

Through the Dragon Glass

By A. Merritt

Herndon helped loot the Forbidden City when the Allies turned the suppression of the Boxers into the most gorgeous burglar-party since the days of Tamerlane. Six of his sailormen followed faithfully his buccaneering fancy. A sympathetic Russian highness whom he had entertained in New York saw to it that he got to the coast and his yacht. That is why Herndon was able to sail through the Narrows with as much of the Son of Heaven's treasures as the most accomplished labourer in Peking's mission vineyard.

Some of the loot he gave to charming ladies who had dwelt or were still dwelling on the sunny side of his heart. Most of it he used to fit up those two astonishing Chinese rooms in his Fifth Avenue house. And a little of it, following a vague religious impulse, he presented to the Metropolitan Museum. This, somehow, seemed to put the stamp of legitimacy on his part of the pillage—like offerings to the gods and building hospitals and peace palaces and such things.

But the Dragon Glass, because he had never seen anything quite so wonderful, he set up in his bedroom where he could look at it the first thing in the morning, and he placed shaded lights about it so that he could wake up in the night and look at it! Wonderful? It is more than wonderful, the Dragon Glass! Whoever made it lived when the gods walked about the earth creating something new every day. Only a man who lived in that sort of atmosphere could have wrought it. There was never anything like it.

I was in Hawaii when the cables told of Herndon's first disappearance. There wasn't much to tell. This man had gone to his room to awaken him one morning—and Herndon wasn't there. All his clothes were, though. Everything was just as if Herndon ought to be somewhere in the house—only he wasn't.

A man worth ten millions can't step out into thin air and vanish without leaving behind him the probability of some commotion, naturally. The newspapers attended to the commotion, but the columns of type boiled down to essentials contained just two facts—that Herndon had come home the night before, and in the morning he was undiscoverable.

I was on the high seas, homeward bound to help in the search, when the wireless told the story of his reappearance. They had found him on the floor of his bedroom, shreds of a silken robe on him, and his body mauled as though by a tiger. But there was no more explanation of his return than there had been of his disappearance.

The night before he hadn't been there—and in the morning there he was. Herndon, when he was able to talk, utterly refused to confide in his doctors. I went straight through to New York, and waited until the men of medicine decided that it was better to let him see me than to have him worry any longer about not seeing me.

Herndon got up from a big invalid chair when I entered. His eyes were clear and bright, and there was no weakness in the way he greeted me, nor in the grip of his hand. A nurse slipped from the room.

'What was it, Jim?' I cried. 'What on earth happened to you?'

'Not so sure it was on earth,' he said. He pointed to what looked like a tall easel hooded with a heavy piece of silk covered with embroidered Chinese characters. He hesitated for a moment and then walked over to the closet. He drew out two heavy bore guns, the very ones, I remembered, that he had used in his last elephant hunt.

‘You won’t think me crazy if I ask you to keep one of these handy while I talk, will you, Ward?’ he asked rather apologetically. ‘This looks pretty real, doesn’t it?’

He opened his dressing gown and showed me his chest swathed in bandages. He gripped my shoulder as I took without question one of the guns. He walked to the easel and drew off the hood.

‘There it is,’ said Herndon.

And then, for the first time, I saw the Dragon Glass!

There has never been anything like that thing! Never! At first all you saw was a cool, green, glimmering translucence, like the sea when you are swimming under water on a still summer day and look up through it. Around its edges ran flickers of scarlet and gold, flashes of emerald, shimmers of silver and ivory. At its base a disk of topaz rimmed with red fire shot up dusky little vaporous yellow flames.

Afterward you were aware that the green translucence was an oval slice of polished stones. The flashes and flickers became dragons. There were twelve of them. Their eyes were emeralds, their fangs were ivory, their claws were gold. They were scaled dragons and each scale was so inlaid that the base, green as the primeval jungle, shaded off into a vivid scarlet, and the scarlet into tips of gold. Their wings were of silver and vermilion, and were folded close to their bodies.

But they were alive, those dragons. There was never so much life in metal and wood since Al-Akram, the sculptor of ancient Ad, carved the first crocodile, and the jealous Almighty breathed life into it for a punishment!

And last you saw that the topaz disc that sent up little yellow flames was the top of a metal sphere around which coiled a thirteenth dragon, thin and red, and biting its scorpion-tipped tail.

It took your breath away, the first glimpse of the Dragon Glass. Yes, and the second and third glimpse, too—and every other time you looked at it.

‘Where did you get it?’ I asked, a little shakily.

Herndon said evenly: ‘It was in a small hidden crypt in the Imperial Palace. We broke into the crypt quite by’—he hesitated—‘well, call it by accident. As soon as I saw it I knew I must have it. What do you think of it?’

‘Think!’ I cried. ‘Think! Why, it’s the most marvellous thing that the hands of man ever made! What is that stone? Jade?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Herndon. ‘But come here. Stand just in front of me.’

He switched out the lights in the room. He turned another switch, and on the glass opposite me three shaded electrics threw their rays into its mirror-like oval.

‘Watch!’ said Herndon. ‘Tell me what you see!’

I looked into the glass. At first I could see nothing but the rays shining further, further—into infinite distances, it seemed. And then—

‘Good God!’ I cried, stiffening with horror. ‘Jim, what hellish thing is this?’

‘Steady, old man,’ came Herndon’s voice. There was relief and a curious sort of joy in it. ‘Steady; tell me just what you see.’

I said: ‘I seem to see through infinite distances—and yet what I see is as close to me as though it were just on the other side of the glass. I see a cleft that cuts through two masses of darker green. I see a claw, a gigantic, hideous claw that stretches out through the cleft. The claw has seven talons that open and close—open and close. Good God, such a claw, Jim! It is like the claws that reach out from the holes in the lama’s hell to grip the blind souls as they shudder by!’

‘Look, look further, up through the cleft, above the claw. It widens. What do you see?’

I said: 'I see a peak rising enormously high and cutting the sky like a pyramid. There are flashes of flame that dart from behind and outline it. I see a great globe of light like a moon that moves slowly out of the flashes: there is another moving across the breast of the peak; there is a third that swims into the flame at the furthest edge—'

'The seven moons of Rak,' whispered Herndon, as though to himself

'The seven moons that bathe in the rose flames of Rak which are the fires of life and that circle Lalil like a diadem. He upon whom the seven moons of Rak have shone is bound to Lalil for this life, and for ten thousand lives.'

He reached over and turned the switch again. The lights of the room sprang up.

'Jim,' I said, 'it can't be real! What is it? Some devilish illusion in the glass?'

He unfastened the bandages about his chest.

'The claw you saw had seven talons,' he answered quietly. 'Well, look at this.'

Across the white flesh of his breast, from left shoulder to the lower ribs on the right, ran seven healing furrows. They looked as though they had been made by a gigantic steel comb that had been drawn across him. They gave one the thought they had been ploughed.

'The claw made these,' he said as quietly as before.

'Ward,' he went on, before I could speak, 'I wanted you to see—what you've seen. I didn't know whether you would see it. I don't know whether you'll believe me even now. I don't suppose I would if I were in your place—still—'

He walked over and threw the hood upon the Dragon Glass. 'I'm going to tell you,' he said. 'I'd like to go through it—uninterrupted. That's why I cover it.'

'I don't suppose,' he began slowly— 'I don't suppose, Ward, that you've ever heard of Rak the Wonder-Worker, who lived somewhere back at the beginning of things, nor how the Greatest Wonder-Worker banished him somewhere outside the world?'

'No,' I said shortly, still shaken by what I had seen.

'It's a big part of what I've got to tell you,' he went on. 'Of course you'll think it rot, but—I came across the legend in Tibet first. Then I ran across it again—with the names changed, of course—when I was getting away from China.'

'I take it that the gods were still fussing around close to man when Rak was born. The story of his parentage is somewhat scandalous. When he grew older, Rak wasn't satisfied with just seeing wonderful things being done. He wanted to do them himself and he—well, he studied the method. After a while the Greatest Wonder-Worker ran across some of the things Rak had made, and he found them admirable—a little too admirable. He didn't like to destroy the lesser wonder—worker because, so the gossip ran, he felt a sort of responsibility. So he gave Rak a place somewhere—outside the world—and he gave him power over every one out of so many millions of births to lead or lure or sweep that soul into his domain so that he might build up a people—amid over his people Rak was given the high, the low, and the middle justice.'

'And outside the world Rak went. He fenced his domain about with clouds. He raised a great mountain, and on its flank he built a city for the men and women who were to be his. He circled the city with wonderful gardens, and he placed in the gardens many thing, some good and some very—terrible. He set around the mountain's brow seven moons for a diadem, and he fanned behind the mountain a fire which is the fire of life, and through which the moons pass eternally to be born again.'

Herndon's voice sank to a whisper.

'Through which the moons pass,' he said. 'And with them the souls of the people of Rak. They pass through the fires and are born again—and again—for ten thousand lives. I have seen the

moons of Rak and the souls that march with them into the fires. There is no sun in the land—only the new-born moons that shine green on the city and on the gardens.’

‘Jim,’ I cried impatiently. ‘What in the world are you talking about? Wake up, man! What’s all that nonsense got to do with this?’

I pointed to the hooded Dragon Glass.

‘That,’ he said. ‘Why, through that lies the road to the gardens of Rak!’

The heavy gun dropped from my hand as I stared at him, and from him to the glass and back again. He smiled and pointed to his bandaged breast.

He said: ‘I went straight through to Peking with the Allies. I had an idea what was coming, and I wanted to be in at the death. I was among the first to enter the Forbidden City. I was as mad for loot as any of them. It was a maddening sight, Ward. Soldiers with their arms full of precious stuff even Morgan couldn’t buy; soldiers with wonderful necklaces around their hairy throats and their pockets stuffed with jewels; soldiers with their shirts bulging treasures the Sons of Heaven had been hoarding for centuries! We were Goths sacking imperial Rome. Alexander’s hosts pillaging that ancient gemmed courtesan of cities, royal Tyre! Thieves in the great ancient scale, a scale so great that it raised even thievery up to something heroic.

‘We reached the throne-room. There was a little passage leading off to the left, and my men and I took it. We came into a small octagonal room. There was nothing in it except a very extraordinary squatting figure of jade. It squatted on the floor, its back turned toward us. One of my men stooped to pick it up. He slipped. The figure flew from his hand and smashed into the wall. A slab swung outward. By a—well, call it a fluke, we had struck the secret of the little octagonal room!

‘I shoved a light through the aperture. It showed a crypt shaped like a cylinder. The circle of the floor was about ten feet in diameter. The walls were covered with paintings, Chinese characters, queer-looking animals, and things I can’t well describe. Around the room, about seven feet up, ran a picture. It showed a sort of island floating off into space. The clouds lapped its edges like frozen seas full of rainbows. There was a big pyramid of a mountain rising out of the side of it. Around its peak were seven moons, and over the peak—a face!

‘I couldn’t place that face and I couldn’t take my eyes off it. It wasn’t Chinese, and it wasn’t of any other race I’d ever seen. It was as old as the world and as young as tomorrow. It was benevolent and malicious, cruel and kindly, merciful and merciless, saturnine as Satan and as joyous as Apollo. The eyes were as yellow as buttercups, or as the sunstone on the crest of the Feathered Serpent they worship down in the Hidden Temple of Tuloon. And they were as wise as Fate.

‘“There’s something else here, sir,” said Martin—you remember Martin, my first officer. He pointed to a shrouded thing on the side. I entered, and took from the thing a covering that fitted over it like a hood. It was the Dragon Glass!

‘The moment I saw it I knew I had to have it—and I knew I would have it. I felt I did not want to get the thing away any more than the thing itself wanted to get away. From the first I thought of the Dragon Glass as something alive. Just as much alive as you and I are. Well, I did get it away. I got it down to the yacht, and then the first odd thing happened.

‘You remember Wu-Sing, my boat steward? You know the English Wu-Sing talks. Atrocious! I had the Dragon Glass in my stateroom. I’d forgotten to lock the door. I heard a whistle of sharply indrawn breath. I turned, and there was Wu-Sing. Now, you know that Wu-Sing isn’t what you’d call intelligent-looking. Yet as he stood there something seemed to pass over his face, and very subtly change it. The stupidity was wiped out as though a sponge had been passed

o'er it. He did not raise his eyes, but he said, in perfect English, mind you: "Has the master augustly counted the cost of his possession?"

'I simply gaped at him.

' "Perhaps," he continued, "the master has never heard of the illustrious Hao-Tzan? Well, he shall hear."

'Ward, I couldn't move or speak. But I know now it wasn't sheer astonishment that held me. I listened while Wu-Sing went on to tell in polished phrases the same story that I had heard in Tibet, only there they called him Rak instead of Hao-Tzan. But it was the same story.

' "And," he finished, "before he journeyed afar, the illustrious HaoTzan caused a great marvel to be wrought. He called it the Gateway!" Wu-Sing waved his hand at the Dragon Glass. "The master has it. But what shall he who has a Gateway do but pass through it? Is it not better to leave the Gateway behind—unless he dare go through it?"

'He was silent. I was silent, too. All I could do was wonder where the fellow had so suddenly got his command of English. And then Wu-Sing straightened. For a moment his eyes looked into mine. They were as yellow as buttercups, Ward, and wise, wise! My wind rushed back to the little room behind the panel. Ward—the eyes of Wu-Sing were the eyes of the face that brooded over the peak of the seven moons!

'And all in a moment, the face of Wu-Sing dropped back into its old familiar stupid lines. The eyes he turned to me were black and clouded. I jumped from my chair.

' "What do you mean, you yellow fraud!" I shouted. "What do you mean by pretending all this time that you couldn't talk English?"

'He looked at me stupidly, as usual. He whined in his pidgin that he didn't understand; that he hadn't spoken a word to me until then. I couldn't get anything else out of him, although I nearly frightened his wits out. I had to believe him. Besides, I had seen his eyes. Well, I was fair curious by this time, and I was more anxious to get the glass home safely than ever.

'I got it home. I set it up here, and I fixed those lights as you saw them. I had a sort of feeling that the glass was waiting—for something. I couldn't tell just what. But that it was going to be rather important, I knew—'

He suddenly thrust his head into his hands, and rocked to and fro.

'How long, how long,' he moaned, 'how long, Santhu?'

'Jim!' I cried. 'Jim! What's the matter with you?'

He straightened. 'In a moment you'll understand,' he said.

And then, as quietly as before: 'I felt that the glass was waiting. The night I disappeared I couldn't sleep. I turned out the lights in the room; turned them on around the glass and sat before it. I don't know how long I sat but all at once I jumped to my feet. The dragons seemed to be moving! They were moving! They were crawling round and round the glass. They moved faster and faster. The thirteenth dragon spun about the topaz globe. They circled faster and faster until they were nothing but a halo of crimson and gold flashes. As they spun, the glass itself grew misty, mistier, mistier still, until it was nothing but a green haze. I stepped over to touch it. My hand went straight on through it as though nothing were there.

'I reached in—up to the elbow, up to the shoulder. I felt my hand grasped by warm little fingers. I stepped through—'

'Stepped through the glass?' I cried.

'Through it,' he said, 'and then—I felt another little hand touch my face. I saw Santhu!

'Her eyes were as blue as the cornflowers, as blue as the big sapphire that shines in the forehead of Vishnu, in his temple at Benares. And they were set wide, wide apart. Her hair was

blue-black, and fell in two long braids between her little breasts. A golden dragon crowned her, and through its paws slipped the braids. Another golden dragon girded her. She laughed into my eyes, and drew my head down until my lips touched hers. She was lithe and slender and yielding as the reeds that grow before the Shrine of Hathor that stands on the edge of the Pool of Djeeba. Who Santhu is, or where she came from—how do I know? But this I know—she is lovelier than any woman who ever lived on earth. And she is a woman!

‘Her arms slipped from about my neck and she drew me forward. I looked about me. We stood in a cleft between two great rocks. The rocks were a soft green, like the green of the Dragon Glass. Behind us was a green mistiness. Before us the cleft ran only a little distance. Through it I saw an enormous peak jutting up like a pyramid, high, high into a sky of chrysoprase. A soft rose radiance pulsed at its sides, and swimming slowly over its breast was a huge globe of green fire. The girl pulled me gently towards the opening. We walked on silently, hand in hand. Quickly it came to me—Ward, I was in the place whose pictures had been painted in the room of the Dragon Glass!

‘We came out of the cleft and into a garden. The Gardens of Many-Columned Iram, lost in the desert because they were too beautiful, must have been like that place. There were strange, immense trees whose branches were like feathery plumes and whose plumes shone with fires like those that clothe the feet of Indra’s dancers. Strange flowers raised themselves along our path, and their hearts glowed like the glow-worms that are fastened to the rainbow bridge to Asgard. A wind sighed through the plumed trees, and luminous shadows drifted past their trunks. I heard a girl laugh, and the voice of a man singing.

‘We went on. Once there was a low wailing far in the garden, and the girl threw herself before me, her arms outstretched. The wailing ceased, and we went on. The mountain grew plainer. I saw another globe of green fire swing out of the rose flashes at the right of the peak. I saw another shining into the glow at the left. There was a curious trail of mist behind it. It was a mist that had tangled in it a multitude of little stars. Everything was bathed in a soft green light—such a light as you would have if you lived within a pale emerald.

‘We turned and went along another little trail. The little trail ran up a little hill, and on the hill was a little house. It looked as though it was made of ivory. It was a very odd little house. It was more like the Jain pagodas at Brahmaputra than anything else. The walls glowed as though they were full of light. The girl touched the wall, and a panel slid away. We entered, and the panel closed after us.

‘The room was filled with a whispering yellow light. I say whispering because that is how one felt about it. It was gentle and alive. A stairway of ivory ran up to another room above. The girl pressed me towards it. Neither of us had uttered a word. There was a spell of silence upon me. I could not speak. There seemed to be nothing to say. I felt a great rest and a great peace—as though I had come home. I walked up the stairway and into the room above. It was dark except for a bar of green light that came through the long and narrow window. Through it I saw the mountain and its moons. On the floor was an ivory head-rest and some silken cloths. I felt suddenly very sleepy. I dropped to the cloths, and at once was asleep.

‘When I awoke the girl with the cornflower eyes was beside me! She was sleeping. As I watched, her eyes opened. She smiled and drew me to her—

‘I do not know why, but a name came to me. ‘Santhu!’ I cried. She smiled again, and I knew that I had called her name. It seemed to me that I remembered her, too, out of immeasurable ages. I arose and walked to the window. I looked toward the mountain. There were now two moons on its breast. And then I saw the city that lay on the mountain’s flank. It was such a city

as you see in dreams, or as the tale-tellers of El-Bahara fashion out of the mirage. It was all of ivory and shining greens and flashing blues and crimsons. I could see people walking about its streets. There came the sound of little golden bells chiming.

‘I turned towards the girl. She was sitting up, her hands clasped about her knees, watching me. Love came, swift and compelling. She arose—I took her in my arms—

‘Many times the moons circled the mountain, and the mist held the little tangled stars passing with them. I saw no one but Santhu; no thing came near us. The trees fed us with fruits that had in them the very essence of life. Yes, the fruit of the Tree of Life that stood in Eden must have been like the fruit of those trees. We drank of green water that sparkled with green fires, and tasted like the wine Osiris gives the hungry souls in Amenti to strengthen them. We bathed in pools of carved stone that welled with water yellow as amber. Mostly we wandered in the gardens. There were many wonderful things in the gardens. They were very unearthly. There was no day or night. Only the green glow of the ever-circling moons. We never talked to each other. I don’t know why. Always there seemed nothing to say.

‘Then Santhu began to sing to me. Her songs were strange songs. I could not tell what the words were. But they built up pictures in my brain. I saw Rak the Wonder-Worker fashioning his gardens, and filling them with things beautiful and things—evil. I saw him raise the peak, and knew that it was Lalil; saw him fashion the seven moons and kindle the fires that are the fires of life. I saw him build his city, and I saw men and women pass into it from the world through many gateways.

‘Santhu sang—and I knew that the marching stars in the mist were the souls of the people of Rak which sought rebirth. She sang, and I saw myself ages past walking in the city of Rak with Santhu beside me. Her song wailed, and I felt myself one of the mist-entangled stars. Her song wept, and I felt myself a star that fought against the mist, and, fighting, break away—a star that fled out and out through immeasurable green space—

‘A man stood before us. He was very tall. His face was both cruel and kind, saturnine as Satan and joyous as Apollo. He raised his eyes to us, and they were yellow as buttercups, and wise, so wise! Ward, it was the face above the peak in the room of the Dragon Glass! The eyes that had looked at me out of Wu-Sing’s face! He smiled on us for a moment and then—he was gone! ‘I took Santhu by the hand and began to run. Quite suddenly it came to me that I had enough of the haunted gardens of Rak; that I wanted to get back to my own land. But not without Santhu. I tried to remember the road to the cleft. I felt that there lay the path back. We ran. From far behind came a wailing. Santhu screamed—but I knew the fear in her cry was not for herself It was for me. None of the creatures of that place could harm her who was herself one of its creatures. The wailing drew closer. I turned.

‘Winging down through the green air was a beast, an unthinkable beast, Ward! It was like the winged beast of the Apocalypse that is to bear the woman arrayed in purple and scarlet. It was beautiful even in its horror. It closed its scarlet and golden wings, and its long gleaming body shot at me like a monstrous spear.

‘And then—just as it was about to strike—a mist threw itself between us! It was a rainbow mist, and it was—cast. It was cast as though a hand had held it and thrown it like a net. I heard the winged beast shriek its disappointment. Santhu’s hand gripped mine tighter. We ran through the mist.

‘Before us was the cleft between the two green rocks. Time and time again we raced for it, and time and time again that beautiful shining horror struck at me—and each time came the thrown mist to baffle it. It was a game! Once I heard a laugh, and then I knew who was my hunter. The

master of the beast and the caster of the mist. It was he of the yellow eyes—and he was playing with me—playing with me as a child plays with a cat when he tempts it with a piece of meat and snatches the meat away again and again from the hungry jaws!

‘The mist cleared away from its last throw, and the mouth of the cleft was just before us. Once more the thing swooped—and this time there was no mist. The player had tired of the game! As it struck, Santhu raised herself before it. The beast swerved—and the claw that had been stretched to rip me from throat to waist struck me a glancing blow. I fell—fell through leagues and leagues of green space.

‘When I awoke I was here in this bed with the doctor men around me and this—’ He pointed to his bandaged breast again.

‘That night when the nurse was asleep I got up and looked into the Dragon Glass, and I saw—the claw, even as you did. The beast is there. It is waiting for me!’

Herndon was silent for a moment.

‘If he tires of the waiting he may send the beast through for me,’ he said. ‘I mean the man with the yellow eyes. I’ve a desire to try one of these guns on it. It’s real, you know, the beast is—and these guns have stopped elephants.’

‘But the man with the yellow eyes, Jim,’ I whispered—‘who is he?’

‘He,’ said Herndon—‘why, he’s the Wonder-Worker himself!’

‘You don’t believe such a story as that!’ I cried. ‘Why, it’s—it’s lunacy! It’s some devilish illusion in the glass. It’s like the—the crystal globe that makes you hypnotize yourself and think the things your own mind creates are real. Break it, Jim! It’s devilish! Break it!’

‘Break it!’ he said incredulously. ‘Break it? Not for the ten thousand lives that are the toll of Rak! Not real? Aren’t these wounds real? Wasn’t Santhu real? Break it! Good God, man, you don’t know what you say! Why, it’s my only road back to her! If that yellow-eyed devil back there were only as wise as he looks, he would know he didn’t have to keep his beast watching there. I want to go, Ward; I want to go and bring her back with me. I’ve an idea somehow, that he hasn’t—well, full control of things. I’ve an idea that the Greatest Wonder-Worker wouldn’t put wholly in Rak’s hands the souls that wander through the many gateways into his kingdom. There’s a way out, Ward; there’s a way to escape him. I won away from him once, Ward. I’m sure of it. But then I left Santhu behind. I have to go back for her. That’s why I found the little passage that led from the throne-room. And he knows it, too. That’s why he had to turn his beast on me.

‘And I’ll go through again, Ward. And I’ll come back again—with Santhu!’

But he has not returned. It is six months now since he disappeared for the second time. And from his bedroom, as he had done before. By the will that they found—the will that commanded that in the event of his disappearing as he had done before and not returning within a week, I was to have his house and all that was within it—I came into possession of the Dragon Glass. The dragons had spun again for Herndon, and he had gone through the gateway once more. I found only one of the elephant guns, and I knew that he had had time to take the other with him.

I sit night after night before the glass, waiting for him to come back through it—with Santhu. Sooner or later they will come. That I know.