Excerpt from
Sam Steele's Adventures
The Scream of the Sacred Ape
by L. Frank Baum

Chapter Twenty-Two
The Secret Passage

When we met the girls in the secluded pavilion the next afternoon, we found that Nor Ghai had brought the Shakespeare and Byron, and she begged us to explain certain passages in them that had puzzled the fair students of English. This we did, and before we parted that day a friendly footing had been established between us that was very pleasant indeed. Of course another interview was arranged for, as all of us had become reassured by our success in escaping observation, and if we still had any qualms of fear we did not allow them to prevent future meetings.

But the girls were more alive to the conditions surrounding them than we were, and their fertile brains arranged a series of signals to let us know whether it was safe to enter the pavilion or not, since at any time one of the eunuchs or older members of the harem might see fit to accompany them. Also they timed their stay by our watches, so as to leave before there was a chance of their being sought for.

All this savored of intrigue, but our meetings were harmless enough. I don't say that little Nor Ghai was averse to a bit of flirtation, but none of us encouraged her because we had no thought of flirting with our new friends. We talked in boyish fashion and treated them exactly as if we were brothers and sisters.

Meantime the days flew swiftly by, and still Mai Lo paced the gravel paths before the Ancestral Halls of Kai, and we hesitated to begin our appointed task. But finally one evening, while talking over our plans and chances of

success, Joe proposed that we should explore the secret passage and accustom ourselves to the way to the underground vaults; so we promptly decided upon the adventure.

At about ten o'clock, the usual time, we dismissed our eunuch, Tun, who always remained in waiting until we retired for the night, and then, instead of going to bed, we put out our lights and sat quietly in the darkness until after midnight.

Every time we had passed by the bend in the hall we had noticed the tapestry of the dragon, but never had we ventured to disturb it to see what was behind the hangings. We dared not show a light in this passage because just around the bend was the guard of the royal apartments, eternally pacing up and down to prevent anyone from penetrating to the sacred precincts.

We had, unfortunately, no candles; but I had unhooked a small oil lamp from a bracket in one of our rooms, and matches were plentiful. When I softly opened our door to listen, there was not a sound to be heard throughout the palace except the steady footfalls of the distant guard; so, being in our stocking-feet, we tip-toed along the corridor, feeling our way in the darkness by keeping one hand on the wall, until we reached the bend in the passage.

We could not see the dragon tapestry, but knowing its exact location I crept beneath the heavy drapery, followed closely by Archie and Joe, and then began to feel for the bronze knob. Across the face of the wall in every direction we fumbled, and I had almost begun to despair of finding it without a light when Joe grasped my shoulder and guided my hand to a tiny projection far to the left.

Yes; it was a knob, all right. I grasped it and pulled it toward me, and at once we heard a faint swish, and a

breath of colder air reached us. I felt along the wall, and found an opening, through which I passed, drawing the others with me. Another heavy tapestry was on this side of the wall, and we crept beneath its folds on hands and knees.

"Do you think it's safe to scratch a match?" I whispered.

"It's got to be done, safe or unsafe," replied Joe, and in a moment a faint light flared up, and Joe shaded it with his hands while I cast a hurried glance at the tapestry.

"No light can shine through that, I'm sure," said I. "Here, Joe; light the lamp." I held it while he touched the match to the wick, and then we stood up and gazed furiously around us.

We found ourselves in a lofty sleeping chamber that was beautifully furnished. The carved mahogany bedstead with its pagoda-like canopy towered fully fifteen feet in height, and its curtains were cloth-of-gold. Around the frieze, just above the heavy tapestry hangings, was a row of embossed golden fishes with ivory horns, set in a background of azure blue. Near to where we stood, at the left of the secret panel, a number of bronze tablets were attached to the wall, their faces engraved with Chinese characters. I supposed these to be the tablets of ancestors, which every house contains in its inmost sanctum. Before the tablets was a sort of altar, containing a vase for burning incense and prayers. A broad archway, hung with stiff draperies, formed a communication with the next room of the suite, and just beyond it stood a great carved cabinet with numerous drawers and recesses and a writing shelf in the center. This I thought must be the Prince's "desk" which I had asked the Chief Eunuch to remove to my room, without realizing its size. That he had promised to do so filled me with wonder, for I doubted if it could be

carried through the archway.

Passing around the huge bedstead and holding the lamp before us, we peered into the further corner of the room and with one accord shrank back in sudden fear. For before us stood a gigantic form in glittering armor, with a face-mask so terrible in expression that it might well cause a sinking of the heart. And behind the mask glittered two cruel, piercing eyes, while the right arm swung a scimitar as if about to attack the beholder and hack him asunder.

"Never mind," muttered Joe, with a low laugh. "It isn't alive, although it looks it."

"It's the statue we were searching for," said I.

"No wonder it used to scare the Prince," remarked Archie. "Ugh! I shouldn't want to own that fellow for an ancestor."

"This was the first Kai," I rejoined. "They must have been giants in those days, if he's a sample warrior."

Then I leaned down and tried to press outward the left foot of the statue, which stood flat upon the floor without any pedestal. It resisted and I knelt down and tried again, pushing with all my strength and using the other foot as a purchase. The foot gave a little—not more than half an inch—and I heard a sharp click and a grating sound behind the tapestries.

"All right," said Joe, pushing aside the drapery while Archie held the lamp. "The panel is open."

The opening disclosed was about five feet high and not more than eighteen inches wide, but it was sufficient to allow us to pass through with ease. A secret passage, narrow and low, had been built in the great side-wall of the palace, and a few paces from the panel a flight of steps, made of stone, led downward. These continued to descend until we had passed below the foundations of the building, when we entered a tunnelled passage slanting

straight into the earth. The walls were protected with stone and cement, but there was a damp, musty smell in the passage; and, as we advanced, numerous vermin, such as rats, lizards and fat spiders, scampered away from the path to hide in the little nooks between the stones.

Archie, who went first, carrying the lamp, growled continually at these pests, but I felt they could not be dangerous or the Prince would have warned us against them.

We traveled what seemed a very long distance to us, under the circumstances; but I now believe the passage was a bee-line to the burial vaults from the palace, and of course the vaults were located some distance from the building that appeared above ground. But my sense of direction was so confused that I would then, and even afterward, have been unable to locate the vaults from the palace grounds.

Finally we reached a steel door which was unlocked and opened easily. Beyond this hung a tapestry, and pushing that aside we came to an alcove, arched high above us and having a grating of bronze or similar metal at the further side.

In the center of the alcove lay a superb sarcophagus or burial casket, set across two slabs of marble. This was of wrought bronze and bore upon the cover a mask with a surprising resemblance to the statue of the first Kai in the Prince's bedroom.

We did not pause to examine it long, however, for all about the coffin stood carven stands and taborets weighted with curious ornaments in solid gold and silver, while upon a low table were several suits of splendid armor, inlaid with gold and set with precious stones that glistened brightly under the lamplight. Nor was this all. Ornaments of green and yellow jade were scattered about,

and at the foot of the coffin stood a semi-circle of big jars of bronze.

I thrust my hand into one of these jars and drew it out filled with beautiful emeralds.

"We don't need to go any farther, boys!" I exclaimed with a gasp. "Here are riches enough, in this one niche, to satisfy a dozen fortune hunters."

Archie examined another vase and found rubies and pearls in it. The third was quite empty, and so was the fourth, but the fifth and last one contained many jade rings, bracelets and necklaces, with which were mingled several large sapphires.

"Yes," said Archie, sighing; "here's more treasure than the priests of Luxor buried in the desert. But let's continue our explorations. This can't be all of the ancestral chih, for only one ancestor is buried here."

"He must have been very rich in his lifetime, if this was but half of his fortune," remarked Joe. "I wonder if he got it all honestly?"

"Probably not," I replied. "This fellow is an ancient, and perhaps lived in an age of robbing and pillaging. But come on, fellows; let's see if we can pass those gratings."

Only a catch, worked from either side, held the grating in place, and swinging it open we passed into what was doubtless an immense domed chamber, for our tiny lamp could not light more than a small portion of it. On either side of the alcove from which we had emerged hung magnificent tapestries worked in threads of gold and silver and representing scenes of battles, processions and the like. The workmanship was so fine on the first tapestry we examined that it seemed impossible it could be anything but a painting, and a marvelous one at that. But we found the other fifty or more sections hung around the domed chamber to be equally perfect in execution.

Beyond the tapestry hangings, each section of which was some sixteen feet in width, was another grating leading to an alcove, and this system we afterward found was continued all around the chamber. None of the gratings were locked and all opened readily to our touch. The alcove we next entered contained another splendid casket and even more golden ornaments and precious gems than we had found in the first. We accounted for the empty jars in the first alcove, which connected with the secret passage, by the pilfering from them by Prince Kai, of which he had told us.

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Joe, as we eagerly started to examine the next alcove. "If we're not careful we're going to lose our bearings in this big place and get lost. Before we wander any further away let's mark the grating to the alcove we came from when we entered."

That seemed good advice, so we retraced our steps until we reached the first alcove, where Joe tied his handkerchief to the grating. Then, feeling assured we could find the place again, we proceeded upon our explorations.

We had examined five or six of the chih, or alcoves of the dead, all of which contained enormous wealth, when suddenly I stumbled against a low stand just outside of a grating. Holding the lamp high to see what the obstruction was, I found upon the stand a large lamp, nearly filled with oil, and a box of London safety-matches.

"Oho!" said I; "Mai Lo has been here."

"I suppose he can now wander through these ancestral vaults at will, since there is no one to forbid him," said Joe.

"I hope he won't decide to come while we're here," remarked Archie, "or our pretty plans will be nipped in the bud."

"Oh, it isn't necessary for Mai Lo to lose sleep to enter

these vaults," I replied. "But it is as well to be on our guard, and I'm glad we found the evidences of his visit."

Entering the alcove before which the table and lamp stood, we looked around with astonishment, for here was more evidence of Mai Lo's presence in the tomb. This niche was evidently very rich in treasure, and the vases and bowls of gems had been emptied into a great heap in the center of the floor. From this heap some one had been assorting the jewels into varieties and sizes. In one place were pearls, the finest of which had been placed in one row, the next largest in a second row, and so on. Rubies had been assorted in a similar way on another side of the chih, and emeralds in a third place. No jewels seemed to have been taken away, and from the size of the heap there was much more assorting to be done, and the job was scarcely begun.

The beauty of the row of great pearls appealed to Archie strongly, so he picked them up, one by one, and placed them in the pocket of his jacket.

"If anything should prevent our coming here again," he remarked, "these pearls will well repay us for our journey to Kai-Nong."

But he never suspected that they were likely nearly to cost us all our lives.