and bedded cattle, the dogs darting like hungry shadows where the tent ropes made hidden snares to our undoing, our swinging ropes

tracing irregular arcs as the whip handles bounced off bewildered sheep and wild-eyed cattle. Finally my rope came back the wrong way in a tangle around my horse's neck and for some moments I thought the big brutes would be up on the horse behind me. But the added confusion of darkness seemed to have bewildered even the dogs, and, although one evidently nipped my mount, just as he leaped I got the rope to swinging again and a few moments later we all rolled off into the waiting arms of Rinchen and his family.

Within our host's tent we relaxed at utter ease and, while waiting for a big haunch of mutton to cook, drank buttery tea and laid in a foundation of *tsamba* (parched barley flour) mixed with tea, butter and cheese.

As Jamtzen oratorically told Rinchen how two horses had been stolen from me and explained that we were come on the trail of a vague rumor that some one in Bu had information for sale, I watched the two men who had joined us on the trail and had also come riding toward Rinchen's tent. In contrast to our deliberation as we waited for the meat to cook, they ate rapidly, mouthing their finger-tips hungrily as they mixed the *tsamba*. Both were travel-worn and poorly clad, their sheepskin cloaks frayed and ragged, their boots marvels of patchwork, and the long straight swords in their belts were heavy and good enough but devoid of any ornamentation.

In accordance with the Tibetan ideal of prompt action when mishap occurs, I had followed Jamtzen on what I was sure was a wild goose chase. Yet, watching the faces of the group in Rinchen's tent, I saw that they were in entire agreement with him, especially with respect to the importance of buying information. That was evidently the crux of the matter. No testimony or witness was worth acting on or would stand the grueling tests of Tibetan justice or retribution unless it had been duly paid for. And, although Jamtzen had heard rumors, he had found no one who would accept payment for his whispered tale, thereby changing it from rumor to truth. All nodded, and the ragged guests, for all their hurry, seemed to give peculiar heed to the argument.

Before the meat was ready they had finished their meal and were preparing to go, although one lingered long enough to ask me if I knew how much a *tam-tra* (single-shot Russian rifle of 1872) would cost in Lhamo. I told him that I knew of two for sale for fifty ounces of silver apiece, and their eyes gleamed with sudden interest. Rinchen at first urged them to stay

for the meat but, after a whispered discussion, followed them out of the tent, and I thought I saw him take down a gun and give it to them.

Some days passed uneventfully while we visited pleasantly in Rinchen's encampment. Jamtzen angled deviously for the information he sought and held numerous private interviews and conferences, but the disgust on his face deepened as the days went by and he could find no tale for which payment could be made in good hard silver. The community intelligence service that makes this land of raids, feuds and ambushments a great whispering gallery of rumor brought word, however, that the morning after our arrival a large party of Samtsa raiders had crossed the ford of the river, riding southward on a raid. The report specified that it was a large party of at least one hundred and fifty rifles and that every rider led a spare mount. It could mean only that the raid was against Chak-ghah-ma, the life-long enemies of Samtsa.

The encampment buzzed with interest. On the whole it was an oddly impartial interest, though some, like Jamtzen, bore Samtsa no good will and others had their own scores against the famed robber-tribe of Chak-ghah-ma. On the fourth day word came that for no known reason the raiders had turned back. There had been no fight; yet Samtsa was riding swiftly homeward and all the encampment wondered why.

Late that afternoon two riders broke through the ring of the encampment and, swinging the tie-ropes with practised ease to keep off the dogs, even essayed a certain jauntiness that ill-matched their own travel-worn appearance and the jaded horses that fairly staggered as they approached Rinchen's tent. Our sudden acquaintances of the night had come back, and again we sat around the fire waiting for the meat to cook, drinking tea the while. This time they were as unhurried as we, sampling with deep satisfaction the flavor of every mouthful. Among friends the tense strain of days of uncertainty slipped from them as they grew expansive and garrulous with good feeling.

"By the Honorable Corpse of the Buddha, yes by the Presence, where do you think we have been, Shes-rab, and what do you think we had when we found you in the dark?" questioned the younger as he greased his face and smoothed his tangled hair. When I shook my head, not wishing to interrupt the story that, as he began it, seemed to clothe him with bravado, he went on to tell the whole.

"That day we heard in Lhamo that some one had heard the best horses of the Samtsa tribe were being emptied for fast riding by being tied

up all day instead of being let out to graze. So we rode for Samtsa and watched the riders gather. Just as darkness came, Whar-lo here, leading my horse so he would be like them—for every rider led an extra mount—joined them and rode with them until he heard the word 'Chak-ghah-ma.' Then he came back to me and we rode for Bu, finding you in the dark, since Rinchen's encampment is on the way to Chak-ghah-ma. We had information to sell, but the ones who would give *gtam-dzan* were in Chak-ghah-ma beyond the bend of the Yellow River.

"After we left here with some food and a borrowed gun—for we were poor and did not own rifles—we rode through the blackness of blackness. We knew where the river and swamp were and could ride fast where others must go slowly in the dark; we swam the river where Samtsa must make a long detour to reach the ford and just wait till daylight—so we reached Chak-ghah-ma the next afternoon when the Samtsa raiders were but halfway there. In Chak-ghah-ma, how much, foreigner, do you think the *gtam-dzan* was for the information we brought? Chak-ghah-ma knew nothing and feared nothing. But for the news that sent scouts out to watch the fords, and for the news that gathered the tribal troops, Chak-ghah-ma, when they knew that they could ambush Samtsa at that difficult ford of the White River, paid well. Yes, by the Body, a shoe of fifty ounces."

He drew an eared oval of silver known as a fifty-*tael* shoe from the knotted twists of his girdle and handled it lovingly in the firelight. A murmur of approbation broke from all, and the shoe was passed from hand to hand for closer inspection.

"Now, Shes-rab," went on the hero of the moment, savoring to the full the triumph that was his, "we can buy a tam-tra and, carrying a gun, we need no longer be afraid. We, the poor ones, who had nothing, not even a new girdle to enhance our appearance." He greased his face some more and grinned at Rinchen's daughter who, with the rest, flashed approval and admiring glances his way.

The meat was done and brought on—blood, grease and juices running down the sides of the trenchers; so we drew our knives, but Whar-lo, the silent one, now spoke. "Yes, a shoe of white silver was good, but it would buy only one rifle and we are two. But when we left Chak-ghah-ma there was still time—for Samtsa traveled slowly. They are not good raiders though they have good horses"—here Jamtzen grunted approval. "So we met them before they reached the ford of the White River. Do you know that

ford, Shes-rab, where the banks are so high and the water is so broad and deep? What do you think Samtsa paid in *gtam-dzan* for the news that their raid was known and an ambush was laid against them at the ford of the White River?" In his bleak, scarred face his eyes glittered with triumph, amusement and utter recklessness as he asked the question.

"That was your idea," muttered his companion. "I wanted to avoid them for fear of questioning."

"Who fears questioning?" came the quick response. "One can always lie. But the news we sold them was true and, because it was true, we received a good shoe of white silver as *gtam-dzan*." With that, aware of all the drama of the action, he brought from among the knotted twists of his girdle a second oval of silver to be examined and admired in the flickering light of the fire. "Now we will each carry a rifle and, though they are only tam-tras, with a rifle on one's back it is easy to come by wealth."

"By the Sacred Books," he exclaimed as a sudden afterthought, "because Chak-ghah-ma learned of a raid they laid an ambush, because Samtsa learned of the ambush they turned back, and because they turned back there was no fighting and so no one was killed. So we, by the very Towers of Religion, have heaped merit for ourselves and are the preservers of life." With an odd, half-humorous gesture he reached for Rinchen's rosary and counted off a prayer or two which had something of amazement in them that wealth and merit had together come from a single action.

Jamtzen then spoke authoritatively, weightily: "You are the ones I am looking for. Will you now ride for me for a few days seeking information about Shes-rab's stolen horses? His *gtam-dzan* will buy shells for your new rifles."

The younger brave's eyes gleamed with answering interest and he half nodded, but the other one spoke gravely. "Samtsa is north and Chak-ghah-ma is south; so now for many moons we must ride with a small heart, thinking always of the north and south. By now they both know, and we can't meet any of either tribe without trouble. For a time we will stay at home or ride only in the blackness of blackness."

I remembered the sudden chill and tingling of my scalp when the sense of unknown riders somewhere in the darkness had overtaken me on the plain. Now the two would have rifles and, looking at their reckless faces, I silently hoped we should never meet in the blackness of blackness when raiders ride and information is gathered at a shoe of silver for the telling.