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IN THE SIGN OF THE ATOM, CONQUER!

# BAPHOMET'S METEOR

**Pierre Barbet**







By the dawn of the 14th Century, the Crusaders' Order of the Knights Templar was well on its way to the control of Europe — enormously wealthy, a secret society stronger than many monarchies. By the middle of that century, it was brutally suppressed on the confession of some of its members that it was a conspiracy intending to conquer the world at the orders of a demon named Baphomet.

*That is history as our Earth knows it.*

*But the only sort of "demon" enlightened modern men would recognize would be an extra-terrestrial voyager with the tools of a higher technology than medieval men knew.*

*And what if Baphomet had been just that?*

*Who then would have called the tune?*

**BAPHOMET'S METEOR** is an enthralling excursion into the world that might have been—and may still be—somewhere else.

PIERRE BARBET is the by-line of one of the most popular science fiction writers in France today, and it is also the *nom de plume* of a distinguished doctor of pharmacology and authority on many branches of medicine. A devoted s-f enthusiast, he is particularly proud of this novel which he regards as his first "historical" and into which he poured a great amount of research. Some of the titles of his recent s-f novels are quite intriguing, although none so far save *Baphomet's Meteor* has been made available in English. They include: *The Conquistadors of Andromeda*, *The Secret of the Quasars*, *Of What Do Cyborgs Dream?*, *The Agony of the Milky Way*, *Chimeras of Seginus*, *Masters of the Pulsars*, *Stars in Perdition*, *Azraec of Virgo*, etc.



# ***BAPHOMET'S METEOR***

by  
**Pierre Barbet**

Translated by  
***Bernard Kay***

**DAW BOOKS, INC.**

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## DEDICATION

Au docteur Jean-Claude Laburthe, historien érudit, dont les conseils m'ont été précieux pour la rédaction de cet ouvrage.

En témoignage d'une ancienne et sincère amitié.

—P.B.





## Prologue



*October, 1118 A.D.*

High in the azure sky of Cathay, a meteor left behind a long silvery trail, clearly visible in the bright sunlight.

Near Troyes, as night fell, a harsh north wind assaulted Grand-Orient Forest, already stripped of its golden finery. Far off, the plaintive yelping of dogs following the scent of some quarry could be heard.

Suddenly, a black shape rushed from the bramble thickets. It was that sturdy solitary, a wild boar with long, thickset hair, which fled for its life. It appeared exhausted, slaver drooling from its mouth where two sharp tucks gleamed, the cleft of its right forehoof rent by a sharp branch.

Then quiet returned.

A few lingering leaves fluttered to the ground. Then from the coppice a horseman charged into view, in full cry, his horse streaming with sweat, its muzzle frosted with foam. In front of him, the dogs—dead tired—kept their noses to the ground, following the still fresh scent of the beast.

They came from the direction of Beaulieu and made off toward the meres in the heart of the forest, great somber pools of stagnant water filled with rotting leaves. There, the full-grown yet young boar still fled before them but with his pace now slowed. The four hounds, their tongues hanging, gained ground.

As the hunter glimpsed his prey, a weary smile etched itself on his lips.

*Well now, he thought, not this time will Hugh of*

*Payens again return empty-handed. By my faith, a fine animal! I wager he'll defend his life dearly.*

Watchfully, the hunter lowered his short hunting spear, ready to strike if the boar did an about-face. On his left, the waters of a pond reflected the bloody rays of the setting sun.

At that instant, a flash of lightning lit up the yellowing leaves that carpeted the ground.

The dogs howled in terror. The horse, startled, swerved unexpectedly, unseating and throwing its rider. In his fall, his head struck the trunk of an oak tree and he lay motionless on the ground, his arms spread, a little blood running down one cheek, torn by a bramble.

Long minutes passed.

Finally Hugh sketched a movement with his right hand, then regained some consciousness and sat up, still half insensible.

It was already night and the full moon washed the undergrowth with a pale luminescence.

Suddenly, a wet raspy touch brought him to his senses—one of the dogs licking his wounded cheek.

With aid of a nearby tree trunk, the horseman got to his feet and ran an exploratory hand over his head, grimacing.

Apparently nothing was broken.

Painfully, Hugh of Payens knelt again, made the sign of the cross and gave thanks to God.

After that he felt better and took brief stock of his situation. The dogs surrounded him, watching with almost human expressions and whining uneasily. The horse grazed placidly on the sparse grass at the edge of the pool.

The hunter frowned as a strange object caught his eye. An enormous, rusty metal sphere emerged from the black waters and, wonder of wonders, its upper dome seemed to rotate slowly.

Hugh crossed himself again without effect. The vision did not disappear. Then, as the dome continued its movement, a distinct groove appeared in the metal surface. Abruptly all movement ceased and, as the sphere rocked gently, a circular opening from which a scarlet glow emanated was disclosed.

Prepared for anything, Hugh seized the dagger fixed at his belt. The enraged dogs snarled, showing their fangs,



but they kept at a respectful distance as though realizing they lacked the size to confront the unknown peril which the roseate opening represented.

Step by step, they retreated, contenting themselves with challenging growls. Instinct warned them of the approach of some mysterious danger.

Then a strange silhouette, not clearly visible in the pale moonlight, emerged from the sphere.

Horried, Hugh of Payens finally made out the diabolic figure. He rubbed his bulging eyes with his left hand as if to assure himself that it was no more than the question of a nightmare.

But, no! He was not dreaming. A few steps in front of him was a deformed, bearded being with a smooth, hairless cranium that bore two short horns. Clawlike fingers still gripped the metal edges of the opening.

The monstrous dwarf was obviously stark naked. Two womanish breasts swelled on his chest. Short wings stood out behind his shoulders.

Exactly like the pictures in the missals! A demon incubus vomited up from hell to tempt the souls of Christians. . . .

Again Hugh crossed himself and mumbled prayers, but the being would not be exorcised. Instead he emerged even further from the orifice of his strange habitation.

Two eyes, glittering like live coals, fixed the knight, who could scarcely bear the unwavering gaze. He had an impression that the malefic pupils emitted flames that pierced his brain, having access to his most secret thoughts.

Futilely, he tried to dismiss the whole thing as some kind of nightmare but the monstrous creature was all too real.

After seconds that seemed like centuries, he felt the unclean spirit pervading his being. Strange thoughts imposed themselves on his mind. The demon was speaking to him!

"Fear nothing, you miserable creature, riveted to this backward planet, I am not Satan. . . . I come from beyond immeasurable reaches of space, and from a world much more highly evolved than yours. Unfortunately, an ion storm crippled my spacecraft while it was orbiting close to your star. And here am I, shipwrecked on this minute

planet in an unsalvageable vessel, without a means of communicating with my own kind. . . . Still, you have no reason to fear me. On the contrary, if you will agree to follow my instructions, you will become rich and powerful, and you will command even kings themselves."

"Your speech is the same as that with which the Prince of Darkness tempted our Lord on the mountain in the desert. May you not be the angel, Lucifer, the fallen one who desires only to lead men to their ruin?"

"Come now, let's leave fairy tales to little children. If I were the evil one, I would seek to lead your king astray, not some obscure knight. No, Hugh of Payens, I am only a living being, come from the stars after a long and difficult voyage. Nearly all the delicate mechanisms of my small spacecraft have been destroyed by this catastrophic landing. However, I still possess powerful weapons that would allow me to destroy you without difficulty. See for yourself. . . ."

On these words, the creature pointed a gray tube toward a huge oak. Hugh could not say from whence it came, but when a blue-green flame sprang from the humid trunk, he shuddered in terror as though lightning had just struck close beside him.

"Well, what do you say to that, knight? This tube could reduce you to ashes, you and ten like you, but I would never use it against you for you can render me an inestimable service."

"Speak. If what you want in no way puts my immortal soul in peril, I shall obey you."

Hugh was beginning to relax.

After all, this strange creature seemed in no way troubled by his signs of the cross. Besides, did he not wear about his neck a venerable relic that would suffice to make all the demons in hell flee, braying like asses?

"There is substantial recompense," continued his interlocutor. "We will reach an agreement. All the more because I ask very little: each day your manservants must place provisions near this pool. Then they must leave and not return. I, for my part, am ready to make you and those who follow your instructions masters of the world."

"Bah! You are poking fun at me. . . ."

"Not at all. I will give you gold: for me the dream of your alchemists is a reality. With this metal you can buy



lands, impose your will on kings. And even, should you so desire, raise armies to do battle under your command."

Hugh felt temptation growing inside him.

If this creature spoke the truth, he, poor knight of the House of Champagne, would acquire riches and renown . . . a petty nobleman could not hope for an equal piece of good luck. Gone would be the bleak winter nights when one counted the bushels of wheat, asking oneself if there would be enough bread until the next harvest. Over and done with the hard labor around the ramshackle familial manor. No more coats worn threadbare, nor tattered doublets. From the very moment he could be done with hunting to assure a roast for the meager seignorial table. He could have serfs and game-beaters for his own pleasure. And yet, the torture with red-hot pincers for all eternity! If this creature were lying, if he were indeed the demon tempter . . . then Hugh of Payens would lose his immortal soul!

Suddenly an inspiration swept away his scruples. These riches, promised to him alone, why not consecrate them to a noble cause and thus assure his salvation? The deliverance of the Holy Sepulchre, for which legions of Crusaders had given their lives, was a thing accomplished, but King Baldwin needed assistance to defend Jerusalem against the assaults of the infidels. . . .

Since 1113, the Hospitalers had fought at the side of knights of all nations, but with resources insufficient for the task. Why not assist them? Better still, why not found a new monastic order that would have as its sole reason for being the defense of the Temple of Jerusalem?

Yes! He would set up monasteries in France and in neighboring countries. He would recruit and train knights who would consecrate their lives to the struggle in the Holy Land, who would go to Jerusalem to offer assistance to King Baldwin II. Surely Geoffroy of Saint-Omar, Andre of Montbart and other knights would support such a project with enthusiasm.

That settled it. He would accept.

"Well, knight, you have decided?"

"I will gladly feed you as long as you wish. On the condition, you understand, that you do not ask the impossible of me. Tell me your name and put your hand in mine: thus we will seal our agreement forever."



"Call me Baphomet!" The dwarf laughed derisively and extended a scaly palm.

Hugh felt a deadly cold seize him on contact with the stranger. Without doubt this being was real. He felt the grasp of a hand. . . .

"It is good," declared the knight, crossing himself. "By the Lord Jesus, who died for us on the Cross, I swear to obey your orders scrupulously."

"Excellent. To begin, you are going to give me your water bottle and the provisions you have in your saddle-bag. My food synthesizer was destroyed and I must content myself with frightful nourishment. After that, you will go and gather around you eight companions, gentle knights like yourself. You will betake yourselves to Jerusalem, abandoning your wives and children. The gold you leave behind will console them during your absence. The king will agree to entrust you with guarding the route taken by the pilgrims, which passes through Jaffa. He will also bestow on you the freehold of a part of his palace located on the exact site of the ancient Temple of King Solomon. There you will establish the rules of your Order before the Patriarch of Jerusalem. After that, an illustrious knight, Hugh, Count of Champagne, will join you."

"How can you already know my desires and be so well-informed about our Holy Land, you who claim to be a stranger?"

"Fortunately, not all the equipment in my ship was destroyed. I still have a device linked directly with my brain which permits me—within limits—to see the future. Your thoughts are known to me, of course. But that is not all. In eleven-twenty-eight you will return to France. From here, you will go to England to enlist new recruits. The Council of Troyes will definitely confirm the rules of the Order of the Temple. Finally, a saintly man, Bernard, will lend you his assistance. Your power will then be great and the white mantle of your knights will be saluted with respect. In due course, you will return to the Holy Land, paying your respects to the Bishop of Avignon on the way, after which, in the company of Fulk of Anjou and his forces, you will engage in many a hard-fought battle. The glory will reflect on the Order and your converts will become innumerable."

"Lord!" cried the knight, quite dazzled. "What have I ever done to deserve anything so marvelous?"

"You have gladly helped a creature in need. God is rewarding you for it by my agency. Listen to me a little longer. Near here, you will set up several Commanderies for the purpose of protecting this forest: at Beaulieu, Pinay, Royson and Bouy. On your death, the date of which I will not reveal to you, you will bequeath our secret to your successor, the Grand Master of the Order, who must swear to carry out every point of your agreement and, like you, jealously guard knowledge of my existence. Wherever you may go, you will take with you a kind of magical statue which will allow you to communicate with me, even when you are in the Holy Land. Bear well in mind that its existence, too, must be kept absolutely secret, for it will destroy itself, if the gaze of one unauthorized should fall on it. I have said enough to you. Later on, I shall place at the disposal of the Grand Masters other devices, powerful weapons and subtle machines which will allow you to overcome all adversaries. For the moment, content yourself with this gold; you might turn the destructive engines that I possess against me."

Hugh could say or do nothing. His head reeled, his eyesight blurred. Was he, after all, dreaming? And yet, Baphomet was holding out to him a block of yellow metal, as promised.

With a mechanical gesture, he detached his water bottle, flung down the saddlebag containing his provisions, then seized the ingot. Its weight surprised him, but its luster was that of good alloy. This creature from another world kept his word.

"Do not forget," warned the dwarf. "Tomorrow, at the same hour, those who serve you must place food and drink beside this pool. I need strength to undertake repairs on my ship."

"I shall take care always that you want for nothing," the knight stammered.

"It is well. Before you leave for the Holy Land, come back here to get the effigy which will allow you to stay in communication with me. And, above all, be discreet. . . ."

With these words, Baphomet reentered his curious abode.



The cover slid across the opening, sealing it. Then the sphere sank slowly under the black waters of the tarn.

Thoughtfully, the knight placed the precious ingot in a leather pocket of his saddle, then mounted his steed and, following the dogs, disappeared in the night mist.

Thus, Baphomet, an explorer lost in the galaxy without hope of return, because a space-time tornado had cast him far from his homeland, had established the basis for an empire of which he intended to be the sole master.

The robot-images introduced into each Commandery would be the means of ensuring his hold on humanity through the intermediation of the Templars.

One day, perhaps, some patrol from his faraway planet would discover him. At such a time, he would be able to bring to his leader an empire already subjugated, and he would be showered with honors.



## CHAPTER I



*1275 A.D.*

William of Beaujeu, Grand Master of the Temple, had every reason to be satisfied. The Commanderies of France, England, Italy and Spain were flourishing. On the other hand, the situation in the Holy Land was disturbing.

Leaning over the stern rail of the ship, William thoughtfully contemplated the attenuated wake of foam on the jade and emerald billows.

The weather was magnificent: weather such as only the Mediterranean can offer its faithful admirers. Birds, flying nearly level with the crests, foretold the approach to land.

Some cable-lengths apart, ten other vessels, loaded to the brim with chargers and the provisioning necessary to an army, scudded along before a stiff breeze.

Beside the Grand Master was another high dignitary: Peter of Sevry, Field Marshal of the Temple. The latter contrasted with William to an astonishing degree: while the first, thin and ascetic, seemed the classic figure of a friar-knight, the second—a thickset and rubicund giant—appeared tailored for the good life and gallant company.

On the bridge, behind them, squires and knights chatted in high spirits, all cheered by the imminent arrival of the convoy. This crossing had been achieved under the best of auspices: favorable winds, clement weather and not the slightest harassment by Saracen vessels.

Before long the gray line of the shore appeared on the horizon: Cyprus, the marvelous island, the veritable paradise protected by the billows from pagan armies, where

the Crusaders, weary from combat, found peace, calm and repose in an enchanted setting.

This sight, announced by the lookout, was greeted with the cheering of all the passengers, knights and bondmen, who rejoiced at the thought of regaining solid ground. The old hands praised the merits of this white city to the novices, the charm of its palaces, its baronial halls, and the sweetness of its nights.

Their enthusiasm seemed to bring the Grand Master from a dream. He stood to his full height and sighed: "Well, my worthy Peter, you have nothing to say?"

"I was respecting your silence, Master. . . ."

"And I appreciate your thoughtfulness. You know my projects are vast and ambitious. This time, thanks to the reinforcements we bring, to the gold and abundant provisions, I hope to finish once and for all with that accursed Sultan of Egypt, Bibars. . . ."

"That demon has taken Caesarea, Jaffa and Antioch from us! May he burn forever in the flames of hell. Now we hold only Tripoli, Acre and Sidon; little enough compared with the flourishing realm of old. That is reason enough for taking the offensive once more. . . ."

"By the Christ who died for us on the Cross, I swear to you that the wretch will not profit from his conquests much longer. In the hold of this ship we bring powerful weapons that shall occasion him some Gehennas. However, the time has not yet come. Before that, we needs must settle some differences on this fair isle of Cyprus."

"You are thinking of the throne of Jerusalem, Master?"

"Most certainly. King Henry III of Cyprus plays no part in my plans. Let his damned soul be the puppet of the Hospitalers. Charles, Count of Anjou, will suit our convenience much better. Thanks to heaven, I bring enough gold to establish him on the throne. It is also reported to me that Bohemond VII, Count of Tripoli, does not like us overmuch. What do you say to Guy II, of Jebala, to replace him?"

"Djebail? They say he is well-disposed toward us. . . ."

"I am certain of it. And, once my supporters are assured, I can throw myself into an assault on those places which Bibars wrested from us in unequal combat. Soon, my Brother, we will enter our castle at Safad once more, and the one at Beaufort, too."



"I pray the Holy Spirit to aid you, Master! However, the pagans are without number and we are but a handful, for it is useless to count on much support from the Hospitalers; the knights of your cousin, King Philip of France, are something less than certain, as are the forces of Edward I of England. . . ."

"I overlook nothing. Nevertheless, thanks to Mary, Star of the Sea, who brought us safely to port, I am in possession of some weighty arguments. You know what Greek Fire is?"

"Indeed, I do. Those flaming balls of naphtha have been the cause of enough ravages in our ranks!"

"Well, what would you say to spheres of flame a thousand times more destructive—the fire of hell itself let loose on the ranks of the Saracens?"

Peter of Sevry made the sign of the Cross.

"Only the devil can command such power, Master. . . ."

"There you are mistaken, Peter. Satan has nothing to do with the matter. Our Baphomet has such engines. Until now, he has not entrusted them to us, fearing that we might make evil use of them. This time, he agreed to grant me this supreme power. I described to him the desperate situation of the Holy Land, and our successive reverses touched him. In his goodness, he condescended to give me one hundred fires wrenched from the sun. With them, I am strong enough to convince the Franks and the English. A discreet demonstration will take place at the proper time. I wager that after having proof of its force, they will agree to unite with us."

"I am completely astounded, Master. . . . Is this the fruit of some new alchemy?"

"There you ask too much of me, Peter. Baphomet gives me not one hint of his magical secrets. The gold with which he supplies us is fine grade ore; no one has ever found any fault in it. This fire from the sun exists. I, myself, have seen its consequences. Unfortunately, I have no idea how it is compressed into the metal spheres which, strangely enough, are cold to the touch."

"In faith, these are great wonders! But would it not be prudent to keep the matter secret so that no word of it may reach that miserable Bibars?"

"You are right, Peter. Only the Commanders and the dignitaries of the Order will know of the existence of this



magic fire. However, while we are at Acre, I shall have a demonstration for Otto of Granson, Commander of the men-at-arms of the English king, as well as John of Grailly, who leads the French Crusaders. In this way, I shall persuade them to join our forces. But a truce to discourse, Brother; here we are at the quay. Let us pay a visit to noble King Henry. . . . Our gold will suffice, I hope, to establish the young prince of Salerno, Charles, on the throne of Jerusalem."

A gangway had already been lowered but, to the disappointment of the Brothers of the Order, all landing had been forbidden.

William wanted to reach Acre as soon as possible, so only the Household of the Grand Master was authorized to go ashore.

A majestic procession formed on the quay: at its head, the Baussant standard, black and white with a cross gules crowning all. Behind it came William of Beaujeu, followed by his faithful Marshal at Arms, both astride magnificent, jet-black chargers.

A few paces behind them, the Seneschal, second only to the supreme leader, moved at the head of the Household, properly so designated, where were found the Brother-Chaplain, two knights chosen for their feats in battle, a scholar well-versed in the Scriptures, two Brother Sergeants, a Saracen scrivener whose richly embroidered silk cape contrasted with the sober white mantle of the Brothers of the Order.

Four Turcopoles, the farrier, the cook and the squires kept their respective distances.

Finally, ten Brothers, formerly noble knights, followed by their sergeants, brought up the rear of the column.

As it passed, the Cypriots paused, filled with admiration for the exalted demeanor of the Templars, for the beauty of their steeds, the brilliance of their new armor. A group of children, shouting and singing, followed them all the way to the royal palace.

William's stay there was extremely brief.

Before midday he left the royal enclave to repair to the Commandery where, after a frugal repast, he heard vespers before reembarking. The flotilla forthwith took to the open sea, sailing before the wind toward Acre.

Five other vessels had joined the convoy to avail themselves of its protection.

There were, therefore, sixteen in all that hove to, after a short crossing, near the fortress-home of the Templars, situated close to the sea in the port of Acre.

It was noon and the heat of the sun at its zenith was oppressive. The Templars and their squires streamed with sweat under their armor. However, the Turcopole slaves immediately began unloading the invaluable cargo contained in the bulging bellies of those ships come from overseas.

The Grand Master and his escort soon arrived at the Commandery where Theobald Gaudin, Master of the Acre Templary, awaited them.

Four large wooden coffers banded with iron were stowed in a safe place; then the knights were able to take some repose in the coolness of the vaulted chambers.

This arrival filled the hearts of the inhabitants of the city with joy. They were greatly relieved to know that they were protected by fresh, well-armed troops. The huge amounts of provisions unloaded assured them that they would be well-fed in the case of siege.

For a long time, Acre had lived under the constant threat of the Mameluke army. It was rumored that Bibars had at his disposal forty thousand knights and one hundred thousand foot soldiers. What could the twenty thousand inhabitants of the city hope for? Even protected by the thick walls, they feared—with reason—finding themselves submerged by such a tide of humanity.

The Accursed Tower, key to the fortress, had been hastily reinforced, but Bibars was a known expert in the art of siege. His war machines, his engineers, his miners, would work swiftly to breach the walls. This done, even the bravery of the Christian knights would be incapable of resisting the onslaught of the Mamelukes.

The arrival of the Grand Master and his knights doubled the numbers of the cavalry, bringing it to more than two thousand. The foot soldiers now numbered almost twenty thousand. Little enough for combat on the open field, but it could be hoped that a siege by the Saracen army would be effectively resisted. Even the Grand Master of the Hospitalers was not unhappy at this influx of Templars, whom he customarily treated as rivals rather



than as allies. At least he recognized their bravery and, in this desperate situation, any reinforcements were welcome.

The visit of the Templar Seneschal, the following morning, surprised him not at all. He willingly agreed to betake himself to the Templary, there to discuss "important questions concerning the safeguarding of the city."

When he arrived in the chapter room, he found an old acquaintance in the person of the giant Swiss, Otto of Granson, a mercenary in the pay of the English king, whose broad shoulders accentuated the lofty stature and the elegance of his neighbor, John of Grailly.

The Hospitaller's observant glance noted a strange circumstance.

Usually, at such meetings, all the dignitaries of the Order, Commanders and knights, were present. This time the number of Templars was reduced to a strict minimum: the Grand Master, his Seneschal and his Field Marshal.

Taking care not to seem to notice, he greeted the assembly with, "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost." This done, the monk-soldier took his place at William's right, while his own Marshal, Matthew of Clermont, moved to stand behind him.

The Grand Master of the Temple knelt and pronounced a brief prayer:

"May the grace of the Holy Spirit assist us. Lord Jesus Christ, Saint Peter, eternal and omnipotent God, wise Creator, giver of all things, benevolent guardian and well-beloved friend, pious and meek Redeemer, mild and merciful Savior, I humbly pray and beg of You that You shed Your light upon us. In the name of Mary, Star of the Sea. Amen."

After this, he rose and regarded each of his guests with eyes as piercing as those of an eagle, then declared:

"Good gentlemen, Brother Hospitalers, I have asked you here today for the purpose of claiming from you all the assistance that it is lawful for you to grant me, for I held high hopes; soon the Holy Sepulchre will be in our hands. . . ."

The most profound astonishment showed clearly on the faces of all present. William had never had a reputation

for jesting. Consequently, they could only ask themselves if the Grand Master had not suddenly gone mad.

John of Villiers, Grand Master of the Hospitalers, made himself their spokesman by objecting:

"This is marvelous news, noble Brother! Pray heaven that you are right. . . . Unfortunately, such an ambition seems to me less than reasonable. Our numbers scarcely suffice to defend this city, and you talk of going out to conquer Jerusalem. . . . Your words demand some explanation because my limited understanding cannot fathom how you envisage such an achievement."

William smiled craftily. He was awaiting the final astonishment of his visitors and took a wicked pleasure in doing so.

Husbanding his effects, he continued:

"By all the Saints, the Archangels and the Host of the Blessed, I swear to you, noble friends, that within thirty days the Holy Places shall be free of the vermin that now overruns them. And I am going to give you proof of it, if a jaunt to the heights of Toru doesn't frighten you."

Hospitalers and Commanding Officers consulted each other with swift glances. Nothing stood in the way of such an outing. The surroundings were safe: not one enemy horseman had been reported. Finally, they signified their acquiescence with a nod of the head.

The seven knights left the cool of the chapter house regretfully and went into the burning courtyard where their steeds, led out by the squires, awaited them.

All, however, were anxious to learn what miracle could truly inspire their host to hold such designs.

They did not have long to wait.

A quarter of an hour later, William reined in his horse on the summit of a low hill overlooking Acre and the neighboring countryside.

On his right, about a hundred meters away, was a rocky eminence, at which he pointed.

"Look closely at those stones, gentlemen."

Everyone stared intently in the indicated direction.

"Now place your gauntlet in front of your eyes and do not, under any circumstances, remove it."

Whereupon, the Templar, using both spurs, raced away toward his target. Drawing a sling from one of his saddleholsters, he placed a grayish sphere, about the size of a



fist, in it. Then he threw this projectile with all his might and, wheeling abruptly, fled at a gallop from the spot hit by that inoffensive-appearing ball.

Some seconds later, a blinding light burst from the ground. Rocks showered around the knights, some striking their shields, while an appalling explosion almost deafened them.

Shocked, they stared in the direction of this apocalyptic thundering, holding their rearing mounts with difficulty.

A high column of dust in the shape of a mushroom, whose revolving summit rose rapidly, hid the point of impact.

As the slight wind drove it inland, they saw that a vast crater had unquestionably replaced the outcropping of stony crags.

For a long time the deafening echoes of the explosion reverberated among the hills, then silence fell once more.

"By Saint George!" growled Otto of Granson. "What kind of lightning was that?"

"Saint Dennis preserve me!" John of Grailly whispered. "How can you talk of lightning from a cloudless sky? The earth just vomited the fire from its entrails. . . ."

John of Villiers did not utter a word. He urged his horse at a trot toward the smoking crater, stopped some distance from it and contemplated the molten pit for a long time. Then, shaking his head thoughtfully, he rejoined the little group of knights, crossing himself repeatedly.

William still wore his ironic smile. Without seeming interest in the general consternation, he whipped his horse to a trot and headed back toward the Commandery.

A difficult task lay ahead: he was going to find himself faced with divergent interests; how could he reconcile them with his own?

Minutes later the seven knights reentered the cool of the chapter room.

Without delay the Grand Master of the Hospitalers launched into a harsh diatribe.

"Noble Brothers," he began angrily, "the faith and abnegation of the Knights of the Temple have already been placed in doubt by certain individuals. Though it is far from my intentions to accuse their leader of dealings with Satan, nevertheless this fire surging suddenly from the rocks irresistibly makes one think of demoniac interven-

tion. Never has man raised up such infernal flames, unless by devilish incantations. I acknowledge that this is an all-powerful weapon whose effects on the pagan hosts would assure us certain victory. But, in your soul and conscience, Brother William, can you swear that you would never use it against Christians in order to become supreme master indeed? Further, can you prove to me that our Lord Christ would approve of such a lightning bolt, even against the Saracens? Have you envisaged the use that could be made of it, should it fall into ambitious hands? Hurlled from the sky on some unfortunate city, it would reduce ramparts and houses to nothing. All inhabitants, the lowly and the exalted, would be killed without distinction. No, William! By heaven, I adjure you to destroy these evil devices immediately, for if you do not, you put your immortal soul in peril!"

The Grand Master of the Templars had let his dangerous rival speak without interrupting. He had blanched with rage at the accusations brought against the Holy Order which he represented, but had succeeded in containing himself. Now he exploded:

"By Christ, placed on the Cross for our transgressions, you are going to take back your offensive words or, if not, you shall smart for it. How dare you doubt my Brothers or myself? Never have we had any ambition other than to deliver the Holy Places and to establish the True Faith throughout the world. You know our motto: *Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed Nomine Tua da gloriam!* We have no wish for glory; all our actions have as their object only the glory of the Lord! You seem to be saying that springs forth by power of the Evil One. Very well, in that case, the Holy Relics, the consecrated wafer would have power to extinguish it on the spot. I, myself, have made the test and I can assure you that they are without effect. . . . It is nothing more than the end result of some alchemy, strongly hermetic certainly, but with nothing of the demoniac about it. I swear it by the Virgin Mary!"

The Hospitaller appeared unconvinced. With contracted brows, he pondered the matter.

At that point, John of Grailly intervened politically:

"Noble sires, I have been—I admit it—dumbfounded by the power of the weapon demonstrated for us by the Grand Master. At the time, those flames made me, also,



think of some intervention by the Prince of Darkness. However, after some reflection, I am convinced that this is only a kind of Greek Fire. Our ruthless adversaries have never hesitated to use the most savage stratagems against us. Have you forgotten the pots filled with deadly vipers that were hurled into our ranks? The quicklime thrown out over the assailants of their castles? The poison placed in the water holes? Well then, in all fairness, I ask to why we should not treat them in the same way. As far as I am concerned, I am certain of the purity of our Brother Templar's intentions; never has great power been placed in better hands. The noble William of Beaujeu promises us never to use this subtle fire except to annihilate our opponents, to reconquer Jerusalem, and to propagate the True Faith. For my part, I am ready to place the fullest trust in him. It goes without saying that he needs must keep us informed of his intentions and of the way in which he proposes to use our troops. Under those conditions I am ready to assure him of the complete support of King Philip's men-at-arms. However, since all labor merits recompense, it seems to me that the lands and castlewards liberated should be divided in all equity among the knights who participate in the combat."

"By my faith, this speaks of gold," thundered Otto of Granson. "All useful work does merit wages. I am ready to send my valiant knights to storm Jerusalem on the condition that some stronghold be ceded to my worthy sovereign, as is proper and fitting."

"This is a matter that calls for further thought," the Grand Master of the Hospitalers interjected. "But first of all, calm your temper, noble William. Casting doubt on the virtue of the Knights of the Temple was farthest from my thoughts. My words only reported the gossip, the 'they say' talk that is heard in the courts of France and Italy. Even though this manner of snuffing out human lives is repugnant to me, I am forced to recognize that, after all, it is only a question of infidels. I would like, nevertheless, to hear from my Brother William's own mouth what his intentions are concerning this campaign."

"I take not of your words with joy, Brother. It goes without saying that the Templars have never thought of appropriating the Kingdom of Jerusalem and the castlewards or principalities belonging to it. All who take part

in the action will have the right to a recompense in proportion to the assistance given. Here and now I make a solemn promise to restore to our Brother Hospitalers their former castles. Later, when our troops shall have liberated the Princedoms of Tripoli and Antioch, I swear to place again in your hands, noble Sire of Villiers, the fortress Krak, which belongs to the knights."

"Well spoken!" trumpeted John of Grailly. "On these conditions, the support of King Philip's knights is assured."

"And that also holds true for those of England!"

The Grand Master of the Hospitalers thereupon rose and solemnly clasped William of Beaujeu in a brotherly embrace. In the closeness of this reconciliation, the resemblance between the two monk-soldiers became even more striking: the same height, the same ascetic slenderness, the same gray eyes, cold and calculating, the same toughness of a soldier disciplined by years of battle, and also the same mystical gleam in each glance. Then both turned to the situation in hand.

"It only remains to draw up a plan for the campaign," the Hospitaler observed. "Our battle forces are still weak despite the powerful weapon you possess. No doubt you have thought of this."

"Indeed I have," William affirmed. "Here are my suggestions born of long sleepless vigils. As of this moment, we have available two thousand knights and twenty thousand foot soldiers and horsemen, all seasoned and courageous. Our troops will follow the seacoast, in the direction of Pilgrim Castle and Nablus. Bibars will not believe his ears when he hears the news; his army will come out to meet us. Only then will we use the magic fire. We will fight with our spears and swords during the first skirmishes but, when the main body of the Saracens is brought up, the flames will send them to hell!"

"Wisely thought out; the power of the weapon must not be unveiled prematurely."

"And the provisioning?" interposed the Marshal of the Hospitalers. "Those devils will do everything possible to cut off our rear guard with their cavalry."

"I have thought of that, Brother Matthew. The vessels that brought me here will also follow the coast, assuring both assistance and control of the sea. As you must have



noticed, they are all furnished with wooden towers which will stand above any enemy galleys and, with the launching of our projectiles, destroy them in one sure blow. Further, Charles of Anjou will receive from his father, the King of Sicily, a fleet of thirty vessels. This, it is understood, if he is placed on the throne of Jerusalem. . . ."

That statement caused the Hospitalers to make wry faces because of their known preference for Henry of Cyprus, nephew of Louis IX, but they held their peace.

"Thus, with mastery of the sea, once the forces of Bibars are destroyed, who shall prevent us from penetrating the interior?"

"I place myself completely in your hands, Brother," approved John of Villiers. "May the heavens bless you! But you spoke of the Princedom of Antioch; it seems to me. . . ."

"We certainly must not limit our ambitions to the Kingdom of Jerusalem! All pagans must be driven from the Holy Land and the former might of the Crusaders reestablished in Syria, even to the country of Edessa. If you agree, I will leave the Holy City in your care. My forces will embark in our vessels for Tripoli. There, we will do battle against the Mamelukes, and against the Mongol Khan of Persia. Again we shall be victorious, have no doubt of it. I need not say that I will accept the aid of all those knights who wish to join me."

"By the Lord Christ, there are great adventures ahead," shouted John of Grailly. "We shall be with you, my men and I!"

"I would be ashamed not to join you," opined the Swiss Commander. "Let me at the Saracens!"

"It is understood," the sharp voice of the Master of the Hospitalers interrupted, "that you possess a large number of these magic spheres; our success depends on that."

"Be reassured," William answered with a discreet smile. "There will never be enough unbelievers to kill. What do you say, my brave Peter?"

The Marshal of the Templars nodded and growled:

"By Christ, we have enough of them to send more Saracens to hell than there are in existence from Damietta to Edessa!"

"Under these conditions, you can count on the Hospitalers. When shall we set out?" asked John of Villiers.

"The Templars are ready, good Sire. It is for you to answer your own question."

"Two days seem sufficient to me. What do you say, my noble companions?"

Otto of Granson and John of Grailly agreed with their leader.

"One word more," resumed the Templar. "Your men will have to construct some catapults and mangonels according to our plans. They must be light and mobile. The wheels must be such that a team of horses can pull them and always keep abreast of our troop movements. We will place them in the center of the forces and defend them, come what may. My projectiles must, in effect, be able to reach the main body of the opposing army before the enemy is too close. I should also point out that the sphere launched by a war machine is much more effective than one thrown by a sling...."

"Lord Jesus! I shall end by pitying these infidels," muttered Grailly.

"Along the route, all these devices will remain in the coffers of my personal luggage. My Household will guard them; no one else shall have access to them except myself and my Field Marshal. Any other Crusader, whatever his rank may be, will be killed without mercy should he attempt to come near them."

"That stipulation was unnecessary," John of Villiers stated with a haughty air. "No Hospitaler would stoop to such treason. These secrets of alchemy belong to the Temple. One last question, Brother: what does our Sainted Father, the Pope, say about these wonderful projectiles?"

"I had an interview with the venerable Gregory X, and told him about this discovery of a Greek Fire with previously unsuspected power, which would allow us to drive the infidels from the Holy Land. He gave me his blessing, promising to keep our secret."

"And did you give him a demonstration?"

"Certainly not! Such an explosion would have attracted attention. Besides, he did not request it."

"I see," said the Hospitaler with a meaningful smile.



"His Holiness will have quite a surprise when he learns of the exact power of this 'Greek Fire.'"

Tight-lipped, William protested, "By my faith, I depicted its effects faithfully for him."

"Assuredly, Brother. Nevertheless, such a marvel must be seen in order to grasp its true significance."

"Are you looking for a pretext to take back your word?"

"No, not at all, good Brother. All the same, I wager that the Cardinals and the Holy Father will talk of this at length in times to come."

With these words, the meeting of the Council came to an end. Each returned to his quarters to give the necessary orders.

One hour later the news had spread throughout the city. Comments were plentiful and unfavorable. Even the sergeants and squires did not show overmuch enthusiasm for a sortie which seemed foolhardy to all.

Still, their discipline was such that everyone made haste to prepare, furbishing armor and weapons, and loading the carts with hay and various kinds of provisions.

That night the revelry was endless: French and English knew not when they would again see their hearts' delights. Among the noble ladies, many a lovely eye filled with tears, weeping for a fiancé or a lover already counted lost forever.

## CHAPTER II



On the morning of the third day, the ranks of the Crusaders thundered out through the Gate of Saint Anthony, and took the southward road along the seacoast.

The army was a brave sight.

In the lead the Templars marched.

First the Grand Master followed by the Marshal, the Seneschal and the Household. The Baussant banner fluttered in a light breeze, high in the clear sky.

The Commanders came next, preceded by their standard-bearers. Fifty knights, as many sergeants and squires marched in closed ranks at their heels.

The carts, loaded to the breaking point, came on behind, guarded by the Turcoples.

The center of the troop disposition had been entrusted to the French and English knights, who followed their respective leaders. They escorted the precious catapults, whose large new wheels rasped at every turn.

Responsibility for guarding the rear had been placed on the Hospitalers. This was a perilous position because the Saracen horsemen were quick to harass the stragglers.

Dust raised by the thousands of marching men did little to dim the flashing of lances and helmets, but was not slow to put these valiant warriors to the test by mingling with the sweat that already trickled under their armor.

All the inhabitants of Acre were massed on the walls, despite the early morning hour.

Not a few shed hot tears, asking themselves how many of those who left thus in the resplendent light of sunrise would come back to their city. No one understood why the leaders advised the Crusaders to take such risks and



the rumors spread rapidly from one to another of the watchers. Some declared they had learned from a reliable source that Philip the Hardy, King of France, was going to disembark on the coast with his troops. Others were assured that an enormous fleet was arriving from Sicily and that it would join the forces of the Grand Master of the Templars at Caesarea. For certain, it was the King of England who was going to come to their rescue.

In fact, no one could reach an agreement except on a single point: all bitterly deplored the sight of their city thus deprived of defenders.

But already the long column was disappearing in the ocher cloud rising from the earth. For an instant one caught again the flash of a helmet glistening in the sunlight or the scarlet of a banner whipping in the wind.

All too soon, there was nothing but a bluish line on the horizon.

The die was cast: the troops of the Crusaders went boldly forward, challenging the Sultan Bibars to do battle.

In the column itself, the bondmen, sergeants on foot and squires talked among themselves, sharing their mutual fears.

Among them there were representatives of all the provinces of France: Manceaux, Champenois, Angevins, Tourangeaux, and also some Englishmen from the counties between the marches of the Scottish border and the Gallic counties.

Among the French squires, two brothers were discussing farming. Natives of Saint-Maurice Thizouaille near Auxerre, they became Crusaders to join their elder brother, Garin, sergeant to the Templar Chapter at Saint-Maurice, who had gone out to the Holy Land.

Guiot Tholon, a robust jovial fellow, formerly a wood-cutter, sported that flamboyant beard-collar known as a Newgate frill which had earned him the nickname, Guiot-the-Red.

The other answered to the name of Clement, which in no way corresponded with his hot-tempered character. One day, a Gallic sergeant had accused him of cheating at dice. Clement picked the unfortunate fellow up bodily, lifted him over his head, let him fall on his bent knee, effectively rupturing his kidneys. Suddenly, the reputation

of the former scythe-swinger was solidly established and no one picked a quarrel with him.

The two brothers were impenitent whoremasters and the elder brother often had to lecture them to lead them back on the right path.

Such as they were, with guileless blue eyes, with renown as fierce fighters, they openly grumbled but never were sullen about a task.

"By 'swounds!" Guiot swore. "I swear to you, if I had it to do over, I would never leave Auxerre. You have to be an animal to come to this God-forsaken country of sweat, tears and blood on these burning trails under a sun that boils your brains. If I listened to myself, I would send all this bloody equipment packing. Me, all I need is a good ax to smash these cursed pagans! "

"You're not very far wrong! I can feel myself broiling under this whore of a coat of mail. The Saracens never weigh themselves down with any such holy scrap-iron; just a tunic, a shield and their saber. But for us, it's like being in a shell; no question of running, you have to crawl in a furnace."

"And this dust! It gets to me everywhere: it scratches as if somebody were rubbing me with a whetstone."

"If you only knew what you were going to have to face in this hellish desert! Just imagine the Grand Master and our Commanders all having to live through this dust! 'Swounds! It would be a fine thing to shelter behind the ramparts of Acre. The Saracens could lay siege to us and, for once, their heads would be broken. But no, we have to go out to do battle in open country, and they are ten times more than we."

"My boy, if the Templar were here, he'd tell you that it's to expiate our sins."

"Oh, that. Perhaps it's true. Ah, that sweet bitch, Mathilde."

"A cursed bawd for certain," agreed his brother knowingly. "But to get back to what you were saying about the Grand Masters. I agree with you, and they know better than we what the infidels are cooking up. For me, Bibars is not far away and we are going to stumble onto him without warning."

"And then what? I tell you their numbers are ten times



ours. After you've killed a hundred thousand, there are just as many."

"Quite likely. All the same, I don't let it bother me: surely they have some plan in the back of their heads to expose us without cover. Me, I have confidence in them."

"Maybe you're right... must have a word with Garin where we make a halt. Perhaps he knows what's going on. In the meantime, I'd give plenty for a quart of good country wine...."

"Don't talk about such things! You cut me to the quick...."

Their throats parched by the dust, the Tholon brothers brought their interesting conversation to a close: it was a question of holding out until the evening encampment at Caipha, situated on the shore of the gulf at the foot of the Carmel Mountains.

The noon halt saw the first ones crippled giving careful attention to their bruised feet. Actually, the majority of the Crusaders had become unaccustomed to long marches. The vegetation, mostly spiny shrubs, offered little shade so that both sergeants and squires crowded alongside the carts and stretched out on the ground. Others sheltered themselves as best they could under their shields, balanced obliquely on a sword or a lance.

Fortunately, there was no shortage of water, nor of food. After taking their fill, everyone surrendered to the pleasures of a siesta, under the guard of sentinels who streamed with sweat under the fiery sun. No alarm troubled their well-earned rest, but some Saracen knights scouted the size of the Christian forces, then retired at a gallop to inform their leaders.

The strident call of horns and trumpets put an end to the sleep of the unfortunate Crusaders, who returned to their places in the column.

This start was made near the hour of Vespers. The heat had not lessened at all, the gait of the foot soldiers showed its effect and the Hospitalers of the rear guard had all they could do to spur on the stragglers. Some unfortunate victims of sunstroke had been placed in the carts where they raved and struggled, fighting with imaginary enemies.

At last the glaring ball of the sun sank to the horizon, lurid in the dust and haze. Then a noticeable landswell

outlined itself against the sky: the Carmel Mountains at the foot of which sprawled opulent Caipha.

Suddenly, tongues were loosened and wagging again. Everyone speculated as to whether the forces would launch an attack on the city or whether they would pass around it. The presence of the siege machines seemed to favor the first hypothesis. It was also the "version" which found most favor among the Crusaders because, once the city had been taken, they dreamed of being able to enjoy some days of carousal and repose.

With the setting of the sun, where the western sky took on tones of amethyst, William pitched camp close to the city walls, but beyond the reach of arrows.

While they were setting up the tents, the squires could see the heads of the defenders who watched this activity with apprehension. But the multicolored banners on the ramparts were not lowered, proof of their willingness to resist. However, the city had had little time to prepare for a siege and its provisions would not last long. The inhabitants had few illusions as to the outcome of this test of strength.

Only Bibars' army could save them. Of course messengers had been sent, hurrying southward with all possible speed. Unfortunately, it would take the Mamelukes several days to assemble and come back up the coast: without a doubt the city would have fallen long before they arrived.

Women, children and old men had fled to the mountains, hoping thus to escape the fury of the Christians, but they would be unable to survive long among the barren rocks burned by the sun. . . .

Soon, the camp fires began to blaze while the blacksmiths occupied themselves with the horses and wheels damaged by rocky roads. The cooks busied themselves around caldrons that spread tempting odors far and wide. Around the tents reserved for the dignitaries of the two Orders, watchful knights mounted guard. Close by, the banners of the Temple and the Hospital flapped lazily in the sea breeze.

The night was peaceful. Only the calls of the sentinels troubled the silence, accompanied by the howls of some jackals coming from the nearby hills.

In the morning, before dawn, everyone was called to



attend mass. Then the Crusaders awaited the orders that would let them know what their leaders' intentions were.

Their uncertainty was short-lived: a small contingent was designated to blockade the city, while the body of the troops broke camp to resume its march toward Jaffa.

Once the Carmel Mountains were cleared, the army again took the trail following the coast. And, stage by stage, it came to Pilgrim Mountain and Caesarea, fording the shallow streams that flowed down from the mountains of Samaria. The advance across the plain of Sharon offered no difficulties; nevertheless, the hearts of the rude knights sank progressively as they got further from their base: Acre.

William of Beaujeu had none of their fears. He knew that the alert had been given and that the squadrons of Bibars were gathering. Each day, his Turcopole spies came to report on the situation. As he had foreseen, the Saracen forces were gathering around Jaffa and his only wish was to cross the Yarquon so as to assure his men a supply of drinkable water.

On the other hand, the Grand Master knew that the small fleet had left Acre and was moving down the shore to support his land forces.

After Caesarea, one party of the cavalry had been sent ahead toward Arsuf and the reports from the Commanders stated that, around the port of Jaffa, the nights were ablaze with fires, so numerous were the Saracens.

Despite all precautions this news spread through the companies. Until then, the forces of the Grand Master had handled themselves extremely well. They had made the usual complaints about the heat and fatigue, nothing really serious. Now the foot soldiers firmly refused to advance another step.

All these brave men, the brothers Tholon included, thought it utter folly to go thus to face in open country an inestimable army which had, besides, a fortified city where it could entrench itself and receive supplies.

For William, the situation was tragic. How to persuade his troops to resume the advance? Must he unveil a jealously guarded secret, thus running the risk of losing his unique advantage? Uncertain, he convened his Council in order to decide what action to take, which proved extremely fortunate.

Actually, the subtle mind of the Grand Master of the Hospitalers suggested a ruse to him which offered a good chance of success. William of Beaujeu, therefore, made his way to the very center of the masses of men, and in substance, rallied them with this speech:

"Brothers of the Temple and of the Hospital, knights, squires and sergeants, I know the anxiety that grips you. You believe that we must retrace our steps in haste in order to regain the shelter afforded by the ramparts of Acre, which we have only just left. Men of little faith! Do you think that William of Beaujeu and John of Villiers, not to mention our noble allies from France and England, would take such a risk without sufficient reason? Know, therefore, that a vision appeared to us. The Archangel Gabriel himself ordered us to quit the city where, with heavy hearts, we awaited the assault which would put an end to our presence in the Holy Land. Verily I say unto you, we are indeed masters of Jaffa and of Jerusalem, for the Lord of Hosts will launch His lightning to assist in the liberation of the Holy Places. Some among you shake your heads in disbelief. For them, I add these simple words: they may try to get back to Acre if they wish. I know from a trustworthy source that they will never reach it, because Bibars has divided his forces in two, cutting off the route that we have followed to come here. Any retreat is, therefore, impossible. Your only hope is to defeat the army which separates us from Jaffa, and for us to take possession of the city. A fleet come from Cyprus will help us there. By Jesus Christ, our Savior, victory stands at the end of your labors!"

Only a gloomy silence answered him.

The Crusaders were pondering what they had just learned. They did not believe overmuch in that story about lightning. From olden times, their ancestors had known many a harsh ordeal, and heaven had never come to their aid. . . .

On the other hand, the news of Bibars' encirclement was a heavy weight in the balance: even victorious over the Saracens, there would have to be long marches to reach Acre, and they knew how the enemy knights would ravage a column in retreat, harassing it day and night.

Everything considered, there was actually but one conclusion: "flight" straight ahead. If a fleet was arriving—



and, on this point, the Grand Master assuredly would not lie—the city attacked by land and by sea would quickly fall. Then it would be possible to breathe in the shelter of its ramparts with their five hundred battlements. . . .

In the end, whether they liked it or not, the armed forces reformed and the march to the south was resumed. With the result that, ten days after their departure, the Crusaders crossed the Yarquon, sighting Jaffa, all white under the sun, from the height of that hill dotted with tombs which overlooks it. A few joyous shouts sprang from parched throats, abruptly cut off at sight of the huge army which barred their way.

There was one poor consolation: the promised ships were at their appointed stations, blockading the small port.

At once, William had horns sound the call for battle formation. Actually, one could not ask for a more favorable location. The hill, assuredly, could be surrounded by the enemy but a sudden attack could not be launched. There would be ample time to hurl down the lightning promised to the Crusaders.

Under the careful watch of Commanders, the catapults and mangonels were immediately drawn up in a circle, and the precious coffers containing the projectiles placed beside them.

Bibars wasted no time. He knew that the midday sun inflamed these men cased in steel, and he, too, had horns and trumpets sound the battle call of his Mamelukes.

The squadrons moved off, one after the other, encircling the Crusaders with a deadly girdle. First he brought up his infantry, holding the cavalry in reserve, in case the armored knights should charge down the slopes of the hill.

On that height, Templars and Hospitalers waited, kneeling and half-hidden by their shields as protection against volleys of arrows loosed by archers to cover the attack. At that distance, coats of mail and shields sufficed to avoid serious wounds. It would not, unhappily, be long until their adversaries were at close range.

On signal, the English crossbowmen began to let fly their bolts on the advancing masses. Since the Mamelukes had no armor comparable to that of the Christians—a helmet and buckler constituting their only protection—the foremost ranks were decimated. This in no way dampened

the ardor of their companions who strode unfeelingly over the bodies and continued the climb.

Statue-like, William of Beaujeu silently contemplated the scene. He noted Bibars poised in the rear with his cavalry, there where the standards made an emerald stain. Then, starting from his reverie, he made his way swiftly to one of the mangonels, slyly nicknamed "the male cousin," and with his own hands placed one of the gray projectiles in a recess made for that purpose.

Careful aim was taken according to his direction, while the chosen Commanders busied themselves at the other catapults. Already their assailants were close: one could see the sunburned faces, the short beards, the grins full of hatred on their lips.

The Baussant banner dipped twice.

The levers of the war machines were freed and their deadly charges launched.

The seconds that followed were apocalyptic.

The explosion of the atomic grenades in the serried ranks of the Mamelukes wrought unbelievable havoc. Shreds of torn flesh flew far and wide. All the way to the city walls, a glaring light blinded the Saracens. Then immense clouds of dust boiled into the sky marking the brilliance of the sun. Some even thought that the luminary, reached by this dreadful explosion, had been extinguished.

Then the thundering sound waves rumbled and reverberated for a long time between the ramparts and the hill, like the beating of a million kettledrums.

When the Crusaders uncovered their faces hidden by their shields, they viewed an appalling sight. More than half of the enemy forces had disappeared. Below them, the plain was covered with pustular craters. The men and horses that had been some distance away were burned alive by the waves of heat. One could see, far off, the flash of white teeth in the blackened jumble of charred flesh.

The few survivors, shocked by this cataclysm as sudden as unforeseeable, remained prostrate on the ground. Some bushes still smoldered, giving off a dense smoke that spread close to the earth as though to conceal this frightful sight. In the distance, riderless horses galloped aimlessly. At last, a silence like death reigned.

The Crusaders, themselves, did not venture to breathe a



word, almost believing that they dreamed. Some crossed themselves, fearing that the end of the world had come.

Only William, a cruel smile on his lips, dared to contemplate the effects of the infernal lightning that he had unchained. All had happened as Baphomet had said and henceforth, with such weapons, who could hold out against him?

The empire of the world was his.

He had only one decision to make: did he want to reign over Europe or over Asia . . . ?

For some time, he meditated in silence, then, when he saw that the fires, lacking fuel, were burning out and that the smoke was thinning, he drew his sword and made a sign for all the echelons of his forces to advance toward the city of Jaffa.

With the Templars leading, the Crusaders descended the slopes of the hill. There, they discovered some who still survived. But the shock sustained had been too terrible: all surrendered, begging the Christians to spare them.

Then the knights reached the points of impact. They skirted the still-smoking craters and came upon the heaps of dead bodies. Men and horses were entangled in an inextricable fashion, the blasted bodies giving off a nauseous odor.

Bones stabbed through the tatters of shriveled skin and it was impossible to recognize the Sultan in such a charnel house. Nevertheless, Bibars was vanquished. There was no longer anyone to oppose the victorious Crusaders.

The Grand Master of the Hospital and the Commanders of the troops contemplated this spectacle, horror-stricken. Never had they imagined that the lightning of the Templars could possess such power and they almost regretted having been accomplices in this massacre.

Before they reached the foot of the walls, the troops took numerous prisoners who did not even consider defending themselves. They would presently swell the number of their fellow countrymen entombed on the hill.

In the city itself, the explosions had caused no serious damage. Some roofs had given way, a few fires had started, all in all nothing serious. Also, when the defenders had somewhat recovered their spirits, they found that the troops stationed in the open had disappeared, noting, on

the other hand, that the walls had played their part in protecting those who were behind its battlements.

The leading Saracens of Jaffa consulted together and decided to pursue the action, believing that they were invulnerable behind the thick ramparts. They did not understand what had happened but trusted that the cataclysm would not be repeated or, at least, that it would be diminished by the fortification of the city.

Unfortunately for them, William had foreseen this eventuality. A Commander of the Temple was aboard one of the vessels that had come from Acre. He had mango-nels at his disposal and some of the atomic grenades.

When the first projectile dropped near the mosque, an appalling panic was triggered. The bravest could not hold out against such a trial. All took refuge in the vaulted halls, the cellars and underground passages. So that, when the first Crusaders reached the base of the walls, they were able to set up their ladders without encountering the slightest opposition.

Shortly afterward, the gates were broken open with blows from battering rams and the Christian forces swarmed into Jaffa.

Foot soldiers and knights spread through the narrow streets, massacring without pity all those encountered. At last, after years of defeats, they could satisfy the accumulated hatred, avenging their brothers who had given their lives at Arsuf, Pilgrim Castle and Antioch. There was such carnage that blood ran in the gutters like torrential rain. Quickly, many soldiers turned to pillage, entering the houses and appropriating all objects of value, howling:

"Death! Death to all who live here!  
Men and women, all shall perish  
Who will not part with what they cherish. . . ."

Some Mamelukes, entrenched in their towers and in the barbican held out for a short time but their courage failed them: the steel-clad knights were not to be vanquished in single combat. Demoralized by the deadly fire from the skies, the last defenders of Jaffa hastened to surrender.

Shortly, Templars and Hospitalers reached the harbor. They severed the heavy chain that barred entrance to it and the Christian fleet was made fast at the quay. There



were swift Byzantine dromonds, vessels with oars and with sails, galleys with rowers made up of Saracen slaves, and cargo vessels for transporting horses. In all, counting the five ships captured in the port, from which the Christian galley slaves were immediately rescued, William had a veritable squadron of thirty vessels.

When night fell on the city, stillness reigned.

For a very long time, the Crusaders had not won such an overwhelming victory. Bibars the Sultan, so dreaded and so evil, was dead. His army was in flight, dead or captured. Henceforth, no one could prevent the reconquest of the Holy Land. Which is to say that joy reigned among the rough Christian warriors!

As might be supposed, the three Tholon brothers celebrated the occasion, each in his own way.

Garin, the Templar, attended the evening service held in the open air, at which the Grand Masters officiated, then rejoined Guiot and Clement in the snug little house where they had chosen to be quartered.

A gross, terror-stricken shopkeeper had installed them in his best room, on sumptuous carpets. Leaning on their elbows, they shamelessly devoured the extravagant feast served by their host and his three wives.

"God damn!" thundered Red-Beard. "Oh! Sorry, Garin! I haven't yet come to. When that some-kind-or-other thunder began to boom, I thought for sure the sky was falling on my head. Yes, I did. I didn't know where I was at. I said a dozen *Our Fathers* before lifting my nose out of the dirt."

"You bet!" agreed his brother Clement. "I went all of a sweat, not a dry hair—I swear it. Worst of all were the flashes of lightning, everything went white. I couldn't see a thing! Only, afterward, I celebrated. There was one of these damned Saracens on his hands and knees! He ended up as a hunk of spoiled meat on my shield. . . . You know something about all this, Garin?"

"You heard the words of the Grand Master as well as I," replied the Templar. "The Archangel Gabriel promised to launch his lightning on the unbelievers: he kept his word. God be praised!"

"Maybe so," assented Red-Beard dubiously. "Only, don't forget the gray balls that were thrown out by the mangonels. I'm pretty sure they did most of this work."

"Why not?" Garin answered stiffly. "Do you forget miracles, you man of little faith? The manna in the desert, the increase of the loaves and fishes, the walking on the water? Don't you suppose the Archangel could have entrusted these spheres to our Grand Master so that he could drive the infidels from the Holy Land?"

"What a wonderful thing it is to be a scholar," replied the scythe-swinger. "You're probably right. . . . All the same, our Lord could have given us His lightning a little sooner. That would have saved more than one brave lad."

"My brothers! The ways of the Lord are unfathomable."

"There again you're right. Me, I'm only trying to understand. The main thing is that we're all here, comfortably lodged. Well, well! Take a peek at this," chuckled Guiot. "This afternoon I picked up a few trifles. . . ."

On these words, he began removing a veritable pirate's treasure from his bag: pieces of gold, collars of precious stones, silver cups and dishes of the same metal.

"Me, too!" Clement was not about to be outdone. "Things just stuck to my paws. Between the two of us, if we get back to Auxerre someday, we can make ourselves the present of a fine farm."

"Vandals!" roared the Templar. "What is come by dishonestly is never enjoyed. What an example you are setting for these wretches!"

"Is that so? You know they weren't ashamed to do the same at Antioch and everywhere else," the two brothers protested in chorus.

"You think that a valid excuse? Of course, if these belonged to the unfortunates killed in the battle, it would be difficult to locate their heirs, so I will shut my eyes to it this time. On the condition, you understand, that you give one-tenth to God. . . ."

Whereupon, he extended his sack with a haughty gesture. Guiot and Clement glanced at each other and then, regretfully, divided their spoils of war with the Templar.

"This is well done!" grunted the latter. "You may be sure that we will make better use of this treasure than you. I shall go straight and give this to its rightful owner. And take care to remember alms for the poor."

With these words he wrapped himself in his white mantle and left with great dignity, followed by the obse-



quious bowing and scraping Saracen, only too happy to find himself protected by his distinguished guests.

The other Tholon brothers consoled themselves for their misfortune by gorging themselves with pastries and loukoums, greatly regretting the fact that the religion of the pagans did not permit them the use of strong drink. After that, they began to make free with the servant girls but, fortunately for them, fatigue came to their aid, the valiant warriors quickly falling into the deep sleep of the just. . . .

## CHAPTER III



William of Beaujeu, himself, had more important things to do. The Grand Masters and the Commanders had installed themselves in the governor's palace, the fortified dwelling where the last defenders of Jaffa had put up a desperate struggle. The squires had effaced all vestiges of the combat, covering the bloodstains with rich carpets, hiding the walls with tapestries. Torches flared brightly in the secluded room to which the Grand Master had retired, still wearing his armor and his white mantle. The coffers containing the precious grenades, as well as the effigies of Baphomet, had been stacked along the walls.

William was in a good humor and, for the first time in years, his faithful servant knights, Marc and Erard, heard him murmuring Guiot of Provins' verses praising the merits of the Order:

"The Templars men of experience and integrity are;  
To them knights betake themselves from afar,  
Knights who have enjoyed the age nearly wasted,  
Who have owned, who have seen, and who have  
tasted.  
With estates and worldly goods they are done  
For there all belongs but to the Highest One.  
This is the Order of the Cross and of high chivalry,  
With great honor in Syria for many a hard-fought  
victory."

But he quickly resumed his habitual austerity and directed, "Erard, my Brother, this day will live forever in the annals of Christianity. Nevertheless, do not at any



time forget our motto and render homage to whom it is due. It is fitting to honor Baphomet, thanks to whom we have won this memorable victory. . . ."

At once the knight seized a filigreed key held out to him by the Grand Master, and opened a coffer ornamented with allegorical motifs, with, in their center, a heart radiating rays of light.

Inside, on a black velvet cushion, was a statue which resembled to an astonishing degree the being who still lay at the bottom of the pool in the Grand-Orient Forest.

Assisted by Marc, the Grand Master took it out and respectfully placed it on a side table surrounded by incense burners emitting a pungent smoke.

William knelt before the image and, after crossing himself, placed his hands on the short horns to put the device into operation. Almost at once, the eyes of the manikin Baphomet gave off a glow like live coals and a deep voice rang out:

"Speak, my Brother, I am listening. All has gone according to your hopes?"

"Yes, indeed, Lord Baphomet, thanks be to you: the powerful weapons that you entrusted to me have destroyed the hosts of the Saracens. Bibars is no more. Never was victory more complete!"

"Did you have doubt of it?"

"Not for an instant. Nevertheless, I swear that the outcome surpassed my wildest expectations."

"Do not believe it within my power to assist you to an absolute supremacy. The number of my weapons is limited and, to assure their wisest use, they must be launched only at troops in battle formation. Never squander them, therefore, on minor skirmishes. You know I have designs of wide intent. . . ."

"I am not forgetting that, Lord Baphomet, and I shall act according to your orders. Now the Hospitalers cannot choose but to obey me."

"That is well, Brother. Do not linger in Jaffa: you must profit to the maximum from the fear provoked by this magic weapon. Follow my plan to the letter and all will turn out for the best. I have made a strategic analysis of the situation with the aid of my computer: a few years hence you should possess the most far-flung empire ever ruled by a single man."

"Thanks to you, Lord Baphomet, thanks to you I shall never forget that."

On these words, the statue became inactive.

With a gesture, William ordered his knights to replace it in its container, out of the view of prying eyes; then he had them call William of Tyre, his historian. For two hours, the Grand Master dictated for the benefit of posterity, recounting the events that marked that memorable day. At midnight, he had himself undressed and slept straight through till dawn.

The next morning he awoke refreshed and in high spirits. After attending mass, he ate with a hearty appetite and then prepared to receive the high dignitaries convoked the night before.

The Grand Master of the Hospitalers arrived an easy first. The rings under his eyes gave evidence that the Chapter of his Order had stayed up the whole night to discuss the disquieting problem posed by the surpassing power of their rivals.

However, the Hospitaller seemed affable, chatting of one thing and another, particularly of building churches in the newly delivered city. He obtained without difficulty the office of Patriarch of Jaffa for a Hospitaller, which greatly surprised him. John of Villiers, a diplomat to the bone, never accepted anything at face value.

Otto of Granson and John of Grailly finally put in an appearance: their rheumy eyes and thick tongues giving evidence of a night of plentiful libations.

With no preliminaries, William went to the heart of his subject.

"Brothers, Hospitalers, noble Lords, you have seen proof that I am not a fabricator. The lightning launched through my good offices has rid us of the evil Bibars forever, and few pagan sultans have had such an escort for their entrance into the realm of Satan."

"Indeed, that's very true," exclaimed Otto of Granson. "The Prince of Shadows is going to have trouble finding punishments for him."

"Henceforth, no one will dare to confront our forces: the Holy Land will fall into our hands without a blow being struck. Jerusalem will again be a Christian city.... King Charles will soon arrive by sea to take his place on the throne. All counts and barons will recover their



former castellanies. The convents, houses and fortresses of our two Orders shall revert to their former owners. It must be our care to restore all the castles that have been to a large extent demolished, even to the Krak of Moab near the Asphalt Lake, including that of Aila on the Red Sea. However, I forbid the annexing of any lands other than those granted to the Kingdom of Jerusalem by the pact of Jaffa. Can I count on your concurrence, good gentlemen?"

"Certainly," the Grand Master of the Hospitalers assured him. "Justice itself speaks with your lips, my Brother. However, one thing distresses me: you speak as though the Templars would not participate in supreme joy—the occupation of Bethlehem, of Holy Jerusalem! Surely, am I mistaken . . . ?"

"You are not, gentle Brother. I would certainly give years of my life to know the Dead Sea, the Holy Temple, the Sacred Grotto, the Garden of Olives. Alas! The Archangel Gabriel has visited me again and has commanded me to leave the highest happiness to you."

"What? Would the Templars leave us alone to reconquer the Holy Land?"

"Unfortunately—yes, my dear Brother. . . . Besides, who is in a position to resist the valiant knights of the Hospital, with warriors of France and England at their side?"

"This is a greatly astounding thing. You will leave us some of your weapons at least?"

"Why should I do that, my friend? It will be enough if you take with you some of the mangonels and coffers filled with gray stones. Everyone will suppose that you, too, have the lightning of our Lord at your disposal and no one will dare to resist you."

"That is a point of view that I in no way share."

"John of Villiers, are you afraid of the infidels?"

"Certainly not! I only find the affair somewhat risky considering our total strength. What do you think of it, John of Grailly?"

The French knight pulled at his beard thoughtfully, then declared:

"By my faith, I agree with William. These dogs have been so soundly thrashed that they will not meddle with us soon again. With the reinforcement which we are going to

receive, we will have no trouble in reoccupying the Holy Land. However, I would like to know the motives that incite the Templars to abandon us on such an easy path. . . .”

“That is only fair! Know then that the Archangel, from a cloud of light, commanded me with these words: ‘You have accomplished the first part of the task which has been allotted you. Now the Hospitalers and the Christian knights are going to achieve the liberation of the Holy Land. It remains for you to carry the True Faith to the inhabitants of the vast countries that extend behind the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Countless human beings, at this moment, are under the yoke of the Mongols. You must free them and instruct them. The Templars, therefore, will embark aboard the vessels come to Jaffa, and sail to the city of Alexandretta, where they will land. From there, across the Principedom of Antioch and the country of Edessa, they will enter the Mongol Khanate of Persia, where Abaka, son of Hulagu, reigns. When the armies of that savage Khan have been destroyed, I command you to attack the Khanate of Kaidon, which extends southward from Lake Baikal. Despite the terrible fire that you possess, you will fight hard battles. Then you must reduce the Emperor Kubla, who oppresses the empire of Cathay, to unconditional surrender. This done, when the True Faith is known from the shores of Syria to those of Cathay, you can at last enjoy a well-earned rest, but make no stop along the way for the Divine wrath will come down on you. . . .’ These are the commands of the Archangel. I must obey him, and that is why the Templars are going to leave you, setting out to accomplish the mission which God has entrusted to them.”

“This is an astonishing revelation, my Brother!” cried the Grand Master of the Hospitalers. “I am completely dumbfounded by it. . . . What, you dream of conquering that immense empire with such feeble forces?”

“Faith moves mountains! I possess weapons of a power unknown until now. The Mongol Khans cannot protect themselves from heaven’s lightning entrusted to me, and they know the fate of Bibars. Further, word of our brilliant success will spread throughout the Christian realms. All the knights will outdo each other for the honor of joining our host.”



"I already claim for myself, and for my knights, the favor of fighting at your side," John of Grailly, all fervor, enthused loudly. "Death to all unbelievers; the True Faith will triumph."

"I accept your offer gratefully," the Grand Master of the Templars assured him. "We shall assuredly have formidable encounters with small groups of enemy partisans. In such cases, there must be no squandering of the heavenly lightning. Lances and swords will still have a role to play. . . ."

"Such vast designs frighten me," resumed John of Villiers. "Pacification of the Holy Land with only the troops left to me will certainly not be easy. So you will understand why my Brothers cannot join with yours. I would, however, like to be kept informed as to the progress of the operations. Will you allow our Marshal, Matthew of Clermont, to travel with you?"

"Assuredly: thus you will have a faithful report on the progression of our army. But it would be well to have matters clearly defined: the Hospitalers will be observers only and must not, under any circumstances, interfere in my affairs."

"This is as I would have it." The Grand Master of the Hospitalers assumed an offended air. "It goes without saying, on my side, that I shall direct the forces operating in the Holy Land and that our former fortified places shall revert to us in full right."

"A promised thing is a thing due! I shall not go back on the word I have given. Take note, nevertheless, that the Hospitalers must yield to the temporal authorities that which falls within their jurisdiction. The King of Jerusalem, the Prince of Antioch, the Prince of Tripoli must recover all the prerogatives they have enjoyed."

"I give my word."

"Under these conditions, good gentleman, we are in agreement. The first thing in the morning, the Templars will sail aboard the fleet for the Principedom of Antioch. We must strike while the advantage is ours. We wager our messengers will soon bring you great news! My Brothers, noble Sires, may God keep you in His Holy care. . . ."

The high dignitaries crossed themselves, then—bowing to William of Beaujeu—they withdrew to their quarters.

The next day, just at dawn, horns and drums aroused

the Crusaders who made for the port in an orderly way. Once again, all showed astonishment, for they had expected to pursue the campaign on land, to attack Jerusalem. Rumors were rife and the ordinary soldiers, pretending to be well-informed, claimed that William of Beaujeu, wanting to erase the disaster of the Fifth Crusade, was going to launch an assault on Damietta. The shame of the capture of Louis IX at Mansûra would thus be forgotten.

This illusion did not last long. Once the ships, galleys and dromonds were on the open sea, the fleet headed toward the north. . . .

During the crossing, William spent all his time in pondering the manner in which he would pursue the vast operation: the most ambitious ever undertaken by Crusaders.

He knew the strength of the Mongols. His predecessors and he, himself, had had contacts with them during that time when Saracens considered French and Mongols equally dangerous adversaries. Louis IX, himself, had hoped to form an alliance with them so as to attack the Sultan of Egypt on two fronts. Unfortunately, the synchronization of the two operations was difficult to achieve, so the King of France, having launched the assault alone, suffered a crushing defeat. Bibars himself was of Mongol origin. In 1244 his troops had struck a shattering blow at the Templars and the Hospitalers; three hundred knights of the Temple had met their death. Yes, the Grand Master knew he was facing valorous adversaries who should not be taken lightly.

William of Beaujeu and his Marshal reached immediate agreement on one point: as long as the forces of the Crusaders kept a tight formation the enemy could do nothing against it. Any large concentration of Mongol forces would be wiped out by Baphomet's weapons. On the other hand, the harassment by Abaka's swift and extremely mobile horsemen would be an ever-present danger, particularly to their lines of communication. These, in any case, risked stretching to the breaking point as the army advanced. Thus it would be necessary, come what might, to live off the land, to seize cities—if possible—intact by delivering a smashing attack. And, concerning this, it was vital to assure rapid liaison between different branches of the army as well as with the reinforcements



which would be making their way from the Mediterranean ports.

William and his faithful Peter of Sevry came naturally in this way to speak of the effigies of Baphomet which could receive messages, the words of that strange creature, from the distant pool near Troyes.

"I sincerely believe that our Order is going to conquer a vast empire, thanks to the weapons given us by Baphomet," the Grand Master declared. "There is every reason to be satisfied: the meteor-borne traveler finally decided to reward us otherwise than with ingots of gold. Our riches have contributed to the establishment in all the realms of Christendom those flourishing Templaries which have allowed us to acquire a considerable influence. However, I ask myself the same question over and over: are we perhaps the dupes of he who seems to be at our mercy? What would happen if we decided to give him no more food?"

"The same thought has occurred to me. I have wondered again and again why this stranger, exiled so far from his own kind, elects to aid us so benevolently for mean subsidies of food. . . ."

"According to tradition handed down from that time when the venerable founder of our Order encountered Baphomet for the first time, the meteor which brought him across the fathomless reaches of space had been seriously damaged, the devices which allowed him to manufacture his food, destroyed. Our donation let him survive to attempt the repairs of his ship: no doubt about that."

"Yes, but what will happen if his fellow-countrymen receive his messages? We will be swamped by them! No possibility of resisting weapons as terrifying as theirs. . . ."

"Undoubtedly, my worthy Peter: I have often dreamed of it. We are—alas!—as defenseless against him as a child against a knight in armor. If we should cease our ministrations, his vengeance would be terrible!"

"We should at least attempt some remedy. It is impossible to live thus at the mercy of a creature so completely a stranger to us. . . ."

"You are right: we must, at any cost, discover the secrets of his alchemy so that we, ourselves, can make the engines whose mysteries are hidden from us. I have already dropped a hint to our chaplain. Did you know that

Brother Joubert has extensive knowledge of alchemy? I will have him called in."

Some minutes later the Templar entered the cabin. He was a small, dark man who had never acquired the dignity of knighthood for his awkwardness with weapons was proverbial. But, in compensation, his lucid and searching mind made him a wise counselor, whose advice William often sought.

"Brother Joubert, I have sent for you so that you may practice an exercise for me that will demand all your intelligence."

"Speak, venerable Master, I am yours to command."

"Like us, you are initiated in our mysteries and you know of the existence of the effigies called Baphomet. You cannot be ignorant of the fact that they enable us to hold converse with the true Baphomet over considerable distances. How do you explain this strange facility?"

The chaplain meditated a moment before replying.

"I have examined these statues very attentively. Their carapace conceals a delicate and subtle installation. It has been impossible to study them in detail because you have never permitted me to push my investigations further. Nevertheless, I have made some interesting discoveries. . . ."

"Speak on, my friend. You will be generously rewarded if one day you can explain how these mysterious effigies operate."

"Very well. The words of Baphomet reach us without hindrance through the air: if the statue is placed inside a cupboard, the words grow a little fainter, to cease completely once the helmet is hermetically sealed. Steel, therefore, is an impassable barrier for the messages which we receive from the Grand-Orient Forest."

"Interesting," approved the Marshal. "But where does that lead us?"

"For the time being, nowhere. Take note, however, that a huge metal wall set up around the pond would prevent Baphomet from talking with anyone."

"And consequently with his compatriots," cried the Grand Master. "You see? Already one fascinating discovery. Is that all?"

"Nay! I have also noted that when a sword is placed above the machines contained in the interior of the



Baphomet-image shell, one hears the words emitted much more clearly. I have concluded that the metal concentrates the diffuse messages coming to us through the air."

"More than interesting, Brother Joubert! Proceed, I conjure you. . . ."

"Further, it is apparent to me that the force which powers the functioning of the device comes from a very heavy box, cased in lead. It contains, most surely, a substance unknown to us. To study it, I would have to be able to examine it more closely."

"You are authorized to do so: we must, at any cost, know the magic charms utilized and try to duplicate this artful engine."

"I will have a Turcopole, highly skilled in copper metallurgy, make a faithful replica of all the complex elements worked from that metal that are in the effigy. If I can pierce the secret of the box, I will undertake to produce a similar machine, all the more since that is what you wish. However, this concerns an extremely hermetic alchemy."

"You are well-versed in the arcana of that science, are you not?"

"That is true. I learned a great deal on this subject in the city of Montpellier. It was possible for me to discuss it at length with Arnaud of Villeneuve and the master, Albert Magnus. All of them think that metals are constituted from one unique and fundamental matter called sperm metal. With that it would be possible to reproduce all the different metallic structures. . . ."

"In a way, the philosopher's stone?"

"Exactly. However, their realizations are not absolutely convincing. On the contrary, during my stay in Syria, I chanced to encounter a Saracen apothecary and a story he told greatly excited me. . . ."

"Don't stop there! We hang on your words."

"Well, according to him, a meteor fell not far from Alexandretta. Its remains, deeply buried in the sands, were difficult to get at. After harsh and painful laboring, slaves finally brought to light a kind of ship, all of metal, terribly damaged by the shock and by heat."

"Does this have to do with compatriots of Baphomet?" exclaimed the Grand Master.

"There is a strong possibility of that. It is unfortunate that, unlike him, their bodies were altered beyond recogni-

tion. Everyone decided that this was an engine of the devil and the derelict was abandoned. However, this learned Arab continued the excavating and discovered a magic box which possessed the power to transmute objects placed inside it. I am convinced that this Arab understood very well the importance of this find and that he hid the strange machine with great care. . . ."

"Why didn't you seek a way to lay your hands on it?"

"Well, simply because the apothecary affirmed that the device had quickly lost its powers. But, on reflection, I am persuaded that it would now be possible to make it function again by connecting it to the box which makes the effigies of our Baphomet speak."

"Marvelous! Brother Joubert, I congratulate you: you are promised the highest positions in our Holy Order. What is the name of this Saracen?"

"Djaffar. . . ."

"If I understood rightly," the chaplain continued with a modest air, "all our problems will be solved with this machine because it will be possible to manufacture the unknown metals we lack. Thus, we will have boxes producing the power necessary for speaking over distances and even—who knows?—the means for making those spheres which contain the lightning in their bosoms. . . ."

"I must have this philosopher's casket," howled William of Beaujeu. "With it to solve all our problems, we will be free at last!"

"Brother Joubert's discourse certainly was most interesting," interjected the Templar Marshal. "Still, these are only words. There is no proof this Arab was not simply boasting. I know them: these clods always claim to be well-versed in hermetic arcana; nevertheless, Bibars' treasure most certainly never came from their crucibles. . . ."

Peter of Sevry, in fact, had always been jealous of the chaplain and claimed that a good sword prevailed over all the science in the world, which assumption had been proven by recent events to be utterly false. He wanted to oust a dangerous competitor and looked disapprovingly on so much importance being given Brother Joubert.

The Grand Master was well-aware of these battles for precedence and he curtly put the Marshal in his place.

"I am in no way of that opinion: Brother Joubert never speaks without weighing his words. This machine certainly



exists and therefore I order that the course for Alexandretta be kept. There, we must lay hands on this Djaffar, and make him talk to find out where he has secreted this treasure. I hold you personally responsible for it, Peter of Sevry. We must also give our chaplain every facility that will enable him to carry on his fascinating labors. Now, my Brothers, I have need for meditation. Good night, and may the Lord bless you and keep you. . . ."

Alone, William of Beaujeu leaned his elbows on the casement of the cabin which he occupied on the poopdeck of the vessel. It was night and countless stars glimmered in the sky.

Thoughtfully, the Grand Master reviewed what Baphomet had told him. If what he said were true innumerable peoples throughout the heavens inhabited worlds similar to Earth. And the latter was only a large ball that revolved around the sun . . . a strange concept contradicting the ideas held up to that time. Most people believed, actually, that their world was flat, edged with oceans, prevailing coasts of the unfathomable deep. On the contrary, if the Earth were spherical, it should be possible to sail to the east or the west and again reach the point of departure! The empire of Cathay, situated at the end of the known world, would prove to be, in fact, halfway to France. An hypothesis easy enough to verify when that empire was his: he must equip vessels and send them across the Cathay Sea in an effort to reach France or Portugal. All these things passed understanding. . . . If they were true, mankind made up only one human race among countless others. What was an Earthly empire in comparison with the countless others existing in space? What strange creatures made up immense stellar confederations? What was their goal? Was an invasion imminent? To face such, arms as powerful as those of these creatures of the dark were needed, and craft able to navigate among the stars.

A conclusion forced itself upon him: the Templars had a sacred duty to humanity, since they alone held these formidable secrets. In the future, therefore, it was essential that scientific research of consequence be undertaken by savants of all nationalities. Strict orders must be given to spare their lives in all occupied countries and, in particular, those in the empire of Cathay who, according to many reports, were considerably advanced in many fields.

One man would be especially valuable in the carrying out of this mission: a Venetian named Marco Polo who had lived since 1271 in the Cathay empire. His knowledge of the people of that locality and of their civilization would be extremely useful in establishing that future university where scholars of all nationalities would be assembled under the aegis of the Templars. For the present, all depended on Brother Joubert. That monk possessed remarkable intelligence and an alert perception. He never spoke imprudently, contrary to what Sevry thought. If he had called attention to the existence of this casket with marvelous powers of transmutation, there was no question of its reality; perhaps he had even seen it in operation. . . .

William felt weary: few men before him had borne such a crushing responsibility. If he succeeded in his task, the people of the Earth would be united and leave off fighting among themselves. The scholars of all nations would work together for their well-being and for their protection against possible incursions of beings from other worlds.

An exciting prospect. . . . However, no one would believe that the Grand Master of the Templars acted thus but for the well-being of his fellowmen and the glory of his Lord.

William knelt at the prie-dieu and murmured:

"Not us, Master, not us, but to the greater glory of Your name. . . ." Then he added: "And peace on Earth to men of good will. . . ."



## CHAPTER IV



The fleet reached port without suffering any loss. A few fugitive enemy galleys followed at safe distances. Obviously, news of the victory won by the Templars had already reached the Mamelukes occupying the Princedom of Antioch. The stupefying power of the new weapon unveiled at Jaffa made the sultans and the Mongol Khans extremely cautious: each wondered who would be the target for the next attack.

The Crusaders were greatly surprised when they noticed that the Grand Master had secretly changed his plans: instead of casting anchor off Alexandretta, as announced, the invading forces landed at the mouth of the Orontes in the small harbor of Saint-Simeon.

William had chosen to proceed in this manner precisely because he wanted to spare Alexandretta, where the famous Djaffar must be located. It was likely that the arrival of the Templars' fleet would have panicked the inhabitants who would have fled, carrying their treasures with them. Then it would have been impossible to ferret out the precious casket.

This was a strange repetition of the past: here it was—long ago—that a Genoese fleet, bringing reinforcements to the Commanders of the First Crusade, had dropped anchor.

While the supplies were being unloaded, the Grand Master formed an elite corps equipped with numerous spare horses, slings and a few atomic grenades. His Seneschal, second in command of the expedition, took charge of this detachment and immediately set out for

Alexandretta, without even waiting for the main body of the army to assemble.

The knights headed north, riding night and day. Among them were Brother Joubert and the Tholon brothers who, as usual, understood little of what was happening.

Thus, they reached the outer fortifications quite unexpected. A grenade blew down the main gate and the Templars charged into the city, surprising all the inhabitants. No one had time to flee, so sudden was the attack. However, the warriors found baggage packed and camels loaded; in a few hours many would have been miles away.

At once, patrols were sent into all the streets in search of Djaffar, each having a Turcopole translator and a detailed description of the man they were trying to find. Naturally, the soldiers would much rather have preferred to enjoy a well-earned rest after their wild ride and did not hide that fact.

"God damn!" Guiot-the-Red swore. "What a bitch of a life! My arse is raw after that crazy ride. The Grand Master must be mad for this Djabar. . . ."

"Djaffar," his Templar brother corrected. "Most assuredly, this unbeliever possesses some important secret, since he must be taken alive."

"I wonder what it is he knows. Perhaps it's something to do with the lightning that demolished Bibars," Clement threw in.

"I would be astounded," answered Garin, "if the infidels possessed that fearful secret, else they would have used it against us."

At that moment, the patrol of which the three brothers were a part came to a halt at the mouth of a dark and narrow alley.

"Well, we're here," said Red-Beard. "Where do we begin?"

"First, we are going to search the houses on the right. Squires, guard each end of the passageway and see that no one escapes. You, Arsouf, follow us."

The Turcopole placed himself behind the Templar, who knocked at the first door. After a few seconds' wait, a frightened Saracen face peeked out. The interpreter questioned him, asking him if he knew where a celebrated seer named Djaffar lived, translating both questions and answers, as needed.



The man under questioning was visibly shaking, but was not a willing source of information.

"The name sounded somewhat familiar. He had heard of a magus who resembled the description. No, he did not know where he lived. And he, only a modest craftsman, did not rub elbows with the great ones of this world."

At last Garin lost patience, half drawing his sword from its scabbard; this stimulated the Saracen's memory a little.

"My neighbor, I am quite sure, will be able to answer your questions, my noble Lords," he managed to say. "He belonged to the Emir's entourage—may Allah curse that coward who, himself, put an end to his days—and this Ghazi knows all the learned men of the city."

Thereupon, the three brothers went to the door of the indicated house. This time a servant came to admit them and conduct them to his master, in a room strewn with opulent carpets. That learned man was studying Koranic scrolls and neither showed fear nor fawned on the Christians.

To their first question he readily answered that he indeed knew Djaffar very well, a widely respected seer, who possessed miraculous medicines effective against a host of maladies. He lived close by, just at the end of the alley.

Garin thanked him politely and the Tholons made for the indicated house. The door-knocker, a copper snake biting its tail, surprised them a little, but not as much as the inside of the house. Djaffar's lair, a large cell with whitewashed walls, contained countless stuffed animals, retorts, pallets, red-hot furnaces under vessels whose boiling contents filled the air with loathsome vapors.

"A sorcerer, without a doubt," grunted Guiot, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

Bent over a ceramic container, a man still young but with a back bent by years of study and research, was vigorously stirring a greenish mixture. He did not pause when the Frankish warriors came in, but readily confessed that he was truly Djaffar. The admission caused expansive smiles to alter the faces of the three brothers. Garin asked him then if he still had the casket discovered in the desert sands. The Saracen nodded, making a sign to an assistant to watch his preparation while he moved to a coffer, ornate with allegorical designs. He pressed the central

pattern—a salamander belching flames—and the cover slowly hinged upward, revealing a simple parallelepiped of silvery white metal.

"This is the marvel from the heavens," the sage declared tersely. "Unfortunately, it lost all its magic powers, so I give it to you without regret."

The Templar at once had the precious object removed by his squire, then bade the seer follow him, for the Grand Master was doing him the honor of holding converse with him. The Arab did not appear to feel especially honored by this invitation, but did not protest either, asking only that he be allowed to give instructions to his assistant for concluding the experiment still in progress. Garin willingly granted his request, but followed him closely, nevertheless, ready to prevent any rash action he might attempt.

That same evening, escorted by a part of the fleet, William of Beaujeu dropped anchor off Alexandretta, so easily occupied by the flash attack. As soon as he set foot on land, he inquired about the search and showed the greatest satisfaction upon hearing its results and learning that Djaffar, and his precious casket as well, had been found. He immediately set out for the Emir's palace, where the captive had already been taken.

The brothers Tholon were awaiting the Grand Master, all proud to have accomplished their mission so well. And William of Beaujeu praised them highly. To reward them, he declared that the brothers would henceforth belong to his House. Whenever there was a delicate mission to be accomplished, he would call on them.

This said, he dismissed them and proceeded with his interrogation of Djaffar. Brother Joubert was present and acted as interpreter whenever a word failed his leader.

"You are truly the seer, Djaffar?"

"That is correct, venerable Master."

"Then tell me—concealing nothing—the circumstances of your discovery of this casket and how you made use of its magic powers."

"It's rather an old story now. Some five years ago, as I was studying the constellations of the Zodiac, I saw a fiery trail in the sky. It seemed to me that it came down onto the desert, not far from here. The next day, I inquired of



the guards as to the location of its impact and they led me some distance from the city, toward the west."

"Therefore, you were the first to reach the spot?"

"No, the soldiers of the guard had already tried to approach it, but the sands were so hot that they had been unable to examine it."

"This is not the way I remember it," interrupted the chaplain. "At the time I met you, you told me that you had not gone to the place until later. . . ."

"There must be some slight confusion in your recollections, my noble friend: I went to the spot several times and the excavations were carried out under my supervision, by the Emir's order."

"This is unimportant," William cut him off impatiently. "Tell me rather what you observed."

"Well, as soon as the heat had subsided, the slaves started freeing this object fallen from the sky. I recall that they had to be whipped because they thought it was a thing of the devil; I was expecting to find a stone rich in iron such as sometimes falls from the sky. Hence, I was not surprised to see a rust-colored surface when the first layers of sand were removed. But as the excavation progressed, I discovered that I was wrong: the object was, in fact, a long cylinder ending in a conical cap, which shape could in no way be the result of change."

"How did you get inside?"

"I am coming to that. Under the shock, this ship—and it was truly a vehicle that came down from the sky—was too near its pointed end. I had to wait a good hour before I was able to enter. Deleterious fumes issued from it and the interior was still very hot.

"The front part of the ship contained nothing any longer identifiable. All its contents had been flattened like a wafer. However, I did observe traces of torn flesh, undoubtedly the remains of the machine's pilot. In the rear section, the same desolation reigned. The acrid smoke choked me and the torch burned badly; but I did see the remains of living beings. They were stretched out inside long, transparent cylinders. The straps that held them were broken and they had crashed against the wall. Most of the objects in the section, also wrenched from their moorings, were only shapeless magma. On that day, I did

not pursue my investigations further, because I was suffocating inside that dark box."

"But you returned again at a later time?" asked the Grand Master.

"Assuredly! Even though my friends attempted to dissuade me, and they were not entirely wrong because, during the month that followed, I suffered from a kind of consumption against which all remedies were ineffective...."

"And that was when you found the casket!" Brother Joubert interrupted with impatience.

"No. That was not until my fourth visit when the debris had been cleared. It was the only mechanism left intact. It had been stowed inside a coffer welded to the floor itself and a white elastic substance had been placed around it for better protection. I put it aside, for its use was in no way evident to me at the time. For an entire week I continued the excavations, making sketches of the least damaged parts found...."

"You still have them?" put in the Grand Master.

"Certainly, at my house. I have copied them carefully on parchment but it has not been possible for me to make sense of them...."

"Tell me more about the casket."

"Well, when my work around and inside the ship was finished, I waited to examine it until I could do so with a clearer head. By then, I was convinced that I was dealing with a craft from out there, from across the immense distances of space, from where the stars burn. Unfortunately, the bodies of the crew began to decompose so rapidly that I was unable to study them. Therefore I abandoned the wreckage, there being nothing more I could learn from it. It was covered over with sand and the Emir pronounced the place anathema. That precaution was hardly necessary, since no one had any desire to go near it. It took many long hours of meditation for me to determine the use of the device inside the casket. Sibylline designs engraved on a metal plate enabled me to do so. The engine was composed of two parts, of a size somewhat larger than a human skull. My first experiment was simply the placing of a piece of amber in the right-hand oven, and then pushing a red button. There was a sort of humming. Soon after, both doors opened by themselves



and I was surprised to see a block of amber exactly like the first. My analyses, the evaluation of its weight, everything confirmed it: the machine had produced a most exact duplicate of the original."

"Astonishing! Almost unbelievable," the Grand Master mused. "Can you prove what you are saying?"

"Certainly! After that I performed many operations of the same kind with various substances, natural and manufactured. Sand or diamond, I always obtained the same results which I could repeat as many times as I wished. These products, the fruit of alchemy, are still in my laboratory."

"We shall see them later," said Brother Joubert thoughtfully. "It appears, then, that the action of this engine is not at all like that of the philosopher's stone which transmutes base metals into gold. Its achievement seems more complete, because it contains in its core the true sperm, quintessence of all matter."

"And even living substances, my learned friend! I was able to duplicate a rat. . . ."

"But that is stupendous!" exclaimed the chaplain. "I bitterly regret that I was unable to study it with you. Alas, when I made my secret visit to you, the Mamelukes were looking for me. I had to make my escape and, I must confess, I did not quite believe what you told me. For that I now apologize."

"Is this everything you can tell me?" the Grand Master asked.

"Very nearly all, noble Sire. After that I made use of the machine to manufacture gold coins. That was the best way of hiding my secret, since I never spoke of it to anyone, except my esteemed colleague here. Unfortunately, after a month or so, my magic casket lost all its power. . . . Impossible to make it work again. However, it had enabled me to stack up enough gold coins to buy my house and be free of want for the rest of my life."

"Good!" declared William of Beaujeu. "I thank you for being so open. You shall be rewarded for it: my treasurer will give you a weight of gold equivalent to that of your casket."

"May Allah and the Christian God bestow their blessings on you, most generous Sire!"

"It goes without saying that you will not utter a word

of all this to anyone else. If, by misfortune, you should betray my trust, I will have your tongue pulled out."

"Never fear: I know where my interest lies and I shall be as silent as the tomb."

"Perfect! My servants will fetch all the duplicates of which you told me. Do not try to hide any. Go now: Brother Garin will accompany you."

Djaffar took his leave, walking backward and bowing deeply.

When they were alone, the Grand Master turned to Brother Joubert. "Well, what do you think of this, learned chaplain?"

"I am convinced that what he speaks is the truth, Master. If you agree, I shall begin at once attempting to repair this miraculous transmuter. Even so, it may take quite some time before I succeed."

"For the moment, it is no pressing matter. You shall have everything you require. Give the list to Brother Garin when he returns. Tell him not to say a word to anyone—him, and his two brothers. You shall have wagons fitted to house your instruments."

"Wherefore? Can I not work here?"

"Certainly not; I want you near me, you and this object with its miraculous hermetic powers. Tomorrow we leave to conquer the Khanate of Abaka and very soon we shall be a great distance from the coast. The liaison with those left behind will be uncertain. There is no need for you to run useless risks."

"True. . . . Such a marvel must not fall into enemy hands. By Jesus Christ, our Lord, I swear that I would destroy it, should we have the misfortune of being vanquished!"

"You understand my wishes perfectly, Brother. In turn, I promise you a reward worthy of your merit if you are successful in your endeavor. Leave me now, and bid my Seneschal and my Marshal to come to me. We must plan the disposition of our forces during the long march ahead."

At dawn, the Grand Master and his escort left Alexandria to join the main body of the army. Immediately the troops got under way, marching upstream along the Orontes, which they soon left, heading eastward toward the Euphrates and the city of Edessa, capital of the former country of the same name.



Antioch was occupied without a battle and supplies reached the Templars regularly. The power of their weapons was known and none cared to face them.

The Hospitalers' observers noted the interest that the Grand Master had shown in a Saracen of Alexandretta. They also remarked that Brother Joubert now had at his disposal a veritable laboratory on wheels which was guarded day and night, and in which he worked like a slave. All these significant facts were duly transmitted to those most concerned.

For his part, John of Villiers sent messages by sea. They announced that Jerusalem was occupied and that the Holy Land was again in the hands of the Crusaders. The news reached William of Beaujeu just as he reached the banks of the Euphrates, after having covered more than two hundred kilometers in twelve days. The weather had been favorable for forced marches: several thunderstorms cooled the air and there was no lack of water.

For this reason he decided to devote a day to thanksgiving, which would enable the foot soldiers to catch their breath.

The army was now at the frontier of the Khanate of Abaka and the Khan would surely attempt to thwart this irresistible advance whose aim could no longer be in doubt: after having recaptured the Holy Land, the Templars wanted to take possession of the Mongol empire.

The Grand Master called his Council into session to determine what route to follow to reach Baghdad, the capital of the Khanate. His Marshal, his Seneschal and several high-ranking officers were present. As for Brother Joubert, he stayed in his wagon, pursuing the work which was proving more exacting than he had anticipated.

"My noble Brothers," William began, "I sent for you to discuss our plan of action. We have just crossed a mountainous region where our adversary, the Abaka Khan, could have attempted to halt our advance. He did nothing, and for good reason: his armies are massed far from here, in the vicinity of Baghdad. In view of that fact and since we have been joined by reinforcements, I suggest that we send a contingent to occupy the city of Edessa, which will ensure protection of our rear guard. Meanwhile, the main body of our forces will follow the Euphrates, thus being assured of water and provisions. This

valley is known to be richly productive and our march should be easy. We shall stop in the city of Siffin, then in Anbara, before reaching the fertile Mesopotamian plain where, in all probability, the Mongol Khan will do battle. What are your thoughts on this matter? Speak, for I shall give them all consideration."

The Marshal, Peter of Sevry, was the first to answer him.

"Venerable Master, my Brothers, in broad outline I approve the plan of battle just stated. The occupation of Edessa will protect our supply lines from Alexandretta, and our right flank will be covered by the arid Syrian desert. However, one objection comes to mind: on our left will be the wealthy city of Mosul which is protected by a strong Mongol garrison. Should we not fear that these troops will join forces with those around Baghdad and engage us in battle as we enter the Mesopotamian plain? I have heard tell of some Venetian travelers named Polo who crossed this region. They reported that there are, not far from Mosul, springs from which flows a black oil used in the manufacture of Greek Fire. Is it not likely that the Mongol Khan, knowing that we have a powerful weapon, will attack us by throwing that fire on our columns before we descend onto the plain? The Al Jazirah Mountains afford many rocky gorges where it would be easy to loose catapults and mangonels. What would happen if our horses panicked and bolted in every direction? That would certainly be the moment for a massive Mongol attack. . . ."

"I, too, have heard of this inflammable oil," the Grand Master agreed. "Assuredly it constitutes an important trick for Abaka but, to ambush our troops, he would have to command the heights that overlook the Euphrates valley. You were right to call this possibility to my attention: we have auxiliary Turcoples who, on their fast, high-mettled steeds, can precede our advance. These horsemen will carefully scout the hills and report any enemy concentration."

"That seems a wise course of action," the Seneschal said thoughtfully. "Personally, I am much more afraid of Mongol attack on our rear guard once we leave the Euphrates valley. There is little doubt that we shall have water available in sufficient quantity, but nothing should be



taken for granted. Quite often in June the temperature in this region is torrid. We shall be completely unable to turn back and regain the coast by way of the Syrian desert and our situation could become critical."

"I have considered such a possibility," asserted William of Beaujeu, "and I—likewise—decided to follow this fertile valley rather than crossing the mountains to the north to reach the Caspian Sea. Now we must take Baghdad and, if the enemy puts the torch to it, lay siege to other cities: Selencis, Kashgar. If worse comes to worst and Abaka destroys all the cities of Mesopotamia, it will still be possible for us to reach Basra. It is a port of call for many merchant ships and we will find abundant provisions available that will allow us to continue our campaign."

"That is indeed well thought out!" exclaimed the Commander, Thibaut Gaudin. "There is no doubt that we shall make a clean sweep of the infidel armies. I am impatient to see the city of Baghdad; they say that its former caliph possessed a fabulous treasure which the Mongols seized. It is almost certain that we shall find vast riches still there!"

An ascetic and modest-appearing monk came to his feet: the Templar of Tyre and the Grand Master's historian. "I am ashamed to raise my voice in such a learned assembly," he said in a low tone. "In days of yore, a pagan named Alexander—the Great, so-called—conquered these lands at the head of a powerful army. It is said that he reached the faraway banks of the Indus, and then returned to die in Babylon. His empire was then divided among his generals. However, he had vanquished all those who opposed him. Alas! The Macedonians were frightened by such daring and refused to pursue his conquests further. What will our brothers say, once Mesopotamia is ours, if we ask them to push on into the Khanate of Kaidu, then into that of the powerful Kubla Khan, who reigns over Cathay? They all have a family, Brothers, in the realm of France. . . . Is it not possible that they, also, will refuse to go any further?"

"Your fears are ill-founded, Brother of Tyre!" the Grand Master exclaimed. "Alexander was only a pagan and his soldiers were not sustained by our faith and the desire to bring back into the fold of the Church those Nestorian Christians who form numerous communities in places as far removed as the cities of Cathay. Christ must

be known and adored from the Syrian shores to Cam-baluc, where Kubla reigns! You are forgetting the heaven-sent lightning: it will dispatch to hell all infidels who dare oppose us!"

This speech more than achieved its point, and the shouts of all those present more than silenced the faint-hearted Brother from Tyre. The die was cast: the Templars had committed their forces to the conquest of an empire surpassing that of Alexander the Great. . . .

Everything developed as the Grand Master had predicted. Edessa was occupied without a skirmish: the garrison—weak in numbers—fled as the implacable, steel-clad warriors approached the city.

The army then moved down the Euphrates valley. However, the extreme heat made the journey an ordeal. The shrunken stream that flowed along the riverbed barely sufficed to quench the thirst of men and horses. On the other hand, they were able to seize abundant provisions: the harvest had been good and the granaries of the peasants were filled to overflowing.

Almost all the knights were forced to remove their armor and wrap themselves in the white mantle with its crimson cross which dampened the heat of the sun somewhat.

Then the trouble began: there were flash raids on the rear guard of the long column by Mongol horsemen. The laggards, the sick and the crippled were put to the sword.

Liaison with Alexandretta was no longer certain and the forces could rely only on themselves.

The Templars cursed "those infidel bastards" but could do nothing other than continue the southward march. The progress of the column slowed a little each day, but the Mongol army failed to attack.

Anbara was taken, but it was in flames and the Templars were unable to rest there as they had hoped. A dense, black smoke from the barrels of naphtha that had been dumped on the town choked them and filled their eyes with tears. There was not one house still standing to offer shelter from the relentless sun.

Dysentery and sunstrokes slowly thinned the ranks of the army to about two-thirds its original size. In his wagon, which was as hot as an oven, Brother Joubert had long since given up his research.



William of Beaujeu and his companions rode silently, their tongues dry, their eyes burned by the glaring light. The Grand Master had begun to fear that the Brother from Tyre had spoken only the truth: among the foot soldiers especially there was much grumbling and mounting protests against this mad journey.

"Never," they declared, "will Abaka face us in battle. He will wait until we are completely exhausted and then massacre us. Of what use will the magic fire be, if we are unable to operate the mangonels, or even to use slings?"

The anger of these unfortunate soldiers was vented freely on the cumbersome machines which they had to drag along with them. They swore at the engines, inventing the vilest names for them but still not daring to abandon them, for they alone prevented the Mongols from rushing to the attack.

This Calvary lasted two whole months.

There was no news from the Holy Land. The Crusaders felt desperately alone, forsaken, far from any possible assistance.

Then they reached the vicinity of Baghdad and, on August fifteenth, they saw in the distance the minarets towering over the wondrous city, its palace roofs, the towers of its ramparts. Still intact, the city appeared a veritable paradise: each man dreamed of its treasures, the cool shade of its courtyards, the countless delights it would offer. . . .

Alas! Between the Crusaders and Baghdad shone a forest of sabers, reflecting the sunlight: Mongol horsemen and archers, assembled in small groups, completely surrounded the Templar forces. . . .

## CHAPTER V



There was no need for a battle call: as if this were no more than parade exercise, William of Beaujeu's troops quickly carried out the well-planned maneuvers.

The supply wagons were drawn up in a circle at the center of their stand, while squires pulled the mangonels into place behind this improvised wall.

At the same time, foot soldiers knelt on one knee outside the circle, their spears pointed forward, ready to resist any possible charge by the Mongol cavalry.

Simultaneously, the knights donned armor which they had removed in order to withstand the oppressive midday heat.

The Grand Master had himself hoisted aloft in the basket of a ballista to survey the disposition of the enemy forces. Unfortunately, this time the Templars were unable to reach high ground, the most favorable position for defense, and William saw immediately that the Mongols most certainly had accurate information concerning the deadly lightning. They had taken care not to form any concentration of troops: archers and horsemen were drawn up in small, widely spaced formations.

In the distance, beyond reach of the projectiles, were Chinese war chariots. For the Crusaders, these were new war machines. Each was drawn by three horses and the cars held a complement of archers, their arrows ranged like ribs of a fan, while the wheel hubs were equipped with long scythe-blades. There was little defense against a massive charge of these murderous devices.

William judged by the location of the Mongol pennants that the Khan, his princes and commanders were poised to



strike at any moment. Yak tails snapped in the wind at the top of the standards, which the Grand Master observed with more than curiosity as each represented a force of ten thousand men under the command of a Tumen. Counting them, he concluded that the Templars were facing close to a hundred thousand men. . . . Enough to strike any Christian with terror. Muigghams, heading a thousand horsemen and archers, were at the front of every battalion, in which Jaghouns commanded companies of one hundred warriors, while Arbans acted as sub-commanders of groups of ten.

William had made good use of the long march from Edessa to Baghdad, collecting all possible information about the enemy. He knew that the elite of these troops, chosen from the bravest and numbering ten thousand, formed the Khan's personal guard. He also knew that the preferred strategem of these daring fighters was a cavalry charge—under cover of volleys of arrows—attempting to breach the ranks of the adversary. If this was unsuccessful, they did not give battle but retreated, trying to draw the pursuit into ambush. If this ruse proved unavailing, they still did not seek an engagement but continued to flee, only to return unexpectedly to surprise an opposition which believed itself triumphant.

Any massive attack would be wiped out by the Templars' lightning, which Abaka certainly would not risk. The only thing to do was to determine the Khan's plans and then force him to concentrate enough of his squadrons so that use of the atomic grenades would be decisive.

Lost in thought, the Grand Master signaled to be lowered from his improvised turret. At that exact moment, the horsemen sent ahead and deployed on either flank rode back at full speed in a cloud of dust. Their Commander dismounted and, in a hoarse voice, announced:

"Venerable Master, we are lost! These dogs have dug trenches on all sides which are filled with naphtha. On our right, the river is an insuperable barrier: its far bank is lined with thousands of archers. Behind us, these accursed devils have just rolled in many kegs of this oil that burns. . . ."

Silently, the Grand Master contemplated the Baussant banners waving on either side of him: his army was downwind. . . . The smoke would blanket the Crusaders,

masking the Mongol operations and effectively preventing any accurate bombardment.

It was a bad beginning. . . .

And a rapid decision was imperative: ink-black clouds of smoke already moved in on the left, reaching the farthest ranks of the soldiers who wept and choked in the suffocating fumes.

In this emergency, the sharp wits of the Grand Master worked rapidly. He had already devised a new plan of action for which he immediately gave the orders:

"Foot soldiers retreat toward the river without delay. Pull the war machines to the edge of the water, all except four. With two of these, start immediate grenade assault aimed at the archers on the other side of the river. The remaining two will launch their missiles into the river itself, downstream from our position. All horsemen, follow me. . . ."

These orders were carried out in utmost confusion under constant volleys of Mongol arrows. Fortunately for the foot soldiers, the thick cloud of smoke prevented the Asian archers from aiming with any precision: however, the barrage was so dense that there were frequent hits.

All the Crusaders took heart at the sound of the first atomic explosions but they could not understand why they were ordered to retreat without giving battle. Not a few wondered why the magic fire was not launched at the main Mongol forces, astonished that it was wasted on the riverbed and on the opposite bank where the enemy troops were least numerous.

But the Grand Master had shown a remarkable competence for making the most of the slightest opportunity: the craters resulting from the explosions quickly filled the riverbed, forming an effective dam. North of the battlefield, the waters overflowed on the plain, miring the vehicles and forcing the Mongol horsemen to withdraw, protecting the rear guard of the Templar army.

Simultaneously, the knights—led by William—forded the Euphrates and rushed the few archers who had survived the preparatory fire. At the same time, sergeants, squires and the auxiliary Turcopole forces formed a solid line of resistance behind a barrier of wagons, their backs to the river.

Abaka Khan was caught in his own trap. He heard the



awesome sound of the explosions but—to his surprise—no projectile fell on his ranks and the dense smoke prevented him from seeing what was happening on the battlefield.

His council was quickly convened to decide what course of action should be taken. Princes and Tumens, hot with impatience, were all for charging the enemy. Abaka, himself, was loath to engage in any decisive assault, having the greatest respect for a weapon that could annihilate Bibars' forces. The arguments were heated, each faction passionately defending its viewpoint. Since they were wasting valuable time, the Khan finally accepted a proposal that reconciled all opinions. Half the cavalry would attack the Templars under cover of the smoke, after another massive shower of arrows.

Each Tumen pleaded his right to the honor of being part of this assault so that the actual attack did not get under way for more than an hour after William's horsemen had crossed the Euphrates which was now dry below the obstruction.

Unfortunately for the Mongols, this lapse of time enabled the knights to ride down the old riverbed and make a wide encircling move to the south, just behind the bulk of Abaka's forces, massed around their leader.

The planned charge of his horsemen met with a curtain of fire from projectiles launched by the mangonels along the river, under the command of Peter of Sevry. At the same instant, the ponderous iron-clad knights attacked the Khan's rear guard. Like devils surging up from hell, the Templars—riding in at full speed until they reached the right distance—launched grenades from their slings, then, wheeling away, sped back for another attack on their right. The results of this maneuver were spectacular.

The Mongols, without the slightest expectation that the Templars might pounce on them from the rear, were butchered by the atomic explosion. The war chariots disintegrated. Terrified horses unseated their riders, who were massacred by cuts and thrusts. Never had the Crusaders enjoyed such a carnival. Blood reddened the earth and their steeds trampled the guts of Mongol horses. . . .

This slaughter increased when the Templars turned back to the Euphrates, cutting off the horsemen who had been sent out to attack the ballistae. For them, no escape

was possible: in front of them, a barrage of atomic explosives; on their right the waters of the river, seeking a new course and forming an impassable bog. The more courageous stood their ground, facing the Templar assault but, unfortunately for them, they wore no armor and their felt bucklers offered little protection. . . .

When night fell on the plain, the Mongol army had suffered a disaster without precedent. A few lone survivors fled what seemed to them legions of Satan, belched out of hell, followed by the garrison at Baghdad which had no wish to face warriors possessing such terrifying magical powers.

Their commanders had lied to them! Not only could the Templars call down lightning: they also had power to fly through the air. How else, when they were surrounded, could they have crossed the Euphrates to surprise the rear guard of the Mongol army?

Before entering the wondrous city where the Crusaders would finally rest from their weary labors, William of Beaujeu went to survey the battlefield where the fires set by his projectiles still burned. Thoughtfully, he surveyed the remains of the man who had hoped to close the road to Baghdad to him. The body of the Abaka Khan was almost untouched, his faithful followers having thrown themselves over him to form a shield and protect him from the atomic grenades. The shock waves alone had caused his death.

The backs of his officers were charred by the heat but the Khan's thin tunic embroidered with gold was still intact. Thin rivulets of blood ran from his nose and ears.

After brief meditation, the Grand Master ordered that the Khan be taken with them so that he might be given proper burial; then, followed by his army, he headed toward Baghdad, discussing the day's events with his companions.

"Do you, dear Brothers, know that in the year of our Lord twelve-fifty-five, the Khan, Hulagu, the father of Abaka, stormed this city and took it after heavy combat?

"When he entered the caliph's palace, he found a tower filled with gold, silver and a thousand other treasures. The astonished Khan inquired why the caliph, seeing that his city was about to fall, did not distribute these riches among his knights and warriors. His captive had no reply



and Hulagu, revolted by such ungrateful miserliness, had him locked in the tower without food or drink. The caliph died at the end of the fifth day. Eight hundred thousand inhabitants were put to the sword. Mosques and sumptuous palaces were destroyed. I tell you all this because I want to avoid such actions when our army enters the city. I intend that all persons and properties be respected. We shall rest for a while at Baghdad and I aspire to a good relationship with its people. Do not forget that Abaka's wife is a Christian princess, the daughter of Michael Paleologue; I demand that she be treated with respect and accorded all the honors to which she is entitled. Later, I shall create an independent kingdom here and, to rule it, I shall name one of the knights who has served me so courageously and faithfully."

This made the intended impression, and explicit orders were given the Crusader troops guaranteeing that the Grand Master's wishes would be respected.

The army reached the outlying ramparts and crossed the Tigris. Some of the splendor that the city had once possessed was lost forever but, in the twenty years of occupation, most of the destroyed edifices had been rebuilt and the splendid palaces, the mosques with their slender minarets, the well-tended gardens won the admiration of all; so much greenery dazzled the soldiers who had all but forgotten the existence of such Edens.

Almost the entire population had remained in the city, convinced of certain victory for their Khan's innumerable forces. But, when all was said and done, the merchants and traders were rather pleased to see the Templars entering the city, bringing promise of expanded commerce with Christian lands. They also believed that the Christian origin of their princess would offer far more protection than any wall, in which assumption they were completely right.

With the greatest curiosity, the Crusader Commanders entered the palace hall where this remote Sister-in-Christ awaited them surrounded by the dignitaries of her court.

That Baghdad court had certainly not usurped its reputation for splendor; was it not in this very city that the most beautiful silks in the world were spun? Dazzled, the Frankish and English Templars were overwhelmed by such ostentation. What a contrast was evidenced by their

sand-dulled armor, stained with dried blood, to the pomp of this court, straight out of one of Aladdin's tales, where satins, gold brocades, and muslins glistened in the light from countless oil lamps of finely chased copper.

All of them felt out of place in such surroundings.

The princess, surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting and her ministers, was seated on a golden throne set with precious stones. Her face was partly obscured by a light veil and the purple tunic she wore was as fine as a spider web.

No sooner had John of Grailly laid eyes on her harmonious beauty than he was swept off his feet. For him, everything else ceased to exist but this goddess sprung from some oriental fairy tale.

William of Beaujeu, on the other hand, was insensitive to her charms. Nevertheless, when she threw herself down at his feet, beseeching him to spare her and her people, he lifted her with a paternal gesture, asserting:

"Sweet daughter, I would be ashamed to behave like a brutal conqueror. It is true that I was forced to do battle with and, unfortunately, kill your husband, Abaka Khan, but I only did this to compel recognition of the True Faith to which you adhere. You shall keep the throne of Baghdad when I am gone far afield carrying on our just Crusade. In the meantime, I ask that you consider us your guests and faithful friends."

The princess appeared greatly moved by these words and tears streamed down her cheeks. At the sight of this, John of Grailly could contain himself no longer; he rushed to her and respectfully took her rose-scented hand which he placed on his forehead, crying out:

"By heaven, Madam, I, John of Grailly, solemnly swear to be your faithful knight forever. If anyone does you offense, I stand ready to make him pay for it."

A faint smile brightened the face of the princess, who said softly, "Sirs, I thank you greatly. A true friendship is the most precious thing in the world. Your words bring much comfort to a poor woman in exile far from her kin. May our Lord bless you. . . ."

"Well said!" approved the Grand Master. "It is my intention to appoint a regent for this kingdom when I leave, and the grave John of Grailly seems to me the right man for the office. If such is your pleasure. . . ."



"Let us talk of this at another time, noble Templar. Now I request your permission to retire to my apartments to prepare for the mourning of he who was my husband."

"I shall certainly not detain you," said William of Beaujeu. "My courageous and ill-fated adversary deserves funeral rites in keeping with his rank and station."

The days that followed remained forever in the Crusaders' memories as the most sumptuous in their lives. After undergoing terrible ordeals, they were at last in an opulent city whose inhabitants were eager to fraternize.

Each took quarters in some comfortable dwelling and the Tholon brothers had no difficulty in finding pleasing bronze-skinned slaves who, between bursts of laughter and kisses, gorged them with sweets. The brothers from Auxerre, without inhibition, enjoyed to the fullest the cool of an inner courtyard enlivened by beds of exotic flowers. Poor Garin had to recite prayers without intermission to prevent his vow of chastity from being broken by the charms of these shameless she-devils; the Christian paradise was pale in comparison with Allah's!

The Grand Master was entirely immune to the seductive witchery of the beautiful courtesans who ensnared the soldiers weary of the bawds and other camp followers.

To secure Mesopotamia, he still had to take the city of Basra on the Persian Gulf. For this purpose he sent the valiant Otto of Granson with his English knights to capture that port, instructing him to seize all Mongol ships but cautioning him not to interfere with the free movement of merchant ships bringing the riches of Cathay and the legendary Spice Islands.

For there were two courses of action open to William in the advancement of his great design: either he could push on through the Khanate of Kaidu by land, like the affluent caravans that followed the silk trade route, or he could embark his army in the port of Basra and reach Kubla's empire by sea.

His choice required the deepest consideration, for there was a world of difference between an expedition to Mesopotamia, relatively close to the Holy Land, and an invasion of the Mongol empire, crossing the vast desert wastes of the Pamirs—on the roof of the world.

True, the Polo brothers, those intrepid Venetian travelers, had followed that route and in all probability were

now in Cathay. According to the report of their first long journey (1260), which William had read with greatest attention, once Niccolo and Matteo reached Balghar on the banks of the Volga, they traveled in seventeen days to Bukhara, the most beautiful city of the Persian empire. There, joining a mission sent out by Kubla, they finally arrived at the Great Wall two years later. Before them, two Franciscan brothers, missionaries from the Pope, had also journeyed to Cathay. The first, Joannes de Plano Carpini, left France in 1247 and arrived at his destination in 1253. The second one, Willem of Ruysbroek, a native of Flanders, left Christian lands in 1253 and reached Karakorum in 1254. The route they followed was known and used regularly by caravans. However, with an army, its wagons and its precious war machines, there would certainly be many difficulties in following in their steps. Also, the problem of communication with those left behind at Baghdad and on the coast must be considered. At this point, quite naturally, the Grand Master decided to consult Brother Joubert, who had resumed his work in complete seclusion.

The Brother promptly descended from the tower where he had installed his laboratory. In his haste, he neglected to remove the leather apron which protected his monastic robe, and his attire contrasted strangely with the subdued luxury of the room where William of Beaujeu awaited him.

"Well, my dear and learned Brother," William began without formality, "where are you in your work? I trust that oriental enchantments have not delayed your research. You know how much this concerns me. . . ."

"Certainly not, venerable Master! Since we reached Baghdad I have labored day and night to unravel the hermetic secrets of this casket from another world. Unfortunately, I have encountered the greatest difficulties, despite the fact that I have surrounded myself with learned men expert in the art of alchemy. . . ."

"You have not divulged the origin of our treasure?"

"I have been careful not to do so! Besides, these savants are cloistered here in the palace and are forbidden to leave. Thanks to your orders, we have everything we need. But the way the magic transmuter works remains a total enigma."



"You have made no progress at all?" William asked, frowning.

"Oh, but I have! Nothing positive as yet. The source of energy contained in the Baphomet effigies adapts well to the casket, but it appears to be too powerful so that the operation is overrapid and the products obtained have only the faintest resemblance to the model placed in the first chamber."

"Therefore you will have to temper its action," stated the Grand Master, thoughtfully, taking a rose-flavored sherbet offered by a deaf-mute slave.

"That is precisely the problem! I have tried heating it slightly and packing it in ice; nothing succeeds. However, when I heated the metal wires that link the energy source to the casket until they became red, the operation slowed a little. Therefore I abandoned my preoccupation with the transmuter for experiments with the fluid coming from the source box by means of the conductors. This has enabled me to make some appreciable observations."

"Tell me about them. All this is of the greatest interest to me; but first have one of these delicious sherbets, a drink unknown in our countries although refreshing."

Brother Joubert, known to be something of a glutton, eagerly accepted one of the delicacies; then, sipping and licking his lips like a sensuous cat, he continued, "When a plain gold or silver wire of the kind used to embroider materials is attached to the red and black terminals inside the Baphomet effigy, it incandesces. The smaller the diameter of the metal thread, the more rapidly this occurs."

"Such unnatural fire is amazing!"

"There's more: when the wires are plunged into chalybeate liver of sulphur in aqueous solution, they produce evanescent bubbles. And, in a solution of Armenian stone, commonly called verdigris, one of the silver threads takes on a beautiful yellow color. . . ."

"Transmutation to gold!"

"No, venerable Master, only ordinary copper. However, this clearly proves that each knob on the energy box has properties that are completely different. . . ."

"A remarkable deduction. By my faith, I never would have thought of that. Congratulations on your perception, Brother Joubert."

The learned Templar smirked complacently and contin-

ued with calculated humility, "These discoveries are especially important because they will help us to determine the laws governing the fluid coming from the box; and, once I am certain what it is, I haven't the slightest doubt that the transmuter can be made to operate again."

"Perfect. But hurry it up for we cannot stay in Baghdad forever and I can understand very well that such research is not easily done in a wagon. Is that all?"

"I also delved into the mechanism contained in the Baphomet effigies and made a strange discovery: I would have told you sooner but—you were always so busy with the management of this vast state. . . ."

"That should not have prevented you, Brother; you must know that to you I am always available."

"You honor me, venerable Master. Briefly, this is what I found. . . . Do you mind if I have another of those delicious sherbets? My throat dries up when I talk. . . ."

"Of course not. And also try one of these Turkish delights."

"Um-mmm! Excellent. These countries indubitably possess a multitude of charms. I have been told of curious substances with stranger properties which are found, so rumor has it, on the road to Cathay. One of them is similar to that substance called salamander: even the hottest fire cannot destroy it. But to return to the Baphomet effigies; inside there is a kind of metal grid with plates that slide between one another. When I changed their position in one, I could hear Baphomet's voice, although no sound came from the others."

"What was he saying?"

"Nothing understandable, since he spoke in his own language. However, because the same phrase was repeated continuously, I am convinced that it was a message meant for his kinsmen, stating his whereabouts and asking for help. Working on this assumption, a Turcopole who is expert in many languages was able to isolate several words. This will enable us to know—from now on—whether his fellow beings have heard him and are coming to his assistance."

"This is a priceless discovery! Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I wanted to make one final experiment, noble Master. There is also a short lever connected to this device. When



I moved it and modified the position of the plates I mentioned before, by using two of the effigies, placed at a distance from one another, it was possible to hold a conversation without any interference from Baphomet's voice."

"Come here and let me embrace you, Brother Joubert: you have just given me the means I lacked. Now the several divisions of my army will be able to exchange information, even when they are several days' march distant from one another!"

After kissing the Templar seer on both cheeks, the delighted Grand Master bestowed the title of Commander of the Order on him, together with full ownership of the city of Mosul—as soon as the army had taken it. He also begged him to devote some research to the oil that burned. Then the two men went their separate ways, each greatly pleased with the other.

While John of Grailly pursued his passion for the beauteous princess, other knights carried on the continued pacification procedures at the head of the Christian army.

Otto of Granson reached Basra and a Templar bearing a Baphomet image joined him so that he was able to give immediate notification of his occupation of the port with its enormous riches and boundless supplies. In accordance with his orders, the Mongol ships were taken but vessels of other nations were left free to ply their trade.

Peter of Sevry, the Templar Marshal, was sent north to annex the Mosul region, completing occupation of the Khanate of the deceased Abaka. His troops met no opposition. The garrison abandoned the city without pretense of fighting and fled toward the Khanate of Kaidu, traveling along the shores of the Caspian Sea. They destroyed nothing before leaving because the inhabitants took up arms to resist looting and the Templars were greeted as liberators. News of this, thanks to Baphomet's transmitter, was instantaneously made known to William of Beaujeu, who ordered his Marshal to make a clear proclamation that the princess, Abaka's widow, still held sovereignty over the Khanate. In this way the transfer of power was accomplished without incident.

Moreover, numerous reinforcements were arriving in Mesopotamia: troops of French, English, Italian, Spanish

and German knights who had heard of the resounding victory at Baghdad and rushed to join this new Crusade.

They almost doubled the effective force of the army, but William of Beaujeu, thinking of the long distances they would have to travel to reach Peking, did little rejoicing. Feeding a large army posed serious problems, particularly when crossing arid deserts like the one which slashed Kaidu's Khanate in half. He resolved the difficulty by forming Mesopotamian garrisons from the newcomers. This retained the seasoned knights in his invasion force, and backed that with large reserve detachments. Keeping his men on the move would prevent them from growing soft as a result of lingering in the seductive oriental cities where the availability of obliging women and rich food threatened to rob them of any desire to push on with the great Crusade.

Two months had elapsed since Abaka's death and it was now too late in the year to initiate a full-scale offensive in countries extremely forbidding in winter, if one accepted the report made by Nicolo and Matteo Polo. William, therefore, restricted himself to a limited operation, leading his army to Sava, south of the Caspian Sea. He kept the Dasht-I-Kavir, the great salt marsh, on his right and crossed the rugged Kurdistan Mountains. Squires and knights alike showed little enthusiasm for the long journey through such rough terrain and loudly lamented the comforts of life in Baghdad.

To fire their lagging spirits, the Grand Master had his chaplains tell them the history of the area. Not far from there, in the Caucasus Mountains, was Mount Ararat, where Noah's ark had beached after the Flood. From the city of Avah had come the three Wise Men, making their way to worship the Child Jesus. With them they brought offerings of gold, incense and myrrh for the Child and in exchange they were given a plain box.

On their return journey, curious as to its contents, they opened it. To their great disappointment they found only a stone, which they contemptuously threw into a well. Instantly, a huge flame sprang from the shaft, which the greatly astonished magi cupped and carried home with them. There, their descendents carefully guarded it in Galasia Castle, only a three-day march from Sava.



Was not this proof positive that the celestial lightning had always been a sign from the Lord God, and that the Crusaders were duty-bound to free these Sacred Places?

These tales spurred the Crusaders on and the army finally reached its destination at the end of October. William set up his winter quarters there and threw himself into the business of working out the details of his spring offensive.

## CHAPTER VI



The winter proved to be comparatively mild and the knights had little time to be bored. Besides the strenuous exercises ordered by the Grand Master, they spent long hours hunting with magnificently deft falcons. The abundant game lent a pleasing variety to their usual fare. In fact, they learned to appreciate a great many things unknown in their native lands.

South of Sava there was a route frequented by caravans carrying all kinds of strange merchandise from the port of Hormuz. Spices, rare fabrics, precious stones, elephant tusks, everything captivated the Crusaders and fired them with a compulsive longing to travel to those regions where such riches could be found.

They discovered strange trees, snow-white oxen with a hump on their backs and—a valuable asset for future operations—mules with unbelievable stamina. Splendid horses were also sent to them from the province of Tunocaim, just in time to replace the ones brought from Cyprus.

They learned to enjoy the taste of dates, pistachios and paradise apples, which were called *naranges* by the Persians and which had the reputation of restoring the strength of warriors after a long day's march. Naturally they began storing up all these treasures.

The Grand Marshal, who was in charge of provisioning, began assembling a great number of camels whose resistance to thirst would be of enormous value when crossing the great desert. The war machines, always dismantled during difficult stages, could be carried by these robust animals as well.



Near the end of winter, several Hospitalers arrived from the Holy Land bringing a message from their Grand Master, who congratulated William on his resounding successes and inquired as to his future intentions. It seemed clear that John of Villiers was more than a little alarmed by his rival's colossal authority. The occupation of Mesopotamia did not disturb him overmuch as long as he had the upper hand in Syria, but he feared any move by the Templars to invade Cathay, the acquisition of which would give them immeasurable power.

William of Beaujeu made as reassuring a reply as possible, leaving it tacitly understood that he was satisfied with his present conquests and had no ambition other than the peaceful administration of Mesopotamia.

One day in the month of April, however, the Tholon brothers—who were always charged with secret missions to one or another of the garrisons—captured a Venetian making for the Khanate of Kaidu. He tried to pass himself off as a merchant on his way to buy silk but, during the examination of his baggage, a coat of mail and a mantle were discovered that left no doubt as to his identity: he was unquestionably an emissary of the Hospitalers. Then, considerably more serious, a message was found hidden in his saddle. When William of Beaujeu learned its contents, he was infuriated: John of Villiers proposed a secret alliance with the Mongol Khans, promising to cut off all communications between Europe and the Templars in the event the latter attacked Kaidu and Kubla. . . .

The Hospitalers' observers were immediately thrown into the deepest dungeon, along with the messenger, and the Grand Master summoned his Council to advise them of the situation.

Unavoidably, it took a certain time for the Council members to reach Sava, so that the meeting could not take place until the tenth of May. This delay was put to good use by mustering the troops and loading the supply wagons.

So it was that all the knights who had taken part in the conquest of the Khanate of Abaka found themselves together, ready to plunge into a new adventure, though ignorant of its nature or purpose. There was the Swiss knight, Otto of Granson, John of Grailly, and all the other Templar Commanders. By then, William of Beaujeu had

completed the plan of action for this new campaign and lost no time in revealing it to his staunch friends.

"Nobles, knights, my Brothers. You underwent the severest of trials before accomplishing our first task; that of lifting the Mongol yoke from all Mesopotamia. Since then we have secured the peace and have rooted out those dogs who defiled this beauteous region—endowed with every enticement. Some among you, I regret to say, have succumbed to its sensuous charms, almost forgetting our mission, the propagation of the True Faith. I am more than willing to excuse such ones: human nature is weak. Did not the Apostle Peter, himself, thrice deny our Lord Jesus Christ? Think on your transgressions, my Brothers, and say to yourselves that paradise shall be gained by leaving this instant to storm the empire of Cathay."

The craggy face of Otto of Granson, scarred by who knows how many saber cuts, was transformed by a broad grin. "Well, now, that's more like it! I was beginning to get rusty. . . . I'm ready! Down with the infidels!"

John of Grailly, on the contrary, did not like the news at all: the months spent at the court of the beautiful Princess Paleologue inspired no wish in him to return to the interminable riding and the rigors of camp life. Secretly, he hoped to persuade the princess to marry him and counted on ending his days in opulent Baghdad. And so he objected weakly:

"This is an enormous task, venerable Master. May it not be one beyond our capabilities?"

"Nothing in this world is impossible to courageous defenders of the True Faith!" William retorted contemptuously. "Kubla Khan has disparaged our Holy Father, the Pope, and I intend to make him regret his words. He had the insolence to say to the brothers Polo that Christians neither had knowledge of, nor the ability, to do anything supernatural; whereas, so he pretends with the help of their pagan gods, his priests have the power to change the weather whenever they wish, to foretell the future, to transport objects remarkable distances without the aid of human hands. 'Ask your Pope,' he told them jokingly, 'to send me one hundred seers, well-versed in your religion. I will match them with my own priests and we shall see who will perform the greatest number of miracles. . . .' Very well, noble Sires, one hundred thousand men are going to



teach this blasphemer the powers of our Savior. We shall see if he still feels like making jokes then."

His speech touched off the wildest enthusiasm. These rough men all had a profound faith which could tolerate no hint of insult. Even the elegant John of Grailly was ashamed of his thought of remaining safely in a sumptuous palace while his Pope was being mocked by the Mongol Khan, and his voice could be heard above all the others.

"I expected no less of you," the Grand Master assured them. "Here is my plan. We shall invade the Khanate of Kaidu from the north, following the caravan track, which will provide us with many useful commodities. Samarkand, where the most beautiful carpets in the world are woven, is our first objective. From there, we move on to Kashgar, but to reach that city we shall have to cross the cold, arid heights of the Pamirs. Do I have to say that our route has been carefully planned? Passing through Kashgar and Yarkand by the way of Khotan, we arrive in Keriya. From there we press on to Tunhwang but—in order to reach that city—we shall have to cross the great desert. Have no fears, our excellent guides are used to leading caravans and will take us by the shortest way. There will be many rough days, but we shall arrive safe and sound. However, a new test awaits us there, the most serious of all for, when we leave the Khanate of Kaidu, Kubla's army will be lying in wait for us somewhere beyond the great desert; the most likely place is in the vicinity of Tunhwang."

The Templar Marshal could no longer contain his dismay. "Venerable Master, we run the greatest risk of arriving there with an army severely diminished by the perils of this interminable journey. When you had the noble Otto of Granson occupy Basra, I thought you had decided to enter Cambaluc by sea."

"I did have that intention at the time, Brother, but several considerations led me to reject such a project. First, the wildest storms often sweep the southern waters, disabling the sturdiest ships and, further, none of us are sailors. Consequently, even with favorable weather, many might be violently ill and incapable of handling our vessels properly. What decided the matter was Kubla's powerful navy, which could easily attack us during the night when

the lack of visibility, together with the heavy loads in our ships, would prevent defensive maneuvers. That is why I finally chose the land route."

"All this should be self-evident," Commander Thibaud Gaudin averred loudly. He never missed a chance to echo the Grand Master with the hope of gaining special favors. "We suffered enough only a little while ago when we sailed from Sicily to Acre. I'm sure none of us want to repeat that experience."

"Besides, I have some good news for you," William of Beaujeu continued. "First of all, a new sign of favor from our Lord: it will now be possible for me to talk with all the Commanders of our Order, even though they are many a day's march away. I shall also be able to keep in touch with Baghdad to ask for anything we need. Secondly, I want you to know that valiant warriors have joined our ranks, men who know the regions where we are going like the palms of their hands. They are the loyal followers of the Old One of the Mountains, all of whom survived a massacre. But I'll let our Seneschal tell you about them, since it was he who discovered these former allies."

"They are indeed rediscovered friends," declared the giant Templar. "A long time ago, our Order was in close contact with their leader. I'm sure you all know that the Khan of the Persian Tartars, the same one that conquered Baghdad, besieged the stronghold of the Old One of the Mountains. For three years he stayed in the vicinity of Kasvin before taking it. This should give you some idea of the noble knights. Most of them were slaughtered with their master but, luckily, some were not in the castle when it fell; they survived. And they hate all Mongols with such a burning passion, they will dare anything to be revenged."

"What you may not know is that the Old One was a powerful magician who enslaved his followers with a dream of blood and carnal ecstasy. He knew the secret of a wondrous elixir: the warrior who drank of it saw the gates of paradise open to him. With the sweetest embraces, wanton houris satisfied his never-ending desires and, during his lustful dream, he sensed strange harmonies, colors, musical sounds and perfumes, all mingled with one another in dazzling convolutions. Unhappily for the dreamer, the vision disappeared all too soon. . . . The wretched warrior had only one desire: to drink this brew



again. But, in order to merit another taste of it, the hashshashin must kill a specified enemy, selected by the Old One. From that moment, the success of his mission was the warrior's only thought: if he survived, he would be rewarded with a draft of the magic beverage and, if he died in pursuit of his mission, he believed Allah himself would open the gates to that paradise which he had only glimpsed, where he would live for all eternity. I possess the secret of this elixir and have already used it to send some of the hashshashins into the Mongol empire: they traveled unrecognized with caravans and obtained priceless information on the preparations being made by both Kaidu and Kubla."

"Please heaven our Brothers never taste this drug!" the Templar from Tyre half whispered. "The good Lord only knows to what ends it would lead them. Life in this fabled Orient is too full of temptations without that."

"Have no fear: the formula for this potion is known only to the Seneschal and myself," William reassured him. "No Christian could indulge in such practices without the gravest danger to his immortal soul." He paused as though struck by another thought, sighed deeply and then continued:

"Gentlemen, my Brothers, it is my sad duty to tell you of a circumstance that has grieved me to the depths of my being. The chance interception of a messenger placed in my hands proof of a shameful betrayal. The Hospitalers are offering to ally themselves with the Mongols in order to prevent us from propagating the True Faith to the ends of the Earth!"

"What? Impossible!"

"Christians would never ally themselves with infidels!"

"Let evil days fall on those dogs! May they roast in hell forever and ever. . . ."

"What are we waiting for? We can help them on the way!"

"We must inform our Holy Father, the Pope."

"Bastards! Sons of bitches! Without faith or loyalty."

Each, in his own way, cursed the unexpected alliance.

William of Beaujeu raised his hand for silence and said gravely:

"God will judge them, my Brothers. The renegades will answer to Him on His Judgment Day. Perhaps they have

an imperative reason for this action. For the moment at least, it does not affect my plan. I leave good, solid garrisons in the Mesopotamian cities. Yet, I cannot understand how they, monks like us, serving the cause of our Lord, Jesus Christ, could fight their Brothers. Thank God, I have the Archangel's fiery sword which—without any doubt—will bring them to reconsider. But I spend too much time on this distressing subject when we should be thinking only of breaking camp. Let everyone take his accustomed place in the ranks, and may the Lord Jesus Christ grant us victory."

There was great joy among the Crusaders; after a long period of inaction they were finally setting out on a new campaign. They boasted to one another and showed off new weapons. This one had an ax with two blades curved like a crescent moon; that one, a long slash-hook for cutting horses' tendons; still another, a fine coat of mail or a shiny-new helmet with a crest of multicolored feathers.

Only the elegant, and eloquent, John of Grailly stayed away from the hubbub and confusion. He had asked his squire to bring him writing materials and was composing a poem to his beloved. In it he swore to be eternally faithful and pledged himself to bring honor to her colors which he wore on his shield.

One hour later, the army was under way.

The attitude of the host differed profoundly from that which had gripped them when they left Alexandretta. All knew that a harsh task lay ahead and they sang psalms with solemn voices, beseeching the Lord to favor their enterprise.

Oriental splendors gave the long column an unusually colorful appearance. All the knights wore splendid silken capes and even the trappings of their horses had luxurious touches, harness straps embroidered with gold reflecting the sun. There were camels too, driven by Turcopoles, and some war chariots in the Chinese style, carrying bowmen and soldiers with slingshots. The mangonels had been reduced in size by using exotic woods and their larger wheels did not sink so deeply into the ground.

The Templars, however, had made no concession to the fashions of the hour: they kept to their sober white mantles with the scarlet cross. The only luxury they allowed themselves was the richly chased or damascened



weapons they captured from the enemy. Among the leaders, only one was missing: the Seneschal. The Grand Master had entrusted to him the heavy burden of commanding the forces left in Mesopotamia. Some of the knights had hunting dogs with them, and others sported a falcon on their wrists. This was no ostentatious whim but a wise precaution: game would still be needed to vary the monotony of the daily rations.

The effective forces had been so greatly increased that William divided them in half, entrusting one division to his Marshal. The vanguard was commanded by John of Grailly and the rear guard was assigned to the trustworthy Swiss, Otto of Granson.

All this multitude formed an immense iron-clad snake which gave an overwhelming impression of power. The anthems sung by these soldier-monks could be heard for miles, clarioning the virile resolution of these Christian Crusaders.

The early stages of the journey were uneventful: after reaching Mulecte, south of the Gelachegan Sea, the knights rode through rich valleys covered with green vegetation and orchards. In six days they reached Shibagan, where an orgy of consuming canteloupe jam was not without distressing intestinal consequences.

After that they entered a wild, uncultivated region where the dust tarnished somewhat the finery of the knights. They were easily consoled, however, by indulging in the pleasures of the hunt without restraint. Game was abundant and the loads of the provision wagons were increased with patés and haunches of venison . . .

In the market town of Talakan, they stocked rock salt, useful for preserving the meats. A little further on, they came unexpectedly into a region rich with vineyards where the natives produced an excellent wine. That night squires and knights fell asleep with reeling heads but, on the whole, more content with their destiny.

Clement Tholon even declared, "I swear, if ever one day I get back to Auxerre, I have to take back some of these vines to get at least two or three hogsheads of this wine. . . ."

Six days later the column entered the province of Badakhshan, which they discovered to be a real treasure find. No one left without pockets filled with lazulite, silver and

precious stones very similar to rubies. The expedition was turning out to be quite promising, especially since there were no signs at all of the Mongols.

From his spies, the Grand Master learned that Kaidu was by no means anxious to confront him and had pulled his troops back. He was hoping that his cousin, Kubla, occupied with fighting in China, would come to assist him in halting this iron-clad army, never yet defeated. However, the Khan of Khans, who did not particularly like Kaidu, sent his son, Nomuqan, at the head of an army to fight against him. From his priceless allies, the hashshashin, William learned that Kaidu had seized Yarkand and Khotan, towns located on the route the Crusaders must follow. Further, he had met with Nomuqan and the two Mongol chieftains appeared to be reconciled. After celebrating Kubla's victories in China, they had decided to unite their forces to do battle with the Templars.

The hour of a new encounter was drawing closer. The Grand Master informed his Seneschal of the situation by means of the Baphomet transmitters, so that the latter would not tie himself down with some rash sorties against the Hospitalers.

He also ordered him to occupy the rich city of Samarkand, to cover his left flank, menaced by Nomuqan's troops and those of his general, Bayan.

The Crusaders' progress was now more difficult: following the Vakhsh River, they left Badakhstan and entered the foothills of the Pamirs. The scaling of the high tableland had begun.

Not a soul lived in this desolate region; no trees, no birds. The only creatures seen were some long-horned, wild sheep who kept at a great distance. Snowy summits towered above the army on every side. The cold was becoming more and more unbearable, and the waters of Lake Sirikol were frozen. For the first time the Crusaders suffered from chilblains. There was, however, enough vegetation for the horses and mules who shivered under the icy winds.

It took them almost sixty days to reach the province of Kashgar. Fortunately, the Mongols did not show themselves there, and the Crusaders were agreeably surprised by the mildness of the climate.

William of Beaujeu found himself faced with a trou-



blesome problem of strategy: somewhere ahead of him, probably in the vicinity of Yarkand or Khotan, Kaidu's army lay in wait for him. The Khan, perhaps to deprive his troops of any hope of retreat, had mustered them with their backs to the great desert. On the Templars' left flank were the forces of Kubla's son, Nomuqan; soldiers few in number and with little experience in battle. Still, it would be better to engage them separately. To achieve this, the Grand Master ordered his Marshal to pursue a northward course into Uzbekistan in order to draw Nomuqan's forces away. He also advised his loyal assistant Commander to ask that more mercenaries be recruited in Mesopotamia to increase the number of his troops.

The seemingly endless trek over the high Pamirs had taken more than fifty days and had completely exhausted the Crusaders.

William studied their situation: on their right, the snow-covered Kashmir Mountains; in front of them, Kaidu's Mongol troops; on their left flank, those commanded by Nomuqan; and behind them the Pamirs.

At any cost, the men must rest before moving on to the unavoidable encounter with Kaidu. The Grand Master, therefore, ordered that camp be set up around the city of Kashgar. Knights and foot soldiers alike rejoiced at this respite. Each hoped to forget, if only for a moment, the monotony of the long haul. The town certainly had fewer attractions than Baghdad but there was a large caravan-sary where merchants following the silk route broke their journey. The local beauties learned quickly enough that these rough soldiers possessed the wherewithal to buy their charms and, inevitably, a wave of debauchery broke over the town.

The white-mantled Templars, however, did not succumb and William of Beaujeu took no repressive action: he was occupied with other matters. . . .

An unsuspected affront awaited him: his need for more atomic grenades grew increasingly pressing. His stock was far from depleted but, in view of the numerous forces that might be hurled at the Crusaders, he wanted a safety margin which he hoped would be achieved by the transmutter. However, Brother Joubert did not even bring him a report. That fact, he felt, called for an investigation. The learned Brother had been installed in a convenient

room in the Grand Master's own quarters and, when the latter paid him a visit, he found Brother Joubert drowsing with his arms around a half-empty wine jug.

"By Christ!" William thundered. "You choose a fine time indeed to turn yourself into a drunken pig. Is this your gratitude? You know how urgent it is for us to make use of the transmuter and you waste precious hours giving yourself up to tippingling."

The Templar staggered to his feet. "Don't get all worked up, ve-venerable—I didn't drink that much . . . just enough to give me fresh courage for my work . . . besides, Horace said. . . ."

He belched, shook his head and took another swig from the jug.

"You drunken sot! Your breath reeks from ten feet away. . . ." Furious, William snatched the jug and dashed it to the ground. "Here I am facing further battles and with my stock of missiles that emit the lightning depleted. A way must be found to make this confounded casket function. Why aren't you working, incompetent?"

"That is going too far! Perhaps I'm not quite myself at the moment but I am not incompetent. . . . I've proved that. It's just that this devilish engine doesn't want me to know anything about it. I've spent hours pondering this cursed problem, without any result. . . ."

"But when we left Baghdad, you had plans," William said in a more conciliatory tone. "You hoped to clear up the mystery of the fluid which operates it."

"Well, yes! I worked at that, but no use, and nothing I could do about it. Besides, I prefer to look at Baphomet."

"Baphomet! And why, please?"

"He's not like you. . . . Without wanting to offend you, vene-venerable Master . . . he says nice things to me. He's the one who told me to take a drink and not to wear myself out."

"What? You dare to claim he advised you to get drunk?"

"It's just as I'm telling you, venerable . . . all this is something we're not supposed to know. It's his problem, not mine; that's why he doesn't want me to work anymore. Enjoy yourself, dear Joubert. . . . Yes . . . he loves me, he does. . . . Stop trying to penetrate the herme . . .



hermetic . . . secrets. Finally, to tell the truth, he forbade me to touch his effigies, except to talk with him."

"Do you talk with him often?"

"Didn't I just say so? I like to do it, I do . . . First, he shows me lots of things with pretty dancing colors . . . and then I hear music, such beautiful music. . . . So, I'd better warn you, don't count on me anymore. . . ."

"Lord, help me!" William whispered. "This imbecile has been bewitched by Baphomet's magic charms. How did this devil find out that I was using his effigies for my own purposes? At any rate, there's no use in counting on the duplicator at the moment. First, we'll have to sober up this idiot, Joubert. . . ."

With a last furious glance at the drunkard who had sprawled on a chair, singing to himself, the Grand Master returned to his quarters, to which he summoned the Tholon brothers. Clement, busy wrestling with some bawd, was not to be found, but the other two answered his call promptly.

The gloomy appearance of their leader, lost in thought, was chilling and they kept respectfully silent, waiting for him to notice their presence. "Oh yes, there you are," the Grand Master said, after some moments of abstraction. "I have an undertaking of the greatest importance for you. Already you have done me signal service and I know your discretion well. This time you must be on your guard even more than before."

"We would suffer torture and death rather than reveal whatever it may be," Garin, the spokesman for the brothers, assured him.

"I am certain you would. That is why I am confiding a secret of paramount consequence to you. Have you ever heard of Baphomet?"

"There are"—Garin spoke guardedly—"certain rumors circulating. Wild stories without any foundation. . . ."

"Not quite; he actually exists. He is a dangerous being from another world who, at this moment, is held prisoner somewhere in the Kingdom of France. However, this creature, who possesses great powers, has agreed to help us. Images in his likeness allow us to talk with our Commanders over seas, mountains and valleys. Brother Joubert, charged with penetrating the mystery of their operation, had made great progress, so that I hoped the solution

was near. Unfortunately, even though far away, Baphomet has corrupted our learned Brother, turning him into a confirmed drunkard who refuses to continue his research. . . ."

Guiot, involuntarily, hung his head. How well he knew the Templar's love for the divine jug, to which Guiot often gave himself up quite willingly.

"Therefore, you are to watch him, night and day, so that he can no longer use the effigy to talk with this creature. Also, see to it that he has no wine. Aside from that, he is free to continue his research, once he is sober."

"And if he tries to escape?" asked Garin.

"Punish him well, but do not maim or kill him. I trust that he will come to his senses and be capable of rendering loyal service again. . . ."

"Won't he be able to cast some spell on us?" Guiot asked in alarm, at which he got an angry look from his brother.

"Never fear, my good man. If you watch him closely, nothing will happen. However, in case of any suspicious actions, call me. Now go and take your stations, and make sure that two of you are always at his side."

"You can count on us, venerable Master," promised Garin.

Alone, the Grand Master returned to his meditation. This matter was turning out not at all well: Baphomet had discovered that William was using the effigies for his own purposes and the thing at the bottom of the tarn intended to teach the Templars a lesson by giving them a hint of his powers. Wasn't there a great risk that Commanders who used effigies to communicate with their leader would be overcome by the same magic? Everything considered, it seemed best to play the game and contact Baphomet direct. It seemed likely that he was unaware of the existence of the duplicating casket and could not reproach the Grand Master with disloyalty on that count.

William stood up and returned to the laboratory where the learned Joubert snored peacefully under the watchful eyes of the Tholon brothers. He took up one of the coffers containing a Baphomet image and went into an adjoining room. After carefully closing the door, he activated it and waited for an answer to his call. Only a few seconds later, the eyes of the statue lit up.



"Ah! It's you, William . . . I've been expecting your call."

A little surprised, the Grand Master asked, "Why so, noble friend?"

"Come now, don't play the innocent. I inflicted a benign punishment on Brother Joubert, who was proving too curious. . . . You both have tried, it seems, to unravel the enigma of the mechanism inside my effigies. . . ."

The Templar kept himself alert, ready to break the connection at the first suspicious sign, but made his reply carefully unconcerned:

"What harm is there in that? Brother Joubert only provided me with a means of keeping in touch with my most distant troops, which is most useful. I really can't see why you should take offense at that."

"Don't try to outwit me! I am cut off from my kind on a hostile planet and only my secrets enable me to survive. If I had wanted to reveal all the properties of my robots to you, I would have done so. You deliberately tried to appropriate them without my authorization."

"You must understand, noble Sire: my army is, at the present time, months of marching away from its base. We are surrounded by enemy forces. How can I successfully maneuver my troops if I cannot talk from a distance with the Commanders of each detachment?"

"You had only to discuss your problem with me. I would certainly have given you permission to use my effigies for long distance communication. But I cannot condone such overweening presumptuousness! This time I shall be lenient. You may continue to use them, but only in emergencies. However, I warn you, if you ever again try to stick your nose into things which do not concern you, our relations will suffer a great change. You have only a few atomic grenades at your disposal and, without them, you are completely incapable of pursuing your conquests. I may, perhaps, let you have more, but I advise you to use them with great miserliness. Do you understand me?"

"I understand," William whispered, containing his anger with difficulty.

At his words, the eyes of the Baphomet image emitted blinding flashes of light which forced the Templar to

protect his eyes with his hand; then the effigy became inactive.

The Grand Master remained motionless for a long moment. His head ached with a sharp torment stabbing at his brain. He was convinced that, if the blinding light had lasted longer, Baphomet would have killed him. This was a further characteristic of the strange device that would bear thinking of.

Decidedly, this otherworldly being had extraordinary powers at his disposal and it would be no easy matter to get rid of him.



## CHAPTER VII



Brother Joubert quickly recovered all his accustomed vigor under the iron rule of the Tholon brothers. He got on very well with Guiot and Clement, who shared his taste for good living, and they made the most of the leftovers from his table. Garin, however, remained aloof. He was not at all interested in knowing the significance of the hermetic engines on which the learned alchemist was again working and he had the greatest mistrust of the Baphomet effigies, asking himself what this being from "another world," of which the Grand Master had told them, could actually be.

The Grand Master, himself, was now thinking of continuing his advance. He had, at first, hoped that Kaidu would move in to the attack and, for that reason, had carefully placed the ballistae in weapon-pits around the camp. But the Mongol Khan was immoderately in awe of the Templars and had no wish to face them with their positions prepared in advance. According to the hash-shashins' reports, he had little inclination to fight at all after his neighbor Abaka's resounding defeat. Some of his mounted patrols kept careful watch of the outskirts of the Crusaders' encampment and his own troops were kept constantly on the alert, ready to move if the Crusaders should resume their march. Kaidu's intentions remained unfathomable and William wondered if he ever would do battle, since it seemed obvious that the Mongol had no wish to become acquainted with the Templars' famous lightning. . . .

This, in the end, determined the Grand Master to push on ahead. The tireless debauchery of his men proved that

they were rested. So, in spite of the intense heat, he decided to attempt crossing the desert that stood between him and Kubla's Khanate, wiping out Kaidu's army on the way, should he decide to attack.

The long column was set in motion once more. This time there was no enthusiasm anywhere in the ranks, since the prospect of crossing never-ending sand dunes during this fiery season struck terror into the hearts of even the bravest.

Yarkand was gained without even a skirmish: Kaidu had fled so precipitously that he had abandoned some of his supplies.

In the felt tents, the Christians found dried milk and yogurt, clogs with wooden soles and leather uppers, and various spices, pepper and ginger among them. The Commanders saw to it that everything was burned because they suspected some Mongol trick, especially the poisoning of any foodstuffs.

Pushing on toward Cathay, they next occupied Keriya, where squires and sergeants got their hands on jasper and chalcedony intended for Kubla.

The advance became more and more difficult: after Charkhlik, the dreaded desert began. The goods on the wagons were therefore transferred to the camels' backs. There were enough provisions for more than a month, ample for crossing the torrid expanse, according to what the guides said, on the condition that the shortest route be taken.

The Mongol forces seemed to have disappeared. Even the swift horsemen who came each day to reconnoiter were no longer seen. . . .

Before ordering the departure, the Grand Master used a Baphomet image to contact his Marshal, instructing him to draw back from Samarkand, so that he could move swiftly to their assistance in case of need.

Then William of Beaujeu had the horns and trumpets sounded and the Crusaders began struggling up the sand dunes under the overpowering sun. Once more, the knights were quick to remove their coats of mail and their helmets. The horses were also stripped of their rich trappings but, in spite of this, it soon became necessary for rapid movement to dismount and lead them by the bridle because the weight of their riders quickly exhausted them.



Among the knights, Otto of Granson set an outstanding example. With sweat pouring down his face, he was instantly ready to lend a helping hand in getting some camel, overburdened by too heavy a load, back on its feet or in surveying the surroundings to make sure the column was holding to the right course.

John of Grailly made himself well-loved by his companions, entertaining them with his poems and songs, and never refusing a sip of his water or a share of his rations at the evening bivouac.

The Grand Master had one obsession: not to stray one step from the chosen route. The guides insisted that it took an entire year to cover the longest part of the great desert on horseback. It was his intention to follow the course marked by the water holes: after one day and one night of marching, there should be enough fresh water to quench the thirst of men and animals. However, William did not count very much on that: first of all, because of the size of his army; and secondly, because he expected some treachery on the part of the Mongols.

And indeed, at the very first halt, the spring turned out to be poisoned. This greatly affected the morale of the Crusaders: the trials suffered by the army in Mesopotamia were still fresh in their minds.

A strange phenomenon increased their fears. While they made their way under the merciless sun, the men heard mysterious sounds: sometimes the rolling of drums; sometimes the murmur of unintelligible voices. At night, this strange manifestation increased in volume. That unfortunate soldier, startled out of his sleep, who went searching for the deceptive summons, never returned to the camp.

Then, too, disturbing visions appeared at sunrise: some saw verdant oases; others, streams of limpid water. Sometimes they believed that they could see a city ahead of them. But each time, when they advanced toward the mirage, there was nothing but the rolling sea of sand dunes and, when their companions overtook them, they found only bodies pierced with countless arrows: a sad witness to the invisible presence of the Mongols all around them.

In spite of everything, the column made progress. Provisions were not lacking and the losses of men were relatively small.

Now William of Beaujeu contacted his Marshal daily to report his position. In the vicinity of Samarkand, everything was peaceful.

On the fifth day, the situation suddenly worsened: a torrid wind sprang up, raising clouds of sand and reducing visibility to a few feet. Every man veiled his face in order to breathe, but the fine dust penetrated the smallest opening, clogging noses, ears and mouths. Gallons of water would be needed to get rid of it and the army was already on short rations.

Moreover, the Crusaders' afflictions had only begun: when the column came to the evening halt, everyone had to face the evidence—nearly a thousand men were missing. Some had lost their way, others had been killed by Mongol arrows, the sandstorm seeming to have troubled the latter not at all.

That same night, about midnight, the dying groans of a sentinel gave the alarm. Everyone rushed from the tents, even before the call to arms was sounded. Then a cloudburst of arrows fell on the camp, claiming innumerable victims. Indeed, since no one had had time to don armor or coats of mail, almost every shaft found a target. There was an even more serious loss, many of the leather containers had been pierced, diminishing the stock of water by a third. Many horses and camels were also wounded.

Any random firing of the ballistae would be less than useless, so the knights quickly armed themselves and began scouring the vicinity, without success. When they returned to the camp, dead tired, they had not seen one of the enemy.

Deeply concerned, the Grand Master called a Council meeting that lasted until sunrise. The tactics of the enemy were obvious: Kaidu, refusing an open battle, would continue his campaign of harassment with swift raids by his expert horsemen. The Mongols knew the desert and could take what supply they needed at every watering place, leaving the spring polluted with the cadavers of dead workhorses.

Must they give up and retreat? Opinions differed widely but, in the end, when an inventory of the water supply had been made, that of Otto of Granson prevailed.

Taking into account the loss of men, there was still enough water for thirty days, if the most stringent ration-



ing was maintained. The precious leather containers would have to be protected from any similar misadventure, and the coats of mail of the dead could be used for wrapping some, while the others would be kept under cover. The knights would have to wear armor and the draft animals would be protected by the padded caparisons.

At sunrise the army resumed its march. The wind no longer blew but the heat soon became intolerable for the knights, sweating blood and water under their armor. The column dragged along, everyone on foot, and the distance covered that day was a grim joke. As might be expected, there were many cases of sunstroke, and nothing could be done for the poor wretches who bestrewed the track behind them.

That night, the exhausted men fell into a profound sleep but they had hardly closed their eyes when the Mongols attacked again. This time the rain of arrows claimed few victims but the alert was repeated many times, so that no one slept a wink.

In the morning, there was nothing to do but resume the march, which became a veritable Calvary. On that day, mirages were numerous and many unfortunates, half-crazed by the heat, floundered across the shifting sand toward the visions that faded slowly away before them the further they ran.

Finally, for better or worse, the column reached the halfway point. Now, there was no possibility of turning back. Whether they wanted to or not, they must go on. And the horses died like flies. And the men were unable to quench their burning thirst. Some jealously hoarded their meager ration of water, allowing themselves only a few drops, others having finished theirs at one gulp. The latter watched for the slightest chance to steal a few drops of the precious liquid.

Otto of Granson did his best to reason with the malcontents; however, after defiant ones felt a blow from the flat of his sword, they needed no further persuasion.

His friend, John of Grailly, had long since stopped singing the praises of his beautiful princess; nevertheless he often spent the night watches writing poems to console him in his solitude.

Day after day, the identical scenes were reenacted: an exhausting march during the daylight hours, and at night

the Mongol attacks. The Commanders tried every way they could devise to cope with the latter. They placed several squadrons at a distance around the camp. Each time the yellow demons located them and, instead of falling into the trap, rained projectiles on them from a safe distance. The Crusaders also tried setting false encampments, pitching their tents in one spot and settling down a distance away. The only result of this stratagem was a spectacular fire because, on that night, their hidden adversary used flaming arrows.

William of Beaujeu, however, had faith that the final victory would be his: he reserved use of his mangonels and grenades and refused to be disconcerted by the continued reduction of his forces, certain that the Mongols could never win a real battle. The skirmishes were irritating, tiring and they played on the morale of the Crusaders; but, after all, each day brought them nearer to Tunhwang.

Furthermore, Brother Joubert, once more sober and for good reason, had suggested an artful scheme that would assure Baphomet's neutrality. Since the latter placed so much reliance on the automatic transmissions that would signal his whereabouts to any compatriot who came within range, effective interference with them would bring him to terms. Whether he wanted to or not, Baphomet would have to let them work in peace.

The Grand Master at once gave orders for carrying out the plan, using the relays at Baghdad and Cyprus to instruct the Commanderies around Grand-Orient Forest how to accomplish the interference. . . .

Baphomet protested, flew into a rage, but was forced to let the Templars act as they pleased.

Finally, fifty-two days after leaving Charkhlik, in spite of everything, the Crusaders emerged from the hellish desert. But the city where they had hoped to find some rest was destroyed, its walls choked with debris and all the running water poisoned with decomposing animal carcasses.

This in no way deterred William from setting up his camp: the ruins of the magnificent Buddhist temples and houses provided sufficient protection against enemy arrows. The foot soldiers also began to build an emergency



rampart with stones taken from the rubble, while the Turcopoles began digging new wells.

Patrols sent out did not encounter the enemy, but they brought back a substantial quantity of game which was more than welcome. Very soon thereafter an appetizing odor emanated from the spits that turned over many fires. Suddenly, morale was considerably higher. . . .

Another blessing, even more precious: the night passed without an alert and everyone slept in peace.

The leaders of the Crusade evaluated their situation: the forces were reduced to forty thousand men. All the throwing engines were intact and there were sufficient chargers and beasts of burden that could be hitched to the carts now that there were usable roads.

To the north was Qomul, capital of the province and further Mongol Karakorum, Kubla's imperial city. According to information from the spies, Kaidu's troops, greatly exhausted themselves from the long stay in the desert, were resting in Qomul. As for the forces of the great Khan, they were massed around Chang-Chu, north of Peking. It seemed that the threat posed by the Templars had given Kubla enough concern so that he had called up both his regulars and his reserve forces; all his supporters, in fact.

Commanders and lesser officers agreed that they should remain where they were, at least long enough for the men to regain their strength. For his part, Brother Joubert started to work again, achieving the remarkable result of duplicating a vase. It disintegrated soon afterward; however, no such success had been previously achieved: the philosopher was nearing his goal.

Then, on one fine morning, the lookouts signaled the sighting of a small group of horsemen. Some were Mongols, but there were Christians among them, for colors of Venice shone side by side with the yak-tail pennants. The order was given that they be allowed to pass, after they had been searched and disarmed.

The Grand Master at once called his Templars together, lining them along either side of the road along which the strangers must travel, with the French and English dressed in all their finery, and between their ranks the embassy made its entrance into the ruined city.

Some of the Crusaders had never seen a Tartar at close

quarters, so that they stared with the greatest curiosity at the slitted eyes, the brassy skin, and the peculiar helmets—pointed steel caps, encircled with a fur corona. They also admired the small horses which were known, despite their short legs, to be almost tireless.

The Mongols wore clothing of silk or fine linen beautifully embroidered with gold, their capes lined with ermine or mink. Their cuirasses, however, made of plain leather left the Templars somewhat skeptical as to their efficiency. The bridles of their horses were magnificent but, for the most part, the horsemen rode without saddle, astride a plain piece of fur or a cloth pad. All wore a large quiver, normally filled with arrows, on their backs, with the bow slung over the shoulder.

At the head of the group rode a Christian, dressed in silk and sumptuous furs. He dismounted before the Grand Master, knelt with great dignity on one knee, and introduced himself:

"Noble Sire," he said, "I am a humble Venetian merchant: Marco Polo by name. That name, perhaps, is not completely unknown to you since my brothers, on their return to Italy, made a report on their travels here. However, it is not as a merchant that I pay you this visit: the great Kubla Khan honors me with his friendship and has made me his ambassador. Here are my credentials which he was good enough to entrust to me."

With which, the young Marco gave the Grand Master several golden tablets on which were engraved a strange script.

"Please stand, Master Polo," William of Beaujeu answered. "We agree to hear you, although it seems strange that a Christian would serve as spokesman for an infidel. . . ."

Leading the way, he conducted his guests into an almost intact room which he used as his quarters. Commanders and guests seated themselves on coffers covered with furs, then the Templar continued, "Well, young man, tell us the Mongol's message."

"The Lord of Lords, sixth in the line of succession after Genghis, the most powerful of all emperors in this world, to the Great Master, William of Beaujeu, Commander of the army which, without a declaration of war, brings destruction and death into our empire, greetings.



"Rumors of your exploits have reached our ears in distant Cathay. Now you have arrived at the gates of my empire and a confrontation of our two armies becomes, it seems, inevitable. You possess a powerful weapon which launches lightning: it proves the worth of the sorcerers who surround you and most assuredly demonstrates the power of your god. The few priests who have come before me, up to the present time, gave a poor idea of your religion, because I, too, possess a few magic secrets and not unimportant ones. Food appears in the air and comes to me without being touched by human hand. I also know how to launch thunderbolts. Furthermore, I have an army of many hundreds of thousands of brave warriors. As of this moment, a battle between us risks costing us a great many human lives without any decisive result; unless it be that the decreasing of our separate forces, to the joy of jealous rivals, counts as a result.

"Here, then, is what seems to me a wise proposal: why do we not form an alliance? You have conquered Mesopotamia and Transoxiana, and I accept you as ruler of that empire, if you will agree not to meddle in the affairs of Cathay.

"I cannot believe that a leader, as wise and valorous as you, would think that he could overcome my countless battalions, like the Persians. For every hundred killed, another thousand warriors will rush to the attack, and if you annihilate them, ten thousand will take their places. I do not, therefore, see anything to be gained by you or by me if you precipitate a fruitless struggle.

"However, if the division of lands that I propose does not entirely suit you, I agree to discuss the matter with your ambassadors, unless you prefer a personal meeting in a mutually acceptable location.

"In the strength of eternal heaven, from my palace in Chang-Chu, Kubla, great Khan of the Mongols."

The Grand Master listened to this message most attentively: he did not have the slightest intention of complying with this suggestion of partition, for his pride and overweening ambition pushed him on to conquer the entire world. Nevertheless, a delay would suit his purposes. It would, perhaps, give Brother Joubert time to produce other atomic grenades which would greatly facilitate his task. Therefore, he replied:

"Master Polo, as you are a Christian, you know that our Lord, Jesus Christ, commanded us to be merciful to poor sinners. I am willing, therefore, to negotiate with Kubla Khan and will send him messages containing my counterproposals. First, I must discuss them with my allies and with my Council. For that reason, I ask that you withdraw for a little while. You shall have my reply shortly."

"I can but agree with such a wise course, venerable Master. However, before I leave you, let me give you the presents which the great Khan bade me to offer you. . . ."

He clapped his hands and some of the Mongols entered to lay a veritable treasure at the feet of the Templar. Together with the most luxurious furs and swords in jeweled scabbards were vases of sculptured jade. There were fine lacquer panels with subtle designs and basins of gold that sparkled like fire. There were also dishes of an unknown material: porcelain. One particular object caught William's attention: inside a large protecting framework, several elephants seemed to circle, each holding the tail of the one in front of him in his trunk, all carved from ivory. The Templar had heard tales of these fabulous creatures and demanded more details.

"Are these those monsters used by Hannibal in his battles with the Romans? Tell me, are they really as gigantic as people say?"

"Indeed they are," the Venetian assured him. "Nature made these animals the most formidable in all creation. With their inordinately long noses, they can uproot great trees and, with their foreheads, they can smash the strongest walls. The great Khan owns several herds. When he goes hunting, four among them carry his lodge on their backs. Furthermore, they are priceless aids to the warriors who, enclosed in a tower on each elephant's back, loose their arrows on the enemy below, while they remain invulnerable. . . ."

"I see," said the Templar thoughtfully. "That is interesting. Thank you. You may retire now."

The discussion among the Crusaders lasted an hour. The manpower of the Mongol Khan and the presence of elephants in his forces gave pause to even the bravest. Nevertheless, William succeeded in imposing his will. He



called the ambassadors and, still ignoring the Mongols, he addressed himself to the Venetian:

"Master Marco Polo, this infidel seems to me to be greatly infatuated with himself. He dares to speak of magic in connection with the lightning entrusted to me by the Archangel Gabriel; this shows how firmly he is anchored to the mummeries of his sorcerers. You must know that our only thought is propagation of the True Faith to the ends of the Earth: therefore, there can be no negotiations between us unless Kubla will abjure all his errors in order to be baptized in our Holy Church. As for his magicians and his elephants, they will be impotent when my lightning strikes them from the high reaches of heaven. I am ready to give him a demonstration if he would like one—on the battlefield, but then it will be too late. . . .

"My ambassadors shall carry the details of my message to him, as well as my presents: a reliquary containing a bit of the Sacred Cross, and an illuminated manuscript setting forth the life of our Lord, according to the Scriptures.

"At dawn tomorrow, you will set out on your return to Kubla's court. Let it be known that any attempt on the lives of my ambassadors, any affront suffered by them, will be cruelly punished. May our Lord keep you and watch over you. . . ."

Marco Polo made no reply. He bowed deeply to the assembly and left the camp, followed by his escort.

And so it was that, the following day, the Tholon brothers and the Templar from Tyre, in company with the embassy, found themselves galloping at top speed along the roads of Cathay.

Besides the promised gifts, they carried one of the Baphomet effigies so that they would be able to talk with the Grand Master from any distance. This statue had been secretly modified by Brother Joubert and contained an atomic grenade: if any unauthorized and overcurious individual examined it a little too closely . . . the ambassadors, naturally, knew nothing of this minor detail.

The four messengers soon understood the effectiveness of the Mongol stage system which allowed extremely rapid communication throughout Kubla's vast empire.

They hardly had time to admire the mountaintops in the golden embrace of the setting sun, the aquamarine of

torrential streams, or the verdant hills fleecy with mist: each day, about noon, they came to a relay station. They stopped only long enough to swallow a snack and change horses, then set out again, galloping on until night fell. They never saw the slightest delay: at the mere sight of the great Khan's tablets, everyone obeyed without protest. To the great astonishment of the Christians, at each stop bed and board were paid for with simple pieces of paper rather than heavy, clinking coins.

Marco Polo explained to the Brother from Tyre how Kubla operated:

"This money circulates throughout the empire. It is manufactured in Peking from the pulped bark of the mulberry tree. The resulting paste is used to make the paper which is cut into rectangular pieces of different sizes. Each bears the signature and the seal of one of the Khan's high officials and everyone accepts them without the least hesitation. They have values from the little *trunsole* to two *besants*, so that merchants can carry large sums without sagging under the weight of their purses."

"This is certainly a strange procedure, which proves the confidence Kubla's subjects have in their master, for it would be a simple matter to counterfeit these pieces of paper. . . ."

"Don't you believe it," the Venetian declared. "The seal of the high treasurer is most difficult to copy and, besides, the punishments devised for counterfeiters are such that no one would be willing to take the risk."

"It is certainly a method favorable to commerce," the Grand Master's ambassador admitted. "I am also struck by the admirable provisions made along highways so that the traveler finds comfortable inns at the end of each day's journey."

"And you will be even more surprised to learn that their maintenance depends directly on the provincial and the imperial governments. Each post keeps fleet horses and racing camels at the disposal of the great Khan's messengers. The entire system is comprised of two hundred thousand horses and ten thousand relay stations which are inspected without warning once every month. Because of this, we cover in four days distances which caravans take twelve days to complete."

"Your sovereign is endowed with great wisdom. I trust



that he will show the same reasoning by accepting baptism and conversion to our Holy Faith. . . ."

"He is most certainly farseeing," the Venetian replied. "You must have noticed that he has had the sides of all roads planted with trees which ensure shade in summer and indicate the roadway in winter when it is covered with snow."

"That I had observed. I also note that his subjects seem very prolific, which means many mouths to feed. Every family appears to have innumerable children."

"That is because these pagans have many wives. But they have no dread of famine. First of all, because they are very frugal, and then because Kubla has proven his foresight. When the harvest is good, his agents buy rice, buckwheat and millet, which is stored. In bad years, they are sold at low prices; actually, at a quarter of their value."

"Now that is a most charitable attitude. This infidel possesses admirable qualities indeed. He knows how to use his riches with humanity. But, tell me, at our last halt, I noticed an astonishing fact: the fire that burned on the hearth was not fed by wood but by some kind of black stones. Is this some kind of magic?"

"Of course not!" Marco Polo scoffed. "These stones come from the earth. They are very difficult to light but once they catch fire, they burn for a long time and give off much more heat than wood, a quality much appreciated in winter."

"This country is full of wonders, indeed, and we have much to learn from its people," concluded the astonished Templar from Tyre.

The Tholon brothers were not having such an edifying conversation. This frantic ride across an unknown country was sorely trying them. Clement cursed without pause.

"By God, my arse is on fire. . . . I've been through plenty in this bitch of a life, but I've never been so worn out."

"Yes," agreed Guiot. "It's damned slavery, that's what: if I had known, I'd never have set foot in this wild country. They don't even have houses; except for these inns, there are only different kinds of felt tents. . . ."

"And the stuff they give us to eat: dried milk and this slop they call yogurt, boiled mutton that smells rancid, and rice."

"Don't even mention it," Clement groaned. "Especially when I am perched on one of these filthy, stinking dromedaries. One word and I'd vomit up my guts. No Christian would ever have had the slightest notion of climbing on the backs of those beasts. They're all savages. . . ."

"Now, now, brothers!" the Templar lectured them. "Think of the honor that has been done us: the Grand Master chose us from hundreds of others; a mark of distinction that will fall on our entire family. And think, too, that you are earning your place in heaven. . . ."

"Well, as for that, I should have a privileged seat for all this," groaned Guiot. "Only I don't find it all that bad on Earth. I don't feel like dying prematurely but if this continues much longer, I'll never be able to sit down anywhere. . . ."

"Yes," agreed Clement, "it's always the same ones who have the best of it. The Marshal is very happy at Samarkand. Oh sure, he keeps his poor wretches maneuvering all day but that's his idea of fun: discipline. The Seneschal only thinks of how he can best devote himself to rise from the ranks and become Grand Master. . . ."

"You're right about that! But Thibaut Gaudin certainly has the same idea . . . always agreeing with the venerable Master, and never failing to butter him up!"

"Bah! How about John of Grailly: scribbling poems all the time to his lady love. The only thing that counts besides that is fine clothes. You can bet he's not working his arse off!"

"But, on the other hand, you can't accuse the Swiss of being lazy."

"Maybe not; but who is always picked to travel the roads of savages? It's always us. . . ."

Despite all this invective, the convoy made rapid progress and, one fine morning, the ambassadors came in sight of Chang-Chu where the great Khan resided.



## CHAPTER VIII



The majesty of the imperial palace filled the Crusaders with awe. The wall surrounding it was even longer than that which encircled the ramparts of Carcassonne. There was an abundance of splendid parks. And there, in the lush meadows through which a lazy river meandered, strange animals grazed. Some trim bamboo pavilions and tents of multicolored silks were reflected in limpid pools.

Marco Polo explained that the Khan often hunted with his favorite leopards in these woods teeming with game.

The palace was entirely of marble and when the messengers found themselves inside they could not decide what they admired most: the iridescent paintings, the lacquer-ware, or the delicate statues carved from blocks of jade.

They were ushered into chambers decorated with silks and rare furs, where the Tholon brothers were embarrassed at the necessity of treading on the resplendent carpets. Above them, the fabulously high ceilings, covered with crimson and gold varnishes, gleamed like the setting sun.

Slaves immediately brought them a meal so plentiful and tasty that the men from Auxerre fairly gave themselves indigestion. When night fell, beautiful courtesans entered to disrobe the emperor's guests. . . .

Clement and Guiot, literally fascinated, didn't know where to look, but the whole thing became even more laughable when the visitors were in their beds: these adorable young females, with their slanted eyes, slid in beside them clad only in the briefest of garments, making it quite clear that they were entirely available. . . .

It took all the faith of Garin and the Templar from Tyre to resist this cruel temptation. They had to lose their tempers, mixing curses with invocations to God, in order to make the she-devils understand that it was not customary in monasteries to have beds furnished in such a fashion. Finally, the gentle maidens fled, crying hot tears at such an insult to their charms.

The other two Tholon brothers did not, alas, give evidence of any such stoicism and enjoyed a night full of incident. . . .

The following morning at dawn the Templars celebrated mass, asking forgiveness for the sins of the poor sinners; then they activated the Baphomet effigy and sent a message to the Grand Master, detailing all they had seen during their journey and announcing their arrival at Chang-Chu. William ordered them to follow his instructions to the letter and to accept no compromise.

An hour later the Lord High Chamberlain came to announce that his master Kubla, Khan of Khans, was ready to receive them as ambassadors. Silk tunics as fine as cobwebs had been prepared for them, but they preferred to present themselves in their customary dress: the Templars wearing their white mantles with the crimson cross and the squires their coats of mail. Carrying their gifts, they followed an honor guard through the palace to the throne room; passing through two false ones before coming into the emperor's presence.

The splendor of the hall surpassed that of any others they had seen and the magnificence of the court dress could not be equaled anywhere. However, it was Kubla himself, seated on the throne, who held their attention.

The great Khan was of medium height and well-proportioned. His light-complexioned face, with dark eyes, prominent cheekbones, and hooked nose, gave an impression of cruelty tempered somewhat by the acute intelligence in his intent look.

He wore sumptuous robes adorned with pearls and precious stones. His guards were dressed in tunics of the same style, with gold belts and short boots of soft leather, trimmed with fur. The Templars' sober habits were in startling contrast with the opulent dress of the courtiers.

The Lord High Chamberlain moved toward them and



uttered a few words which Marco Polo translated, "Bow down and adore!"

The Venetian gave the example, reverently bending low, but the ambassadors contented themselves with a curt and somewhat disdainful salutation. The Khan gave no sign of offense but he treated their meager gifts with the greatest disdain. After putting them aside, servants censured him with golden incense burners; then Kubla spoke:

"So these are the Templars' ambassadors. By Tengri, they're not much to look at . . . ! Is William of Beaujeu so poor?"

"Our dress is that of our Order, Sire," answered the Templar from Tyre. "All our Brothers have taken vows of poverty and own nothing besides their weapons. Each of us is the servant of the Grand Master, who may send us wherever he pleases. We promised God and our Lady to obey our leaders without question and swore to reconquer the Holy Land which, thanks to the Holy Mother Mary, is now accomplished."

"I am not unaware of your rules: poverty and chastity among them. But must you also harm people who have never offended you?"

"Certainly not, Sire. But Bernard, the holy monk of Clairvaux, has said: 'Knights, use your weapons to strike down the enemies of Christ fearlessly, chastise nations, punish peoples by binding their kings and leaders with iron chains and shackles.' That is why our Baussant banner is of two colors: black and white, to signify that the Templars are open and benevolent with their friends, and relentless toward their enemies. And it is clearly evident that, until now, you have refused to obey the envoys of our Holy Father, the Pope, who exhorted you to forsake your pagan ways and become a Christian. Did you not insist that your magicians had powers surpassing those of the priests of Christ? Take careful heed: the madmen who dared to stand against the Templars in the Holy Land and in Mesopotamia paid for it with their lives. The Archangel Gabriel has decided to chastise you for your presumption by entrusting his servant, William of Beaujeu, with a celestial lightning against which all pagans are powerless."

"These are most insulting words coming from the

mouths of ragged dogs like you. If I had not promised my faithful friend, Marco Polo, to hear you out, I would have you executed on the spot and make sure that you suffered a thousand deaths. Be done with insults: what is your Master's answer to my message?"

"The Grand Master cannot agree to leaving such a vast empire in the hands of an unbeliever: therefore he enjoins you to be baptized without delay. This done, he will—in all clemency—agree that you continue to rule Cathay, on the condition of course that you swear allegiance to him and to our Holy Father, the Pope."

Kubla burst into epic laughter when the Venetian had translated these words. His courtiers imitated him and, after a full ten minutes of ribald derision, the Khan regained control of himself to state:

"I have not laughed like that in a very long time. What? Your William has the generosity to offer me what is already mine? Is he mad? His lightning doesn't frighten me: I, too, have devices that can throw flames, but does he have war elephants? Hundreds of thousands of horsemen? Let him push on into my vast empire if such is his wish. Soon, not one of his filthy pigs will remain alive. I was too kind in trying to avoid the extermination of such vermin. Your William has vanquished only poor luckless wights up to now; he does not know how powerful the Khan of Khans is. Go back to him and report my words: if, within a month, he has not ceased polluting my land with his presence, my army will wipe out the last vestige of the Templars. Now there is no question of letting him have the Khanate of Kaidu, nor even the Holy Land. I swear by our mother, Etugen! I shall not rest until the last Christian has left Mesopotamia and Syria. . . ."

The Templar of Tyre made no reply: he simply nodded and, followed by his small escort, left the palace. The Tholon brothers tried to put on a bold front but knew that they were in a tight corner and kept close watch on every side.

Marco Polo made a point of accompanying his coreligionists to their horses and wished them a safe return journey, with these words, "I am sorry that no common ground could be reached. Why were you so unbending? You could at least have proposed to demonstrate the



powerful weapon you possess. That might have given the great Khan food for thought. . . .”

“No, my Brother,” replied the Templar from Tyre. “Our Grand Master did not wish it so, for the element of surprise provoked by this horrible explosion is, in itself, an important asset. Try to convince Kubla to be baptized; that is the only chance for peace. He knows our heaven-sent lightning only by hearsay but I can tell you that he will be terror-stricken by its power.”

“I am willing to try but any chance of success seems to me laughably small. My influence here amounts to little. All my good wishes go with you. Above all, do not stray from the road followed to come here, for the Khan has given orders for you to be killed if you attempt to spy on him.”

“May heaven protect you,” replied the Templar. “Take care not to be with the Khan’s army if he dares to send it against us.”

The four Crusaders again took up their wild ride. At the first stop, the Grand Master was informed of the outcome of their meeting with the great Khan. He made no comment other than to advise his ambassadors to make haste.

At that moment, William was going through a period of depression. Without waiting for the results of his mission—he had no illusions as to what they would be—he had put his forces in motion, occupying Süchow, or at least what was left of it, for the Mongols had burned it to the ground. This scorched-earth policy was their custom: they never accepted face to face combat unless their chances of success were beyond question. Buddhists, Saracens and Nestorian Christians had been evacuated but the latter were now treated as enemies and led in long convoys toward the rear.

The morale of his army and its officers was at a low ebb and William once more convened his Council, for he sensed the rumblings of revolt among the Crusaders. He did not falter or dissimulate:

“Noble Sires, my Brothers,” he began in a scarcely audible voice, “I will not hide from you my realization that our situation is perilous. . . . What good can come of a continued advance if, at every move, we find nothing but ruins?

We have no lack of water but our food supply is dwindling dangerously. There is no possibility of living off the land with food taken from the peasants, for this devil Kubla creates a desert in front of us! Hunting provides only a limited supply of meat, for the game flees at the approach of hunters and leads us always forward."

"Nevertheless, our situation is unchanged in one way," Otto of Granson exclaimed. "No one can withstand us in actual battle with the lightning we possess. So, I cannot see what prevents us from marching right to Peking: Kubla is going to have to face us one day or another. Why should we be demoralized by some poor wretches who are afraid of tightening their belts? Anyway, I am certain that I can bring them back to reason if you give me leave."

"That is all very well, my brave Otto," replied the Grand Master. "With the exception of one point: I have come to wonder if we will indeed be able to defeat Kubla when he launches his troops against us. . . ."

"And why shouldn't we? We certainly defeated the Mongols at Baghdad!"

"We certainly did, my sagacious friend . . . but I have just received most disturbing news. The great Khan has called up three hundred sixty thousand horsemen and one hundred thousand foot soldiers: that is more than ten to one against us. Further, he also claims to be able to hurl the lightning. . . ."

"Oh, come now," interrupted John of Grailly. "That is sheer nonsense. How could he possess a weapon entrusted to us by God Himself?"

"There is no proof it is the same."

"He is trying to frighten you," Otto of Granson muttered. "Nobody ever heard of such a thing until the Archangel gave it to you."

"It is possible nevertheless. I must warn you that my supply is now limited. What would happen if the Mongols charged, wave after wave, without thought of their losses?"

"Bah!" growled the Swiss. "So much the better if there are some left; my sword is thirsty for blood. Any one of your armored knights is worth ten of these dogs!"

"If we do not starve to death before then. . . ."

"Leave that to me," said the Swiss. "Give me one



hundred horsemen and I'll make it my business to bring you back supplies. We have only to head south, where they're not expecting us."

"That seems a worthwhile proposal," approved the Grand Master. "What is your opinion, Brothers?"

Everyone approved the argument of the valiant Swiss, and the discussion was resumed.

"One final point remains to be considered," William continued. "My emissaries report that Kubla has in his army those monstrous elephants which Hannibal once used against Rome. I fear that a charge by those huge creatures could not be stopped as easily as that of horses, even with the blinding power of our weapon."

"I have thought at length on the problem of meeting these beasts," John of Grailly interrupted smilingly. "I am told that these monsters have tender bellies and a simple fire fed by a few barrels of naphtha, of which we have a sufficient supply, should send them stampeding back toward their own masters."

"That is an ingenious suggestion," the Grand Master approved. "It seems then that we should continue to advance, come what may. Besides, no one is anxious to recross the great desert, where our losses were so great. I shall bow to the will of the majority. . . . Let those who wish to continue the march toward Peking raise their hands."

A majority of two-thirds having approved the resolution, the Crusaders left the ruins of Süchow and headed toward the large city of Kanchow.

At that time, Brother Joubert reported a startling discovery to his leader. Baphomet, still locked in the depths of his pond, had modified the text of his distress signal. It was considerably longer and a detailed breakdown of its contents enabled the Turcopole linguists to translate it. Baphomet was now relating the particulars of what had happened to him on Earth since his accident, pointing out that the Templars were making dangerous scientific progress and that it was of the utmost importance to stop them before they became dangerous.

The news sent William of Beaujeu's spirits soaring: it seemed to verify the fact that the learned Joubert was on the right track! Everything would be different if he could

finally adjust this mineral-sperm generator, this super-philosopher's-stone which was capable of duplicating endlessly any kind of object.

Further, Otto of Granson's expedition proved extremely profitable and his raid on regions which appeared to be unmenaced by the Crusaders yielded a considerable stock of rice; enough to ensure a month's food for the entire army. The future suddenly looked much brighter and everyone took heart again.

Unfortunately, as they approached Kanchow, the usual cloud of smoke informed the Crusaders that the Mongols had not changed their tactics. Again gloom settled over the army. The exhausted foot soldiers refused to go any further, preferring to die on the spot rather than take another step.

William took stringent measures against the ringleaders. For the first time since they had set out, knights were ignominiously stripped of their rank and paraded through the camp in carts. Squires were decapitated, sergeants whipped. All this was lost effort.

Deep despair had seized the Crusaders who—lost in an unknown country, several months' march from Baghdad—no longer believed in the final victory. Besides, winter was approaching and the prospect of facing its rigors without the least shelter from the cold frightened even the bravest.

Again it was the giant Swiss who saved the situation. Always ready for a scouting expedition, he took long rides through the surrounding countryside, often meeting and doing battle with enemy horsemen. He was always victorious, for even the sharpest arrows could do little against his coat of mail. This enabled him to study the large wild oxen of the country—called "yaks" by the natives—covered with long hair and difficult to capture. They roved the plains in enormous herds. The Swiss privately decided to carry out a great roundup and succeeded in driving an entire herd back to the camp. The arrows and spears of the squires killed several hundred, again ensuring the Crusaders of food.

This time it could not be regarded as mere chance: God, most assuredly, wanted to encourage His faithful servants and William ordered thirty masses of thanksgiving to be said.



In the midst of all this, the Templar of Tyre and the Tholon brothers rejoined the army. The Grand Master immediately heard their report, which gave him much food for thought. On their way back, the ambassadors had received a package, carefully wrapped in yak hides and, when they opened it, they found the heads of the hashshashins previously sent out by William. There was no use then in counting on doing away with the great Khan and, from then on, there would be no more information as to the movement of his troops. . . .

This new setback was a heavy blow to the leader of the Crusade.

Even a visit from Brother Joubert, who came to tell him that he had finally succeeded in generating the fluid needed to operate the transmuter, gave him no joy. The Templar had strung long silver wires between the several terminals, at last successfully producing duplicates of the atomic grenades. Unfortunately, they stubbornly refused to explode. . . . There was still some detail he had not grasped.

Cloistered in his tent, the Grand Master spent his days in prayer, going out only to attend mass, refusing to speak with anyone. . . .

No one paid any heed, for food was abundant again. In addition to the yak meat, hunters were also bringing back musk deer, which tasted delicious roasted on a spit, providing the musk gland near the navel was first removed. They also killed enormous pheasants, which reminded them of other days in the pleasant realms of France or England.

While the army regained its strength, the commander in chief moped in his tent. Finally William actually fell ill, attacked by a high fever. Immediately, doctors were called but they understood little of the nature of the complaint from which he suffered. They prescribed bleeding and the application of plasters which resulted only in unbearable itching.

Everyone grieved. Masses and prayers were said for his recovery but to no avail. Our Lady seemed to have forsaken Her servant. . . .

The Grand Master was greatly affected by all this: possessing a robust constitution, he had never been ill

before and thought that he was going to die at any moment. The Commanders of the troops were therefore called to his bedside to hear his last wishes.

Absolute silence reigned in the camp, everyone speaking in low tones and the servants careful to make no sound in the performance of their duties.

The Commanders of the Temple, Otto of Granson and John of Grailly, knelt by the bed of this illustrious patient. They recited prayers under the direction of a Brother-Chaplain, then William spoke in a weak voice, while his clerk carefully recorded his words:

"Kind Lords, my Brothers, today I was heard in confession and I speak to you with a pure heart, cleansed of all sin. My greatest desire has always been to propagate the word of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and to convert pagans. That is the reason why our forces are now so far removed from our respective countries. Heaven granted me weapons of a power previously unknown and with their help I gained spectacular victories; therefore you must by no means stop on such a promising path. I plead with you to continue our Crusade when the God of all Christians has called me to Him. The first task incumbent upon you is to choose my successor. The Chapter of Commanders will therefore meet and each of you must obey he who will be appointed as you have obeyed me."

He caught his breath and continued, "I know that this election will not comply with the rules laid down by my predecessors, for many Commanders will be unable to attend. The man elected, therefore, will be only an interim Grand Master and his office will be definitely confirmed only when the dignitaries from all Christian kingdoms are able to gather in assembly. I know that he will be capable of doing what is required but his task will be most difficult, for this time the infidels are numberless. They have, besides, their monstrous elephants and we . . . we have only an insufficient quantity of the celestial weapons. . . ."

He took several deep breaths and resumed, "For a time I hoped it would be possible to acquire more by resorting to the subtle mysteries of alchemy, and our devoted Brother Joubert has spent many days and nights working to that end. That hope, up to now, has been disappointed. Therefore you must count only on your courage to win



the victory. Have faith in our Lord and the Blessed Virgin Mary who will not forsake you. . . .”

This speech seemed to have exhausted him: his head fell back and he closed his eyes. Those present thought for a moment that he was about to die, but the strong chest rose and fell regularly.

With tear-filled eyes, they left the tent in total silence.

While the Crusader Commanders held long talks trying to decide if it would not be better to start retreating at once, without waiting for the Grand Master's death, the common soldiers gave themselves up to debauchery. They believed that all was completely lost, for they knew what fearful numbers of troops Kubla had massed against them and held no illusions as to their fate.

The rice wine discovered in peasant huts flowed in abundance and Christian heads reeled under its high alcoholic content. But even worse, the absence of prostitutes led to a wave of sodomy in the camp. Discipline was nonexistent, and if the Mongols had attacked at that moment there would have been no doubt as to the outcome of the battle.

However, the Crusader officers shortly recovered some degree of confidence and authority. Sergeants went through the camp and threw all the drunks they found into a pit, leaving them there for several days without food or drink. The less guilty ones were simply flogged with their stirrup straps. Some Templars caught in the act of debauchery were dropped from the Order and reduced in rank to mere squires. Two unregenerates, who persisted in their erring ways, were beheaded before the whole army. This served as a lesson for the others and the situation soon became normal again.

In the meantime, William—contrary to all expectations—was slowly recovering. Brother Joubert, as a last resort, made him drink a horribly bitter concoction prepared from aromatic barks and red earth from the Indian kingdom of Multifili, to the north of Coromandel. Some caravan merchants had left these with him in gratitude for the hospitality they had received during their stay in the camp, and they had declared that this remedy was sovereign against tertian or quartan agues.

Soon the Grand Master started to eat again and the yak

meat quickly restored all his vigor. The army, of course, saw this as a miracle and everyone recovered, as if by sorcery, all his previous energy. These brave souls had come to know their leader well and had complete confidence in him. Once more William of Beaujeu would lead them to victory.

It was a strange coincidence that on the Mongol side Kubla was also experiencing alternating periods of pessimism and optimism. He went on assembling his regulars and his reserves but remained undecided and could not give the order to leave Chang-Chu. His adversary's lightning worried him much more than he had let William's ambassador know.

Because of this, the great Khan summoned before him everyone who might be able to give him information on the subject. The merchants who came from Mesopotamia by both land and sea were the most explicit. Their reports all agreed: no army, however large its numbers, would have the least chance of victory over the Templars.

The lightning acted in several ways. First, the explosion threw horsemen and foot soldiers to the ground. Those near to it were simply vaporized. The others, seriously burned, died quickly. It also produced a wind of incredible force which could be felt at a considerable distance and which flattened everything in its path. Finally, those survivors who stayed for any time near the craters made by the explosion, even if not significantly wounded, ended by dying of consumption after varying periods of time.

However, one detail of all these reports caught his attention: it seemed to him that several times during the battle of Baghdad the Grand Master had been in perilous situations from which he could have extricated himself by a massive use of his lightning; however, he had not done so.

The unanimous opinion of his counselors was that this proved his adversary must use the weapon carefully because of limited supply.

The problem, then, was to discover how many times the Grand Master could unleash his lightning in the course of a regular battle. No one knew how to find out. . . .

As a precautionary measure, on the advice of one of his Tumens, an officer commanding ten thousand men, Kubla



had ten thousand cassocks made up from salamander—asbestos—for the protection of his personal guard.

He then questioned other travelers as to the size of his opponent's army. All agreed that the Crusaders numbered no more than fifty thousand. This greatly encouraged the great Khan, for his available forces were superior by ten times that figure.

One question discussed at length in the council was that of the use of elephants in the course of such a battle. Opinions were divided: if the pachyderms panicked from the explosions and burns, would they not turn back against their masters? Taking everything into account, a solution was found: the elephants would be blanketed with salamander to protect their flanks and their ears would be plugged with wax.

It seemed that all tactical questions were resolved, and yet the great Khan remained undecided.

The reason was simple: his shamans had practiced their divinations by examining the scapulas of sheep and the results had not been at all favorable. He then called on magicians who, in a trance, communicated with the realm of the dead and their conclusions were unequivocally adverse. Some among them went so far as to claim that the Khan's ancestors were waiting for Kubla's imminent arrival. . . .

Therefore, propitiatory rites were performed. Incense was burned before the ancestor images, while priests did complicated dances around them, grimacing and gnashing their teeth. Horses and slaves were sacrificed, but the dead did not change their views.

Saracen astrologers, highly expert in that art, were then called upon. They were extremely cautious, declaring that the position of the planets in the days to come could give victory to the Templars or to the Mongols.

Nevertheless, a decision must be made for, as the days went by, an increasing number of brawls flared among the warriors of this immense army gathered from vastly different regions.

Princes, Lords and Tumens therefore were asked to agree to a great sacrifice and to contribute either a beloved slave or a favorite horse. The influence of the Khan was such that no one protested: rivers of blood flowed during this holocaust. And finally the diviners declared with joy

that the dead were appeased and promised success to the Mongol forces.

Thanks, in the form of sumptuous gifts to priests, were paid to Natigai, god of Earthly destinies.

All punishments, floggings, the yoke torture or the strappado were suspended. The legions began their march to the place chosen by the commanders of the army, the Noyans, to lie in wait for and destroy the army of insolent fools who dared to soil the empire of Cathay with their feet.



## CHAPTER IX



The Grand Master had now recovered all his accustomed vigor. Because any retreat was next to impossible, the only reasonable solution was to fight—to win. He carefully studied the terrain between the two armies: the only favorable location was near Taichaohsiang. The caravans usually followed that route which passed between a swampy loop of the Hwang Ho (Yellow River) and the Hara Narin Ula Mountains. Since they would again, on this occasion, be facing an opponent superior in number, the wisest course was to position his fifty thousand knights and foot soldiers on high ground where the ballistae could be aimed with precision.

According to merchants traveling the route back to the west, Kubla had not yet left Chang-Chu. By setting out at once and pressing on in forced marches, the occupation of this key position would be feasible. However, before giving orders to break camp, William needed to consult Baphomet.

After a few seconds' wait, the device came to life and Baphomet answered the call, "Well! It's a long time since I last had the pleasure of talking with you, Earthly friend; can it be that you have encountered unexpected difficulties?"

"I certainly have had my share of troubles," the Templar informed him stiffly. "My forces melted away while we were crossing the desert. We have known famine and, to complicate matters, I was the victim of a serious illness."

"Oh? I tend to forget that your race is still subject to many maladies. Unfortunately I can do nothing for you in

this area, for the small store of medications I possess would not do you any good at all. Besides, we are separated by a considerable distance and I have abandoned any hope of flying through the air again. Still, you seem to have recovered complete health?"

"I have indeed, for the Lord decreed that I should continue to lead our Crusade against the unbelievers, and that is what I want to consult you about. Our enemies number close to five hundred thousand, ten times our forces, and my stock of magic weapons is now sufficient. . . ."

"Here again, I regret to say, I cannot help you. You know that when my spacecraft met with this accident I kept an absolute minimum of necessities and I cannot give you any. But you have already proven your abilities as a strategist. Using my grenades judiciously should assure your victory."

"May heaven hear you!" sighed the Grand Master. "You advise me then to seek out this encounter?"

"Most certainly! I promised your predecessors that I would give them the entire world as an empire, and you are nearing that goal. If you are victorious now, no one hereafter will be able to stand in your way."

"Have you consulted your magic devices that foretell the future?"

"Indeed I have, and you have a good chance of winning the day," answered Baphomet, without committing himself.

This evasive response did not satisfy the Templar, but he was unable to extract any further information from the creature. The conversation ended in a rather surprising way.

Suddenly the eyes of the effigy were streaked with a thousand colors and a hypnotic music filled the tent. William, transfixed, barely seemed to breathe.

Then Baphomet continued, "William of Beaujeu, are you prepared to obey me in all things?"

"Yes, Master. . . ."

"You are to go forth and destroy this vermin that attempts to bar your way to the Empire of the World. Then you will govern, under my orders, for the greatest good of all Baphomets."

"I understand."



"Good. You will forget the end of our conversation."

On these words the statue became inactive and the Templar, as though waking from a dream, stretched and yawned.

Some hours later the army formed its long column and set out for Yungchang, the first city on their way to Taichaohsiung. The Tholon brothers, since they already knew the terrain, were in the vanguard and as usual—talking their heads off.

"By dawn!" Clement swore. "I was beginning to rust. I'm not at all sorry to go and give those savages a thrashing. How about you, Guiot?"

"Damned right! Let's finish them off for good. All the same, I have an idea it's not going to be easy. It seemed to me that Kubla was a foxy devil."

"Foxy he may be, but that's not going to save him from croaking just like the others. I swear to God, when that lightning goes off, there'll be meat and guts all over the place. How about it, Garin?"

"I'm not, unfortunately, as optimistic as you, my dear brothers. . . . The great Khan has a well-trained army and his monstrous elephants will be the death of more than one good Christian."

"Rubbish! Are you trying to make me believe their little beasties can stand up to the Archangel Gabriel's lightning?"

"Perhaps you're right," the Templar brother admitted. "However, we'll have to use a lot of the gray spheres to destroy those powerful brutes. Please God we have enough to sow death in the Mongol ranks!"

"What are you saying . . . that the Grand Master doesn't know what he's doing?"

"Our venerable leader has certainly weighed every argument for and against it, but that doesn't change the fact that this battle is going to be far more difficult to win than those before."

"By damn!" said Clement dreamily. "When I remember that palace we visited, I get goose-bumps all over! They say Peking is even more stunning."

"Don't be so easily tempted by the vile pleasures of this world," scolded the Templar. "You tend overmuch to forget that our only goal is to propagate the True Faith."

What kind of an example will you be for the pagans if you lie around in luxury and debauchery?"

"You're right," Guiot mumbled. "We didn't behave very well in Kubla's palace. But you have to admit that those poor girls were pretty upset at the thought that we didn't want to . . . take care of them. . . ."

"Did I yield to temptation?" asked Garin sharply.

"No. Of course not. But you . . . you're practically a saint; and me, I'm only a poor sinner. . . ."

"Well, say your prayers a little more often," his brother snapped. "Wear a haircloth shirt to mortify your flesh if necessary."

"I'll try . . . but it's not my fault that I'm hot-blooded. . . . Say, getting back to the subject of Kubla, is it true that we're going to wait for him at Taichaohsiang?"

"So I've heard."

"Not a bad spot they say. If we can dig in on the slopes, the Mongols will have a hard time driving us out."

"Provided we get there before they do. And the men are dragging their feet. Go and prod them a bit."

Guiot, the Red-Beard, obeyed and his gruff voice thundered at the laggards. He backed his words with some striking arguments and everyone was soon back in place.

And so the army came to Yungchang, where it stayed only long enough for the men to rest a little. Besides, this city too had been destroyed and had no strategic value.

The Crusaders' forced marches brought them to the Hara Mountains before Kubla with time for hurried fortification. They dug trenches at the bottom of the slopes and set the most exposed areas with long, pointed wooden shafts.

The ballistae and mangonels were placed on hilly summits where they could command all sectors. Finally, the last night before the Mongols came in sight, William ordered that hearty rations of yak and game be distributed to all. It was of little importance now that supplies were dwindling: either they would be victorious or they would die. . . .

The great Khan took his ease and hurried nothing. Why should he, when his ancestors had assured him that he would be victorious? Certainly the multitude of his soldiers, his war chariots, his battle-trained elephants carrying archers in turrets, was an extraordinary spectacle. No



one, not even his grandfather, Ghengis Khan, had ever commanded such an army. There was no doubt that the Christian dogs would be annihilated. There would, of course, be losses in the Mongol ranks, caused by their diabolical weapon but that mattered little. The empire of Cathay swarmed with people, and the death of one hundred—or even two hundred—thousand men would not be an irreplaceable loss.

Moreover, he—Kubla—had new and astonishing engines invented by the Chinese savants, whose talents he had stimulated with generous gifts so that their ingenuity had developed fantastic weapons. They were not, certainly, as powerful as those of the Templars; nevertheless, they were valuable assets. Not to mention subtle ruses he intended to use which would give the foreign dogs some difficulties. . . .

The Khan passed that night preceding the battle in his palace at Linho while his troops took positions about the plateau, almost encircling the Crusaders.

He honored, because it pleased him, his favorite wife and in the morning—before daybreak—ate a hearty breakfast. Then, donning his most resplendent robes, he climbed to the tower carried by the strongest of his elephants. From there he could easily survey the battlefield and have an overview of all phases of the engagement.

The mahout started the enormous pachyderm, which—surrounded by the ten thousand men of the Khan's personal guard—majestically took the road to the Hara Mountains. The Khan was exceedingly good-humored: his magicians had once more assured him of the success of this venture. It promised to be a beautiful, clear day. Who could ask for more? During the journey he constantly exchanged pleasantries with the princes who accompanied him.

When he reached the field, he had the satisfaction of seeing the many squadrons all in their planned positions, well beyond the reach of the enemy mangonels.

A small doubt still lurked in a corner of the Khan's mind, however. He was reluctant to launch his troops in a decisive action unless under the most favorable omens. He therefore called a new Tibetan magus before him, a seer of great renown, and asked him if he thought the outcome of the battle would be favorable for him.

The old man did not resort to any of the usual trickery of charlatans. He was a small man with a skin as wrinkled as that of an old apple, and piercing eyes of astonishing acuity. It was said that he had the power to communicate by thought alone with the lamas in the faraway regions from which he came. He could also impose his will on whomever he wished, and make him perform actions of which the temporary slave had not the remembrance.

The Tibetan put himself into a trance: his eyes rolled up, his body was seized with a cataleptic rigidity, then he rose some distance above the ground and floated there, to the great astonishment of everyone present. Presently he sank slowly to the ground, shuddered violently as though he had witnessed mysteries too frightening for the human mind, then said in a low voice:

"Mighty Khan of Khans, you put me to a formidable test. My incorporate being plumbed the limitless spaces between universes and consulted our wise ancestors but it was almost impossible to communicate with the spirits who preside over the destinies of our enemies. A terrifying aura surrounds them. I felt the presence of a malefic creature who subjects them and whose power throws a cloud over the future. Nevertheless, I was vouchsafed a glimpse of this plain covered with dead bodies. . . . I am unable to say which side will be victorious. One thing, however, is certain: your precious days are not in danger."

"That means that we shall win," Kubla exclaimed. "These Templars would certainly not allow me to live if they won the battle. Still, this aura intrigues me greatly. What, in your opinion, is it? Could it be produced perhaps by one of their gods?"

"Absolutely not! I have never encountered such a powerful and malignant spirit: I believe that the creature is a stranger to our world."

"Is it serving them?"

"No indeed. This being serves only its own best interests."

"Good. Why then should we fear it? Go. My Lord High Treasurer will give you twenty stallions from my own stables or, if you prefer, the equivalent in pure gold."

The Tibetan bowed but without servility. Kubla climbed back into his palanquin, the elephants moved forward and



the imperial standard was raised and lowered several times, a signal for the foot soldiers to begin the attack.

Each Tumen passed this order along to his own ten thousand man division, which rushed in a body toward the Christian positions. Like an army of ants, the sea of warriors swarmed up the slopes.

The bravest among the Crusaders felt their throats go dry at the sight of such a multitude. And a horrifying shock was in store. Using a trick common among the Mongols, Kubla had ordered his troops to drive all the Nestorian Christians captured in the destroyed cities before them.

Men, women and children, forced to advance for they were spurred on by the pikes of the foot soldiers, called out to their coreligionists to have pity on them, to save them. . . .

Immediately advised of this, William was faced with a terrifying dilemma. Should he refrain from launching the grenades to avoid killing these fellow creatures who, although considered heretics, were nevertheless Christians?

With bowed head, nervously clasping and unclasping his hands, he remained indecisive for seconds that seemed an eternity. Then, with a sigh, he ordered the mangonel tacticians to launch the projectiles, but behind the wretched flock which, with eyes streaming tears, advanced toward them uttering piteous cries.

At once the deadly mushrooms of smoke and dust rose from among the sea of Mongols, resulting in appalling carnage. In the midst of men so closely massed, the destructive force of the grenades was unbelievable. Fragments of human flesh flew in every direction; severed limbs were thrown with such force that they fell on the horsemen waiting some distance behind the advance line.

Salamander tunics, to some extent, staved off burns, but did not lessen the shock nor other effects of the explosions. When the smoke began to lift, the Crusaders saw all survivors running away at full speed, seized by uncontrollable panic. Some of them even ran past the last lines of reserves and disappeared from the plain, without anyone being able to stop them and bring them back to reason.

From the height of his tower Kubla saw everything. He had expected the enemy weapon to be spectacular, but its

effect was far more horrifying than anything he had been able to imagine. The blinding bolts of lightning, the deafening explosions were something inhuman. Even the elephants trembled, despite the wax plugs in their ears and the mahouts calmed them with difficulty. As for the horses, they reared and bucked in terror, throwing the most expert riders.

Nevertheless, the unfortunate prisoners, almost all of them unhurt, except for a few burns and singed hair, rushed the Christian lines, causing great confusion. They were quickly led to the center of the defense formations where they fell prone with hands pressed to their temples. None of them felt strong enough to go through such an experience again.

For a long time the two adversaries remained alert and expectant. The Crusaders had no wish to abandon their fortified position; as for the Mongols, their ardor was definitely dampened. . . . The Jaghouns—officers commanding one hundred men—ran through the lines threatening and exhorting but with little result.

Kubla himself had to down several cups of wine to recover his self-control; then he consulted with his generals in order to determine whether or not there was still a reasonable chance of being victorious.

All declared unanimously that defeat was certain if the Templars had a large supply of the fiendish weapons. There was, however, one hope: by saturating the battlefield, William of Beaujeu could have completely wiped out the assault waves, but he had launched a relatively small number of explosives. Wasn't this a sign that he did not have many more?

Reassured, the Khan had his own fireworks technicians called to demonstrate to his followers that he, too, possessed powerful magic trickeries.

Powder, which had been known for some time, had been used by the astute philosophers to manufacture self-propelled weapons. Pressed into long bamboo tubes, it was lit at the rear, which had the effect of driving the long shafts forward. In theory, they were designed to reach the Crusaders' positions, then the front part would explode, scattering iron pellets mixed with the powder in all directions. Preliminary tests had been relatively satisfactory except in the matter of length of the slow-burning fuse



used for propulsion. Having no time for further experiments, they had to rely on the results already obtained.

The pyrotechnics fired the primitive rockets which soared gracefully from their launching cradles, leaving sinuous trails of smoke behind them. Unfortunately, some stubbornly refused to leave the ground, exploding without warning and killing some of the artillerymen. Others exploded harmlessly in the air.

These projectiles generated a great deal of smoke but did little damage. In fact, the metal pellets lacked the force to penetrate mail, much less steel helmets. A few Turcoples were wounded, since they were less well-protected; a few horses panicked; nothing really alarming. . . .

Among the Mongols, however, the effect on the general morale was euphoric: from a distance the result appeared identical with that of the Christian explosives, so that all were convinced that they possessed a weapon equal to that of their adversaries.

The Tumens were able to resume command of their divisions; Kubla, however, had no illusions, having clearly seen the laughable effect of his toys, and could not bring himself to order a new assault. After all, the enemy was surrounded: they would be forced to take the initiative since they now had many more mouths to feed, and there was no water on the hilltops. They would have to do something about that. The Khan therefore ordered the foot soldiers to withdraw beyond range of the mangonels, and to wait there.

It was then that the hot-blooded enthusiasm of the Franks and the English almost brought about a catastrophe. Seeing the enemy retreating and wanting to distinguish themselves in battle, they rushed to attack, riding down the slopes at full speed. The Templars alone held their positions.

This charge was a splendid sight: their lances pointed forward, shields against their breasts, helmet plumes whipping in the breeze, armor glistening in the sun, these men of iron appeared invulnerable. The painted coats of arms, the embroidered caparisons blazed with a thousand fires.

Far from opposing their insane thrust, the wily Khan quickly had an opening made in front of them, so that the

brave impetuous knights suddenly found themselves far from their positions.

Then the Asiatic artillerymen began firing their rockets, aiming them along the ground at the legs of the horses. The noble warriors were quickly thrown from their mounts, biting the dust or floundering on their backs like overturned turtles. . . .

Fortunately, they were more frightened than hurt and, by the time the Mongol infantry moved in, the majority were on their feet, their long swords ready for their opponents.

Yet all this seemed bound to end badly, for they were completely cut off. The furious Grand Master was forced to order more grenades launched at the enemy artillery positions, and then a Templar relief sortie.

Again armor glistened and unsheathed swords flashed in the sun. With a cry of "Baussant to the rescue!" the monk-warriors cut through the Mongol ranks like augers in soft wood and reached the Frankish and English squadrons.

Monks or soldiers, in their large white capes with the crimson cross and their square helmets, they were the incarnation of courage and gallantry. With each stroke of their blades, accompanied by a hoarse grunt, a Mongol fell.

At last, the surrounded horsemen were able to mount some of the riderless horses, or climb up behind a Templar. Then, as though on parade, the latter did an about-face, carrying the rescued men back to their own lines.

The total loss of men was negligible but one horse out of three was lost. Some, their bellies cut open by the grapeshot, were still trotting aimlessly, stumbling over their own entrails.

Again calm reigned on the battlefield. Each of the adversaries waited for the other to take the initiative. Finally, Kubla decided the time had come to send in his elephants, hoping that William would exhaust the last stock of his devilish lightning on them.

The Templar was careful not to fall into that trap. He waited until the cohort of monstrous pachyderms was at the foot of the slopes below his fortifications, then set fire to naphtha poured into the trenches dug the previous day.

His stratagem was a complete success. Panicked by the



flames licking their bellies, which were unprotected by the salamander blankets, the elephants—trumpeting in pain—turned and charged the Mongols. . . .

The rout was spectacular! Unfortunately, at that very instant, Commander Thibaud Gaudin, terror-stricken, arrived to tell the Grand Master that a Mongol attack on the other side of the plateau had been launched simultaneously with that of the elephants.

This time it was impossible to resort to tricks. The ballistae again launched their deadly missiles, but Kubla intended to finish off his enemy: he had ordered his officers to kill anyone who tried to flee. The result was that his foot soldiers advanced even with terrible losses. Never-ending streams of Mongols poured over the smoking craters. For every one killed, one hundred more surged up behind him, unceasingly, without respite.

This time the stock of grenades was alarmingly low. With certain death before them, the Grand Master ordered the firing to cease. The Templars grouped together to fight hand to hand until the end.

On another side the Mongol cavalry had attacked again and the outnumbered Christian horsemen were falling back. The situation was fast becoming desperate. . . .

As far as the eye could see the plain was teeming with the enemy.

The Crusaders had only one hope left: to kill, kill and kill again, to sell their lives dearly until they were engulfed by this human tide.

It was then that one—two—ten—a hundred atomic explosions ravaged the rear lines of the enemy. One after another, without interruption, the mangonels loaded, firing as though they had boundless reserves. William thought he must be dreaming. Lowering his bloody sword, he left the front line and made his way to the mangonels.

There he found a triumphant Brother Joubert producing endless new grenades from the duplicator that at last worked again.

Now every mangonel and ballista was in action. The bravery, however legendary, of the Mongols could not hold under such carnage. They stampeded. The range of the mangonels was increased.

In the distance, the Grand Master could make out the mahouts attempting to curb the elephant on which Kubla's

turret was perched, but in vain. The canopy of colored silks plunged to the ground.

A charge of knights carrying grenades forced their way through the ranks of survivors and reached the Khan of Khans. Kubla, dusty, bruised but unharmed, was taken prisoner. Completely broken by such misfortunes, he was put in chains and brought back to William of Beaujeu without having quite realized the extent of his defeat. . . .

That same evening the Crusaders discovered with delight the thousand refinements of an imperial palace with its gracious courtesans.



## Epilogue



Well-served by his good fortune and his courage, William of Beaujeu would, from that time onward, possess the most extensive empire ever conquered by a single man.

No one would ever dare to oppose him: the report of his victory spread throughout all Asia like wildfire. Kaidu and General Nayan, until then living in expectation of a different outcome, arrived to offer their submission.

The proud Sung dynasty, which still dominated the southern regions of Cathay, sent an ambassador to bring him the keys to their capital, Hangchow. The commanders of the Karakorum and Peking garrisons did the same. Now the Grand Master completed his conquests without making a move.

However, he could not keep his faithful supporters at his side, for the management of such vast territories demanded trustworthy overseers. Therefore, he put the former Khanate of Kaidu and all the realm of Transoxiana in the care of his Marshal, the valiant Peter of Sevry. John of Grailly, who seemed to be on hot coals, seized the first opportunity to board a vessel bound for Basra, where his beloved princess waited for him.

On the other hand, the fiery temperament of Otto of Granson would allow him no satisfaction in the luxury of a palace with prospects of nothing but peace. He therefore assembled a fleet and, at the head of his English knights joined by Mongol mercenaries, sailed to conquer the fabulous island of Japan.

The Templar from Tyre remained at the side of his

leader to set down the chronicle of his epic crusade, already legendary.

Among all those who survived these memorable adventures, the most astonished was Kubla. After his capture the Khan of Khans expected his vanquisher to have him executed. The Grand Master, quite to the contrary, treated him with great honor, learned his language and spent long evenings talking with him. The Mongol was permitted to keep his private quarters, his wives, and was given a lavish allowance. There was a single, minor restriction: a guard commanded by Garin with the assistance of his two brothers kept the Khan under surveillance night and day.

During the course of one of their friendly discussions, Kubla asked the Templar how the magical weapons which gave him the victory had come into his possession. William hesitated an instant, then told him the exact circumstance of the finding of Baphomet, the past alliance with him and the gift of the atomic grenades, passing silently over the existence of Brother Joubert's precious duplicator.

The Mongol was extremely astonished to learn in this way of otherworldly beings who, to him, were nothing but demons inhabiting inaccessible heavenly bodies. However, the frankness of his new friend moved him to tell of the revelation made before the battle of Taichaohsiang by the Tibetan magus.

Now it was William's turn to be dumbfounded. According to this seer, he, the Grand Master of the Templars, was nothing but a puppet in the hands of Baphomet. Reason enough for him to be stunned.

Until now his relations with the creature lurking in the tarn had seemed to him to be entirely to his advantage, since he believed that he held the demon at his mercy. Actually, only the food faithfully supplied each day by the Templars of Pinay or Beaulieu allowed Baphomet to survive. The Grand Master had always believed that putting an end to that service would be sufficient to bring the mysterious being to terms. And now someone had revealed that he was the dupe, that his so-called captive held him under a spell, thanks to his astonishing psychic powers.



William could not believe it was true. Yet, turning the matter over in his mind, he remembered how Brother Joubert had been subjected. Perhaps, after all, there was some truth in what this foreign magician said. Inquiry revealed that the Tibetan was still in the palace and William sent for him that he might question him further.

'As soon as he was shown in, the lama showed the perceptive nature of his mind by declaring:

"Puissant Master of the Templars, you acted wisely in calling me before you. On numerous occasions I have attempted to warn you but each time your door was barred to me. You are under the sway of a devilish creature who uses you for his own evil purposes. All your actions are directed by him, for he hopes his own kind will find him and plans for the day when this alien race will spread over all the Earth, reducing humans to slavery, as he has already done to you."

"You seem indeed to be endowed with strange talents," William mused, "but furnish no proof of your words. They amount to no more than the conjectures that any charlatan might make."

"Well, then, is it not true that you communicate with this treacherous being by means of effigies in his likeness which transmit your words over lands and oceans?"

"I cannot deny it."

"Further, do you not believe that you hold him in your power because he would have nothing to eat if it were not for your help?"

"You are quite right but, since you know it, you must have read my thoughts."

"Now that you finally recognize my powers, I am going to try to help you prevent what would be, if he is not overthrown, an appalling catastrophe for the people of this world. Each time you have talked with this alien he has commanded you to forget a part of his words, which are deeply buried in your memory. I have been able to discover what they are, in this way confirming that you have only an illusion of power: the evil mind of Baphomet holds you captive!"

The Grand Master was silent, overwhelmed. Was he indeed no more than a willing tool manipulated by Baphom-

et? Was the propagation of the True Faith, which he had considered his sole objective, no more in fact than a cover-up, masking a vast enterprise of conquest, the only beneficiary of which would be this stranger? Unthinkable . . . still, the Tibetan appeared to know his most carefully hidden secrets. . . . Well, then, face reality, no matter how abhorrent it might be. This did explain a number of strange facts: Baphomet's close confinement had always seemed inexplicable to him, since that accursed being could leave his protective sphere by using hermetic armor. But the creature had no need at all to move about the Earth since the Templars, no matter how far away, acted according to his will. Further, others had suspected this: the Grand Master of the Hospitalers had believed that the gift of the famous lightning was nothing but a demoniacal stratagem.

William's pride kept him from voicing his immense confusion. Then Kubla put a friendly hand on his shoulder and declared, "I know what you feel . . . believe me, it took every effort for me to accept the loss of an empire bequeathed me by my ancestors.

"Your nobility of spirit made me your counselor, rather than reducing me to slavery. You must believe this Tibetan seer and act according to his directions in order to save Earth's people. Whether they have white, yellow or black skins, their destiny lies in your hands."

"What do you propose?" The Grand Master's question was little more than a whisper.

"I have carefully considered this grievous problem, for I knew that one day you would ask me that question," replied the lama. "Your weapons, however formidable, cannot be used against Baphomet because a magic circle protects him, both him and his ship. To defeat him, there exists but one means: to subjugate his mind as he has yours, and then kill him. To that end, I have already brought together a certain number of sages, possessing—like me—great psychic powers. By joining our abilities, perhaps we can bring him to quarter. This is how we will proceed: you must contact this demon, as usual, using his effigy. Then we will make a surprise attack, following the channel of the path that allows him to talk with you. I hope to win out because he will have no time to set up



counter forces. This will demand a considerable effort from us and I am not at all certain of success. However, we have no choice. . . .”

“Let us try. You have succeeded at least in convincing me: it shall be done as you wish.”

The lamas then took their places in the room where the transmitter was kept. Brother Joubert stood by to cut communications immediately if anything went wrong, then William made the connection.

The Tibetans, motionless, with fixed stares, seemed lost in a state of suspended life-functions.

Suddenly the effigy came to life and Baphomet declared:

“Well, William, you have neglected me . . . but surely you are rested from your labors now. You must end your inaction and come back to France in order to let your king know that, here also, you are the master. You are going. . . .”

His speech ended abruptly on those words.

Flashes of light streaked the large eyes of the effigy.

William felt an excruciating pain in his head, then the lights flickered and suddenly went out. The Templar pressed a hand to his forehead in an attempt to drive out the stabbing torment. Grimacing in agony, he leaned toward the baleful eyes of the effigy. A large room bathed in a reddish glow could just be distinguished. Its walls were lined with strange devices, completely meaningless to him. On the floor, motionless, lay a hideous dwarf with two short horns on his forehead and two wings on his back. One might have thought it a cathedral gargoyle. Suddenly he was struck by all the horror of it. His liberated mind finally realized that he had indeed been the plaything of a being compared with whom the Grand Master was as weak as a child.

The Tibetans lay exhausted on the ground, suffering from the recoil of the frightful struggle. The sweat ran from their wrinkled faces. At last, their leader sat up and muttered:

“Well, the demon is dead! The struggle was more difficult than I would have believed: it missed failing by a very thin line. . . .”

"How can I ever thank you?" exclaimed the Grand Master. "You have set me free! May heaven bless you!"

"We ask nothing of you. Be lenient with your subjects and never forget that the universe is peopled with mischievous demons who seek only to delude poor humans. . . ."

And so it was that Baphomet lost his empire.

The lamas, loaded with honors, returned to their far-off native land. Brother Joubert would gladly have accompanied them, but William had need of him.

Racked by the fear of one day seeing demons arrive from sidereal space to invade the Earth, he wanted above everything else to penetrate the secrets of the spacecraft hidden in the marsh. At his order, the Commander of Pinay removed it from the muddy bottom with aid of teams of horses, and a convoy carried it to Aigues-Mortes, where it was loaded on a ship.

Arriving at Alexandretta, it was carted to far-off Cathay, as easily as the ship of the Syrian desert treads the sands.

The learned Brother Joubert, having become expert in such matters, discovered the secret of the engine's magnetic seal with little difficulty. Thanks to the remains of this second Baphomet spacecraft, he had high hopes of being able to build a vessel suitable for navigating the vast spaces of the skies, and the Polo brothers asked only to be aboard on that voyage!

Often, when William of Beaujeu contemplated the rising of the two moons of his planet, one rose-colored, the other alabaster, he asked if the God of the Universe would allow this to happen. . . .

The ways of the Lord are inscrutable: thus, in a parallel universe where the sun rises in the east, the Earth has only one satellite. There, history such as that recorded by the Templar from Tyre is quite different. On May 18, 1275, William of Beaujeu was killed at Acre, defending the Accursed Tower, for he did not have access, alas, to any atomic explosives.

John of Grailly, grievously injured, embarked with extreme appropriateness on a ship, in company with Otto of Granson and the Grand Master of the Hospitalers, wounded by a bolt from a crossbow.



Marshal Peter of Sevry and Commander Thibaud Gaudin, defeated by the Sultan, perished under the debris of the chapter house-fortress of the Temple in company with two thousand Mamelukes.





# CRUSADERS OF THE ATOM

Are there parallel dimensions in which history turned out differently? Are there other universes with other Earths where the alternates became the realities? Here is an exciting science fiction novel of such an historical by-pass. Told with the color and romance of the Crusades, reminiscent of the work of Harold Lamb and L. Sprague de Camp, what would have happened had the Knights Templars really made the demoniac alliance claimed by their royal rivals? The "demon" was Baphomet—a stranded extra-terrestrial—and his alliance gave the Templars the atomic arms and scientific equipment to create the empire Baphomet needed for his own outer-space motives. Pierre Barbet, one of the Old World's most popular science fiction authors, has created a fascinating and authentically researched novel of the empire upon which our sun never rose.

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