

DURANDAL

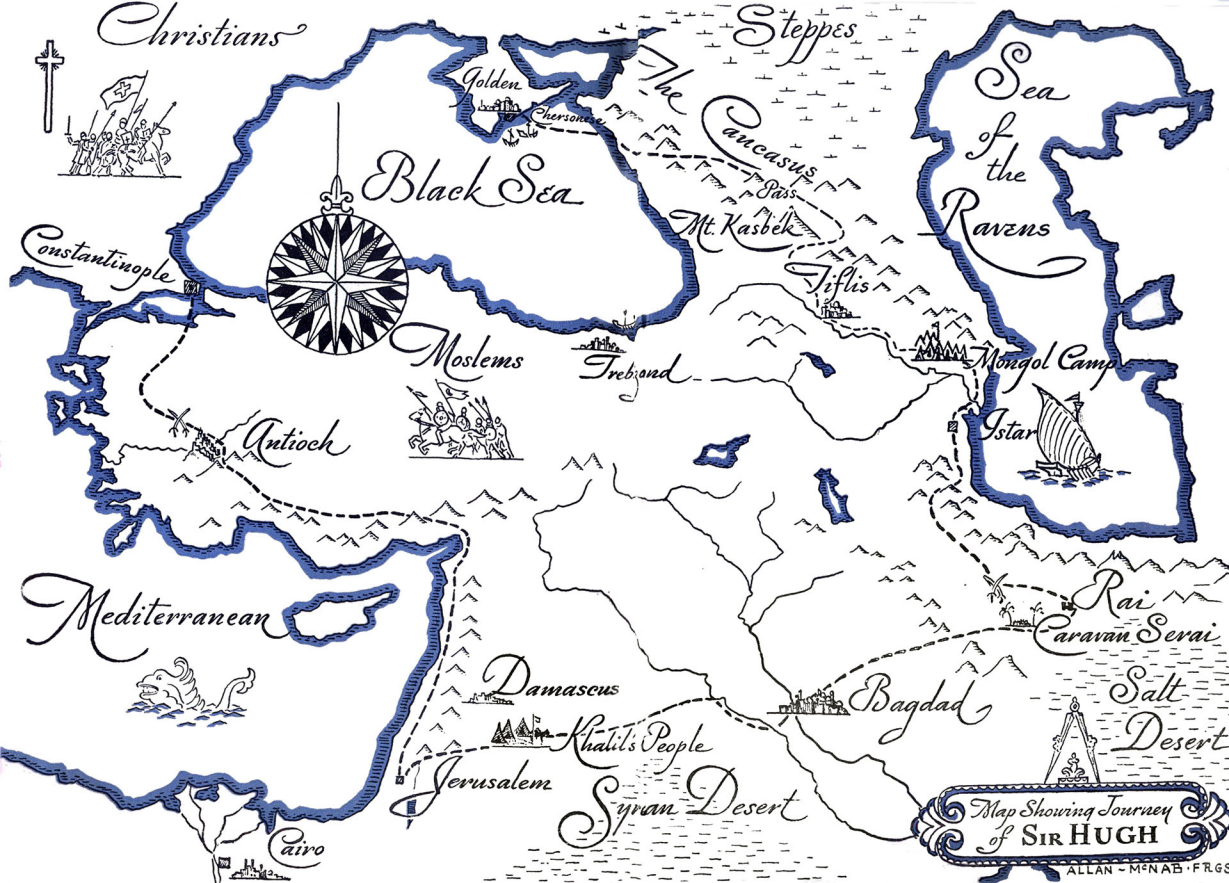
A Crusader in the Horde

by

HAROLD
LAOMB



Illustrated by Allan McNab



Christians



Steppes

Sea of the Ravens

Black Sea



Golden

Chersonese

The Caucasus

Pass

Mt. Kasbek

Tiflis

Mongol Camp



Constantinople

Moslems



Trebond

Antioch

Mediterranean



Damascus

Khalil's People

Jerusalem

Bagdad

Rai Caravan Serai

Salt Desert

Syrian Desert

Cairo

Map Showing Journey of SIR HUGH

ALLAN - McNAB - FRG

DURANDAL
A Crusader in the Horde

BOOKS BY
HAROLD LAMB

Iron Men and Saints

Genghis Khan

Tamerlane

House of the Falcon

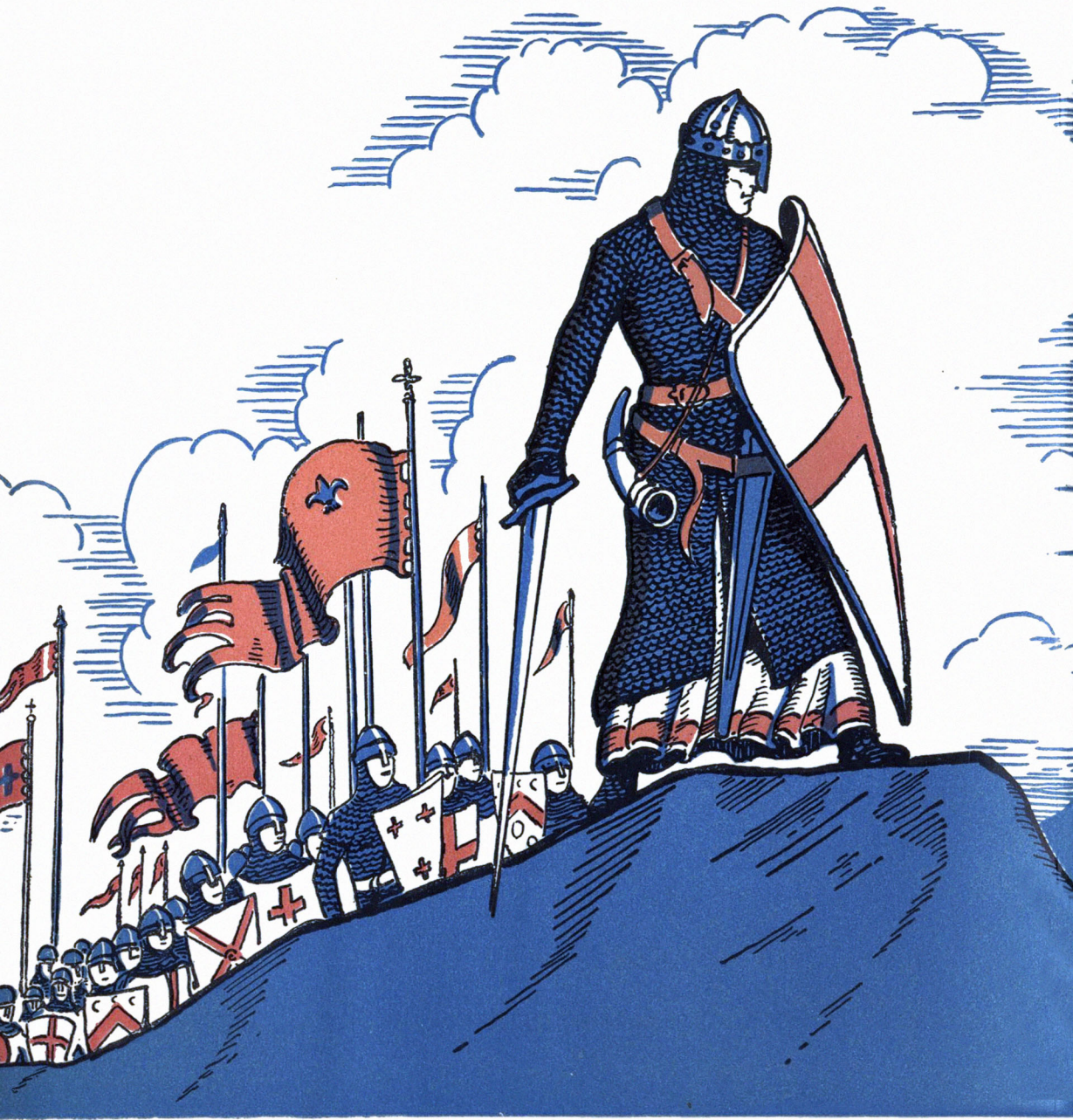
Marching Sands

White Falcon

The Crusades

The Flame of Islam

Durandal



SIR HUGH MOUNTED THE CREST OF THE RIDGE, SEEING IN THAT INSTANT THE FULL POWER OF KAI-KOSRU.

DURANDAL

A Crusader in the Horde

BY
HAROLD LAMB

ILLUSTRATED BY
ALLAN McNAB



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THIS BOOK
IS DEDICATED TO
MY DAUGHTER, CARY
WHO WISHED TO HEAR MORE ABOUT
THE SWORD OF ROLAND

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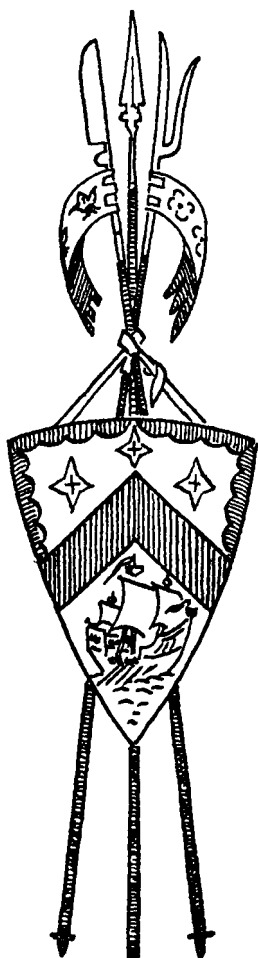
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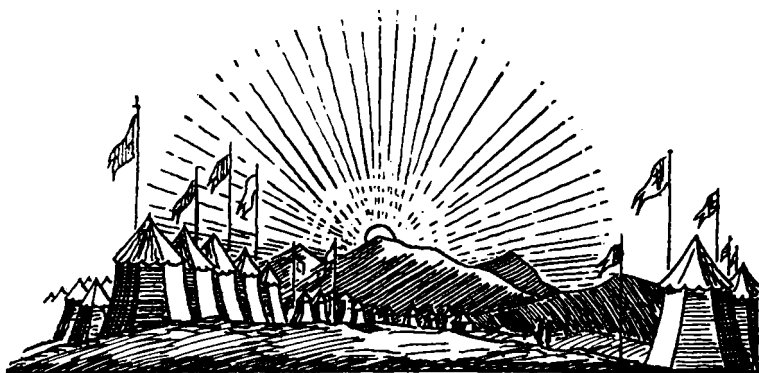
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Sir Hugh mounted the crest of the ridge, seeing in
that instant the full power of Kai-Kosru *Frontispiece*

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DURANDAL
A Crusader in the Horde





CHAPTER I

SIR HUGH IS CHOSEN

*It hurts not the sword that its sheath be worn,
nor the hawk that its nest be mean.*—MAQAMAT OF
HARIRI.

MAVROZOMES pushed back the flap of his tent and looked at the stars. Dawn was only three or four hours off, and he had a task to finish before the first light. Always, before a battle, Mavrozomes had this task.

He took up the insignia of his office, which was armor to the Emperor Theodore of Constantinople. The silver hammer he thrust into his belt, and the white leather glove likewise. Mavrozomes was a creature of habit.

Through the mist of the ravine he watched the red eyes of light that were the fires of the men-at-arms, and

he sighed. Ten thousand men lay or sat by their weapons in this ravine, and from the ten thousand he must select one. This was his task, and it troubled him.

He had put off doing it until he heard the advance division getting their horses out of the lines, stumbling about in the mist, and talking low-voiced. If the advance was mounting to move forward, there would surely be a battle, because Sultan Kai-Kosru lay yonder in the plain, beyond the ravine, with a good many more than ten thousand paynims.

In his own mind Mavrozomes was not quite clear as to whether the paynims were Turks or Arabs; but he knew very well they were Muhammadans—bearded gentlemen who wielded curved swords that had keen edges.

Somewhere in the plain was a small river called the Meander, and on the river a walled town. The town was Antioch and belonged to Sultan Kai-Kosru, and this town the crusaders meant to take for themselves before the sun had set again. Mavrozomes wished that the páynims were not so numerous—or that the Emperor Theodore had decided not to give them battle.

There was little chance of the helm or hauberk of the Emperor Theodore suffering harm on the morrow—so the armorer reflected. His work had been to polish, not to mend, his master's chain mail.

Theodore Lascaris, the gracious, the all-governing, the lord of Constantinople and Nicea, would not be within reach of sword edge or arrow tip on the morrow. But the paynims would seek him, and for this reason—and to hearten the Emperor's men—someone else must wear the gold inlaid armor of Theodore, the surcoat

with the royal purple border, and the shining helm surmounted by the griffon crest.

Behind the bars of the steel casque the face of this unknown would not be seen. The foeman would notice him, would seek him out and perhaps slay him. But the person of the real Emperor Theodore would be safeguarded.

It was not a simple matter to select this make-believe monarch. The man would need to be a weapon wielder of skill and daring to keep safe the imperial standard that would follow him through the course of the battle. He must be a man of clear mind and tight lip, and one who could hold up hand and head in chaos. Certainly many of the crusaders would believe that he was actually the Emperor Theodore.

Since the odds were he would not live to see the sun set, he must needs be a man of courage.

So Mavrozomes reasoned, and made his way past the snoring and growling ribalds who tended fires and horses and stole what they might. He avoided the groups of sergeants-at-arms. The mock Emperor should be of gentle blood.

He circled around the pavilions of the nobles, before which motionless banners drooped. Once a lantern was swung close to his face, and he waited until the patrol had clanked and stumbled away into the mist. He waited because, in the gleam of light, he had seen a man sitting on a stone.

Mavrozomes had never before seen a man just like this one, who sat alone in the mist. A long staff, iron-bound, lay across his bare knees, and his long, loose-jointed arms rested upon the staff. He wore a short,

sleeveless shirt of clumsy plate mail. Over this a cloak was thrown carelessly, and the cloak was white with a gold clasp at the throat and a hood upon the shoulders.

"What man are you?" asked the armorer.

It was clear to him that this stranger did not wear a knight's belt, and the only weapon hanging from his leather girdle was a short falchion with a horn handle, little larger than a knife.

The stranger did not look up.

"I am Donn Dera."

Soft as a woman's was his low voice. But his face was dark and bony, the hair shaggy over eyes and forehead—shaggy and fiery red.

"What lord do you follow?" demanded Mavrozomes, who was plagued by a demon of curiosity. "What do you here?"

By the voice of the stranger, he was neither Greek nor Italian, Fleming nor Frenchman. His hairy, withe-bound legs were like a thrall's, and he certainly had no helmet about him anywhere. Nor upon his cloak was there any sign of the cross worn by every follower of the Emperor Theodore.

"I wreak destruction. Yea, I look for rapine."

Mavrozomes stepped back a pace, but the man in the cloak appeared to take no heed of him. About the stranger was something sad and lonesome and unyielding. Thralls did not speak to the armorer of the Emperor like that.

"Are you noble born, Donn Dera?" asked Mavrozomes. For a space the stranger made no reply.

Then he pointed toward the faint glow where the stars were failing.

"Yea," he said gruffly, as if giving tongue to the burden of his thoughts, "the day comes, and there will be a rare feeding of ravens and whetting of sword edges—there will be sorrow and blood that the wolves will drink. I have no more words for you, little man."

Reminded of his mission and the passing of time, Mavrozomes stifled curiosity and hurried on. Glancing over his shoulder he saw that Donn Dera was still sitting on his stone, alone in the chilling mist.

Mavrozomes picked his way through the tents and the sleeping groups to the fires of the Franks.

These Franks, following their custom, had settled themselves at a little distance from the warriors of the Emperor Theodore. Eight hundred of them, from France and Norman England and Flanders had joined the master of Constantinople in his march against the Saracens. They were the flower of his fighting men—long-limbed and high-tempered—utterly reckless of themselves or others.

He asked his way, and so came to a fire where a dozen men roared over wine cup and dice board. They greeted him with an instant's silence and then quick outcry.

"Ho, the pagan gods have sent a messenger! Here is Thor with his hammer."

"Nay—Saint Denis!—only mark the gauntlet. He has been flying pigeons!"

A dark-browed Provençal—a minstrel, by token of the gittern resting upon one knee—smiled and swept skilled fingers across the strings.

"Messers," cried he, "attend yel!" And he pitched his fine voice to a ringing couplet:

*"His hair is oiled—painted his cheeks.
A paladin he—of the Greeks!"*

"Well and truly sung, Marcabrun!" declared a giant Frank solemnly when the roar of mirth had subsided. "You have put heart into yon baron of Constantinople. I trow he'll make a brave stand in the camp when we fare forth to smite the Saracens."

In truth, blood had darkened the smooth cheeks of Mavrozomes. The Frank's held the fighting qualities of the Greeks in as much contempt as the men of Constantinople held the savage manners of the crusaders from the west, whom they called barbarians.

"Enough!" cried a young knight suddenly. "See ye not, messers, this armorer bears the insignia of his office?"

The speaker was a youth who had grown to the full strength of manhood. He had put aside his mail and knelt by the fire in stained and creased chamois leather, scarred and rent in more than one place. Broad black leather strengthened by silver plates belted him above slender hips. His long body upbore the chest and wide shoulders of a man accustomed to the weight of armor.

Wide and firm-set were his lips, and friendly his gray eyes. There was in him more than abundant physical vitality—the eagerness and willfulness of a boy who has never known shame. This beauty of head and bearing—

or the peculiarity of his long, red-gold hair—had bestowed upon him the nickname of Hugh the Fair.

Him Mavrozomes saluted profoundly, and his boisterous companions were silent.

"To Sir Hugh of Taranto, called the Fair peer of Christendom, most puissant of the knights of the Cross, descendant by direct line of Charlemagne the Great," he began.

"Enough!" cried the youth again, ill pleased. "What will ye, Messer Armorer?"

Mavrozomes drew the white gauntlet from his girdle, arousing the instant expectancy of the Franks. Although he knew well that these barbarians from over the sea were not at all patient, he did not know how to curtail his ceremonious message.

"*Equites illustrati*," he announced, "noble knights, Mavrozomes, *armiger imperatoris*, gives greeting and a summons to Sir Hugh from the most illustrious, most gracious Emperor—" he lifted the light silvered basinet from his head, and the giant Frank sniffed loudly, aware of musk and oil—"Theodore Lascaris—" he bent his head, throwing up his left hand before his eyes as if dazzled by the very mention of the imperial name—"in this wise. To Sir Hugh hath fallen the honor above price and claim, the distinction of bearing upon his person the imperial and shining helm, the emblazoned shield of the Emperor, so that in the battle with the Saracens of Kai-Kosru, the great Sultan, he shall worthily uphold the name and honor of the Emperor, strike fear into his foes, and by so doing safeguard the person of Theodore. I await, Sir Hugh, your answer to the summons."

The eyes of the youth kindled, and he struck palm to the massive pommel of the sword at his side.

"It likes me well, Messer Mavrozomes!"

The Greek bowed.

"Thus, the charge is accepted. The imperial standard will accompany you. And it would be advisable," he added thoughtfully, "to choose certain of your brother knights renowned by name and deeds to act as body-guard. Of a truth, the Saracens will not deal lightly with you and your fellows, my lord."

He could have said nothing better suited to the mood of the men. The minstrel cried that he would ride with Sir Hugh. Only the bearded stalwart, the knight who had baited Mavrozomes, frowned blackly and stood up, folding his arms on his chest.

"It likes me ill, Greek. I have fought ere now with sword and lance and mace against the Saracens. And I wit well that they will make a set upon Sir Hugh. Hath not your emperor men of valor to his command that he summons a boy such as this to a passage perilous?"

To this Marcabrun took exception.

"Ill said, Rinaldo! Were the Emperor to give this honor to a Greek, it would be an affront upon us."

"Now out upon thee, Marcabrun," retorted Rinaldo, "with thy qualms and punctilios! If affront it be to choose a Greek for the mock Emperor, I say this—when the battle is at an end we will go over to the Greeks and wipe out the affront with our swords."

"Hast forgotten, Rinaldo," quoth the minstrel, "that we have sworn fellowship with the Greeks and service to the Emperor?"

"Well, we did not swear we would not draw blade upon them." And the bearded Rinaldo glared at Mavrozomes. "I have said it likes me ill, and what I say I will maintain with hand and glove. Full well the cowardly Greeks know that this adventure will give Hugh's flesh to the wolves and ravens."

"Too much have you said, unwisely, Rinaldo," cried Hugh. "Theodore is our leader in this venture, and his men are our brothers-in-arms. It is their thought to do honor to the Franks."

"If ever a Greek thought of aught but his own skin and wallet," quoth Rinaldo stubbornly, "then am I a cup-shot churl."

"Messers," spoke up a man who had been silent hitherto—a gray-chinned Norman, blind in one eye—"it is true that among the Crosses there is no baron the equal of Sir Hugh. His valor and prowess at arms is proven. Methinks the honor would be greater did this Theodore yield to him the baton and horn of leadership in this battle. Right willingly would all the Christian knights follow Hugh in that case."

"Ay," shouted Rinaldo, "let it be so! The Greeks shall give the command to Hugh."

Mavrozomes raised his hands in horror, as if he had witnessed sacrilege.

"O ye peers of Christendom!" laughed the minstrel. "Are ye querulous churls, or men of faith? Theodore is crafty and wise in leadership. Have ye followed him a hundred leagues into Asia, to bay at him now, like dogs?"

"Wherever your folly leads you, Marcabrun," declared the morose Norman, "my step shall go as far as

yours. But Theodore is a fox with an eye to his burrow. If it suited him, he would betray us."

"To whom?" exclaimed the minstrel. "To the jackals and kites? To the Saracens, who hate him in greater measure than they fear us?"

Hereupon Hugh picked up his leather-bound sword, and lifted his hand.

"An end of words! We must bear ourselves so that no foeman comes anear the person of the true Emperor, and this we shall do right willingly."

"Ay, so," muttered Rinaldo, "we shall so bear us, by God's grace. And before we mount into the saddle, Theodore shall have proof of our will."

And when Hugh had departed with Mavrozomes, Rinaldo summoned to him the men who had gathered around the fire, hearing rumor of the choice that had fallen upon the young knight. To them the big Frank spoke earnestly, low-voiced, and there was no more roaring of songs or clinking of cups.

In the tent of the armorer, Marcabrun, the Provençal, fingered his guitar in high good humor. Marcabrun was already armed, and he followed with experienced eye the fingers of Mavrozomes, who had slipped over the stalwart body of Hugh a double chain mail threaded with gold inlay. From foot to throat the young knight was clad in the glistening mesh. Mavrozomes buckled on him the wide sword belt of the knight, and laced to the steel collar of the hauberk the unmistakable helm of the Emperor Theodore.

It pleased the minstrel that this casque should be in-

laid with gold and surmounted by a cleverly fashioned griffon with flaming rubies for eyes. The two cheek plates and the long nasal piece hid Hugh's features except for eyes and chin. But Marcabrun did not think the shining helm would ward as stout a blow as his own plain conical steel cap.

When the long triangular shield, emblazoned with the Greek cross on a purple field, was slung about the youth's neck, the minstrel gave voice to his delight.

"Olá, messers!" he cried. "It were well that this hour should be rendered joyous with a fitting lay."

"What were better," ventured the armorer courteously, "than the illustrious song of the Franks, of the hero Roland and his sword?"

A shadow crossed the minstrel's brow.

"God forfend! Roland, the peer of Charlemagne, came to death by treachery in a day ago—ay, and the chivalrous Olivier, his brother-in-arms."

"There is no song like Roland's," said Hugh calmly. "I know it well. Sing, O Marcabrun, for this is a joyous hour."

For a moment the minstrel scanned his friend, thinking that the erect form of the youth made a finer figure in the imperial armor than the lean and stooped Theodore. Smiling, he struck the strings under his hand, and the Greeks fell silent to listen.

"It is the prelude of the great battle that I say and relate," he chanted. "Give heed, O noblemen and lieges, to the words of Roland, in the vale of Roncevalles, on the day that Charlemagne passed with his peers through the

Pyrenees, and the two heroes held safe the rear of his host :

*“Olivier climbed to a mountain height,
Glanced through the valley that lay to right;
He saw advancing the Saracen men,
And thus to Roland he spake again—*

“I have seen the paynim,” said Olivier.

*“Never on earth did such host appear;
A hundred thousand, with targets bright,
With helmets laced and hauberks white,
Erect and shining their lances tall;
Such battle as waits you did ne’er befall.
In mighty strength are the heathen crew,”
Olivier said, “and our Franks be few;
My comrade, Roland, sound on your horn;
Charles will hear, and his host return.”*

*“‘I were mad,’ said Roland, ‘to do such deed;
Lost in France were my glory’s meed.
My Durandal shall smite full hard,
And her hilt be red to the golden guard.
The heathen foemen shall find their fate,
Their death, I swear, in the pass they wait——’ ”¹*

A swift roar of voices interrupted the measured tones of the minstrel, and a thudding of hoofs and grating of steel were heard without the tent. Rinaldo thrust in his head, coifed and helmeted.

¹The quotation from “The Song of Roland” are from the translation by John O’Hagan in *The Harvard Classics Series* used by permission of Lathrop, Lee & Shepard Company.

"Well and truly sung, Marcabrun. The Crosses have sent hither a bodyguard and await sight of Hugh. Come!"

Going from the tent with the young knight, Marcabrun saw that a gray light overhung the dark ravine, and in the mist he made out a forest of spears. A close array of mounted men surrounded them, and Hugh's battle horse was held in readiness before them. All the eight hundred crusaders had assembled to accompany Hugh, instead of the small band suggested by Mavrozomes.

The knight in the imperial armor halted as if struck when he beheld them, and Rinaldo laughed under his breath.

"Lo, sir brother, here is thy bodyguard, and if this day thou art slain, full eight hundred bold men will bear thee company."

Sir Hugh looked silently upon the restless war horses, the rows of grim-faced warriors. He went to his charger, picked up the curved horn that hung from its chain at the saddle peak, and sounded a blast that echoed from rock to rock in the ravine—a rallying note that the archers who had gone forward in the first advance heard and understood.

But Mavrozomes slipped from his tent and ran, a shadow moving through the mist, to where a light Arab courser had been saddled and kept waiting in readiness. Mounting hastily, he trotted through the encampment of the Greeks—as the followers of the Emperor Theodore were called.

Where a wall of cloth had been stretched across the

ravine he dismounted and approached two spearmen in silvered mail, who lifted their weapons as he gave the password. At the entrance of a silk pavilion he was scrutinized sharply by the guards and recognized. Taking on one arm his basinet, he raised high his right arm and empty hand, and, bending forward at the waist, crept as a jackal crawls into the presence of Theodore Lascaaris, the Emperor.

When he beheld under his feet a long, narrow carpet, he bent still lower and drew his right arm across his eyes. Sidewise, he peered at the gilded sandals, the long cloth hose of Greek attendants, until he judged it was time to speak. There had been a deep silence in the pavilion.

"Is it permitted, O greatest of the Comneni, to speak and live? The servant of thine Illustriousness hath gained the consent of the most renowned of the Franks, who now goes forth in thine armor——"

"What was the trumpet call?"

A quick, modulated voice asked the question.

"May it please your Grandeur, that was the rallying note, to announce the advance of the Frankish crusaders. From horse sergeant to baron, they ride forth, led by the champion who is garbed for the day in thy royal semblance—may thy years be increased!

"To them likewise I gave thine order, that they should pass from the ravine and attack, and that thy host would follow——"

Mavrozomes paused, to discover if his master wished him to proceed, and again he took account of legs to make certain that no hostile ear should hear what next he said.

"It has happened in all things as thou hast desired it. Lo, the Franks go against the Sultan and his array. The Saracens will be confounded by the onset of the barbarians. There will be a slaughter and a ceaseless play of weapons. When the day is near its end, then may the invincible host of the Emperor advance to victory."

"Ay," said the reflective voice, "it is well done. And yet—will not the Franks turn back when they find they are not supported by my companies?"

"Turn back they will not. They are like unleashed hunting hounds at scent of a stag. Their champion may be smitten down, their standards reft from them, and still they that breathe will fight on. It is the nature of the barbarian."

Another voice was heard, modulated and unctuous as a flute attuned to the ear of a musician:

"May I, the Cæsar¹ of your Grandeur, speak and live? When the imperial host advances upon the broken Saracens, a remnant of the barbarians may yet stand in arms. *Imperator Maximus*, it were well that *none* should outlive this day."

"Ay, great Lord," put in Mavrozomes eagerly, "the barbarians have blunt tongues and scurrilous. Not an hour ago they did blaspheme thy Majesty——"

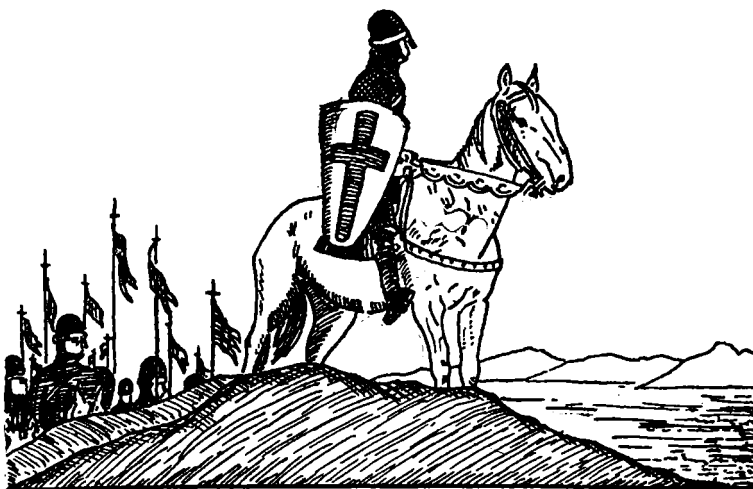
¹Cæsar—The Greek Empire was the last fragment of Roman dominion, comprising, in the early thirteenth century, what is now the Balkans, Greece, the eastern islands of the Mediterranean, and Asia Minor, along the coast of the Black Sea, and as far to the south as Palestine. Constantinople was its imperial city.

It had been ruled for centuries by the family of the Comneni. Now the warlike Seljuk Turks had settled themselves in the heart of Asia Minor.

"Thy mission is accomplished, Mavrozomes," the cryptic voice of the Emperor broke in. "Take care to guard thy tongue!"

Not once had the armorer looked up into the lean and pallid face of Theodore Lascaris. He did not see the tawny eyes pucker thoughtfully, or the down-curving lips tighten. Yet he heard the unmistakable clink of gold coins.

Theodore, weighing within his fingers a small purse that lay in an ivory casket at his side, was considering how greatly he need reward the armorer. And Mavrozomes, from the corners of his eyes, was watching the hand of the Emperor.



CHAPTER II

THE FRANKS

WHEN the sun was high, the last files of the crusaders emerged from the ravine and formed on the sandy plain. Close at hand upon the left, the river Meander wound through dense rushes where water fowl clamored and swooped. The ground in front sloped gently down to a dry bed of a stream and ascended gradually to a line of hillocks a quarter mile away.

On this ridge the host of Kai-Kosru awaited them.

The Saracens seemed to be drawn up in no particular formation. Groups of horsemen were visible moving through the gullies between the hillocks, and the heights were held in strength.

This continual motion of the Saracens and the heat haze that clung to the valley bed concealed the true numbers of the Sultan, and the little group of leaders that surveyed the field from in advance of the crusaders' ranks watched it all in silence.

"I like it not," quoth the gray Norman, brushing the sweat from his eyes.

"What is their strength?" wondered Marcabrun, who had put aside his gittern and was drawing taut the lacing of his coif.

"Three—five times our own," answered Rinaldo impatiently. "Come, messers, let us advance out of this hell-hole and try them with sword strokes."

"More lie hidden beyond the upland," insisted the Norman, "and it seems to me that here we have the full power of Seljuk and Turkoman under the banner of Kai-Kosru."

"Let it be so!" cried Rinaldo. "We may not now draw back. If, indeed, twenty thousand paynim lurk on yonder height, we should do ill to abide their charge. Forward, say I."

"Ay!" acclaimed the impetuous Provençal. "What says Sir Hugh?"

"The Emperor tarries," mused the young knight, without turning his head. "When the Greeks come forth from the ravine there will be confusion in their array. At that moment well might the Saracens charge and do us harm."

The silence of the older nobles showed their assent and understanding.

"The Emperor tarries," went on Sir Hugh quietly, "and so must we go forward to clear his path. Mark ye,

messers, that the Saracens hold broken ground. They have left us the heavy sands to cross, the height to climb. Their real strength lies beyond our sight."

"And so," quoth the dour Norman, "it were well to abide the coming of the Greeks."

"Not so!" Sir Hugh shook his helmeted head. "If the foe be in such strength, they can pass around us and climb to the sides of the ravine, trapping the Emperor and his followers."

And the youth in the imperial armor tightened his rein, trotting along the line of knights and men-at-arms, standing full armed by their chargers. Behind him three Normans bore the standard of Theodore, a purple banner surmounted by golden eagles.

Now when he wheeled at the end of the line, a low murmur grew to a joyful muttering. Not a man in the ranks but knew the bay horse he rode, and they who first perceived that this was not Theodore but their comrade-in-arms passed the word back to others, until the groups of archers, leaning on their short halberds, were aware that Sir Hugh was in command.

Silence was broken by a roaring shout as men got them to saddle and took lances in hand. Sir Hugh wheeled his bay charger and paced slowly down the slope. No need to race the horses through the sands.

The short line of mailed riders extended no farther than the center of Kai-Kosru's forces. Sir Hugh knew well the danger of thinning his array to try to meet the wide-flung wings of the Moslems. His lances were in the first rank, the axes and swords in the second, and, walk-

ing beside the horses, the hooded archers, with strung bows, arrow in hand.

They descended to the rock-strewn bed of the stream and picked their way across before the Moslem riders moved.

At once a shrill clamor of kettledrums and cymbals arose from musicians hidden in the gullies, and clouds of light-armed bowmen galloped down, to wheel and dart around the Franks. Arrows whirled into the mailed ranks. But the archers of Sir Hugh made such response with their long shafts that the skirmishers kept their distance.

Then, with a roaring ululation and a thunder of hoofs, a flood of Moslem swordsmen swept over the crest of the ridge and made at the foremost knights.

"Forward—the lances!"

Sir Hugh turned in his saddle to shout, and, lowering his heavy spear, put spur to the bay charger. The horses of the crusaders broke into a trot that quickened to a plunging gallop before the wave of Moslems struck them.

His feet thrust deep into the stirrups, his body rigid behind close gripped shield, Sir Hugh glimpsed faces that swooped down and passed him. His spear drove back against his shoulder, and he freed the point from the body of a man, swinging it fairly into the round shield of a bearded son of Islam who was galloping down on him.

The long steel point picked the rider from the saddle, and the horse careened against the iron-plated chest of the bay charger. Dropping his spear, Sir Hugh whipped his sword free and glanced from side to side.

The wave of Moslems had broken upon the line of spears and—except where single riders wielded scimitar against sword or mace—had scattered into fragments that drifted away under the sting of the long shafts that flew from the bows of the veteran archers.

“Ha—messers!” Sir Hugh laughed, rising in his stirrups. “Pass forward and strike!”

He broke through a fringe of dry tamarisk and galloped out upon the crest of the ridge, seeing in that instant the full power of Kai-Kosru.

Before him stretched a wide level where two battalions that had been reining in impatient steeds now launched against the Franks—two masses of horsemen, mailed from knee to throat, and splendidly mounted. He saw that one of these groups were Turkomans, lean men in white and black *khalats*—the other, the Sultan’s Seljuks, glittering in peaked helmets and inlaid mail, poising javelins as they advanced.

Swinging up his shield, he parried and cut with his sword, aware of men behind him who thrust with spear and blade, and of the joyous shout of battle:

“For Christ and the Sepulchre!”

The mass of agile riders hemmed him in, and he was struck upon the helm and shoulder. Blood from his forehead dripped into his eyebrows, and he shook his head to clear his sight. The Moslems were pressing against the standard and the man they had singled out as the Emperor.

But Sir Hugh, putting forth the utmost of his strength, advanced through them, his long sword lashing aside up-flung shield and battle ax. And the Normans, on rearing,

screaming horses at his heels, kept pace with him. No rush of the lighter Moslem horse could stem that steady advance of the close-drawn ranks on level ground.

"Brave blows!" cried Marcabrun, at his side. "They stand not. Let us go on, to where the Sultan abides."

"Stay!" ordered Sir Hugh. "Archers to the center. Rein back your men, Sir Clevis! Stand here!"

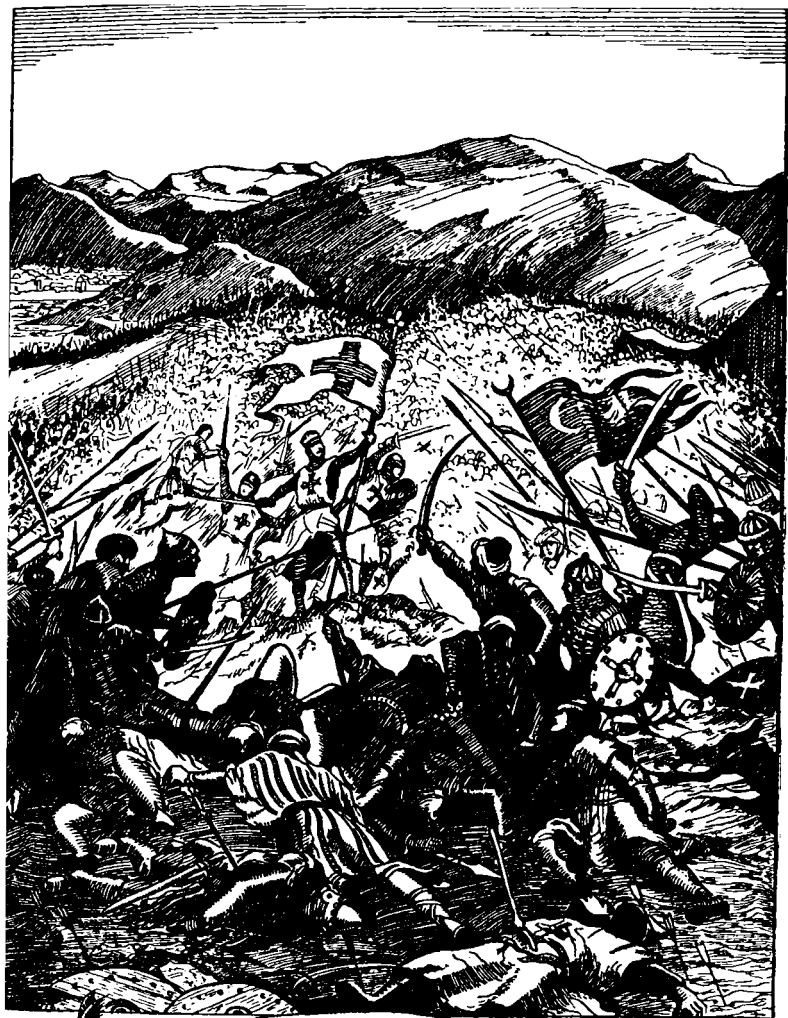
The masses of Moslems that had drawn off sullenly were joined by others that emerged from the gullies and advanced on the crusaders. On a distant knoll Sir Hugh beheld the green banner of the Sultan, Kai-Kosru, surrounded by warriors who had not been in the fight as yet.

"The Greeks come to the valley!" Marcabrun pointed across the bed of gray sand, at the ravine behind them where some scores of the Emperor's spearmen were visible. Sir Hugh watched them for a moment, searching in vain for the helmets of Theodore's nobles. If the Emperor's host advanced promptly, it could join the Franks and occupy the ridge. The crossbowmen of the Greeks could clear the gullies and the Sultan's center could be broken by a timely charge. The Moslems were wavering.

This was so clear to Sir Hugh that his heart burned with impatience, and he caught up the orifan, the long, curved horn that could send a blast across the tumult of battle. Once and again he sounded the rallying note that the Greeks *must* hear. The men about him, with souls intent on the work in hand, heard the horn and shouted gleefully:

"Strike, sir brothers! The field is ours."

But above the clashing of steel, the neighing of horses,



THE MOSLEMS WERE PRESSING
AGAINST THE STANDARD

and the splintering of wood were heard the drone of the hidden drums, the clangor of the cymbals.

At first the crusaders had broken up the rushes of the Saracens by counter charges. For the most part, their spears had been broken, and they fought with sword and mace. Most of them were bruised and bleeding, and all of them suffered from the burning heat that made the steel upon their limbs a torment, and sapped the might of their sinews.

Kai-Kosru's Turkomans had crept up the ridge on all sides, taking advantage of boulders and cross gullies that protected them from the onset of the dreaded horsemen. With their powerful bows they picked off the horses of the Franks, and the shafts of Sir Hugh's few archers did not avail to drive them back.

By mid-afternoon the crusaders ceased sallying forth and contented themselves with holding the high ground in the center of the ridge.

"Verily," quoth Rinaldo, pulling off his helmet to cool his forehead for an instant, "Satan spews forth these companies of paynim. The cursed fellows rise out of the earth. Hark to their music! Ho, they come again. Make way!"

He thrust forward, urging on his men, until his horse was killed under him by an arrow, and he fought on foot. Sir Hugh noticed him, and reined aside to get between him and the Moslems. The reckless giant had let fall his helmet, and before Sir Hugh could reach him, a Turkoman had leaned down, an arrow quivering in his fingers.

The shaft struck Rinaldo between the eyes, and the bowman's horse knocked him to earth. One of the Franks

slew the Moslem, and Sir Hugh took his stand by the fallen chieftain, bidding those who were nearest carry the body back to the standard.

He looked around, seeking the Norman baron in vain. Marcabrun was casting away the stem of a broken sword, and calling for a new one. Now that Rinaldo and the Norman were gone, no one remained to give wise counsel to the young chieftain.

The sun was sinking toward a line of purple hills, and the hot breath of the sandy gullies rose into the faces of the surviving Franks. More than half of them lay outstretched on the hard, shelterless earth, dead, or sorely wounded. The sun was in his eyes when he looked back at the ravine from which he had come that morning, and he could not tell whether the Greeks were moving at last to his aid or not. But Sir Hugh no longer hoped for succor from the Emperor.

A glance down the ridge showed him that the Saracens had lost three and four men to his one; but so great were their numbers that their force seemed unimpaired by four hours of battle.

And now the Sultan Kai-Kosru took matters into his own hand. His green banner was seen advancing toward the remnant of the Franks, and in that clear, level light of late afternoon the Sultan himself was visible, mounted on a white Arab courser, bearing a target ringed in black and gold—a slender, bearded man who looked ever steadfastly toward the height upon which stood the wearied bay charger of Sir Hugh.

Around Kai-Kosru trotted his bodyguard, two thousand Seljuks, still unwearied, and more than eager to

end by a single charge the long affray wherein such losses had been inflicted on their fellows.

Beholding this, Sir Hugh knew that two alternatives remained to him. He could close up ranks and try to cut his way through to the ravine where the Greeks stood, or he could risk everything in one advance upon the Sultan.

Swiftly he took account of the numbers of the enemy and decided that it was vain indeed to draw back now. His little company, harried and beset, would never survive the long march to their allies—and to turn about would discourage his men and hearten the Saracens. Not a hundred horses remained fit to carry riders.

So thinking, he bade an archer cut the lashings of his helm, and sighed with relief when the hot steel had been cast aside. Shaking back the mail hood from his head, he held up his sword arm and called to his comrades in the brief moment of quiet when they became aware of the oncoming mass of riders and looked to him for an order.

"My brothers, well have you sped this day. You have struck good blows. If we turn back, some few may win through; yet, if we turn again upon the Saracen, we shall break the Sultan's last array or die with our faces toward the tomb of the Lord Christ."

"Yea, we will go with you, Sir Hugh!" cried the nearest, and even the wounded raised a faint shout of approval.

There was no flinching, no glancing back toward the valley. The men on foot closed in among the horses, and they who limped and panted caught at stirrups to steady them. Tortured by thirst, silent, and afire with grim determination, they moved down the eastern ridge.

So the watchers on knoll and cliff beheld a dark cluster of Franks move onward into the rush of Kai-Kosru's guards. And, as the waters of a torrent sweep around immovable rocks, swirling and breaking into foam, the Saracen horsemen engulfed the remnant of the Franks.

The bay charger flung up its head, stumbled, and sank beneath Sir Hugh, who freed his feet from the stirrups and fell clear, staggering on aching legs. There was a haze of dust about him, and he felt men lurch against him, until a hand pressed his shoulder heavily, and he looked up into the bloodless face of the Provençal minstrel.

Marcabrun swayed in the saddle, leaning upon his young comrade. His eyes were sunk in his head, and his cracked and bleeding lips mumbled words:

"A horse for thee, Sir Hugh—God shield thee! I go——" He coughed and gripped the charger's mane with bloodstained fingers. "*Mea culpa*——"

It was a groan rather than a prayer. The broken shaft of a javelin was embedded in one of the rents of his hauberk, beneath the straining chest.

Sir Hugh caught the body of his friend as it slid from the saddle. Marcabrun's songs were at an end, and he had spoken his last brave word. But Sir Hugh never mounted to the minstrel's saddle. A group of foemen burst through the ring of men-at-arms around him, and as he let fall Marcabrun's body he beheld the white courser of the Sultan Kai-Kosru rearing, and black hoofs lashing out at his head.

Kai-Kosru was crouching in the saddle, a heavy scimitar upflung in his right hand, which was toward Sir Hugh.

There was not a moment between sight and the blow that flashed down at his bare head, but in that instant of time the young chieftain was aware of the gold chain that linked the sword to the Sultan's wrist—of precious stones that flared and sparkled in the Moslem's turban knot—and of exulting brown eyes that were fixed avidly upon him.

Then he flung up his shield. Kai-Kosru's blow, descending with the full force of arm and body, and the impetus of the dropping horse, struck fairly upon the shield, cracking it asunder and knocking Sir Hugh to the earth. But as he fell the crusader cut upward with his long blade, slashing the Sultan's knee and the tendon in the courser's off foreleg.

His left arm hampered by the fragments of the shield, and his bruised shoulder numb, Sir Hugh rolled over and found himself prone beside Kai-Kosru. The Moslem chieftain had fallen from the saddle when his horse sank under him, and, maddened, by pain, lay on the earth.

"Yield thee, paynim!" cried Sir Hugh, catching the Sultan's sword arm in his left hand.

Kai-Kosru spat savagely into the youth's bleeding face and let fall his scimitar to pull a long-hilted dagger from his girdle. With this he stabbed several times at Sir Hugh's throat, only to have the slender blade thrust aside by the right hand of his foe, protected by its chain mitten.

Writhing back, and freeing himself from Sir Hugh's grasp, the agile Moslem gripped again his scimitar hilt, bound to his wrist by its chain. Uprising on one knee, he whirled the curved blade about his head.

But in this second of respite Sir Hugh struck his adversary between the eyes with his mailed fist. Mighty sinews were behind the blow, and the slender Moslem sank back with a groan.

Sir Hugh slipped the loops of his broken shield, and grasped his sword again, striking swiftly. The blade passed under the beard of Kai-Kosru and bit through his neck into the ground.

In another moment—before the Moslems, who had drawn back and reined in their horses for fear of harming their sultan, could do more than cry out in horror—Sir Hugh grasped the severed head by the beard and hurled it among his enemies with a wrathful cry:

“Dead is Kai-Kosru!”

A horse, darting upon him from behind, struck him with its armored shoulder, driving the breath from his lungs and the sight from his eyes. He staggered and fell on one knee, powerless to rise or behold what passed above him.

Then, leaping through the rearing horses came a figure panting and yelling, and in semblance more demoniac than human. Its bristling head was red as the blood that ran from its fingers and loins, and in the deep glow of sunset its whole grotesque and powerful body was dyed crimson.

And with knotted, hairy arms this figure laid about it, dealing blows with a seven-foot staff of iron bound upon wood, shattering the steel blades and the leather targets of the infuriated Moslems until they drew back, crying:

“*Div—div!* A demon—a demon!”

Then was heard the blast of a hundred trumpets of the Emperor Theodore, who was leading forward his companies of nobles and slaves, of Tatar bowmen, and Bulgar axmen, and the cavalry of the Greeks.

Stunned by the death of their sultan, and wearied by the long combat with the Franks, the host of Kai-Kosru, scattered among the ravines by the river, made little resistance to the Greek attack. They separated into groups, each seeking its way from the field, some swimming the river, some galloping back to Antioch, leaderless.

Thereupon came Theodore, to ride over the field with his captains and councilors, and to look at the chivalry of the Franks, the dead men that lay from the bed of the valley to the ridge and from the ridge to the small ravine where Marcabrun's body was found, scarred by hoofs.

But the body of Kai-Kosru was not found, because the Turkomans had carried it off with them. And, though Theodore, the shrewd and far-seeing, promised rich reward to the man who should bring him the body of the mock Emperor, no trace of Sir Hugh was discovered other than his dead charger and the imperial helmet he had cast away in his last advance.



CHAPTER III

A WARRIOR'S BROTHER

The man who stands beside a warrior in battle shall be in all things his friend, and no quarrel may arise between them; the man who carries a wounded warrior from the field shall be his brother, and thereafter neither hatred nor evil word shall come between them.—THE YASSA OR CODE OF GENGHIS KHAN.

WHEN Sir Hugh's sight cleared, and the blood left his throbbing temples, he was aware of silence and of shadows. The sun had set, and though the sky overhead was a shimmering blue, the defile was in semi-darkness.

A score of bodies lay near him, but the headless corpse

of Kai-Kosru was not to be seen. Only one living man was in the gully, an ungainly form seated on a boulder, a long staff across its bare knees.

Striding toward the stranger, the youth halted to stare at his clumsy armor of iron plates lashed together, the half of them sliced from his shoulders, and at his restless, gleaming eyes.

"What man are you?" he demanded.

"Donn Dera."

"Where are my followers?"

"Raven meat, and so they will lie. There is no help for that."

Leaning on his sword, Sir Hugh bent his head. It seemed impossible that all the Franks could have perished; in the desperation of the last struggle he had been able to see only what happened within arm's reach. Where were the Saracens? He asked Donn Dera this, and the strange warrior looked up craftily at the sky. His voice was husky, and Sir Hugh thought he had heard it before.

"The war bands have taken to fleeing," said Donn Dera. "They are fleeing before the incoming of the Greeks. There has been a destruction of many men."

"The Greeks! Has Theodore come upon the field?"

"Yea," responded the stranger, "he has taken up the standard that you let fall."

Again the youth's temples grew hot, and he drew a long breath. Turning away, he strode unsteadily down the defile, until Donn Dera's heavy hand on his shoulder checked him.

"What now?"

The stranger shook his head.

"It is clear that you are going to confront the Emperor himself, and there will be ill words and an end of the matter. You are a fool, though you do not lack courage. Being wise, the Greek will slay you with poison or in other fashion, that no ancient men or minstrels may say he did not keep faith this day."

"Eight hundred men died this day!" cried the youth, beside himself. "He—he is the one to answer for it."

"In his own fashion he fought," responded Donn Dera grimly. "And surely, now, it was you who led your followers into their destruction."

The blood drained from Hugh's cheeks, and his hands clenched the leatherbound hilt of his long sword. Donn Dera shook his shaggy head moodily.

"Yea, overyoung you are to be a chieftain. Another time it will fare worse with your foes, better with your followers. Come, we must hide."

Hugh could only look upon him silently. His wearied brain ached.

"Messer Donn Dera," he said thoughtfully, "it is in my mind that you shielded me when I was on my knee among the horses. So may you say to me what would bring harm upon another."

The stranger raised one shoulder.

"What is done is done, and the black shame upon Theodore. Now, a while ago I was spying and peering and saw the Greek spearmen going about the field putting their weapons into the wounded Franks."

At this Hugh tried to shake himself free of the man

and make his way toward the Emperor's men, but the hand on his shoulder was not to be put aside.

"Come," whispered Donn Dera again.

"Whither?" Hugh laughed hoarsely. "To the Arabs?"

"Better than the Greeks," nodded the stranger. "The river is best. We must drink."

Hugh suffered the warrior to lead him back through the gully. Donn Dera seemed to have a dog's sense of direction, or a nose for water. Presently the young knight looked down at the ungainly figure, and at the ironbound staff.

"What is your lineage, and whence are ye, Donn Dera?" he asked.

"I am a man of weapons, and I follow the war bands and the hosts. Yea, I am quick at rapine and plunder."

"Whose son are ye?"

"The son of Etil, son of Tara."

Although Hugh had never heard these names before, and although he wondered from what land the stranger came, he put forth his hand and said frankly:

"I am beholden to you, Donn Dera, for my life, and while I live this shall not be forgotten."

The man of weapons merely grunted, yet he did not look displeased. The hand that closed around Sir Hugh's was like an iron claw. In silence they pushed through the dense willow growth until they descended a steep slope and dropped among the rushes of the Meander's bank. Then they drank greedily from cupped hands and plunged steaming heads into the muddied water.

Abruptly Donn Dera clucked and raised his hand. Above them horses were crashing through the under-

brush at a mad pace. The man of weapons glanced around, and motioned his young companion to squat down where the tall rushes grew thickly.

Instead of turning aside along the upper bank, the horses came directly toward the river, and in a moment more a score of them slid down the declivity and plunged about in the slippery footing.

Hugh saw that these were Moslems who wore pointed helmets from which hung linen hoods that hid everything except their eyes. They were armed with light spears, slung upon their backs, and scimitars. Black cloaks enveloped their slender bodies, and he thought they were neither Turkomans nor Seljuks. Their steeds were nimble-footed and splendid, and these men he had not seen in the battle. They were trotting straight upon him.

Flight was useless, and concealment hopeless. The light along the river was stronger than in the defile above, and he stood up, grasping his sword with both hands.

"Back to back, Donn Dera!"

He moved to where the ground was a little higher and firmer, so that the water came no more than to his knees, and his companion followed him.

The leading Moslems reined aside in surprise. Then, seeing that only two Franks stood in the rushes, they drew forward their spears and rode in upon the twain.

Hugh felt the rugged shoulders of Donn Dera making play behind him and heard the snapping of spear shafts. A man cried out, and horses reared and plunged. For his part, he cut and parried with instinctive skill. He was

overweary, but so great were his strength and quickness of eye and hand that no spear touched a vital part in him. Glancing steel points slashed him across thighs and arms, and his blood ran down into the muddied water.

"*Mash'allah!*" cried one of his assailants.

The riders drew their swords and exchanged swift words, preparing to rush upon him with their blades. At this moment three other horses crashed down the slope and trotted into the group about Hugh.

One of the newcomers took matters in hand at once. Flinging a question at his companions, he advanced close to Hugh and peered down at him. This was a man lean almost to emaciation. He bestrode a splendid gray Arab, sitting the high saddle with the thoughtless grace of one bred to horses. The trappings of the saddle were cloth-of-gold. Above the black veil that hung from his helm, deep-set, sparkling eyes surveyed the youth.

"Yield thee!" exclaimed the stranger in fair French. And to his companions he added as he noticed Hugh's armor, "*Padishah roumi*—the Emperor of the Greeks!"

The Arabs exchanged glances and lowered their weapons.

"I yield me to no paynim!" cried the young knight defiantly.

Donn Dera edged closer to him. The man of weapons had been fighting warily, and without the sheer berserk rage that had gripped him during the battle. He, too, was tired. Frowning, he weighed chances, and before Hugh could move he had lifted his heavy ironbound staff and whirled it down on the flat of the crusader's sword.

The blow, quick and savage, did not strike the weapon from Hugh's hand, but the steel blade snapped, and the point shot from it into the water.

"Take him—thou," croaked Donn Dera to the chieftain of the Arabs. "There is no help for it."

And he cast away his staff into the rushes. The rider of the gray horse scanned him curiously.

"What man art thou?"

Donn Dera folded bleeding arms across his heaving chest.

"I am a son of a king. Yea, of Etil, son of Tara, overlord of Erin and the grandest monarch of the earth."

The Arab signed to the men who waited behind Hugh, and when the crusader raised his broken stem of a sword, they leaned forward, gripping his wrist. Weakened by loss of blood, he tried to twist free, and then stood quiet, knowing that further effort was useless.

Thereupon the chieftain dismounted from his gray courser and led forward through the mud and broken rushes two riderless horses, ready saddled.

"*Khoudsama!*" He held out one rein to Hugh. "My lord, I am Khalil, the Bedouin. Verily, we are here three princes, and—there has been enough of slaying this day. Come with me!"

Hugh looked into the dark eyes, and in silence gave up the broken sword. The Arabs helped him into the saddle, while Donn Dera mounted. Surrounded by Khalil's men, they swam the midcurrent of the Meander and climbed the far bank, unseen by the sentries of the Emperor Theodore because the sudden darkness of the southern plains had covered the river.

The droning of flies and the *swish-swash* of something moving over his head woke Hugh of Taranto from feverish sleep. He opened his eyes and saw that the moving thing was a fan of heron's feathers, held by a slim hand. The hand emerged from a loose black sleeve, and the sleeve was part of a fragile girl who knelt by his side.

A loose veil, running from her ears to the bridge of her nose, concealed all of her face except two very tranquil and dark eyes and a smooth white forehead.

Hugh stretched out his hand toward an earthen water jar that stood beside him, and the girl raised it to his lips and held it until he was satisfied. Then, with a half-friendly, half-curious glance, she rose and left his sight. An Arab warrior came and squatted down in her place.

Hugh lay back and began to think. He was in a small tent of dark wool, supported by a single pole and by the shafts of spears. Under him was a mat of dried rushes. His mail and leather gambeson had been removed, and a sleeveless tunic of fine white linen, beautifully embroidered, and a coarse brown cloak covered him.

He was alone in the tent with the squatting Arab and the water jar, but he heard camels grunting and smelled horses. Through the open flap of the tent he saw high, tufted grass, and naked children playing with goats.

Suddenly he groaned aloud, and the warrior looked at him in surprise. But the knight was not feeling the ache of his open wounds; he had remembered the battle of the Meander, and that his comrades Marcabrun and Rinaldo and all the Norman chivalry were being eaten by crows and wolves. He did not think that the Greeks, who had slain the wounded, would give them fitting burial in

consecrated ground. And this thought brought the blood to his forehead.

"Khalil!" he said to the warrior. "Take me to Khalil."

Although the Bedouin had not understood the words of the knight, he recognized the name of his chieftain. Nor did he try to restrain the wounded youth. If the Frank wished to go and speak to Khalil, that was his affair. He did bring Hugh the stained and wrinkled leather jacket, and the sword belt, adorned with silver plates, from which the empty leather scabbard still hung. This Hugh girded on and went forth, moving slowly because he was in pain and weak. It had been three days since they had crossed the Meander, and all the first day they had kept the saddle.

Hugh thought they had come twenty leagues, south from the battlefield. He did not remember seeing this village, because they had come in at night, and he had been asleep.

The village was really an encampment where women and children tended the goats and camels. It was near the hour of sunset, and Arabs were rising from the evening prayer and talking in groups. They were thin men, who moved with the grace of animals.

Hugh noticed that the camp itself was in a grassy hollow, by a rushing stream, and only the wooded summits of distant mountains were visible against the sky. The air, too, was cool, and he thought that these Arabs had chosen a place of concealment far up a mountain side. In the horse herd were more than a hundred beasts, and

the saddles standing between the tents were of Turkoman and Greek make as well as the narrow Bedouin saddle.

Khalil, the chieftain, separated from a throng of warriors and advanced toward him.

"Honor and greeting to the Emperor of the Christians!" he said courteously. "Has the fever left thee? Are thy wounds closed?"

Then Hugh remembered that Khalil had taken him for the Emperor Theodore, and that their swift flight from the river must have kept from the Bedouin the knowledge that the real Theodore was with his victorious host.

"No sultan am I," he made answer in the *lingua franca*. "I have no rank other than knighthood, and I am Hugh of Taranto."

Khalil's impassive face was touched by inward amusement.

"The lord Emperor, who is my guest, sees fit to hide his name and high position. Wherefore?"

"It is the truth."

"In the battle of the Christians and the Seljuks," smiled the Arab, "thou wert surely the Emperor. Now it is not otherwise, though a sword is lacking, and thou art the *rafik*, the guest of the black tents."

"My companion, the elder warrior, will tell thee the truth, even as I have said."

"Thy comrade hath said it—thou art indeed the Emperor."

Hugh frowned angrily. It seemed as if Donn Dera

always did what was least expected of him. He had not forgiven the wanderer for striking the sword from his hand.

"*V'allah!*" said Khalil seriously. "Mine eyes beheld thee among the infidel weapon men, ay, in the red heart of the slaying. Thy hand slew the Sultan Kai-Kosru when a hundred Seljuks hemmed thee in. By the names of Omar and Ali, thou art worthy! I say it—I, Khalil, of al-Yaman, of the Ibna."

Hugh raised his hand impatiently.

"Nay, and again nay! Release me, O Khalil—give me a horse, and the man Donn Dera to attend me. I must hasten to the court of Theodore at Antioch and accuse him before all men. I shall cast my glove at his feet—let him pick it up who will!"

Although Khalil could speak the *lingua franca*, having wandered, like many of his race, from Fez to Saragossa, and even to Venice and Constantinople, he was none too sure what the young knight meant by his words. In all the swift forays of the Bedouins who came up from the desert lands, he had never encountered a chieftain who allowed another to wear his garments and armor in battle.

So it seemed to Khalil—a master of deception himself—that the captive was trying to conceal his true rank and making a clumsy job of it. Only one thing puzzled the Arab, who was a judge of character—this royal youth spoke wilfully and with the appearance of truth.

"Nay, and again nay," the Bedouin made response. "In the battle thou didst bear thyself as a prince—as one, even, of the Three Hundred of Badr. That is truth.

Yet, having taken captive the chieftain of the Christians, I may not give him a horse and release him with only one follower, as if he were a common man."

"What then?" demanded Hugh.

Khalil considered. He had been guessing at profit for the last three days. Being a fatalist, he had wasted no thought on his extraordinary fortune in carrying off an emperor. God had given it, and moreover the chieftains of the Nazarenes were not like Moslems. They were accustomed to rush into peril unguarded, to fling off helmets when the sun boiled the blood in them, and to venture into all sorts of places.

"*V'allah!* I shall hold thee for ransom at four thousand *miskals* of gold. That is little enough, for the Greek lords are rich beyond belief. I have seen."

It was Hugh's turn to ponder. He and Donn Dera alone had survived the slaughter on the Meander, and Theodore, having betrayed the Franks, would risk much to silence their tongues—if his men had put to death wounded crusaders on the battlefield.

If Sir Hugh should survive and reach Constantinople, and tell his tale to Henry of Flanders, commander of the French and English crusaders, he would be believed, against the oaths of eight thousand Greeks. Theodore would find it no very easy matter, in any case, to explain to the Count of Flanders the loss of his eight hundred crusaders. And if the truth were known in Constantinople, the host of the Crosses would harry Theodore through all Asia.

"Send to the Greek camp," Hugh said slowly, "trusted men, a few. Bid them look about and ask if the Em-

peror be not in the camp. Ay, they will see him there. Thus it will be manifest that I am no more than a Frankish knight and my ransom no more than one gold piece."

But to Khalil, experienced in wiles, this appeared no more than a simple trick to lessen the ransom that was his due, and he said so at once. He even laughed—a rare thing in an Arab—not to mock his captive but to show his appreciation of the trick.

"Shall I sell to the Greeks their emperor at their price and not at mine? May God forbid! If thou wert captive to the Seljuks who hold Antioch, they would ask three cities, and twenty camel loads of silver, and a sworn truce, with other matters. Give praise to thy saints that I ask no more than two horse loads of gold!"

A sudden thought struck the youth.

"Tell me, Khalil. Am I—a Frank surely—the man to be named Emperor by the Greeks?"

For some time the Bedouin had mused upon this very question and had arrived at an answer that was quite satisfactory.

"By the beard and the breath of Ali, thou art stubborn as a she camel with unslit lip! Have I not heard that the Greeks chose thee Emperor before the battle?"

He glanced around his little camp and added good-naturedly:

"It was written that I should fall in with the Seljuk Turks as they were mounting for battle. I rode with them to the river and watched events. My men gained a few horses, good and bad, and some saddles and gear."

"Khalil!" cried the youth. "Give me no more than one horse and a week of liberty. I pledge thee the word of a

belted knight that I shall return to this place, alone, and become again thy captive."

Among the crusaders such a pledge, no matter under what conditions, would have been accepted. Hugh of Taranto was a youth who had kept his word inviolate.

But it did not enter Khalil's mind to let four thousand *miskals* of gold out of his hand for a week. He had experienced the treachery of the Greeks.

Considering the anxious gray eyes and the flushed forehead of the youth, it seemed to him that his captive's fever must have gripped the brain.

"Nay," said a voice behind them, "not in a week or in a week of ages would you return from the Greek camp."

Donn Dera was leaning on a knotted staff that he had cut with his knife, and his narrow, bony face was wistful as he looked at his youthful companion.

"That would not be good," said the wanderer again, and turned to Khalil. "Give us to eat, O chieftain!"



CHAPTER IV

THE CUNNING OF DONN DERA

THIS was a matter of pride with the Bedouin, that his captives should be entertained and made comfortable. He had the hind quarters of a sheep broiling, for them alone, and since his men could not be expected to serve meat to the Franks, he bade the young girl who had attended upon Hugh fetch them milk that might have been goats' or camels'.

"Eh, Lord," Donn Dera grinned, "wash, wipe, sit, eat, wash, and then talk. But not before. A drawn belly breeds ill talk."

And he ate a whole quarter of the sheep, to Khalil's subdued amazement.

"*Yah Khawand,*" the chieftain exclaimed, "what manner of man is this that gorges as a tiger, and drinks as

a horse, and sings so that the children gather round him?"

"I know not," responded the crusader under his breath, "save that he comes from a land called Erin by some, Ireland by others——"

"Erin," put in Donn Dera, wiping his broad hands on a passing dog. He seemed to have the ears of a cat.

"He calls himself a king's son and a man of weapons," added Hugh coldly in a tone Donn Dera could hear readily enough.

"Ay," nodded the wanderer, "in all the world there is no weapon that fits my hand. Sword handles I have broken—ax shafts I have split. From yew wood and iron I fashioned a club, and now that too is gone from my hand."

"I did not know you were so strong," said the youth curiously.

Donn Dera glanced at him sidewise, but saw that the crusader had not meant to mock him. After a moment he stretched out his right hand in which the new cudgel was grasped.

The knotted muscles of shoulder and forearm swelled suddenly, and sinews cracked. Between his quivering fingers the wood of the cudgel creaked and then snapped.

Khalil watched with interest and picked up the short staff when the warrior dropped it. The bark had been squeezed away from the wood, and it was broken.

"*Ai*," he acknowledged, "no man of mine could do that, nor could I. But edged steel is another matter."

"True," put in Hugh at once, "yet in the fighting at the river Donn Dera stood over me when I fell, though

mounted Seljuks hemmed him in. How he lives, I know not."

"There was a fury in me," explained the wanderer quietly. "At such moments my hand wreaks chaos and woe, for my father was a man of the elf mounds, and in him a power of spells and magic."

They were sitting by then at the fire that had been made for the chieftains by the girl, who fetched woollen mantles against the chill of the night that Hugh and Donn Dera heeded not. After a silence, Khalil nodded understanding.

"Such a man we call *djinn*-possessed. Surely thy strength is uncommon."

Donn Dera, chin on hand, looked into the fire. Hugh, leaning back against the tent, was moody in spirit.

It seemed to the young knight as if this craggy fellow was indeed a companion of evil beings. Donn Dera had broken the good sword in his hand—had lied to the Arab concerning his name—and now boasted openly and with a loud voice. Anger against Donn Dera was bitter in the youth.

"There is one weapon that will fit my hand," the soft voice of the wanderer went on. "It is a sword, and the sword of the great champion Roland, the knight of Charlemagne."

Idle, such words, Hugh mused. Durandal, the unbroken sword of the matchless Roland, was buried with the hero in some cathedral. Long since—four centuries ago—it had passed from the sight of Christian men.

"Of Roland I have heard," assented the Arab courteously. "My ancestors went against him in Frankistan."

"Men say," went on Donn Dera, "the shining sword of Roland is of such weight that no warrior of to-day may deal a cut with it or raise it from the ground, save with two hands."

"That also my ancestors said."

The voice of the wanderer took on a lilting note, and his eyes half closed.

"It was in Nicea, in a hostel, that an ancient man of more fell than flesh sat with me the night. He announced to me that he had been to the Holy Land where the feet of the Lord Christ trod, and there was in his wallet a silver flask and in the flask a hair of Simon Peter, and he swears to me by the relic itself that he had word of Durandal, the shining brand, the sword of Roland."

Donn Dera sighed.

"And so this pilgrim tells of the sword, how it lies in the land of the Saracen folk, hanging in the hall of the Sultan Kai-Kosru. And this hall is in the castle, and the castle is in Antioch. Now in me there is a longing and a desire to have the grasp of Durandal, and that is why I joined the company of the Emperor that was making a raid upon Antioch."

"That cannot be," said Hugh bluntly. "Durandal never left the hand of Roland. Often have I heard Marcabrun—may God grant him eternal rest—relate the song of it. Hark ye, Donn Dera."

He reflected a moment, and repeated the verses of Roland's death:

*"'Roland feeleth his eyesight reft,
Yet he stands erect with what strength is left.*

*That none reproach him, his horn he clasped,
His other hand Durandal grasped;
Before him a massive rock uprose—
He smote upon it ten grievous blows.
Grated the steel as it struck the flint,
Yet it brake not, nor dulled its edge one dint.*

*“ ‘ ‘ ‘ Mary, Mother, be thou mine aid!
Durandal, my masterless blade,
I may no longer thy guardian be,
Though battle-fields I won with thee!
Never shalt thou possessor know
Who would turn from face of mortal foe——’ ’ ’ ”*

The resonant words of the song rang forth in the clear voice of the youth, and when he had ended he turned to Donn Dera.

“So, it was. The hero could not break the blade against the stone, so he placed it beneath him and lay down, that his soul could pass from his body.”

Donn Dera wrinkled heavy brows.

“All that may be; but I also have heard Marcabrun, the minstrel. Surely this Roland was a champion and a good man with his weapon. Yet after he died he could not lift hand against a foe, and the Saracens may well have taken such a sword from under his body.” After a moment he added, “Was there not a bit in the song about a Saracen who coveted the blade, and took it with him to Arabia?”

“He was slain!”

“Was it an elf or a ghost, then, that dealt with this

Saracen? Surely the song relates that all the Franks lay dead about Roland."

At this Khalil, who had been listening attentively, lifted his head.

"Ay, Lord King, that is truth. I knew not the name of the sword, but among my people there is a legend that the blade of Roland, the Frank, was carried from the field under the Pyrenees, to Saragossa, and thence by sea to the land that was once under the yoke of my people and was just now the kingdom of Kai-Kosru."

Hugh flushed and said quietly:

"It is not good to mock captives, O Bedouin."

Khalil's deep eyes gleamed.

"Harken, ye Franks—the matter may be adjudged in another way. Years ago I passed through Antioch, and at the palace of the Sultan I was shown somewhat of his treasure."

He paused a moment to reflect.

"Kai-Kosru was ever wary of his gold, but he showed me a strange sword. It was long, it was heavy, and it was not made in a Moslem land. The blade was broad as thy hand, of blue steel. The hand guard was a cross, inlaid with silver, the pommel a ball of gold from which the precious stones had been taken. It hung upon the wall behind the carpet where the Sultan sat. No single man could lift it down from its place. And the Sultan said it was the blade of a Christian warrior long since dead. Is this thy Durandal?"

"So was the sword of Roland!" Hugh responded promptly. "Oh, that we had known this thing!"

"It waits the man who will not turn his face from any

foe," cried Donn Dera. "By the cunning in me I will possess the sword."

Now it seemed to Khalil that both his captives were out of their minds with fever. But when Donn Dera spoke again Khalil looked upon them with greater amazement.

"And thou, Moslem," observed Donn Dera, "thou art consumed by one thought—to take Antioch!"

Veiling surprise with pretended scorn, the Bedouin asked how, with eighty men, he was to think of mastering a mountain citadel held by several hundred Seljuks and just now besieged by a host of Greeks.

Closing his eyes, Donn Dera rocked his ungainly body in the smoke above the fire, his lips moving.

"There is a way unknown to the Greeks. A way through the stone of the mountain, into the palace."

This time the self-control of the Arab failed him.

"Art kin to the *djinn*-folk? That was a secret well guarded by Kai-Kosru. It was his way of escape if an enemy pressed him too hard."

The wanderer wagged his shaggy head.

"It was in thy mind, Moslem, to lead thy men through the stone of the mountain into the stronghold, when Kai-Kosru had achieved victory over the Franks. It fell out otherwise, for the Seljuks fled like wolves while thy men were picking up horses. Now a scattering of Seljuks hold the wall of Antioch."

"Say on," demanded Khalil.

"Ochune! Easy to say! Now there is doubt in thee. Thy men are few, and, besides, here is the Emperor, to be ransomed. Doubt is in thee."

"True—by the beard and the breath of Ali!"

Donn Dera opened his eyes, and Hugh cried out impatiently:

"Mad art thou! I am not the lord Emperor!"

"Easy to say!" Donn Dera grinned. "What dost thou desire above all things? To ride in among the Greeks, ay, to the royal tent, and say thy say."

"That is true," acknowledged Hugh moodily.

"And what do I seek? Faith, naught but the sword, Durandal. Well, let us go and accomplish what we wish."

"How?" insisted Khalil.

His raid into the Taurus mountains had been inspired by sheer love of risk and spoil. As the man from Erin said, he had learned of the two armies that were bound to meet at the river, and he had left the women concealed in this spot, riding to the heights from which he watched the battle.

His plan had been to strike boldly at Antioch, which would be left almost unguarded if Kai-Kosru drove off the Franks. Stirred by the brave stand of Hugh's followers, he had drawn nearer the river, until his men had taken to driving off horses, and he had seen the Greeks overwhelm the shattered Seljuks. Then Hugh had fallen into his hands, and before doing anything else he meant to win a royal ransom.

It seemed to Khalil that the red-haired captive had indeed the gift of seeing hidden things. This being so, he might profit by the gift.

"How—O my guest?" he urged.

"Easy to say. Going alone with thy men against the city, even through the mountain, would bring no good to

thee. Fighting within the city would bring the Greeks over the walls."

"Well, what?"

"Make a pact and truce with us. Give us good weapons, and we will make thee master of the castle."

"Ye are but two!"

"Two," admitted Donn Dera modestly, "yet such men as we are not found elsewhere in the lands of the earth. We shall wreak a destruction upon the Seljuks, even as at the river."

"Why should I trust thee with weapons?"

"Trust *him!*" The wanderer nodded at Hugh who listened in frank amazement. "As for me, how could I turn upon thee, Khalil? Would the Seljuks embrace me as a brother? They would not, and that is easily understood."

Khalil thought this over. It seemed to him now, beyond any doubt, that the strange captive had looked into his mind. He yearned to loot Antioch—he had glimpsed a little of the treasure Kai-Kosru had hoarded so jealously. To be master of that palace on the crest of the marble mountain, for a night! To root out its corners! To bear off weapons, ivory, and shining jewels!

"It were folly," he mused aloud, with an eye on Donn Dera, "to risk lives on such a blind path when I can have three horse loads of gold as ransom for this lord of the Greeks."

"Oho!" Donn Dera hesitated an instant, without the Bedouin's perceiving it. "The Greeks have not so much gold or silver among them."

"That, at least, is true!" cried Hugh angrily. "Save

for the trappings and gear of the nobles, there is little precious metal in their coffers."

"But if they take Antioch?" Khalil mused again.

"They will," quoth Donn Dera readily, "unless we do. The Seljuks are losing heart." He grinned at the fire. "Khalil, we will storm the city for thee. Let this royal youth go among thy men, and when we have finished with the Turks, do thou talk of ransom to the Greeks—from the towers."

Khalil was silent a long space, while the girl came and cast more wood on the embers and the flames crackled cheerily again. To loot Antioch—to compel a Greek army to send to Constantinople to ransom their emperor! The thought filled the desert chieftain with delight. He no longer doubted, because he saw how he could do this in his own way.

"What sayest thou to this?" he asked Hugh suddenly. The young knight lifted his head and smiled.

"To go against several hundred with eighty is no easy matter. Give me three days' rest and a fair weapon, and I will go with thee."

"Wilt thou swear, on the honor of a prince, not to try to escape from my men?"

"I give thee the word of a knight that I will not escape."

Looking at the youth, Khalil decided that he would keep his word, but still the Arab was a little puzzled that Hugh should speak of himself as a knight.

"Swear!" he cried, scenting evasion.

"Then fetch me something in the form of a cross—the hilt of my broken brand."

Khalil struck his hands together, spoke to the warrior who lounged out of the shadows into the firelight, and waited until the stem of Hugh's sword with its valuable hand guard was brought. Holding this in his left hand, while the Arabs watched with curiosity, the crusader placed his right hand upon the hilt.

"I swear upon this cross that I will not lift weapon against thy men or thyself during the truce between us, and that I will not forsake thee. Moreover, in God's sight, I swear that I will not go from this land until I have faced the Emperor Theodore, and cast his treachery in his teeth."

His eyes half closed, and his wide lips drew down at the corners, and Khalil thought there was in this young warrior something of the falcon or wolf. Surely the lord Frank meant what he said, although it was nothing less than madness to swear an oath against himself.

"All things are possible in the sight of Allah," he meditated aloud. "Be thou at ease, my lord. Another moon will not grow to the full before the Greeks ransom thee."

"Of all things," answered Hugh, "I desire that least."

Donn Dera chuckled under his breath, but the Arab flung up his hands.

"Thou art weary, and the fever—go to thy tent and sleep."

Hugh wished to talk with Donn Dera apart, but his limbs ached, and his veins were hot. He suffered himself to be led away by Khalil's attendant, and while he waited for Donn Dera to come to his tent, sank into deep sleep. Khalil, too, left the fire, and the man from Erin remained

alone with Youssouf, the warrior who had brought the broken sword.

Donn Dera, apparently, never slept. Looking through the smoke at the motionless Arab, he said softly, as if giving tongue to his thoughts:

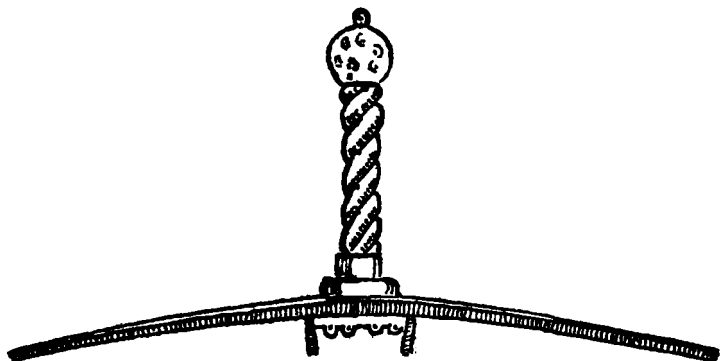
"Yea, the day comes, and there will be a rare feeding of ravens and whetting of sword edges—there will be sorrow and blood that the wolves will drink."

This prospect was rather pleasing to the warrior of al-Yaman, particularly as he firmly believed the speaker had the gift of sight into hidden things, and he asked Donn Dera to prophesy whether the issue would be favorable or not.

"God knows," responded the wanderer.

The Arab nodded, in complete agreement.

"With Him are the keys of the unseen."



CHAPTER V

THE SWORD OF ROLAND

*If a chain is on the lion's neck, the jackal will range
the ruins all night long.*—ARABIC PROVERB.

THE third day dawned clear and cloudless in its heat, and Khalil waxed impatient. Hugh's fever had left him, and his hurts had mended, and it was decided to move toward Antioch.

The horses were driven in from pasture by the boys of the tribe, and the men selected their mounts—Hugh picking out a bay charger that looked as if he were accustomed to a heavy rider in armor. Then Khalil led them to where plundered weapons were kept.

Swords—of the weight that would suit the crusader—were lacking, and the knight of Taranto selected an ax with a curved edge and a pick at the other end. The handle of the ax was three feet in length, of gray ash, smooth

and oiled. Donn Dera raked over the pile, grumbling, until he grinned and held up an iron flail—two-foot lengths of wood and metal hinged together, the tip set with spikes.

"That will not cut a shield," Khalil remarked.

"It will break bones," responded the wanderer.

No shields had been taken by the Arabs, or helmets, and Hugh gave to Donn Dera the mail shirt, sleeveless, that he had worn under his hauberk. At first the man from Erin would not accept this, but when Hugh reminded him that he was defenseless against arrows without it, he put it on.

Hugh had been watching the Arabs. They carried light leather targets slung to slender spears at their shoulders. Each man had his scimitar girded high, and his hands rested among the hilts of numerous and varied daggers—some even wore two swords. Long kaftans covered their mail and light steel helmets. They wore no spurs, and managed the horses by knee and voice.

"They move like foxes," said the youth, "swift and alert—but ready to flee as well as strike. How will we storm a gate with such as they?"

"That remains to be seen," admitted Donn Dera, "but if the gate be open they will slip through like elves."

It was the first time that the crusader had been able to talk with Donn Dera. Hitherto, when he had sought the man of weapons in the camp, Donn Dera had been out with the watchers, or off somewhere with Khalil. The red warrior had the gift of tongues and could make himself understood more easily than Hugh.

"I know now," said Hugh frankly, "that you broke

my sword to keep me from death—though at the time it angered me. But what reason is there for lies? You have made Khalil believe that I am the lord of the Greeks, and you have boasted overmuch.”

“That is my nature,” explained Donn Dera gravely. “As for the lie—if Khalil understood that you were no more than a young lord of the Franks, he would ransom you for fifty pieces of gold to Theodore, who would pay readily enough. Would it please you to stand as a prisoner before the nobles of the Emperor?”

“Ay, so that I could face him with his treachery!”

Donn Dera only puckered his lined face and inspected the hinge of his flail.

“It may be,” he said after a while, “that the Greeks cannot or will not find a ransom of two men’s weight in gold. That is your safety.”

“You have the gift of foreknowing,” assented Hugh calmly.

“Not so. I have cunning, and eyes and ears. Youssof ben Moktar, who is lieutenant to Khalil, speaks the *lingua franca*. Yea, he is almost as great a boaster as I. From him I learned that Khalil covets the spoil of Antioch. And this is a strange city.”

“How strange?” asked Hugh, not quite convinced that his companion could not look into the future.

Donn Dera twisted in the saddle. He rode not with the steady seat of the crusader or the pliant ease of the desert man, but with a jerking and shaking of his mighty limbs.

“Well, Youssof and I fared forth together two days ago to a height whence we looked down upon the city.

He did this because I dared him to go with me while I cast a spear over the wall of Antioch.

"Thus, from a shoulder of these mighty hills, we beheld the city, and it lies in a valley. A small river runs down the valley, and on either hand of the river are two stone mountains, like giants. Now the town of Antioch runs down the slope of a hill—the one on this side of the river.

"The castle itself sits at the crown of the hill, and its walls are white stone. Now, look. Behind the castle, guarded by its walls, is the quarry from which this stone is taken. The quarry eats into the stone summit as a wolf gnaws into the flank of a dead cow. All this we saw, for we left the horses and climbed and peered. We climbed to the end of the castle wall and cast two spears over it."

"And what of the path that is to lead us into the castle?"

"Youssof said there was a way through the stone of the quarry. The lord Khalil had heard tell of it. But what the way is and where it lies, I wit not."

He blinked reflectively, and added:

"Yet horses can pass through it. On the shoulder of the mountain behind the castle we saw their tracks, coming and going."

"They might have been Greeks."

"Not so. The Greek standards are planted in the town, where the Emperor builds mangonel and ram to batter the gate and wall. Not even a dog or goat could climb from the town to this side of the summit."

"Why did you throw the spears?"

Donn Dera rubbed a gnarled hand through his boar-like bristles of hair.

"They were javelins of your Franks. When they fell among the Seljuks, the paynim must have feared they were cast down from the heavens by warrior angels. It will be a miracle and an omen, and that will not be a bad thing for us."

Everything Donn Dera did was a matter of impulse, and yet he always had a plausible reason for it afterward. He had gone off on a mad venture, in which he might well have broken his neck. And he came back with a clear description of the lay of the castle and its strength.

Three days ago the two Franks had been captives, disarmed and kept only to be sold to the Greeks by the Arabs. Now they were mounted on good horses and had weapons in hand. Hugh knew that Donn Dera had arranged this by his cunning. Yet, as he thumped about on the hard wooden saddle and fingered his clumsy flail and grimaced, he did not seem to have an idea in his head.

"You do not make plans, Donn Dera," he observed, "but luck always aids you. Why did you join the standard of the Emperor to come hither?"

"Easy to say, Hugh. In all the years of my life I have found no weapon that fits my hand save that great staff I lost in the river. When I heard the pilgrim tell of Durandal, the sword of Roland, hidden in a Moslem hall, I came to seek this sword. When I heard the Emperor was marching hither I joined his followers."

Now when the young knight considered these words, it

became clear to him that the man from Erin had schemed to persuade Khalil to take them into Antioch through the mountain.

"And you," asked Donn Dera, his small eyes twinkling under shaggy brows, "what brought you and your fellows to the battle?"

"Faith," the knight meditated, "it was the Emperor who came to us with an offer to share in his venture. He swore that he would march from Antioch through the Saracens to Jerusalem. We have taken the vow not to turn back until we have seen the tomb of the Lord Christ in the Holy City."

"Well, then, you were fools—all eight hundred of you—for Theodore seeks only the gold of Kai-Kosru in Antioch. He will not go to Jerusalem. He will go back to Constantinople with the treasure—if Khalil does not lay hand on it first."

"Do you think, Donn Dera," Hugh asked, "that Durandal lies of a truth in the hall of the Seljuk palace?"

"I think this. The paynim folk have a great fear and a dread of the Frankish champions, such as Richard of England and Roland, who was the peer of Charlemagne. Such swords they could not swing in their hands, but they would cherish them from father to son as an honor and a glory to their name. If they say that they have Roland's sword, it is the truth."

A mighty longing came upon Hugh to have Durandal for his own. He felt sure that he would have the strength to wield the sword.

Observing him shrewdly, Donn Dera spoke again:

"I shall find and take Durandal. To that have I set my mind."

"My life I owe to you," assented Hugh readily, "and though I desire the great sword above all things, I will yield it to you if I take it."

"Youngling—" the wanderer laughed harshly—"you have no hand for such a weapon. I will be the one."

His mood changed in an instant from kindness to brooding, and he sighed many times.

"Oh, it is said by the priests, 'They who take up the sword shall perish by the sword.' I have a boding and a sensing of ill to come."

Whatever Donn Dera might feel within him, he gave no sign of it when they halted that night where a little grass grew among a labyrinth of loose rock. They had climbed steadily, and a cold wind buffeted their lair, to the disgust of the Arabs. Khalil would permit no fire to be lighted, and they slept in their cloaks, rousing at times to listen to the horses cropping the tough grass.

The Arabs were in no hurry to take to the saddle again, and when broad daylight came Hugh wondered where they were. All around him grew scattered firs, dwarfed and bent by the wind.

At places he could see down into distant valleys, where brown grain rippled and tossed, and through the mesh of the evergreens he glimpsed the reflection of the sun on water—evidently the river of which Donn Dera had spoken.

Late in the morning Khalil sought them out.

"Come," said he, "it is time."

They mounted and wound upward, through the firs, and Khalil, who rode in advance, scrutinized closely the marks on the trail. There was only the one trail, because it clung to the shoulder of the mountain, and at times they were forced to edge their horses between the wall of brown stone and a cliff that fell away sheer.

Khalil's lips moved as if he were counting, and he and Youssouf exchanged a brief word.

"Many tens of Seljuks came along this trail two nights ago. There were some women, but no pack animals heavily laden. The Seljuks are dropping away from Antioch, but these are the first deserters, who had not much loot."

Hugh could see that the hoof marks went away from the mountain, but he wondered how the Arabs guessed at women, until Khalil showed him the faint outline of a slipper, where a woman had dismounted to lead her pony around one of the outcroppings of stone—and pointed to a fragment of coral anklet trampled into the ground. He showed the crusader, too, where the Seljuk horses had galloped across a wide slope, explaining that heavily laden animals would have kept to a foot pace.

"If these warriors have their families," he added shrewdly, "they will not wait to plunder those who come after. They will not wait at all."

When the sun was almost overhead, and its heat warmed the cavalcade in spite of the chilling wind, Khalil dismounted to search the ground. Here a narrow gorge ran back into the cliffs that now rose several hundred feet overhead. And here the chieftain left all his men but Youssouf and Hugh.

On foot the three leaders followed the ledge around the shoulder of the mountain, and Hugh saw that here were no hoof marks. Soon they were ascending over masses of purple and whitish stone and leaping fissures. Youssouf led the way around a turning and climbed a pinnacle of rock with the agility of a goat.

"*Antharikyah, dar assiyadah!*" he called back softly. "Antioch, the abode of power."

When the others joined him, all three lay down and drew themselves to the edge of the rock.

"*V'allah!*" muttered Khalil. "We have not come too soon."

In the brilliant sunlight the scene below them, to the left, was etched in minutest detail. Almost abreast them, a bare two arrow flights away, was the castle of Kai-Kosru—a castle built upon a ledge of solid marble, white, with reddish veins running through it. A wall of marble blocks, some twenty feet in height, had been built around it. Above the wall appeared the dome of a mosque, the terraced roofs of buildings and a single slender tower with a watch gallery at the summit.

This ledge was the shape of a half moon, curving out from the summit of the mountain, and so steep was the slope at either side that no men in armor could climb it without aid from above. Groups of warriors were visible on the wall, plying their bows through the crenels of the battlement. Others stood in the watchtower, and Hugh could hear them shout, one to another.

"How many?" Khalil asked his lieutenant.

"More than two hundred, less than four. I watched, for the interval between two prayers. I saw no women."

"They have been sent away. A few Seljuks went to guard them, and these others remain to carry off the Sultan's wealth, if the castle cannot be held."

"Would even a few go hence without the wealth?"

"Ay, for they had the women of these as surety." He nudged Hugh and asked, low-voiced, "What think ye of the wall, my lord—will it fall?"

Hugh could see the flank of the castle and one end of the Greek lines. The ledge on which the castle stood was some hundred feet above the highest roofs of the town. And the town itself, amid gardens and terraces, descended from the base of the ledge to the river, far below. The streets were little more than stairs.

And these streets swarmed with Greek soldiery. Archers and crossbowmen occupied the nearest buildings and kept up a steady fire at the battlement above them. Other detachments escorted captive Turks who were hauling up massive timbers. The snapping of whips mingled with the whirring of crossbows.

"They have built a counter tower," explained Hugh. "See, they batter down the gate."

Within the vision of the watchers stood a strange edifice. It was wide at the base, narrowing to a summit, on which, reared back like the head of a striking snake, the long shaft of a mangonel was being bent. The wooden tower was fashioned of tree trunks, laid horizontal, and covered with raw hides as a protection against blazing arrows. Men could ascend within it to the platform, which was shielded by mantelets. And these men were levering back the seasoned beam that held a boulder in the pocket at its end. Great ropes creaked, and the beam

was suddenly loosed, the stone shooting forward and up.

Khalil, watching with interest, could not see where it struck, but heard the thud of it, and the pounding of marble fragments sliding away. A white dust rose over the wall, and the Seljuks shouted in anger.

"How is the castle gate?" asked Hugh. "Do ladders or steps lead up, or is there a road?"

"A road," responded Khalil, "runs slantwise up the ledge to the gate. By it, horses come to the castle. Half-way down the ramp small towers stand, and a lower gate, but this the Greeks may have destroyed."

"Then, when the stone caster has battered in the gate, they will assault the ramp and enter through the breach. But they will not attack until a way has been opened."

Khalil nodded assent, thinking that the crusader was eager to join the Greeks once more. And when they had climbed down from the rock and rejoined the waiting warriors, Khalil spoke to Youssouf, ordering his lieutenant to follow at Hugh's back with two men, to shield the crusader.

It seemed to the Arab that his captive was eager to go against the Seljuks. And, having witnessed the crusader's recklessness in battle, Khalil proposed to take no chances of losing four thousand *miskals* of gold.



CHAPTER VI

THE WAY THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN

AT THE end of the first watch of the night, Arab sentries came back from the lookout rock and reported that all was quiet in Antioch. The Greeks had ceased their hammering at the wall.

Khalil glanced at his men, nodded to Hugh, and flung off his white *koufiyeh*. Tightening his girdle, he looked up at the stars and spoke three words:

"Come, my children."

Striding into the maw of the ravine, he was lost to sight instantly, and the three warriors who followed him. Youssouf nudged Hugh, and the two Franks stepped out of starlight into the utter blackness of trees between two cliffs. In their dark armor, with black hoods and skirted tunics, the Arabs were invisible.

At sunset the horses had been sent back along the trail, guarded by five warriors who made no secret of their disgust at this mission.

Hugh, ax on shoulder, his eyes on the vague shape of the man in front of him, advanced up the ravine, feeling his way around the twisted and thorny boles of trees, and sliding down clay banks. At times he walked over the round stones of a dry stream bed.

There was a halt and a muttered challenge when Khalil picked up the two sentries that had gone up the ravine.

Then Youssouf peered into his face and touched his shoulder. Following the lieutenant, Hugh climbed a bank, clinging to the roots that met his hand, and emerged from the brush into a narrow gorge. Through the cleft between rock walls far overhead, he could see the gleam of stars, and a cold wind brushed past him.

"Ah, what is this?" Donn Dera whispered in his ear. "I am thinking that this is neither quarry nor cairn, but a path into a pit, and no good at the end of it all."

Hugh could hear his companion's teeth clicking together, and his breath sighing, and the ends of his flail striking against the cliff, and he wondered at the man's anxiety. Donn Dera did not lack courage, but the gusts of wind that whined in the gorge, the silence of the place, made him fearful.

Skilled marauders, the Arabs moved without a sound of footfall or metal striking against armor. Hugh could make out the faint gleam of their helmets. Then he could see nothing before him, and his ax struck stone overhead. He felt up with his hand and discovered that he was

entering a tunnel, where he could touch the wall on either side. Bending his head, he strode on.

Presently the walls fell away, and the forms of men ahead of him became visible. He was standing in what seemed to be a narrow room, carpeted, without any ceiling. Reaching down, he picked up gritty dust in his fingers. Then he knew that he was in the quarry and that the white walls of the niche were marble.

The Arabs cast about a moment and entered a corridor that was so narrow only one man could go at a time. This passage turned many times, until the men in advance halted and Hugh was dazzled by the gleam of fire-light on the streaked stone.

Pushing up to Khalil, he looked around the corner. There was barely room for one man to squeeze out of the corridor, and the Arabs had halted.

By looking over their heads Hugh could see the fire in the heart of the quarry. It crackled and swirled under the wind gusts and sent shadows leaping over the gleaming wall of stone. Marble blocks, half chiseled into smoothness, stood at the sides, with piles of ropes and pulleys and hammers, and the short wooden ladders used to climb from ledge to ledge.

Clustered around the fire were some score of Seljuks. Several of them were talking at once, pointing and arguing, and—though they had spears ready to hand—they had eyes only for one another. A single sentry leaned on his spear and listened, almost within reach of Khalil.

This man was a bearded warrior with two swords and an array of daggers girded under his ribs, and a Greek shield slung over his shoulders. From time to time he

yawned and spat. And without warning, aroused by a slight sound, he turned and looked squarely at the Arab who was moving toward him from the corridor.

"*Yah hai*——" he roared, and reeled back, falling with a clash of steel, Khalil's javelin fast in his throat.

The Seljuks sprang up, groping for weapons. Seeing the warriors running from the passage they closed in on them without waiting to dress shields or string bows.

Khalil, with a half dozen Arabs, met their rush with two-edged scimitars, and before Hugh came up the chieftain had shifted his ground. The Arabs seemed to flow, rather than run, from the passage, bending low until they leaped at their foes.

Spreading out to the sides, they pulled down the Seljuks who tried to fly from the quarry. The remaining guards crowded together, then scattered and rushed desperately. But the swift-footed desert men sliced them with the curved scimitars, and the cry of "*Aman*—have mercy!" was raised in vain.

"*Yah Khawand—yah rafik!*" roared Khalil's men as the last Seljuk went down. Some picked up an extra sword, and they all swept after Khalil across the floor of the quarry.

At the edge of the firelight they came full upon a chasm or a foss cut where the castle plateau met the stone of the mountain. It was too wide to leap, and there was no way of telling its depth.

As a precaution—though no attack had been expected from the quarry passages—no bridge had been built across this chasm. Instead, a light beam lay athwart it, and two sentries stood at the far end.

They had heard the fighting and seen the Arabs run from the fire, but, fearing to leave their comrades in a trap, had not pulled back the beam until the first assailants came up.

And these, without a second's hesitation, flung themselves bodily upon the beam, catching it in their arms and holding it in place with their weight. Some of the Arabs rushed across the shaking bridge, and the two sentries fled. The men who now hung to the beam were drawn up, and Khalil's band ran into the heart of Kai-Kosru's stronghold.

Hugh saw that the last man over halted long enough to push the beam loose, and it disappeared into the depths of the mountain.

Somewhere in the darkness kettledrums sounded, and a man ran from the door of a palace building waving a smoldering torch over his head. He was cut down before he had a chance to cry out. Darkness favored the Arabs, and Khalil, who knew the plan of the castle, made the most of surprise.

Leaving the dome of the mosque on his left, he ran toward the Sultan's dwelling on his right. At the portico a dozen of the garrison had mustered and were shouting at the sentries on the wall.

These were surrounded by the Arabs, and their outcry ceased suddenly, in a clatter of steel. Guards were at the gate of the outer wall, and some hundred Seljuks were standing at the rampart, kindling cressets, stringing bows and shouting to know what the matter was.

Between the wall and the palace, Hugh made out the foliage of a garden and the shimmer of water. Beyond

the garden stood a low structure that looked like a barrack, and here also there was a bustle and clamor. Calling half of his men to him, Khalil plunged into the garden, and Yousouf cried out to the Franks:

"Come, lords, we will take the Sultan's *serai*!"

Paying no attention to the warriors on the outer wall, who fingered their weapons and peered into obscurity, unable to make out friend or foe, Yousouf sprang through the columns of the portico into the tiled entrance hall.

Hither the leaders of the Seljuks were hastening, down the stairway from a balcony, out of corridors. And here there was light, reflected on the gilded ceiling from hanging oil lamps.

Hugh confronted the foemen who had vanquished his followers a week ago—stocky men, with broad, bony faces, clad in Damascus and Persian mail. By the plumes in their helmets he recognized several chieftains and made toward them with Yousouf at his elbow.

One of the Seljuks stepped out to meet him, with shield advanced and scimitar lifted. Hugh had learned that the light, curved blades of these fighters could strike inside the sweep of an ax. Lacking a shield, he gripped the shaft of his weapon in both hands and sprang aside as the warrior cut at him.

The scimitar glanced from the mail coif, laced about his head, but his ax, swung with all the strength of his shoulders, caught the man fairly between throat and arm. Tearing through steel links and shoulder bones, the ax grated against the Seljuk's spine, and he fell prone, bearing with him the embedded ax.

Others leaped at Hugh with a shout of anger, but Yousseuf slipped in front of the crusader, and Donn Dera's whistling flail backed the Arab up. Putting his foot on the Seljuk's body, Hugh wrenched out his ax and snatched up the round steel shield that the dying man had dropped.

Outnumbered, the leaders of the Seljuks fought desperately, crying to their followers to come to them. Several of them pressed together and cut their way out of the hall and ran from the palace. The others were pursued through corridors and balconies until they scattered in headlong flight.

"Ho!" cried Yousseuf. "These are vultures, and we have stripped their feathers from them."

He kicked a plumed helmet and sent it spinning across the tiled floor.

"Come, Lord King, let us see where Kai-Kosru kept his wealth."

"What of Khalil?" demanded the knight.

"Khalil is a hawk, and these are vultures. Come!"

And, regardless of what was happening outside the palace, the Arabs snatched up lamps and torches and spread through the inner chambers. Here the floors were richly carpeted, and the marble walls bore paintings of Seljuk sultans and their battles. Yousseuf halted in his stride, and threw back his head, baying like a hound at scent of quarry.

"By the Ninety and Nine holy names—by the beard and the breath of Ali, the Companion—lo, the vultures have trussed up their meat and left it for the hawks to find!"

It was, perhaps, well for the marauders that the garrison had been preparing to evacuate Antioch. Had the Arabs, scenting loot, scattered through the sleeping chambers and the deserted women's quarters, stripping and plundering, Yousseuf could never have held them together.

As it was, in dozens of stout leather saddlebags and goatskin packs, the treasure of Kai-Kosru and his ancestors lay gathered before their exulting eyes, in the center of an anteroom. More, it was neatly sorted and packed, and the warriors who had been guarding it had fled.

With a slash of his scimitar, Yousseuf cut the thongs from the neck of one sack and thrust his hand within. Under the beards of his companions he held out gold bezants, and heavier coins stamped with Greek letters and the likeness of pagan gods—Persian *dinars*, bearing the figure of a horseman.

"*Ai-yah!*" cried Yousseuf, delving deeper, "here is a *dirhem* of the caliph Aaron the Blessed¹ and another of Saladin, the foe of the Franks. Verily, Kai-Kosru had his finger in every purse of al-Islam."

"The praise to the Giver!" echoed a warrior, who was prodding a goatskin.

Others unearthed jewels in the smaller saddle bags, and held them up to the torchlight gleefully, but Yousseuf, well satisfied with the extent of the Seljuk treasure, remembered that the fighting was not over by any means. Hastily he told off ten men who were slightly wounded, to guard the sacks.

¹Haroun al-Raschid, of Bagdad.



SAT DOWN DERA WITH A FIVE

FOOT SWORD ACROSS HIS KNEES



Then he looked around for the two Franks, at first casually and then more anxiously, until he struck clenched hands against his temples and stormed at his followers.

"Thieves—sons of misfortune—O ye spawn of the gullies! Was the door of plunder open, that ye should shut eyes and ears against the two Nazarenes, the captives entrusted to ye by Khalil! Out upon ye—search, seek——"

A shouting at the outer gate silenced him, and he clutched his beard when he heard the cry of the Seljuks.

"Yah hai—Allah, il allahi."

Muttering, he gathered together the twenty remaining able-bodied men and sallied forth to learn what was taking place outside the palace.

While the Arabs were crowding around the bags of gold, Hugh looked for Donn Dera. Not finding him in the anteroom, he went back to discover whether his companion had been struck down in the entrance hall. Here was no sign of the man from Erin, and Hugh continued his search, wandering through a corridor that led into the garden court in the center of the palace. This was in darkness, but at the far end a glimmer of light came from between slender pillars.

Ax in hand, the crusader crossed the garden, circled a marble pool, and advanced through the colonnade. He found himself in the throne-room of Kai-Kosru.

A single oil lamp brought to life the blue of lapis lazuli set in the wall, the soft sheen of silk carpet underfoot, and the glint of shields and rare swords—scimitars, yata-

ghans and daggers hung behind the dais upon which stood the narrow silver chair of the dead Sultan.

And beside the lamp on this dais sat Donn Dera with a five-foot sword across his knees.

Hugh came closer and looked at it, knowing that this was the sword Durandal. Its pommel was a gold ball from which the empty jewel facets stared like blind eyes. From pommel to crosspiece extended a bronze bar, long enough for two hands to grip, and the wide crosspiece curved toward the blade like a new moon.

"That is Roland's glaive," he said.

The blade was broad at the base, and the bright steel had the glow of silver. Down it ran an inscription that Hugh could not read. The point was blunter than in the swords Hugh had used.

All at once he felt that here was a sword of enduring strength. His hand longed to take it up. He thought that the bronze would fit his hand.

"Yea," quoth Donn Dera, "I found it hanging above the throne. I lifted it down."

The wanderer was gazing at the great blade as if puzzled or grieved.

"I can bend any bow, or cast any spear—I can lift this blade above my shoulders, but there is no strength in me to swing the sword Durandal."

"With both hands, then," suggested Hugh, who was afire with eagerness to do that very thing.

"Nay, I have the ache of long years in my joints. The sword is too heavy. Ah——"

Donn Dera stared at his companion in surprise. The

young knight had dropped to one knee and clasped his hands upon it, and had shaken back the mail coif from his head, so that his mane of tawny hair fell around his shoulders.

After a moment Hugh spoke to Donn Dera.

"I thank the Lord Christ that we have found the sword of the hero and will take it from paynim hands."

"Yea, we shall take it," muttered the wanderer. "My cunning found it, though I have not the strength to wield the great sword."

"Come and find Khalil."

Together, the elder walking with effort under the weight of the five-foot blade, they went from the throne room and garden to the entrance of the palace. Hugh could not keep from looking again and again at Durandal. Donn Dera had found the sword, and it was his. But the young knight was glad that it would not fall to the Greeks. The blade gleamed in such a friendly manner, as if asking him to take it up.

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CHAPTER VII

THE GAUNTLET

UTTER confusion reigned outside the palace. Riderless horses plunged away from spluttering torches. Groups of Arabs flitted between lights, and beyond the outer wall of the castle there rose the steady, threatening roar of a multitude. On the wall Seljuks were loosing arrows from their bows.

But they were sending their shafts into the outer darkness, and half-heartedly, because they were aware of the Arabs in the palace and the stables.

"By Michael," grinned Donn Dera, "the Greeks are attacking the gate."

They saw Khalil, then. The chieftain of Yaman was taking full advantage of confusion. Having cleared the

barrack of Seljuks, he had scattered his few men so that the garrison on the wall could not judge his strength, and must have fancied, in their desperation, that all Arabia had descended from the mountain.

Carefully Khalil had counted the defenders of the wall—a hundred and fifty, warriors and officers. He had loosed the horses to add to their perplexity, having appropriated the best stallion for his own mount, and now, escorted by torches, with sheathed sword and hand on hip, he revealed himself to the harassed Seljuks.

“O ye men of Kai-Kosru!” he shouted in a voice that carried over the tumult. “Are there not souls enough in paradise that ye should stand against the Roumis and join the company of the slain?”

“What man art thou?” one of the Seljuk leaders demanded.

“I am Khalil el Kadhr, chief of the Ibna, lord of Yaman. My men hold the palace and what is in it. Lay down your weapons, or we shall throw you to the Roumi dogs that bay without!”

Khalil looked both triumphant and satisfied. In reality he was on fire with anxiety. If he tried to withdraw, taking the sacks of gold—and Youssouf had told him their worth—the Seljuks would be aware of his scanty numbers and would turn to fight for the treasure. So far he had not molested the garrison on the castle wall, and the last thing he wished to do was to attack them from below.

Meanwhile the Greeks, aroused by the tumult within, had ventured up the ramp and were beating at the outer

gate with a ram. Their crossbow bolts whistled past the Seljuk helmets.

"Nay, withdraw, O ye Arabs!" cried one of the Turkish officers. "Leave the horses—the infidels will be in upon us before the first light."

Khalil laughed loudly.

"When did the men of Yaman leave horse to the Sultan's dogs? We shall deal with the Greeks. Throw down your weapons—now—or we will come against you with the sword."

Perhaps memory of the dreaded Arab scimitar stirred the Seljuks, or sheer uncertainty made them desperate. They had seen their comrades slain or scattered—most of their leaders were lost, and they were quarreling among themselves.

"Then, Khalil," cried he who had bid the assailants withdraw, "let there be peace between us. We will help thee bear the gold to safety, away from the cursed Greeks. Then will we talk of horses and a division of the treasure——"

"Does the lion sit down with the jackal? I would have left ye, to live——"

"Nay, Arab!" The Seljuk cried out hastily when he saw Khalil turn as if to give an order. In imagination the men on the wall saw a thousand arrows loosed at them, and they all began to shout at once.

"Aman!"

"Forebear—we are believers. Have mercy, Khalil!"

"We hear and obey! Only stand back and let us pass into the quarry."

Khalil looked at them without apparent pleasure.

"Then cast down weapons—*all* weapons! The javelins likewise. What, have ye no knives?"

A few at first, scores of scimitars, spears, and bows clattered on the stones beneath the wall, and the Seljuks ran down the inclines, some prostrating themselves before Khalil's horse. But the Arab wished neither talk nor delay.

Yousouf and bands of the desert men hounded the prisoners off toward the stables, thrusting at them with their own javelins and mocking them. The Seljuks were thoroughly disheartened, and—though many of them had long knives hidden under cloak and girdle—more than willing to flee.

A few of them picked up a stout plank bridge set on rollers that must have been used by the Sultan to pass horses across the chasm. Pushing this into place, they fought to be first to cross to the sanctuary of the mountain. When the last had disappeared, Yousouf stationed a guard at the movable bridge and hastened back to where his chieftain was loading horses with the sacks of gold and precious stones that were being carried from the palace.

And then a warrior shouted, and they stopped their work, rigid with astonishment.

Hugh had walked past them to the gate that was already splintered and shaken. One of the iron bars had been knocked down. Setting his shoulder under the remaining bar, the tall crusader lifted it, cast it aside, and wrenched open one of the teak doors.

Reaching out he gripped the sword on Donn Dera's

shoulder, and with Durandal in his hand he stepped through the opening, and confronted the mass of the besiegers.

No Arabs were near enough to prevent him, and they who snatched up bows and javelins to slay him remembered that he was Khalil's captive, the Emperor.

Below Hugh of Taranto a hundred torches smoked and crackled. Under his feet was the débris knocked from the wall by the stones, and the length of the inclined ramp was littered with fragments of marble and the ruins of the lower towers.

Upon the ramp several hundred Greeks had ventured, and now stood poised, with shields raised over their heads, sword in hand. The nearest, who had been driving a tree trunk against the gate, had let fall their ram, and snatched up spears, fully expecting a sally from the opened gate.

On the hillside below were ranks of crossbowmen, covered by mantlets, and on the *beffroi*, the gigantic tower, were other detachments, mustered under the white and gold standard of the Cæsar.

Beyond arrow flight of the wall, Theodore the Emperor sat a white horse with crimson caparisoning, attended by his Sebastocratos, his chief officer, his councilors and Mavrozomes, the armorer. He had heard that the Seljuks were forsaking the wall and fighting among themselves, and, no sluggard where an advantage was to be gained, he had commanded an instant assault, lending his presence to encourage the men of his host.

Conspicuous, in his gilded armor and griffon-crested helmet, illuminated by a ring of torches and outlined

against the great banner with the purple cross, Theodore was perceived at once by the knight of Taranto.

For their part, sight of the tall Frank in the aperture from which they had expected a sally of Turks filled the Greek soldiers with astonishment. When they noticed the gold-wrought mail, and the purple cross upon Hugh's ragged surcoat, their bewilderment waxed greater.

They had been told that all the Franks were slain at the Meander, and here was one of the crusaders in the Emperor's mail, leaning upon a sword of unearthly size—and Hugh himself, standing upon the pile of débris, his long hair shining in the flickering torchlight, seemed to them of gigantic stature.

So, within and without the castle wall, there fell a quiet in which the crackling of cressets and the stamping of horses could be heard. And in this moment of near silence Hugh raised his hand.

"Lord King——" he cried.

A bolt from a crossbow whirred past his ear and crashed into the stone lintel of the gate.

Hugh's voice now reached to the imperial cavalcade, and even the horse sergeants beyond.

"Down weapons! Sir Hugh of Taranto speaks, who defended the banner and person of the Emperor at the Meander——"

He said no more. In Mavrozomes, peering up from the press below, there was a nimble wit. The armorer understood instantly that Hugh had escaped the slaughter at the river, probably as a Seljuk prisoner—Mavrozomes imagined that Hugh had been thrust out by the Seljuks to parley for terms of surrender, and the last

thing the Greek nobles wished was that the knight of Taranto should have opportunity to speak before the whole army.

So Mavrozomes reasoned, and acted upon the thought. Gliding to the rank of crossbowmen, he clutched the shoulder of a sturdy Genoese, whispering:

"A purse of bezants—a captain's belt to thee, if thou canst bring down that tall foeman."

Thus the first bolt was sped, and the armorer, cursing its failure, passed to a second man, offering a dozen slaves and two heavy purses.

"Aim lower!"

The other man settled his shoulder against the iron stock and pulled the trigger. The bolt whirled upward, crashed against the knight's light shield, and tore through it but glanced aside. The crusader shook the shattered shield from his arm.

The parley ended as swiftly as it had begun. For the captain in command of the men highest on the ramp had noticed the two missiles, and, feeling himself in jeopardy, shaded his eyes and looked down at his leaders.

One word passed Theodore's lips, and the Sebastocrator heard and lifted his ivory baton, pointing it toward the gate, twice—that there should be no mistaking his meaning. The captain understood, and cried to his men:

"At him—through the gate."

Spears lowered, the Greeks advanced. And at this sight fierce anger mastered Sir Hugh. His eyes glowed, and he raised the sword overhead.

"St. George!" he cried, and again, "St. George!"

His sword flashed down in a horizontal sweep that snapped off the nearest spearheads, and swept back, as he stepped forward, into the boldest of the Greeks. Three men were cast down and lay without moving.

"A traitor!" shouted the captain. "Oho—he is leagued with the Saracen and the devils of the pit!"

What followed was witnessed by three thousand souls on the hillside below and by as many Arabs as could crowd into the half-opened gate—the sight of whom had inspired the Greek officer's shout.

The ramp was no more than eight feet wide, and covered with broken stone, so that only three men could stand upon it abreast. Bending low, and shortening their sword arms, the Greeks rushed, and were swept from their feet with broken bones and bodies gaping. Some slid off the ramp, but they were dead before they touched the ground, a hundred feet below.

"Over the bodies," ordered the captain angrily. "Shield to shield. Thrust with spears from behind."

Three warriors linked shields together and went up, while others who had the long light spears of the foot soldiers pushed their weapons in advance of the three.

"Well done!" laughed Sir Hugh.

He stepped forward, and a spear tore through his cheek, grinding into the bone. His sword smote down the middle man of the three, and he leaped back. An ax clanged against his straining chest as he heaved up Durandal, breaking the links of his mail.

"Well struck!" he roared, and cut inward, toward the rock. The two leaders were knocked against the cliff, their limbs numbed by the impact. Spears snapped.

Hugh fought with the cold rage and the swiftness of the man who knows his weapon. There was in him, at such a moment, the instinct of the falcon that strikes only to slay and is not to be turned from its quarry. Aroused in every nerve, his long body and iron muscles wielded Durandal as an ordinary man might swing a staff.

No man, struck by that sword, rose again. He saw the Greek captain climb in desperation upon the huddle of his men. The Greek, who gripped a shield close to him, and a short sword upraised, leaped forward to strike at the crusader's unprotected head.

And as he leaped Sir Hugh took two steps back, swinging Durandal far behind his right shoulder. The long blade whined through the air, and checked as it struck the Greek above the hips—then swept out and up, gleaming and hissing.

Smitten in mid-leap, the body of the Greek flew out from the ramp, and a shout burst from three thousand throats. The form of the captain divided into two parts, the legs and hips whirling away from the trunk, falling into the line of crossbowmen.

Beholding this, the Greeks on the ramp drew back, and the mutter of voices from the ranks below was like the murmur of innumerable bees:

"May the saints aid us—such a stroke!"

"Take up bows—make an end——"

"Nay, what say the nobles? I marked how the first bolts did him no harm——"

"By Sergius and Bacchus, the warrior is more than human. Whence came he? See, there is fire playing around his brow."

This muttering dwindled when Hugh, resting his sword tip on the roadway, drew from his right hand the gauntlet of steel links.

"Theodore Lascaris," he cried, "Lord King, forsworn and traitor. By thy treachery died eight hundred, my companions, who served thee faithfully. Worthier knights than I lie now unburied at yonder river, but I alone am left to proclaim thy guilt, and this I do, challenging thee in thy person or by champions to do battle with swords that God may judge between us."

And he cast the gauntlet after the body of the Greek captain, so that it circled in the air and fell among the knights sitting their horses below the ramp.

This sudden cessation of the struggle at the gate produced a silence among the Greeks, and they who understood Sir Hugh's words glanced curiously at the Emperor. But Theodore Lascaris, his lean face white under the silver helmet, fingered the tasseled rein of his charger, giving no response or any indication that he had heard. Seeing him thus hesitant, the nobles debated whether or not to pick up the gage cast down by the Frank, and while they hesitated, Sir Hugh spoke again.

"I am the banneret of Taranto, my lineage the equal of any prince of the Comneni. If thou wilt not accept my pledge, name thy champions, and I will meet them in this hour upon level ground until one or the other perish."

A strong hand grasped Hugh's belt at the back, others caught his arms and he was drawn suddenly into the darkness of the castle court. The gate was shut before his eyes and the iron bar dropped into place. He heard Khalil's deep voice at his ear.

"In the name of Allah the Compassionate, let there be an end of madness!"

While he had been engaged with the Greeks, Yousouf had loaded the treasure sacks upon a score of pack horses, and the Arabs were already crossing the bridge into the quarry.

They carried lighted torches, and Khalil waited until the last of his men, except his own escort, had disappeared into the cleft behind the quarry. Then he glanced for a last time around the deserted palace grounds of Kai-Kosru. Only the bodies of a few Seljuks were to be seen, because the Arabs had carried away their dead with them. Even the stables stood empty. The Greeks, after their encounter with Sir Hugh, had not yet returned to the attack.

"*V'allah*," said Khalil, "it is finished."

He ordered one of his men to dismount and to give Sir Hugh his horse, ready saddled. Then in their turn they crossed the narrow bridge leading to the quarry and cast it into the chasm behind them. Not until then did they hear the thudding of the battering ram at the gate again. And Khalil thought that the Emperor's men would find little spoil in the palace.

"Where is Donn Dera?" asked Sir Hugh suddenly, looking around for his comrade.

"He has gone on, but he is carried in a litter because he was wounded at the wall."

Pushing through the men laden with bundles of loot wrapped up in rugs, the crusader sought for his friend and found him among the pack animals. Donn Dera lay

in a rude litter made of spears and cloaks, and his eyes were closed. He was breathing, but he would say no word until they came to the encampment of the tribe the next day.

Then, after he had been carried into a tent and given water, he raised his head and motioned for Sir Hugh to come closer.

"Let me see," he whispered, "the blade Durandal."

The knight held out the long sword that he had kept near him ever since the fight at the gate. He had cleaned the blade, and the blue steel gleamed without flaw or rust. Donn Dera touched it with his crooked fingers and sighed.

"'Tis a good sword I will be leaving behind me. Take it, and guard it well. Nay—" he smiled grimly as the crusader started to speak—"I will not be carrying a weapon in my hand again. For an arrow hath . . . given me my death. Call Khalil."

Sir Hugh looked once into the bloodless face of the wanderer and would have cheered him with words. But Donn Dera lifted his hand. "I had a foreboding that this would be. . . . Make haste."

Hastening from the tent, Sir Hugh found Khalil counting the captured horses, surrounded by the exulting Arabs. Readily the chieftain agreed to go to listen to the dying man—saying as he strode beside the crusader that the strange Frank surely had the gift of prophecy, since he had said that they would take the treasure of the Sultan and that ill would come to himself.

At their coming Donn Dera raised himself on his elbow. "Now, Khalil," he said slowly, "is it clear to thee

that this youth is not the Emperor of the Greeks?"

"Ay, for I saw the true Emperor beyond the wall. By Allah, I know now that this young warrior is no man of his."

"So it is," said Donn Dera. "Now I will be dying, and I shall tell ye no more lies. This man, Sir Hugh of Taranto, a champion of the Franks, was chosen by the Greeks before the battle to wear the armor and weapons of the Emperor, so that no harm would come in the battle to the real Emperor Theodore. Ay, they clad Sir Hugh like the Emperor and thought that he would be slain with the other Franks."

"*Mash'allah!*" Khalil thought this over for a moment. "Who may escape his fate?"

"I told thee the truth," said Sir Hugh. "I am no lord of men, but a knight without gear or gold to pay a ransom."

"Now, listen ye—" Donn Dera breathed heavily, whispering his words—"Khalil . . . if thou dost sell Sir Hugh to the Greeks they will pay well . . . because they wish to silence his tongue and leave his body with the other Franks upon the battlefield. But thou wilt not!"

The Arab chieftain looked thoughtfully upon the ground.

"Nay," went on Donn Dera, "thou wilt not because he hath eaten of thy salt and shed his blood in fighting for thee. Look."

He pointed at the red spear wound that scarred the crusader's cheek, and Khalil nodded assent.

"True," cried the Arab. "Am I a dog, to sell a guest of my tent for profit? Nay, I have enough."

"And," whispered the wanderer, "seek not to take the sword from him. My cunning found it—and I yielded it to him. He alone hath the strength to wield Durandal."

"By Allah," Khalil smiled, "have we not seen what the sword did to the Roumis? They dropped from the gate of Antioch like sheep over a cliff. We would be fools to seek to take it from him."

Sir Hugh lifted his head and would have spoken, but Donn Dera checked him with a sign. "Nay, a last word, youngling. What words said Roland to the sword when he felt death anigh? '*Never shalt thou possessor know . . . Who would turn from the face of mortal foe.*' Thus said he, and so it is. Ay, Khalil, the sword is not for me but for this youth who did not turn his face from the Seljuks, and who went out alone to face the Emperor and the Greeks."

"*V'allah!*" cried Khalil, who had all an Arab's love of prophecy and miracles. "What more canst thou foretell?"

Donn Dera's head swayed, and he chanted:

"This must be said, and now the sight of it comes upon me. This youth is not wise, and his way will ever be the way of the sword. There is no help for it. Yea, he will be set upon and he will know suffering. When that is said the worst is said. But he will keep faith with the sword and will not turn his face from any foe, and in the end he will find peace. Ochune! Now my eyes are dim . . . I can see no more."

That night while the young crusader watched, Donn Dera died, and Hugh covered his face. When it was light, he dug the grave himself and buried the body of the wan-

derer who had saved his life. The grave was under a great pine tree, and Hugh fashioned a cross out of wood to set over it.

He had barely finished when Khalil sought him out. The Arabs had taken down and packed their tents, and had loaded the pack animals.

"We must go!" cried the chieftain. "All of us. The Greeks are in the valley, moving toward this place. Thou art my guest—so I give thee the horse that carried thee here, with its saddle. Thou art free. What road wilt thou take?"

Leaning upon the hand guard of Durandal, Sir Hugh considered. He no longer had a friend to accompany him, and he knew that if the Greeks made him prisoner his life would be forfeit.

"Whither go ye?" he asked.

"To our lands, beyond the river Jordan that lieth near to the Holy—the city thou callest Jerusalem."

"In other years," observed the crusader, "I made a vow to go to Jerusalem, to kneel before the tomb of Christ. So, if you will take me with your people I will fare to the south and redeem my vow."

"Come, as my guest!" cried Khalil joyfully. "And surely my honor is increased thereby. But knowest not that Jerusalem is held by the men of Islam?"

"I will find a way to enter."

"And after?"

"Then must I journey to the north. I have challenged the Emperor Theodore, who betrayed my comrades the Franks. Not yet has he atoned for his treachery."

Khalil nodded. He understood perfectly the need to

finish a pilgrimage—did the Moslems not journey to Mecca?—and the need to take vengeance upon an enemy. But an emperor! “Nay,” he smiled, “surely Allah hath made thee mad! Doth the antelope go into the lion’s lair? Better it would be to abide with my people.”

Hastening back to his men, his long cloak swinging behind him, he cried out to them. “Good tidings! The great sword goes with us—ay, and the Frank who is a little mad, but only after the manner of his kind. Now surely we will see happenings!”

The next day Theodore Lascaris, Emperor of the East and Lord of Constantinople and Nicea, sat alone in the disordered throne room of Kai-Kosru. Chin in hand, he meditated, sitting upon the low silver seat that had been the Sultan’s.

His men had ransacked the palace, the mosque, and the gardens. They had found some silks of Cathay and ivory and scattered gold ornaments, but no trace of the true treasure of Kai-Kosru. This had vanished with the mysterious Arabs and the tall crusader who had disappeared, it seemed, into the mountain itself. Theodore had sent officers to follow them and bring back a report to him.

He had won the battle at the river, he had captured Antioch, and had rid himself of the troublesome Franks, yet he had not laid hand on the treasure for which he had journeyed hither. So, moodily, his white fingers stroked the jewels sewn into his silk mantle.

At the far end of the room the curtains parted, and the officer of his guard entered and knelt.

"May it please your Grandeur," the soldier said, "the lieutenant of the Cæsar who commanded the riders sent in pursuit of the Arabs——"

"Admit him," ordered Theodore, and added, "alone. Then fetch hither the two deaf Bulgars and Mavrozomes the armorer."

When the lieutenant knelt before the dais, Theodore leaned forward impatiently. "Thy tale!"

Reluctantly the Greek spoke. He had found the path through the quarry and the tracks of the Arab and Seljuk horses. He had found Khalil's camp, but the nomads had vanished into the southern hills, and it would be useless to follow. On their camp site, however, he had noticed a grave with a wooden cross set over it.

"A cross!" Theodore smiled. "Then, surely, is the crusader slain. Was the body his?"

"May it please your Magnificence, the body was a strange barbarian with hair the color of fire and an iron flail laid by him."

"Eheu!" Theodore closed his eyes, to hide his rage from the soldier. It seemed to him that this young Frank who had donned his armor at the battle had a power of magic in him. Had not the crusader escaped the slaughter and appeared miraculously at the gate of Antioch with a sword that was like to no other sword?

"And yet," put in the lieutenant swiftly, "bears he your mark, O Majesty. For I have heard it said that his face is scarred from eye to chin by a spear-tip. And by this scar will he be known wherever he goes."

Theodore's pallid face showed nothing of his thoughts. "Then," he said, "bear this command to the Lord Cæsar

thy master—have a message written and sent to all garrisons of the frontier, and the seaports, ay, and the captains of our fleets. Describe the tall Frank, with the sword and the scar he bears. Say that he is a deserter from the battle who joined the infidels and dared draw his weapon against our men. Is this clear to thee?"

"Ay," the officer assented joyfully, for he had feared the anger of the Emperor.

"Then, say that we will bestow a thousand pieces of gold upon the man who brings in to us the deserter and recreant Sir Hugh of Taranto. Inform the agents and spies who go among the Moslems beyond the border. Bid them trace this wanderer and send me all news of his movements. Fail not."

"Nay——"

"Fail not, I said, this time. Once thou hast come back with empty hands. If now this wanderer finds his way back to a Christian city thou shalt answer for it—" the dark eyes of the Emperor gleamed—"with thy life. Thou hast leave to go."

Two heavy men entered, clad in black leather and wolfskins. They were the deaf Bulgars, the torturers of the Emperor, and between them they led Mavrozomes. The armorer did not bear the glove or hammer of his office, and he trembled in his legs and arms as he cast himself down before Theodore, hiding his eyes.

The Emperor smiled. At last he had before him something to appease the rage in him.

"Mavrozomes," he said softly, "I have chosen two companions who will attend thee and make much of thee—upon the rack. And remember, when they have done

with thee, Mavrozomes, if Satan bids thee choose for him a mock Emperor in the nether world, bethink thee and do not pick out such a one as thou didst for me."

Still smiling, he listened to the screams of the doomed man, borne away by the two deaf torturers.

So did Sir Hugh become a marked man, who took refuge among the Arabs from the enmity of a Christian emperor who sought to silence his voice.

And the eyes and ears of Theodore reached, unseen, far into Asia. Months later one of his spies in Jerusalem sent tidings of the crusader.

Sir Hugh had appeared, unarmed, in the streets of the Holy City, and the Moslems had suffered him to go and pray at the Sepulchre—because he came as a pilgrim without weapons, and because Khalil, a chieftain of Yaman, had escorted him.

Before the agents of the Emperor could make any attempt to seize him, the crusader left Jerusalem. By inquiring among the Arabs of the bazaar the spies learned that Sir Hugh dwelt in Khalil's tents across the gorge of the Jordan. The crusader had joined in the warfare of the desert clans, who told many tales of his great strength. He had learned to speak Arabic well, and Khalil hoped that he would abide in the black tents and take a wife from the Arab girls.

Thus time passed, until the agents of the Greeks ventured out into the desert country to seek Sir Hugh.

They came to Khalil's tribe, which had grown wealthy in horses and camels since the taking of the treasure, and they found their way to Khalil's tent.

There they heard that the crusader and the chieftain had set out upon a journey, around the frontier of the Empire, into the east.

All this they wrote down and sent from Jerusalem to the court of Theodore. It was months later that a wandering Syrian in the pay of Theodore, bound upon another mission, saw Sir Hugh face to face in the streets of Bagdad. He recognized the scar and the long sword that the crusader now carried in a sheath upon his back.

But the Syrian, a clever scholar, Rabban Simeon by name, dared make no attempt against the life of the man who was Khalil's guest. He sent his report to the Emperor, adding—for he was a shrewd and careful soul—"The men of Bagdad say that these twain journey now towards the north, to seek the Sea of the Ravens. What they have in mind to do, I know not. But the Christian's life would not endure an hour if harm befell Khalil. If he lives to attempt to cross the frontier, it will be upon the eastern side."

After this word from Rabban Simeon, no further tidings came by letter to the court. But an order was given to the guards of the east—along the mountain wall of the Caucasus, and in the ports of the Black Sea—to look for a tall Frank with a yellow mane of hair who spoke Arabic and bore an old scar from eye to chin.

For Theodore's memory was as long as his arm, and he had not forgotten the gauntlet that Sir Hugh had flung at his feet—the steel glove that still lay rusting beneath the broken wall of Antioch.



CHAPTER VIII

THE STAR GAZER

*Only two men ride into the desert—he who seeks
and he who flees.*—ARAB PROVERB.

ON A late afternoon in midsummer a solitary rider made his way into a caravan *serai* at the edge of some bare brown hills. He was a little man in a wadded black gown tied round the waist with a shawl. He sat perched on the rump of a small bald-faced donkey, and he whacked the donkey steadily with a stick, trying to make it trot.

When he dismounted, he took the pack off his steed and sat down with a sigh of relief in the shade of the rough stone wall. The *serai* had no roof—only the wall and a few stunted tamarisks round the well. No grass grew in the hard clay, and the water, when the little man drew it up, tasted like sulphur.

“The praise to Allah,” he muttered as he drank. “This is the end of the salt desert. How my bones ache.”

He stared back the way he had come, shivering as he saw the familiar haze of dust over the broken gray plain. In that haze he knew that the *ghils*, the spirits of the

waste places, were dancing over the bones of travelers who had not lived to cross the salt desert.

When the sun dipped behind the hills the little man began to feel hungry. He gathered up dried dung from the *serai* floor, and some twigs from the tamarisk, and made a small fire. Over this he hung a copper pot and emptied into the pot the last handfuls of barley from a bag in his pack. To the barley he added water, and he was squatting down to wait for it to boil when he heard a sound behind him and peered anxiously over his shoulder.

Two Turkomans leaned against the wall. They wore greasy sheepskins and shaggy *kalpaks* of black wool, and they looked like vultures in search of dinner. One of them, who wore a long yataghan, a sword-knife, kicked the little man's pack. It flapped open, disgorging nothing but a ragged cloak and a prayer rug with some scrolls of paper and a brass pen.

"God be with you!" cried the man at the fire, because he was afraid. All Turkomans, he had heard, were robbers, and some would rather slay than rob.

"Whence art thou?" muttered the one with the sword.

"*Ai*, my lords, I have crossed the desert from the Land of the Throne of Gold. But," he added hastily, "I have not a single piece of money upon me."

This was not quite true, because he had bracelets and a purse slung beneath his armpit.

The Turkoman went up to him and felt through his shawl girdle, finding only a sack of tinder and a flint. These he tossed angrily into the fire. "What road dost thou follow?" he demanded.

"Perhaps to Rai—" the little man pointed to the north—"perhaps to Bagdad, far to the west. I do not know. I am an astrologer and a man of peace, without a weapon of any kind. Nay, I am fleeing from calamity. There is a great war in Kharesmia, which you call the Land of the Throne of Gold, and the Sultan himself is fleeing. He has gone from Samarkand, although he is the greatest lord of Islam, because this calamity hath come upon his head. But now the desert is between us and that war, and here I am safe."

And the astrologer smiled up at the lanky tribesman, although he felt far from safe. The Turkoman was angry, and being angry might strike him with the sword or take his donkey. Instead, the warrior reached down and lifted the copper bowl between two sticks. With the bowl between them, the two Turkomans began to eat the wanderer's barley.

"Hi, star gazer," one of them snarled, "what is thy name?"

"Nureddin," the little man answered, edging nearer in the hope that he might have a share of his dinner. He ached with hunger.

"Then, Nureddin, prophesy something for us. If you have no gold, you can at least read the stars." And they laughed.

The astrologer looked up blankly. Suddenly he got to his feet, his fingers twisting in his thin beard.

"*Ahai!*" he cried. "Look! A portent! Above the mountains God hath hung the banners of death."

The two Turkomans turned their heads quickly. They saw that the sunset had changed to an unwonted hue,

since a light cloud stratum lay upon the horizon. It gave the effect of giant crimson streamers hung above the mountains.

"It is a sure sign," Nureddin added gloomily. "We call it the *maut ahmar*, the crimson death. Its meaning is that before sunrise one who is now alive and looking upon it will be put in his shroud."

The Turkoman with the sword spat into the empty bowl and flung it at Nureddin. He yawned, yellow teeth gleaming through the mesh of his beard, and stretched his long arms. "By Allah, then is the vulture a better prophet than thou—he knows where not one but many will die between sun and sun."

Idly the tribesman glanced at the hills and frowned. The fire had vanished from the sunset, and the clouds had turned ash gray. Round the *serai* the volcanic ridges had changed in a moment from red to clay color—as if an unseen hand had snatched away the light from the sky.

In the silence horses' hoofs were heard, drawing nearer.

Two riders entered the inclosure with a pair of pack horses following. The Turkomans, peering into the dusk, saw that the saddle mounts were splendid beasts—a gray *kohlani*, with long tail and mane, and a powerful bay stallion. The newcomers glanced around and dismounted, with a click of steel. One—the tallest man Nureddin had ever seen—pulled the loads from the led horses and gathered brush for a fire, while the other rubbed down the chargers, talking to them under his breath.

When flame was kindled and caught in the tamarisk,

Nureddin saw that the tall stranger wore no helmet; long yellow hair, cut evenly over his brow, fell to his shoulders, and his beard was like red gold. Though his skin was burned many shades darker than his hair, his eyes were a light gray. He was clad in chamois leather, stained and wrinkled by armor. Strapped to his broad belt was a five-foot sword, and Nureddin did not fail to notice that empty sockets in the ball of the pommel might once have held jewels.

While the newcomer put an iron pot over the fire and tossed into it dried meat and grain, Nureddin's thin nostrils twitched. When the tall Christian, before eating himself, gave to the horses a measure of barley and dry grass, Nureddin rose to his knees. He was half starved, and these strangers had food.

Abruptly the Turkomans got up and left the caravan *serai*. No sooner had they departed out of hearing than the astrologer scurried over and gave greeting to the warriors.

"Peace to him who directs his steps aright!"

He had spoken in lilting Persian, but the smaller of the two strangers gave response in sonorous Arabic:

"And upon thee be the peace."

Nureddin looked more closely at the slender stranger—at the flowing garments of loose black wool, at the hood that almost hid the braids of hair upon the warrior's forehead.

"*Ai-a*, thou art an Arab, my lord. Surely the chieftain of a tribe! That I should sit at the fire of a son of Yaman! The honor would be greater if I knew thy name."

"Khalil el Kadr."

Curiosity began to plague the astrologer. Here was an Arab, a Saracen, journeying in company with a Nazarene crusader. Whither?

"Verily," he pleaded, "the favor of Allah hath been turned from me until now. I have not tasted food for a night and a day."

"Give the mountebank food," laughed the tall crusader, who understood Arabic.

Rising abruptly, Khalil went to the well and washed clean a wooden bowl. This he filled with rice and dates from his own platter and barley cakes from the crusader's.

"May God reward thee!" cried Nureddin, reaching forth.

The good fare put new courage into the astrologer, and his curiosity waxed mighty. For a while he watched the tall crusader, who had drawn the long straight blade from its leather sheath and was polishing it carefully with a clean cloth.

"Eh," he addressed the warrior, "I am no mountebank—no charlatan who vows he can bring rain by piling stones in a certain way! I am Nureddin, the Mirror of Wisdom. None can predict so well as I the *sa'at*—which is, as your Nobility comprehends, the hour of commencement of happenings." He folded his short arms, and his eyes glimmered under bushy brows. "I have foretold to kings the most auspicious hour for battle, to merchants the day of profit or loss. By the wisdom of the stars I have weighed all things. Ay, at the courts of Cathay, Ind, Kharesmia, and Persia."

"Of Cathay I have heard," smiled the crusader. "It

lies on the far side of the world; but what is Kharemia?"

"Eh, a place of wonders, a land of gold and honey. Its emperor is called the Shah. He rides upon an elephant, seated beneath a canopy of silk. Wherever he goes it is merry. Houris and *bayaderes*—waiting women and singing girls attend him by hundreds."

Nureddin sighed in remembrance.

"They walk like gazelles, and smell from afar of musk and acacia bloom. Their bodies sway even as feather fans in the wind. And when they dance——"

Puffing out his cheeks, he pressed his fingers together and blinked.

"Verily there is no court like the Throne of Gold. A thousand black slaves could not carry the Shah's treasure. The softest shining of matched pearls, the fiery rubies of Badakshan, lumps of clear turquoise, diamonds, blue and yellow! His sword belt would ransom a king, and his turban crest would buy a kingdom. It is easy to see that your Grandeur will find work for that sword in Kharemia, at the court of the Shah, whither, beyond doubt, thou art riding."

"We seek a road," the yellow-haired Christian made response.

"What road?"

"To the Sea of the Ravens."

Nureddin blinked and leaned forward to peer into the expressionless face of the crusader.

"And why? Surely that is a jest, my lord!"

"Is the way known to thee, O Mirror of Wisdom?"

"Indeed, and indeed! I have stood on the shore of the sea. But thou—O prince of the Nazarenes, that road is not to be traveled by thee!"

The crusader looked at the astrologer inquiringly.

"Verily, I would serve thee, my lord," Nureddin chattered on. "Not since the day of Iskander¹ hath a man of thy race set eyes on the Sea of the Ravens. But beyond this place the life of an infidel is forfeit."

"Eh, where lies the road?"

"There be many—and there is none. Look!" He pointed up at the dark line of summits under the glitter of the stars. "To the west and north are the hills. Beyond are the higher ranges, and the pastures of the Turkomans. They would cut the head from an unbeliever and set it over a tower gate."

The crusader nodded understanding, and Nureddin wondered how he had come by his knowledge of Arab speech.

"Be warned!" he went on quickly. "It were better to cross the salt desert than to go into yonder passes."

Again the Christian nodded assent.

"To thee, my lord," Nureddin pointed out, "God hath given a mighty stature, a lion's mane, and a voice like a trumpet. A razor could shave the hair, and the garments of a believer might cover the limbs—but can a lion be made to pass as a leopard? Nay, and indeed nay! Without disguise, an unbeliever may not win through the mountains of the Turkomans."

¹Alexander the Great, who conquered that part of Asia sixteen centuries before the crusaders, and whose name was still a thing to conjure with.

For the third time the listener made a sign of assent, as if he were weighing this in his mind.

"A way may be found," Nureddin observed shrewdly. "The stars will point the way."

"Of all fools," growled Khalil under his hood, "the greatest are they that prophesy."

"Tck-tck! To cast the light of understanding into the shadows of the future is not folly. For a silver *dinar*, my lord Nazarene, I will trace thy fate in the stars."

Hastily the astrologer drew from his breast a parchment bearing the signs of the zodiac, and smoothed a space of sand before him.

"Thy birth, hour and day and year? The place?"

A smile touched the dark face of the crusader.

"The eve of Candlemas, in the year good King Richard sailed for the Holy Land," he said in English.

By Khalil's aid this was explained to Nureddin, who began to draw lines and symbols and make calculations in the sand.

"*Ai*, my lord, that was a time of war, and verily the sign of war is large in thy life." He frowned over his figures, muttering. "Thus stood the planets in their houses then." Glancing at the sky, he added gravely, "Misfortune hath come upon thee, O Nazarene, at the hand of a great king in the west and a fullness of misfortune is yet in store for thee. And this is strange—strange."

He shook his head, sunk in meditation that was not at all assumed. "Two signs befriend thee. Look for the coming of the Dragon and the Archer—they will aid thee."

All at once his eyes gleamed, and he held out his hand to the warriors.

"May it please your Nobility—a silver *dinar* of full weight was promised."

"We have heard," grinned Khalil, who had no patience with Persian soothsayers, "the bleating of a goat. Begone!"

He drew a coin from his wallet and tossed it on the sand without looking at it. Nureddin snatched it up and held it to the firelight, astonished that it was gold.

"May God reward the giver!" he cried joyfully. "May the calamity be averted from the head of the hero. Fail not to watch for the Dragon and the Archer!"

And he shambled off, to bury himself in his cloak and think of ways of getting more gold from the warriors.

"If he had learned thy name, O my brother Hugh," Khalil said grimly, "he would have betrayed thee for a *bezant*."

"And yet he spoke of my foe in the west."

"Guessing that we fled from a powerful enemy. As for archers, we have seen enough of them, but I have reined my horse through many lands and have never set eyes upon a dragon."

While the Arab slept, the crusader kept watch, listening to the snuffling of the horses and the snores of the astrologer. Sitting in the shadow of the packs, his sword across his knees, he meditated.

When he had told Khalil that he meant to leave the Arabs and find his way round the frontiers of the Greek Empire to a Christian land, Khalil had sworn that he would bear him company until they came to a safe road. But even in Bagdad they had met the agents of the Em-

peror, and Khalil had turned again to the east. Merchants told them of a caravan track that led to the north by the Sea of the Ravens.

Here, at the edge of the salt desert, no one thought of the Emperor. Yet few spoke Arabic, and the country was strange even to Khalil. Without the Arab chieftain, Hugh would be little better than a blind man without his guide. . . .

Sir Hugh roused from his reverie. No sound had disturbed him, but the horses had stopped munching. The moon had come up over the plain, and flooded the caravan *serai* and the sleeping men with white radiance. Shadows came and vanished, and presently the crusader made out groups of horsemen moving toward him out of the desert.

He touched Khalil on the shoulder, and the Arab sat up, glancing at the horses, then at the sky.

"*Ai-a!*" A voice wailed suddenly near at hand. "They have come after me. Look! They are the *ghils*. O brothers of misfortune!"

Nureddin had rolled out of his cloak, and was gathering his pack together with quivering fingers.

"Do the *ghils* ride camels?" asked Khalil, thrusting forward his sword sling. "Nay, these be men—but what men?"

Camel bells clanked, a horse neighed, and Nureddin ran to the wall.

"Allah be praised! They are not *ghils*, but they may be Turkomans, come to loot and slay."

Sir Hugh glanced at Khalil, who shook his head. The

riders who had come out of the desert moved with the stumbling gait of utter weariness. The horses were no more than bones and sweating hides. One paced through a break in the wall, and a man swung down stiffly from the saddle, peering into shadows until he saw the well.

"Allah kerim!"

Drawing his scimitar, he took his stand before the well, a lean, pockmarked warrior, his brocade cloak thrown back from a hairy chest. Long-handled daggers filled the front of his girdle, and his slant eyes were baneful as a hawk's.

Evidently he was feared, because the riders who came in after him did not venture to drink, or to allow their horses within stretch of the well.

"Whence are ye?" cried Khalil.

The warrior who stood guard at the water glanced at the Arab and snarled.

"Kum dan—from the sands."

Camels padded up, grunting, and knelt complainingly. Dust rose around the forms of the desert riders who soon filled the caravan *serai*. Someone kindled a horn lantern and hung it from a spear thrust into the ground. Black slaves, glistening with sweat, staggered up, bearing burdens, and after them came a cavalcade of turbaned men, their gaunt ponies decked out in fringed trappings. They were escorting a white camel carrying a carpet shelter. Bells tinkled as the camel knelt, while the men of the cavalcade dismounted and clustered around it.

Standing aloof, Sir Hugh and Khalil saw the carpet shelter quiver and yield up a hooded figure that passed quickly into a silk pavilion, set up by the slaves. At once

warriors with drawn swords took post at the pavilion entrance. The dust subsided as the horses were led outside.

The first comer sheathed his blade and filled a water jar at the well, bearing it into the pavilion. Not until then did the others satisfy their thirst.



CHAPTER IX

THE GRAY HORSE

NUREDDIN had departed to ask questions, and he returned full of news to the corner whither Sir Hugh and Khalil had betaken themselves with their belongings and horses.

"They are Kharesmians—men from the Throne of Gold. Around the pavilion are officers and others in robes of honor. I heard talk of the Shah, and surely there is a woman of the imperial household in this *serai*."

Khalil nodded at the moon and at the horses of the Kharesmians that were tethered outside the wall.

"It is no more than the fourth hour of the night, yet the steeds be overdriven. Throughout the day—ay, until this hour, they have been ridden. *Wallahi!* What woman of the Throne of Gold would come so swiftly and so far?"

"Nay, the grandees, the weapon men, the slaves—whom would they escort if not a woman?"

Receiving no answer, Nureddin went to lead his ass from the caravan *serai* before anyone should notice that he had not done so and should kick him. If indeed an amir of Kharesmia were in the pavilion, no animals would be permitted to remain within the wall.

Khalil squatted down where he was partly in shadow, and motioned his friend to do likewise. For a while he watched the men of the caravan, trying to understand their talk.

"They are indeed Kharesmians," he whispered presently, "lords of Islam, and uncurried devils. O my brother, they have no love for an unbeliever, and their mood is one of little patience. Put on thy hauberk and helm. We will lead out the horses."

Without questioning, the crusader drew his mail from one of the packs and put it on, while the Arab roped the packs together. They were saddling the horses when a tall warrior strode up and stood between them—the same Kharesmian who had taken charge of the well and its water.

"The hour of your going is not yet," he snarled.

Coming up to the horses, he looked them over with an experienced eye, especially the gray stallion of the Arab.

Khalil, thrusting the bit between the charger's teeth, made no answer. The beasts of the Kharesmians were done up, and it was likely that the pockmarked warrior would wish to trade or buy one of the pack horses. Other men of the caravan approached, staring at the tall form of the crusader.

"This is the following of the Amir Omar," quoth he of the necklace. "Make now the earth-kissing salaam, for he draws near."

But Khalil only bent his head and touched his breast as an elder Muhammadan came through the throng, a man who carried himself well in spite of years, who was clad in a flowered silk *khalat* girdled with a green sash. The face of the Amir Omar was gaunt and lined, the eyebrows gray, and the thin beard below the slit of a mouth stained brilliant henna-red.

"What men are ye?" asked the Kharesmian lord.

"From Jerusalem, O *Khoudsarma*."

"And he? Verily, he is an unbeliever, an accursed!"

In the glow of the horn lantern the tawny hair of the crusader had caught the attention of the amir, who glanced curiously at the long sword and the plain steel basinet.

"Ay, an unbeliever," Khalil replied boldly. "A chieftain of Frankistan¹ who hath performed a pilgrimage to the shrine of his prophet. Now he seeks the road to his own land. There is a truce between his people and mine."

"And yet—" Omar fingered his red beard reflectively—"this warrior is an infidel from the tribe of the Cross. And thou art his brother."

¹Europe.

"Ay, his *rafik*, his brother of the road! We have shared the salt."

"Ha! This, thy horse, pleases me. He is fine in the limb, and there is courage in his eye. Surely Allah hath made him swift of foot."

Khalil's jaw thrust out, and his hand tightened on the bridle of the stallion. Omar was asking—after the manner of princes—that the gray horse Khutb be given him. To ask an Arab of birth to sell his saddle horse would have been an insult unforgivable. Khutb was Khalil's most prized possession—as much a part of him as his right arm.

"He is Khutb," Khalil said quietly. "Between sunup and sundown he could carry me to Rai."

The amir stepped forward to stroke the soft muzzle of the stallion and run his fingers through the long mane.

"My steed is foundered," he said. "Give me thine, and thou shalt not go unrewarded."

This was sheer arrogance, for no man would willingly give up his horse in the desert. And Khalil, his arm across the shoulder of the stallion, shook his head, smiling.

"May Allah forgive thee!" he responded.

Still fondling the charger's mane, Omar lifted his hand. Sir Hugh heard breath indrawn, and saw the dagger in the hand. Steel flickered, and Khalil staggered back against Khutb, the blade of a long, curved *kindjhal* buried under his heart.

The Arab stretched to his full height and grasped

at the hilt of his scimitar. He drew the sword, and lifted his arm, when his body swayed, and he cried out:

"Ho, brother—go, with Khutb! Take him!"

An arrow crashed against the mailed chest of the crusader. Men closed in on him, and swords grated from sheaths. Sir Hugh could not draw his long blade in time to meet the onset.

So sudden had been the attack, so wanton the knifing of Khalil, that Sir Hugh acted by instinct—striking out with his mailed fist. He smashed two of the Kharesmians to the ground and caught the blade of another in his mittened fingers, pulling the man to one side. Something thudded against his light steel helm and red flashes veiled his sight.

Bareheaded—for the blow of a mace had knocked off the basinet—he staggered back. Khutb reared and snorted beside him, and he turned swiftly, leaping into the saddle of the stallion.

This gained for him a moment of respite. Khutb, wise in battle, reared again, lashing out with his forefeet. Sir Hugh found the stirrups barely in time to keep his seat, and by then his sight had cleared enough for him to make out Khalil kneeling and watching.

Bringing down the horse, Sir Hugh quickly warded off a scimitar blow with his arm, and reached down to pull the Arab to the saddle.

But Khalil, dying, a smile on his drawn lips, flung himself back under the weapons of his foes, out of the reach of his comrade's hand. In his fading consciousness one thing was clear: his own hour was at hand; for him, the end of the road.

Neighing, Khutb reared again, and the on-pressing Kharesmians gave back hastily. One of them thrust his scimitar through Khalil's throat, shouting savagely. Upon this warrior Sir Hugh wheeled the frantic horse. Lashing hoofs struck the man down, and he rolled over.

Sir Hugh had seen the death stroke given Khalil, and knew in that instant there was no mortal aid for his companion of the road.

Tightening the rein, he struck spurs into Khutb's flanks and plunged through the Muhammadans. Once clear of the corner, he turned sharply and galloped toward the entrance. Men stood in his path, but none ventured to seize the rein of the gray horse. Javelins whistled past him, but the moonlight was elusive and Khutb's swift turn disconcerting.

Passing the silk pavilion, a flicker of lights caught the eye of the crusader. The opening flap had been thrown back, and he beheld a shimmering carpet that stretched to a couch, and on the couch a man who had risen to his elbow to peer out.

A stout figure, at once powerful and indolent, a broad pale face with a heavy jowl and restless brown eyes, a turban of green silk, close wrapped and falling at the end over a massive chest, and in the turban a crest of precious stones that reflected the gleam of the pavilion lamps—all this Sir Hugh saw clearly.

Then he vanished through the caravan *serai* gate. No one rode in pursuit because the horses of the Kharesmians were spent, and the Amir Omar claimed the big bay charger of the crusader for his own.



CHAPTER X

SIR HUGH RIDES ALONE

SIR HUGH drew rein and turned in the saddle. No one had followed him from the *serai*—probably because their tired horses could not keep pace with Khutb. The gray charger whinnied, stretching out its neck, and the crusader leaned forward to rub the twitching ears.

“Nay, lad,” he murmured, “you’ll not see your master again.”

Khalil had died because he would not give up his horse to the strangers, and deep anger ran through Sir Hugh’s veins when he thought of the wanton murder—the knife of the Amir Omar and the broad face that peered from the pavilion.

With his friend, he had lost the other horses, his headgear, and all his provisions. He knew better than to expect to find anything in the *serai* after the Kharesmians had departed the next day. In this country a man took what he could lay his hand on. Their law was the law of the wolf pack.

And now at last the crusader was cast out among

them. He did not know the caravan tracks nor where the towns lay. Khalil had told him that the Sea of the Ravens was to the north, but it would not do, in this wasteland, to ride in any direction haphazard. Sir Hugh thought it all over, stroking the damp neck of the horse.

"Eh, Khutb," he said, "we will e'en let our foemen show us the way. And it may be that we shall give back to them the blow that made an end of Khalil."

The next morning the caravan of the Kharesmians left the *serai* and turned north along the foothills. It entered a long gully between volcanic ledges where the sand was streaked with gray salt. Among the slaves rode Nureddin on his bald-faced donkey.

And an hour after the caravan had passed, Sir Hugh emerged from a cross-gully, under a clump of poplars, and followed in its track.

For the rest of the day he trailed the Kharesmians, sometimes seeing them in the distance through the heat haze in which brown figures of men and beasts danced grotesquely. At night the caravan halted at a stream, and Sir Hugh, waiting until the dark hour before moon-rise, rode up the stream to a wooded spot where he could get clear water to drink and Khutb could find some grazing. But he had no food.

At dawn the Kharesmians were off again, and the crusader thought they were making a forced march. He passed dying horses, and more than once had to make a wide circle to avoid stragglers. He had fashioned a kind of headcloth out of the saddle cover, so that his yellow hair was hidden.

He saw the white walls of villages here and there. Women and donkeys nearly buried under burdens passed him on the trail, staring at his tall figure and strange mail. They must have taken him for some warrior lagging behind the caravan. Sir Hugh suspected that no Christian had come so far into the East before now.

The men stared covetously at Khutb, and sometimes they shouted at him. When he passed a throng of them he gave them the greeting of Islam.

"May the Peace be upon ye."

They answered him, wondering. Perhaps he seemed to them to be some giant from India or Cathay. When he topped a ridge and saw below and ahead of him a city with its domed tombs and flat roofs, he asked, "What place is this?"

And a horseman, passing at a gallop, flung back an answer in Arabic. "Who art thou, not to know? It is Rai."

It lay like a walled garden in the middle of a green valley, for here the desert ended, and poplars bordered the road, and water glinted in the twilight. Toward it small groups of riders were hastening—some of them nobles in silk and shagreen, their reins heavy with silver, their horses caparisoned with damask. Slaves ran before them with torches, and warriors attended them.

Sir Hugh thought that it must be a feast night, and he trotted forward, keeping his distance from the torches and speaking to no one, until he reached an arched gate where spearmen loitered, listening to a hubbub of voices within. Riding through the gate at a trot, Sir Hugh turned blindly into the darkest alley, and Khutb picked

his way through piles of refuse and packs of snarling dogs until they came to a street covered with matting that smelled of broiling mutton and rice and oil.

It was part of the bazaar, where food was sold to the hungry. Sir Hugh dismounted at the first likely looking stall and bought a twist of garlic, a round loaf of bread, and a handful of pieces of mutton. With these in his fists he sat down on his heels in the shadow of the stall with Khutb's rein over his arm. He was ravenous, and he cared not what happened until he was fed. From time to time he would hold up a bit of bread to Khutb.

Lanterns swung past, and bare feet pattered by. Once a camel slouched by with its load, forcing Khutb up against the stall. Voices argued and shouted in a dozen tongues, and somewhere a drum muttered. All Rai seemed to be awake and astir.

When he had satisfied his hunger, the crusader bought grapes from the man in the stall. He still had a few gold coins and some silver in his wallet—gleanings from his forays with Khalil.

"Hast thou a boy?" he asked the shopkeeper.

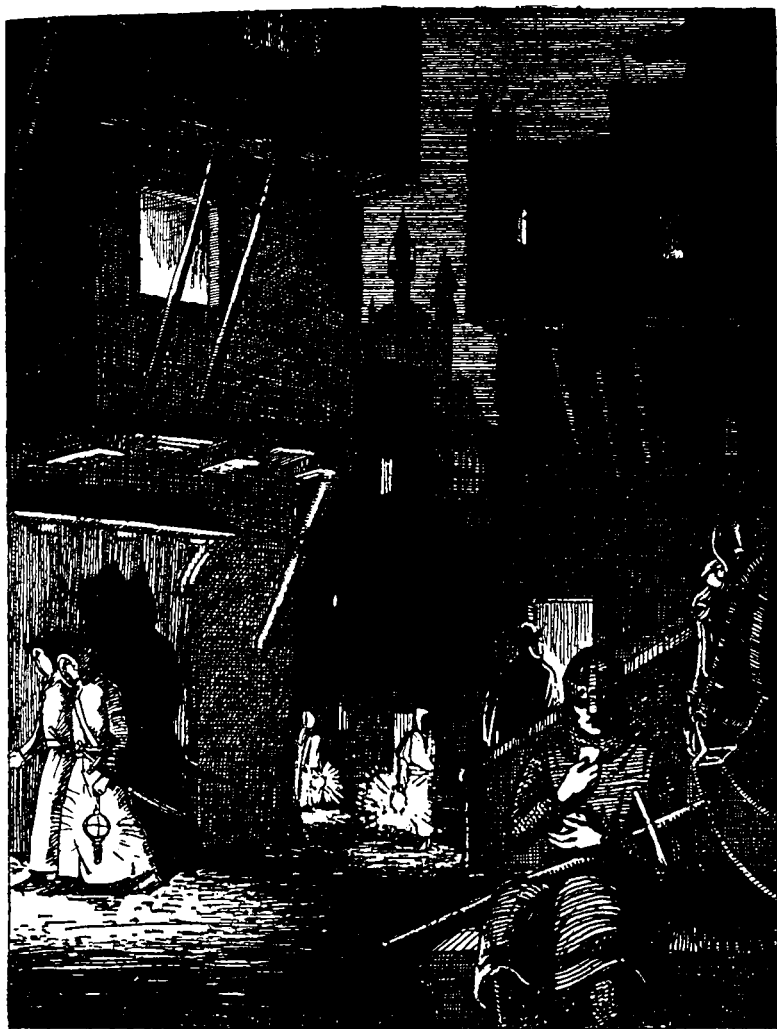
"Have I a tooth that aches? Verily I have a brat that is fellow to a *ghil*."

"Then let him come here." The crusader knew that every man in the bazaar had an urchin to run errands and watch for thieves, and when presently an excited brown lad slipped out between the sacks of *barley* and *olives*, Sir Hugh held up a *dirhem*.

"Knowest thou the *serais*?"

The boy nodded, staring at Khutb's fine Arab saddle.

"I seek a man who rode in with a caravan of Khares-



ALLAN T. NICHOLS

LANTERNS SWUNG PAST AND BARE FEET PATTERNED BY

mians after the evening prayer. He rode a bald-faced donkey, and his name is Nureddin, the star gazer."

Again the boy nodded, reaching out for the coins.

"Bid him come to me here, saying that one awaits him who will pay well for—for a reading of the stars. But he must make haste."

"*Wallahi*, thou hast not the speech of a true Arab. What man art thou, O impatient one?"

"I am a man with a sword from Marghrab," responded Sir Hugh, thinking that few in the bazaar would have talked with travelers from Marghrab—Africa. "By Allah, thou hast too long a tongue, and I will find——"

"Nay, my lord!" The boy snatched the coins and darted off. "I go—I go!"

But the bazaar had ears for every whisper. The seller of food ceased haggling over a handful of too-ripe figs and leaned forth to stare down, like a bald vulture from its eyrie, at the dim figure of the crusader. "May Allah shield thee—art thou a man of the Amir Omar?"

Sir Hugh had learned to guard his tongue. He spat out the grape seeds and grunted. "Hast thou not seen?"

"Ay, verily, Lord. I have seen thee pay with silver for worthless things such as bread—and toss *dirhems* to a boy. Surely thou art a swordsman with a fat wallet, in the service of a great one. And if thou knowest the men with the Amir Omar, thou art in his service."

Munching some fresh grapes, the crusader answered idly. "Fool—I rode at the rear of his caravan, to watch for his enemies."

The bearded head above him nodded vigorously. "*Ai-a*, did I not say it? Then thou hast come all the way

over the salt desert from Samarkand. Tell me, is it true that the Shah himself is with the Amir Omar, in disguise?"

Sir Hugh thought of the stout man in the green turban who had hidden himself in the pavilion at the *serai* and had been offered the first drink from the well. "What words are these?" he demanded.

"The servants of the palace have told it. They say the world-defying Shah of shahs, the veritable Lion of Islam, hath journeyed secretly from his Eastern cities, and hath dismounted at the palace of Rai, where his foot hath not touched ground before now. Nay, already the *imams* and *begs* hasten in to salute him. Surely it is true!"

His face hidden by the Arab headcloth, Sir Hugh pondered. He had seen the nobles riding in to Rai, and the commotion in the streets. But why did a great prince travel across the desert floor with a small following, in haste and nameless—in such haste that one of his amirs had slain Khalil to gain some fresh horses?

Through the crowd in the alley he saw Nureddin's black sugarloaf hat moving toward him, and he got to his feet swiftly.

"Thou?" cried the astrologer, shrinking back. "Oh——"

"Still thy tongue," whispered the knight, "and lead me to thy lodging, where we may talk."

"But I am quartered in the palace. Verily—if I am seen talking to an infidel they will cut off my skin."

"Then take care thou art not seen," responded Sir Hugh grimly. "Bethink thee, there is gold if thou shield me."

Nureddin clutched his beard and shivered. Then he turned and beckoned the crusader to follow.

Half an hour later Khutb had been put into a clean stable near the garden of the palace, and the astrologer had escorted his unwelcome guest under the shadows of great plane trees where Kharesmian spearmen slept, up a marble stair to a lofty terrace where his belongings lay piled upon a carpet in one corner. Nureddin explained with some pride that this place had been given him so that he could observe the stars. He had lost no time in attaching himself to the nobles of the caravan.

Seating himself on the carpet, he breathed a sigh of relief. After all, he might profit by Sir Hugh's appearance. He might exact money from the Christian warrior and then betray him to the Moslems and sell the horse for a good price. He glanced furtively at the lean dark face of the crusader. The round moon hung over them, and in the garden a watcher called the third hour of the morning.

"Thy companion," he observed when Sir Hugh did not speak, "was a hot-headed fool who took no account of omens. He might have had rare jewels for that horse."

"Some men think not of money."

Nureddin rubbed his chin, remembering the gold piece Khalil had tossed him. "Why hast thou come to this place?" he asked. "Here thy life is forfeit—unless I aid thee. Hast thou found the Archer and the Dragon, who will befriend thee?"

Sir Hugh shook his head. "Whither rides this Shah?"

The astrologer gasped and glanced anxiously over his shoulder. "Art mad—what——"

"The Shah is here," said Sir Hugh calmly, "but he travels in haste, and I would know whither he draws his reins."

He felt certain that the Prince of Kharesmia had come to Rai, and that Nureddin's curiosity had long since ferreted out what was an open secret in the bazaar.

"By Allah, I know not. The Amir himself knoweth not!"

"Then why do they flee like hunted men?"

Again Nureddin started. "The *ghils*!" he said after a pause. "They flee from the spirits and the storms of the dry lands, even as I do."

"Thou art a father of lies," Sir Hugh said calmly. "When did a prince of Islam venture into the barren lands when the caravan route lay open to him? The truth! Tell the truth, or—I swear it—the Shah's men will find a dead star gazer here at sunrise. Thou art thinking to sell me to the Moslems—bethink thee that I may need to silence thy tongue."

Sir Hugh was seizing at a slender chance. He knew that, alone, he could never pass undiscovered among the Moslems. It was possible that the Shah was traveling in haste to the north, toward the Sea of the Ravens, and that he might ride unnoticed at the rear of the caravan, as he had done the past day.

Nureddin crouched beside him, frightened. "Nay, lord of men—by the Ninety and Nine holy names of Allah, I have no thought but to aid thee. Surely the Shah Muhammad, the Lion of Samarkand, has been fleeing from the *ghils*. They are hard at his heels, and they are more than mortal, because they vanish and take shape

at will—their eyes see through the darkness, their horses run over the summits of the high mountains. They are magicians out of Cathay—” Nureddin stabbed a thin finger toward the east—“and until now they have been penned up beyond the Roof of the World, beyond the mountains where the sun rises.”

It seemed to the crusader that the Persian believed his own words. Long ago the knight had heard of Cathay, whither the hero Roland had wandered, and of the wild horsemen who guarded the palace of Prester John by the sea of sand. He wondered if these horsemen had come out of the east.

“Muhammad Shah,” went on Nureddin, “had more power than any prince, a year ago. When it pleased him, he did men to death by putting them under elephants or casting them from towers. And then he cut off the heads of some travelers from Cathay. So the story is told. I am a man of peace, and I know naught of such matters. But the Khan of Cathay moved against the Shah, in his anger. Some call him Genghis Khan, and his people Mongols. Nay, it is certain that they came out of their deserts, and the Shah lifted the standard of war against them. He had multitudes of mailed warriors and elephants and great walled cities. But the horsemen of the Gobi overthrew his armies, and slew his elephants, and tore down his walls. Verily, there was calamity.”

The astrologer shook his head and sighed. “I was in Samarkand when the Shah passed through. He said he was hastening to raise a new army, but he was fleeing. I also went away, and within two moons the Horde of the desert had entered Samarkand. Then the Shah began to

hurry into the West. It was said that Genghis Khan had summoned two divisions of his Horde, and sent them to pursue Muhammad Shah, and not to come back until they had found him."

Sir Hugh smiled. "To hunt down a great prince in his own domain?"

"Ay, so. They are like the *ghils* of the desert. They ride without halting to eat or sleep. At Nisapur they were no more than three days behind the Shah. Then he hurried into the waste lands, to throw them off his track. Allah shielded him, because now they have not been seen at his heels."

Nureddin sighed gratefully. "That is good, because these magicians care naught for human life. Their arrows fly through the air and always strike the mark. The wind carries their messages——"

"Now thou art lying again," said Sir Hugh wearily. Whatever the reason for his flight, Muhammad Shah apparently meant to stay in Rai. And the crusader dared not let his face be seen in daylight. He felt very sleepy, but he could not venture to rest here where Nureddin could betray him. He must take out Khutb and find some place to sleep, unseen.



CHAPTER XI

NUREDDIN'S SIGN

RISING and stretching his arms, he went to the parapet and glanced down. Some Turkomans were gathering near the garden gate, mounting their horses—men of the guard, he thought.

"What wilt thou do?" Nureddin asked curiously.

"Only Allah knows."

"Do not go now." Nureddin seemed suddenly anxious for his safety. "Harken, my lord—the drums are sounding."

"It will soon be dawn."

But Nureddin came to the parapet uneasily. The high roll of kettledrums came from near at hand, and horses galloped away from the garden. "It is strange—strange. I have not heard drums like these." Suddenly he cried out, "Look yonder!"

The moon was setting, and there was a gray streak along the eastern skyline. In this half darkness before the dawn he beheld, sitting a motionless horse in the square by the governor's house, a solitary rider. Faintly gleamed upon the horseman's head a helmet, and behind his shoulder a lance tip.

Sir Hugh bent over the parapet, straining eyes and ears. The white bole of a minaret was visible in the murk, and upon its balcony a light gleamed, rising and falling. The sky grew lighter, but no muezzin cried out the sonorous call to prayer.

Invisible in the maw of the alleys, horses still galloped past the house. The changed aspect of the city, the sounds of an invisible multitude—all this savored of magic.

"*Al*—prince of swordsmen, mighty Nazarene! Aid, or I perish!"

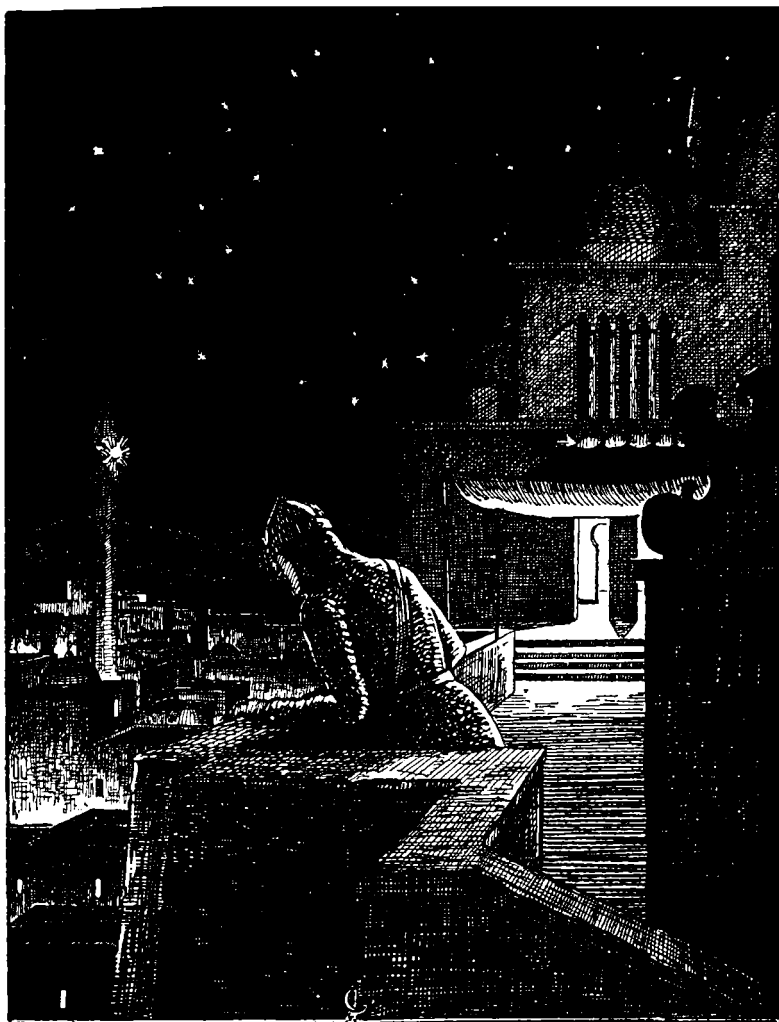
Panting, Nureddin cast himself down by the crusader. Behind him two strange warriors appeared.

They were little taller than the astrologer. Clad in dark leather and wolfskin cloaks and soft boots that made no sound on the tiles, they darted like ferrets on their prey.

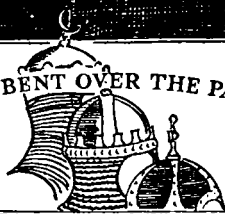
"Back!" cried Sir Hugh, lifting his sword.

"Allah give thee strength," moaned Nureddin. "Look, here are others."

Two warriors came through the curtain—a quick-striding man in breastplate and helmet with a long horse-hair plume, and an archer, broad of shoulder and bare of head. The bowman plucked a two-foot shaft from the quiver at his hip and loosed it at the astrologer.



SIR HUGH BENT OVER THE PARAPET



The bow was as thick as Sir Hugh's wrist, and the arms that drew it were massive with mighty sinew. Nuṛeddin rolled over, and the arrow passed only through his robe under the armpit, pinning him to the parapet.

The archer, ten paces distant, fitted a fresh arrow to his bow and glanced at Sir Hugh. Apparently the sight of the tall warrior surprised him, because he exchanged a low word with his companion, who seemed to be an officer, and the man with the crested helmet called out sharply.

Immediately, Sir Hugh was aware of figures ascending the stair and flooding the terrace. Someone gave an order, and the taut muscles of the bowman's arm slackened.

"Cathayans!" cried Nureddin. "Already have I died. My heart is water and I must die again."

But the weary and tight-lipped crusader, facing a throng of strange foemen, was looking into the eyes of a man of his own height—a majestic figure robed in blue silk, his bare throat encircled by a chain of pure jade stones, his black nankeen cap surmounted by towering peacock plumes. A thin beard swept his broad chest, and his wide, full eyes were those of a sage and a dreamer.

"Where is the Shah?" the stranger asked, his deep voice pronouncing the Arabic syllables slowly.

To Nureddin it seemed quite natural that a wizard from Cathay should speak in tongues, and he hoped with all his heart that the Christian would propitiate the tall lord:

"I know not," Sir Hugh made answer.

The bearded Cathayan swept the roof with an understanding glance.

"Thy speech is not the speech of the other *Tu-kuie*. Thou art a barbarian from another land—to the west?"

His calmness brought inspiration to the despairing Nureddin.

"O exalted one—O lord of created things—this, my companion, is a foe of the Emperor. Hither came he to give challenge to the Shah. And I am his friend, his brother. I am a traveler and a man of experience, and I will serve thee well and faithfully. His sword hath a sigil writ upon it, and it deals death when it strikes."

The bearded noble glanced at Sir Hugh questioningly.

"I will not yield me to unnamed foes," said the crusader quietly.

"Ay," murmured the Cathayan, "thou art a barbarian, blunt and bold and foolish. The Eagle would wish to see thee and thy weapon. Wipe and sheath it."

Sir Hugh made no move to do so, and the stranger seemed to read his thought.

"I am Ye Lui Kutsai," he said, "Prince of Shantung, of the Golden Dynasty of Cathay."

"Leader of these men?"

Kutsai shook his head and stretched out a wide-sleeved arm toward the red glow of the sunrise.

"Servant—as thou wilt be—of the great Khan, Genghis, who is master of Cathay, and of all the earth from here to there. Keep thy sword. What would it avail thee against us? Come to my *yamen* when I send for thee."

Sir Hugh's set face relaxed, and when one of the war-

riors brought him his leather scabbard, he sheathed the blade of Durandal. Then he bent down to free Nureddin from the arrow. But the astrologer was staring open mouthed beyond him.

"O Nazarene," he croaked, "it has happened, even as I foretold. Look, here are the signs that were to be revealed to thee! Thy fortune is assured—remember that I foretold it."

Puzzled by the earnestness of the little man, the crusader glanced behind him. The warrior who had handed him his scabbard—the same who had loosed the arrow at Nureddin—was now slipping the string from his heavy bow of black wood and ivory.

"The Archer," chattered Nureddin. "And on the robe of the magician——"

The silk tunic of the Cathayan bore, embroidered in gold, the writhing semblance of a dragon.



CHAPTER XII

BEHIND THE HORDE

SIR HUGH was roused from deep sleep by a hard grip on his shoulder. The sun was nearly overhead, and the rug upon which he lay outstretched fairly simmered on the hot tiles. The officer of the horsehair crest, having wakened him, motioned for the crusader to descend the stair.

"Now is the *sa'at*, the hour of commencement of happenings," observed Nureddin, who had come to heel faithfully. "Will they torture us? *Ai*, it is not good to be in the hands of wizards!"

Sir Hugh noticed that the rent in the astrologer's black robe had been neatly sewn up.

"Did the arrow wound thee, little man?"

At this Nureddin seemed confused.

"Nay, Lord—it glanced from a— a purse that was slung beneath my shoulder."

He inspected his robe carefully, glancing up timidly as a bird that sees a stranger approaching its nest.

"No more than a few worthless trinkets," he added, although his companion only smiled.

They were escorted into a wide hall, where the bodies of Persian spearmen lay thrust into a corner. In the hall sat Kutsai behind a sandalwood table, his arms folded in his sleeves. At either end of the table two slender Cathayans wrote with tiny brushes upon rolls of rice paper.

Before the prince stood harassed Muhammadans, acting as interpreters while captives were brought to the table and questioned. Sir Hugh inspected the warriors on guard at the door, with a soldier's eye for detail of bearing and equipment.

Stalwart men, he thought, road weary—horsemen beyond doubt. All carried two bows in a wooden or leather case slung at one hip; their broad, curved scabbards hung between their shoulder blades on a strap passed around the neck and secured over the chest armor—boiled leather coated with lacquer.

Except for the leather drop, studded with iron rings, that protected the nape of the neck, they wore no armor on the back. Nor were they supplied with shields. But the broad, sun-browned faces, the muscular throats and hands, bespoke endurance and the bows were certainly heavy.

"They are Mongols," Nureddin whispered in answer to his question. "Genghis Khan is the chief of the Mongols. He conquered Cathay, and these magicians are conquering all the other lands for him. Look, they make spells with birds and tablets of brass and writings. Ay, the Mongols came out of their desert, but now they have made themselves masters of Cathay, and the twain are as one. The Horde is one—and greatly to be feared."

The birds were pigeons, dozens of them, penned in little bamboo cages. Kutsai gave an order, and a servant took one of the pigeons from its cage, first reading carefully an inscription painted on the bamboo.

Swiftly the Cathayan prince took a tiny square of rice paper from a secretary, read it over and rolled it up, thrusting the scroll into a silver tube clamped to the bird's claw. Then he nodded to the servant, who went to the door and cast the pigeon up into the air, watching for a moment before returning to his duties.

"It flew east," Sir Hugh commented. "Ay, a messenger pigeon."

No witchcraft in that! But the circular brass sheet puzzled him. A Cathayan hovered over it, steel-tipped stylus in hand. At intervals he carried it to Kutsai who, after cross-questioning the most intelligent of his captives, the *imams* and *mullahs* of the city, pointed out a spot on the brass, and he of the stylus made a mark and inscription.

More than half the sheet, Sir Hugh noticed, was covered with these marks—wavering lines and squares that looked like houses, and triangles that might be tents. Finally he understood.

Long ago, when he had struggled with his letters under

the tuition of a priest, he had been shown a parchment bearing such lines. These were rivers, the squares were cities, the rows of triangles mountains and the brass sheet was a map—a map that grew under the Cathayan's direction.

"No magic this," he said, "but the arts of priests and scribes."

"Ay, but yonder are strange devices, I think, for judging the position of the stars."

Nureddin nudged his companion and pointed to a small and highly polished bronze globe ruled off in parallel circles. Beside this was a jade slab with a silver arm pointing up from it at right angles. Before the arm a square inset of some size was filled with water.¹

"As to that I know not," Sir Hugh admitted.

Weapons and men who used them, and horses he could judge with an experienced eye. But these instruments were things undreamed of by the savants and astrologers of Europe. Nureddin, however, drew comfort from them, perceiving that they were devices for measuring the changing of the seasons by the sun's shadow.

"These Cathayans," he whispered, "be astronomers, who calculate the position of the sun and moon. Knowing that, they measure off the hours and the size of the earth's surface—they keep a calendar. I can do more than that, I foretell events, as thou hast——"

He broke off in confusion, perceiving that the Cathayan prince was listening. Kutsai spoke to a clerk, who

¹A simple quadrant, for figuring the sun's shadow, the water serving to keep the plane of its base level.

bowed thrice and approached them, saying in broken Arabic that cooked food awaited them in the courtyard and it would be well to satisfy their hunger, as they would have to leave Rai at any moment.

"Whither?" Sir Hugh asked himself as they left the hall.

Scores of Mongol officers were seated around fires in the courtyard, fires tended by Muhammadan captives who boiled whole quarters of sheep in great copper pots. Nureddin, after watching the hungry warriors fearfully, approached a pot with Sir Hugh and cut himself off a generous portion of mutton with his dagger as the others did, saying nothing at all about religious scruples.

"Wine!" he whispered, nudging the crusader. "Allah send it be of Shiraz."

The captives were going about among the warriors filling lacquer bowls with a sizzling white liquid that they poured from goatskins held under their arms. Nureddin held out his bowl eagerly, but his face changed as he sniffed at the bubbling fluid.

"Milk," he muttered and tasted it warily. "Pfaugh! Mare's milk—goat's—camel's!"

Sir Hugh found the milk fermented, strange to the palate, but refreshing, and he emptied his bowl without complaint, making a hearty repast of the mutton. Barely had he finished when a horseman plunged into the courtyard, scattering the cooks, and leaped down from a sobbing and sweat-soaked pony.

The rider, stumbling on stiffened legs, ran into the hall, holding outstretched a long silver tablet. Instead of armor he wore bands of heavy buckram around chest and

loins and forehead, and he was caked with dust and sand from his deer-skin boots to his bloodshot eyes.

Another moment and Kutsai appeared in the door, drawing on a linen cloak. He spoke briefly with the Mongol officers, and nodded to Sir Hugh.

"An order has come from the Eagle," he said in his measured voice. "I ride to join him. And of thee I have need."

"Then I am captive—to this Eagle?"

The Cathayan considered, as a philosopher weighs an axiom.

"Is a stag within the hunting lines a captive? Thou art within the power of the great Khan since this dawn. Only the dead are free of the Mongol yoke—the living must serve, each in his own way."

He swept his long arm around the courtyard.

"From one of the nobles of Rai I have learned thy history—though the *Tu-kuie* believed thee mad. Thou art a Christian warrior from the *Ta tsin*, the Western world. The seas and rivers and peoples toward the setting sun are known to thee, and I may have need of thy knowledge."

"Whither goest thou?"

"Where the Shah rides we follow."

Sir Hugh's gray eyes lighted.

"It likes me well."

Nureddin's ears had been pricked to catch every syllable, and now the astrologer leaped up gleefully.

"We will not be slain. *Ai-a*, I am most useful—a hound upon a scent. I know all about the Shah and can interpret omens."

Gravely the Cathayan surveyed him.

"Jackals also play their part," he said cryptically.

"O Prince of Cathay," said the crusader boldly, "in Rai I have a charger beyond others dear to me. By thy leave, I would seek him out."

"A steed of good blood, fair to see?"

"Ay, a gray *kohlani* with unclipped tail and mane."

"Then the Master of Herds will have found him. Come!"

Gathering up his cloak Kutsai strode into the public square where a high-wheeled cart awaited him—a light chariot to which four horses were hitched. Mongols were mounted on the outer horses of the span.

When the Cathayan stepped into the chariot, a patrol of lances trotted around a corner—its officer saluting the prince and dividing his ten men, half before the chariot, half behind.

Thus escorted, the three were whirled through the alleys of Rai, meeting at times other patrols, but never a Muhammadan. Courtyard gates were closed, and window lattices drawn. Sir Hugh, who expected to come upon pillaging and disorder, saw only deserted streets and empty gates when they passed through the wall of Rai on the far side.

It seemed to him that the Mongols could not be a great force—only the indolence and overconfidence of the Kharesmians had enabled the invaders to slip inside the gates. If Muhammad, he thought, had dared make a stand against them, matters would have turned out otherwise.

Outside the gate they came upon something grim and

altogether unexpected. Almost covered by crows and flapping vultures and furtive, snarling jackals, the bodies of hundreds of Persian warriors lay in heaps throughout the orange groves and gardens.

"*Wallahi!*" Nureddin shivered and clutched the rail of the swift moving chariot.

"The guards," Kutsai said to the crusader, "upon this side of the city surrendered to us when it was known that Muhammad had fled. They were slain."

Sir Hugh frowned, restraining an angry word. But the Cathayan seemed to read his thoughts.

"It is well to think, and think again before blaming," he remarked. "I am not a Mongol, yet I understand their code. These Persians were warriors; because of fear they threw down their weapons. When fear had left them they would have fought against us again. It is the order of the Khan to put to death all weapon men who surrender. When a foe is brave enough to stand against us, then quarter is offered him, because such men may be trusted."

"A strange order," quoth Sir Hugh.

"It saved thee life." The Cathayan smiled. "As it did me, for I was faithful to the Golden Dynasty."

The crusader looked back at the white wall of Rai.

"The Persians lacked heart, it is true. Five hundred men-at-arms and archers could have held the city."

Kutsai's dark eyes were meditative.

"Once in Kambalu, in the imperial city of Cathay, five hundred thousand men-at-arms failed to hold a wall five times the strength of that yonder. I saw it, for I was then an officer of Cathay."

"How could that be?"

"This astrologer would say 'twas done by magic. I say—otherwise. Look about thee and reflect."

They were passing at a gallop through an open stretch, thronged with Mongol patrols and Muhammadan merchants. Wheat, rice, and dried dates were being brought in carts and piled in great heaps, while bellowing herds of oxen and flocks of sheep were counted and driven off to the far end of the field.

"Nourishment," said Kutsai briefly.

"There is gold in Rai," spoke up Nureddin tentatively, "and many wealthy grandees——"

"But no time to plunder."

"Muhammad has escaped—gone far away. And his treasure was sent ahead upon fresh camels."

The Cathayan looked twice at Nureddin.

"Ay, wisely he kept fast horses saddled behind his house. From the men of Rai I learned that he rode with a hundred nobles and followers through the north gate at the time we entered the *rigistan*. Our scouts sighted him just about here, but his horses were fresh, ours jaded. He fled toward the mountains at first. Then, out of sight of pursuit, he turned west. Our advance riders picked up one of his stragglers."

"He is safe." Nureddin wagged his head shrewdly. "At the end of the western road lies Bagdad, with the armed host of the caliphs."

"A long road." Kutsai seemed to be weighing the little man's words. "Have the stars foretold his arrival in Bagdad?"

But Nureddin for once held his tongue. The chariot halted beside a stone wall that served as a corral for a

neighing and rearing mass of horseflesh. Some Mongols in sheepskins and leather breeches came out of the dust to salute the prince, and receive his orders. In a little while Sir Hugh shouted with exultation and held out his hand for Khutb's rein. The gray stallion, already saddled for the road, whinnied and thrust his soft muzzle against his master's throat.

"Well for thee," smiled Kutsai, "we came swiftly, for the horse had been groomed and fed for the next courier."

He himself mounted a powerful roan, and Nureddin was given a tough-looking pony with a rolling eye. While their escort of some fifty archers was coming up, the herders handed them saddlebags. Sir Hugh untied the thong and inspected the contents of his with some curiosity. One bag held rice and grapes and sun-dried mutton, with a small jug of the mare's milk. The other, that served for a feed sack, held grain for the horse.

A smaller wallet was thrust into his belt, and this contained wax and flint and steel, with a needle and whetstone.

"Equipment," observed the Cathayan, who had been watching him. "There is no knowing where we will halt or when."

When the escort had changed saddles to fresh mounts, Kutsai lifted his hand, the herders raised a shrill cry that might have been warning or well-wishing, and the Mongols who took the lead trotted across the rice fields and leaped irrigation ditches until they came out on a broad road that ran toward the setting sun.

Then the horses were put to a gallop, the riders eas-

ing their weight in the stirrups and slinging their lances over their shoulders. Kutsai glanced over his right shoulder at the mountains they were leaving behind them.

"The order was to come to the Eagle," he said, "and *he* may be in Bagdad or beyond that snow peak before we reach him."

Nureddin, bouncing along uncomfortably in the dust at the rear, his long woollen shoe tips flapping in the wind, heard the words and muttered to himself as if he were cherishing a secret grievance known to no other soul.

Nureddin, relieved of the fear of death, was a different person from Nureddin about to die. He kept his eyes about him, noticing the caravan of camels lightly laden that they passed in the first few hours, and listening until he was certain that this was the first unit of the Mongol baggage train. From that—although a man of peace—he deduced correctly that they were drawing near the fighting forces. A courier appeared on the Bagdad road, plying his whip and bending over his pony's neck when he beheld them.

Kutsai gave an order, and the Mongols divided, drawing to the side of the road. One, on a restive horse, dismounted in the cleared space. The courier, drawing nearer, held up a silver tablet—the Mongol on foot raised his hand, and the courier was in the warrior's saddle, gripping the reins in a sinewy hand. Flying past Kutsai he shouted a hoarse greeting.

"Ahatou—noyon!"

Again that night when they halted to cook supper and rest the horses where a stone bridge spanned a stream, a

dispatch rider came along and commandeered a mount. This time Kutsai halted the man long enough to ask a few questions.

"A message to the Khan," the Cathayan explained. "The post to Samarkand."

It seemed to Nureddin that the world was topsy-turvy. Instead of the usual straggle of pilgrims and nobles' cavalcades on the Bagdad road, they encountered only scattered patrols of the invaders, driving in cattle. Somehow the silence and the unceasing activity that went on in the hours of darkness depressed the astrologer more than all the imagined terrors of actual war.

So he carried his troubles to the crusader, who sat by the fire munching raisins. The Cathayan was sleeping soundly beyond earshot.

"Eh," pronounced Nureddin, "we are brothers of misfortune."

Sir Hugh continued to look into the fire.

"Let us flee. I have thought of a way. These devils who carry messages all have a silver tablet with a falcon drawn on it. Let us go away secretly and lie hidden until one comes along. Then, when he dismounts to take thy horse, slay him with that long sword and keep his *talsmin*. The accursed Mongols honor it more than my people do the Shah's ring."

Sir Hugh smiled at the thought of Nureddin ambushing a dispatch rider. As for trying to escape, he had satisfied himself that they had pickets out and that the sentries did not sleep.

"What of the omens, O watcher of the stars?" he

asked gravely. "We have found the Archer and the Dragon."

Torn between professional pride and anxiety, Nured-din twisted the curls of his beard.

"True, and yet—and yet the omens may be of evil, not of good alone. I have been thinking."

He watched Sir Hugh thrust some more brush on the embers and draw his saddle cloth over his knees to sleep.

And Nureddin crept back to his quilt heartily cursing all men of weapons and the whole race of warriors, including crusaders of past ages and Christians still to be born.





CHAPTER XIII

THE EMPTY TENT

THE next day Kutsai said that Muhammad Shah had been seen in a camp within the foothills far ahead of them. "The Eagle hath flown thither with a chosen detachment," he explained, "and we must follow."

That day Sir Hugh had his first sight of the main body of the Horde. Several regiments were moving along the road at a trot. Each man had a led horse, and from time to time a warrior would dismount, run beside the horses, and leap on the bare back of the fresh mount.

"The Kerait clan of the *orda*," said Kutsai. "The bodyguard of the Eagle."

"Who is this leader, the Eagle?"

"The Orluk, the marshal of the army. The Great Khan ordered him to hunt down the Shah and not to turn aside until the hunt was ended. He obeys the Khan, but here—in his division—his commands are law, and life and death hang upon his words. The Mongols spare others no more than themselves. Remember, if ever you stand face to face with the Eagle, bear yourself boldly."

Sir Hugh nodded, glancing at the horsemen, who kept together, although not in ranks. They wore chain mail and black helmets that, with the wide leather drop, almost hid their faces. Long blue robes covered their knees, which were upthrust in short stirrups—as if the riders squatted in the saddle.

It began to rain, but no one heeded wind or wet. When they had passed the Keraites, Kutsai pressed forward more rapidly, until, after nightfall, he was halted by a patrol with lanterns. Other lights flickered beside the road.

"Here is the pavilion of the Shah," said Kutsai. "It was empty when our men discovered it. Muhammad has vanished. Look!"

Sitting upon a brocade couch the tall Cathayan pointed at some objects on the carpet that covered this inner chamber of the great *toph* that had been prepared for the Shah by his people. Near the teak pole of the pavilion lay a satin tunic and a fine *khalat* of cloth-of-gold, wet and splashed with mud. Thrown down haphazard were

silk trousers and pearl-sewn slippers, and the unmistakable green turban with the emerald crest.

"These scimitars were his," went on the Cathayan philosopher, brushing his long fingers through the tip of his beard.

Sir Hugh, working off his mail with the help of a Mongol warrior, shook his head. Kutsai dipped an exploring finger into an ivory jar and sniffed the brown powder dubiously.

"This stuff breeds dreams. Muhammad may have sought forgetfulness, and that means he was afraid. He would be, I think. Here he changed his garments in haste and separated from his men. Perhaps he has made himself a pilgrim, or even an astrologer."

Sir Hugh looked down in surprise, but the wide brown eyes of the prince were thoughtful.

"The power of *T'ien*, of Heaven, is illimitable, but upon the earth the Khan is master of all men. Alas that I, a former servant of the Golden Dynasty, should say this—the princes of Cathay were unworthy and *he* cast them down. And Prester John of Asia in like manner. The Muhammadans cry that Heaven's wrath is visited upon them. Can this be so? Perhaps there are times when earth's rulers grow false and weak, and at such times a barbarian is sent with a sword out of the desert." Arms folded in his sleeves the Cathayan meditated. "Since my youth I have been the councilor of Genghis Khan, and he is no more than a barbarian chieftain wiser than other rulers in the art of war. He is like tempered steel, unswerving and unbreakable. Those who serve him he spares not, and yet upon those who are faithful in all

things he bestows power vaster than that of your Cæsars."

"Wherein lies the power of this Khan?"

Kutsai smiled, and answered promptly.

"Obedience! One who is infallible inspires respect. One who seeks no gain for himself inspires reverence. Every Mongol from here to Kambalu lives only to serve the Khan. And," he added with a smile, "he is aided by the wisdom of Cathay."

"The Muhammadans say thou art a magician."

"It was said also of Prester John, the Christian. When men do not understand a thing they say it is witchcraft."

Kutsai withdrew a hand from his sleeve and showed in his palm a round box of bamboo. The cover of the box was transparent crystal, a silk thread suspended from its center. At the end of the thread hung a long splinter of steel, so balanced that it quivered and turned slowly from side to side.

"The blue tip of the needle," the Cathayan explained, "points always to the south. It hath been touched by a lodestone. This needle would guide thee on a straight path in the darkest night."

Sir Hugh looked at it curiously. Indeed, no matter how the Cathayan moved the box, one end of the needle turned ever toward the tent pole.

"Without this," the philosopher added, "we could not cross the deserts. Only the commanders of a *tuman* and the higher officers are allowed to possess the south-pointing boxes."

"Nureddin said you broke down the strong walls of cities by enchantment."

"By mixing saltpeter with a little sulphur and clay we have made what we call *pao*, a blasting fire. By penning the *pao* within large bamboos and stopping the ends with iron, and then touching it with fire, we have found that the blast will shatter a gate or uproot a tower."

In silence the crusader pondered this until it was clear in his mind.

"In my land we would call thee an alchemist, and doubtless we would set thee to making gold, so that merchants and princes would profit. I have been reared in the use of weapons, and my knowledge is no more than that."

Kutsai replaced his south-pointing box in his sleeve and smiled a little.

"Subotai—the Eagle is like to thee."

Above the lash of rain on the pavilion top the slapping of hoofs in mud could be heard, the jangle of bit chains and the muffled clash of steel, echoed by deep-throated laughter and shouts of greeting. Kutsai stepped to the silk partition, listened, and hastened back to his companion.

"Now will thy fate be decided, lord of the Nazarenes. The Eagle has come back from the Horde without sending word to me. If thou art able, stand!"

Sir Hugh rose to his feet, resting his good arm on the wide hand guard of Durandal. Kutsai glanced at him with some anxiety and whispered swiftly:

"Do not look for mercy. The Eagle tears with his talons more often than he lifts with his wings. Bear thyself boldly and answer from an open heart—that is the only help for thee."

The flap of the partition was thrust back, a gust of wind whirled through the chamber, setting the lanterns to swinging, and a man stood between them—a warrior whose like Sir Hugh had never beheld.

Tall as the crusader, his limbs were massive as a bear's, and his mighty body seemed to roll forward on its bowed legs as if driven in by the wind. In a single movement he unclasped and tossed away a dripping sable cloak and lacquered helmet from which hung an eagle's feather. His armor was black lacquer, his under tunic, wide-sleeved, was soft shagreen. His broad, dark face out-thrust from high shoulders had an animal's alertness and vitality; but his long hair was red and his eyes—to Sir Hugh's utter surprise—a clear blue.

"*Ahatou noyon Kitai!*" His drawling voice greeted the Cathayan, and his eyes went to the scimitars lying on the carpet. He picked them up instantly, weighed them in a gnarled hand, tried the flexible steel, and cast them down on the *khalat* of the Shah. "We have pulled a little hide from the running hare," he said in Mongolian, "but the hare has vanished like an arrow shot into thick reeds."

Then his blue eyes fastened on Sir Hugh, and after a moment he held out his hand.

"*Timur*—the sword."

The crusader extended Durandal, the scabbard grasped midway in his right hand. He was captive to this pagan lord and Subotai was privileged to ask the surrender of his weapon. But Kutsai's fine eyes were shadowed by anxiety.

The Eagle gripped the hilt and drew the long blade from the scabbard, still looking squarely at the wounded knight. The weight of the sword seemed to surprise him, and he took it in both hands, raising it above his head. Sir Hugh, holding the empty scabbard across his knees, made not the slightest movement when the Mongol general began to swing the sword.

To wield such a heavy weapon skill and supple muscles were more necessary than the sheer strength of a man like Subotai. The steel blade moved slowly over Sir Hugh's yellow head, but the Mongol's sinews cracked, and he breathed deep. The gaze of neither man faltered.

"*Khai!*" Subotai said abruptly.

Kutsai put in at once, "O *noyon* of the Horde, I saw him swing it in one hand, so that it whistled in the air."

"Who could lift it in one hand?" Subotai shook his head, unbelieving. "Let him take it, and I will judge of his strength."

Returning the sword to Sir Hugh, he stepped back, dropping a powerful hand upon the head of a short ax in his belt.

"Canst lift thy weapon, Nazarene?" Kutsai asked anxiously in Arabic. "Beyond all feats the Eagle loves a feat of strength."

Without answering, Sir Hugh planted his feet wide on the carpet, resting the tip of the long sword on the ground before him. He glanced at the teak pole that supported the pavilion, seasoned wood, as thick as a man's thigh. Setting his teeth and letting his left arm hang limp, he whirled up the blade.

He put forth every ounce of strength in him. Skilled in handling the sword, he swung it high and lashed down at the teak pole, striking it a yard above the ground.

So keen the edge of the sword, so great the impact, the hard wood cracked and split. The jagged end leaped out and darted into the earth, piercing the carpet at Subotai's side. The whole pavilion sank and billowed as the top was loosened by the shortening of the pole. The lanterns set up a mad dance.

Subotai had not moved, though the pole had brushed his hand.

"*Khai!*" he shouted, and his blue eyes gleamed. "A good stroke."

As he spoke he placed himself astride the slanting pole, wrapped both arms around it, and lifted. Sir Hugh, amazed, saw the Mongol walk back the five paces to the stump projecting from the earth, bearing the weight of the pole and the rain-soaked pavilion top. Sticking the shortened tent pole beside its stump, he turned upon Sir Hugh swiftly.

Seizing his opportunity, Kutsai related the crusader's story as he had heard it from Nureddin—the death of Khalil, and the meeting in Rai. "And there is a tale, Subotai Bahadur, that once this Nazarene held a castle gate against the emperor of the Roumis and his men. In him is high courage and no falsehood."

"And in thee a woman's pity." Subotai's blue eyes were expressionless, until his wide lips smiled. "At least he is a warrior. He shall come with me and find his death in the Horde."

Kutsai, arms folded in his long sleeves, bent his head.

He had learned that it was useless to argue with a Mongol.

"Bring tea," Subotai ordered, "and use thine arts to seek trace of the Shah. Be like a ferret in cunning. I will sleep."

He waited until the Cathayan summoned some attendants with a steaming bowl of tea. Quaffing this slowly he flung himself down on the carpet, drew the wet sable cloak over his limbs, and after a few deep breaths slept as quietly as a child. He had been in the saddle for two days and nearly two nights.

"He spared thy life this day," Kutsai whispered to Sir Hugh, "for he wishes to see thee in battle."

Sir Hugh slept also, waking at times when Mongol officers came to the tent and talked with Subotai. Then the pavilion was deserted, all the lanterns but one darkened. Kutsai alone was visible, sitting by a little table on which was a board marked in silver and gold squares. In this board stood tiny images of kings and queens and priests and bowmen on prancing horses. From time to time the philosopher would stretch out his hand and move one of the pieces to another square.

It seemed to the knight that this man was, after all, a magician, weaving a spell by the aid of these effigies.

The rain still pattered on the pavilion, and a voice cried out of the storm:

"Woe to Islam! O ye who believe, the wrath of God is at hand!"



CHAPTER XIV

TWO ROADS

FOR several days Sir Hugh saw nothing of the Cathayan or the Eagle. He was possessed by a vast hunger, to which his guards ministered methodically and in silence. They brought him roast joints of mutton, and sugared fruits and jellies that were part of the spoil of the Shah's camp.

When Kutsai appeared again it was in haste and clad for the saddle.

"Our scouts brought in captives," he said, "and I have learned from them that Omar was seen going with a few camels to the north, toward the mountains. It is clear that Muhammad hath departed from this camp and is hastening in disguise upon one of the two roads. Subotai

gave command to divide the Horde, half to go with him to the north, and half to ride toward Bagdad under leadership of the khan of Almalyk. I go to Bagdad. In Bagdad I have heard are the academies and mosques of the caliphs—the library of a certain Haroun al-Rashid, and there will I find scholars who will help me finish my map, who will have tables of the movements of the planets, to verify mine. A pleasant city, a place of ease. Come, then, with me, for the road is smooth and straight.”

“What of the Eagle?”

Kutsai's brow clouded.

“His is the road beset by peril, guarded by the tribes of the *shan*—of the hills. I do not know what lies beyond the ranges, but winter draws on, and the snow increases on the far summits. Subotai will never turn back. He will ride with his men even to the *ta tsin*, the edge of the world. The choice is thine.”

“Whose captive am I, Lord Kutsai?”

“Ah!” The Cathayan smiled. “The Mongols take neither slaves nor captives. What king dost thou serve, O Nazarene?”

“For twelve winters I have not set foot upon the land of Frankistan. My liege lord is in his tomb, and of his successors I know not.”

“Good!” Kutsai seemed to draw satisfaction from this. “Wilt give obedience to the great Khan, Genghis?”

Sir Hugh considered, chin on hand.

“Ay, so. For the Sultan of the Kharesmians is my foe, and to the warriors of the Eagle do I owe my life.”

“Then ponder the debt of obedience. Thou must obey without question all commands of the *gur* and *orkhans*,

of the bearers of the falcon and eagle and tiger tablets. It will be forbidden thee to lift hand against a Mongol, to steal or to utter an untruth. Death is the reward of transgression. In battle thou must keep thy face toward the foe, save when the standard is carried back. When a comrade of thy ten is wounded, thou or another must bear him from the conflict; if one is taken, thou or another must succor him."

"In that there is no dishonor," Sir Hugh made response. "And this obedience I will give."

Kutsai inclined his head.

"Forget not, it is forbidden to take spoil, even though no eyes may behold thee. All weapons and gold and horses must be given to the officers of the Khan."

"Ay, so."

"And think not to flee from the Eagle. In the darkest night, eyes will see and swift hoofs will follow. The road of obedience will try thy strength, and at the end—what awaits thee?"

Sir Hugh sprang up and clapped a stalwart hand upon the thin shoulder of the philosopher.

"Verily, the Dragon was a fair omen! Aforetime the Arabs told me a tale of far-wandering. They said that beyond these mountains lies a sea wherein all the birds of the earth do come at certain seasons—a vast sea, penned on two sides between mighty ranges, and on two sides between deserts. And the name of it is the Sea of the Ravens."

Kutsai's fine eyes were incredulous, and when he had thought for a moment he said gravely:

"That may not be. In the first cycle of the Heavenly

Emperor, the great waters were divided from the earth, so that the seas surrounded the land. In this desert country there can be no great water."

"And yet, Lord Kutsai, thou hast seen the desert of salt and sand. Was not that once the shore of this hidden sea?"

"Ah! It may be so. My son, thou art wise beyond thy years. Come with me and help draw my map."

Sir Hugh shook his head.

"Nay, father of wisdom, I was bred to the sword, and I have no skill save that. If the sea is there, I shall embark upon it. Surely it must lead beyond the lands of paynimry, to Christian folk."

"I, too," observed the prince after a pause, "long for my home. I would like to go back to my garden that is fringed with bamboo and azalea and dark pine trees, above a pool that is a haven of meditation. I would like to watch my grandchildren eating mulberries. Upon my roof I would sit, studying the course of the Fire Star. Alas! I grieve because we must part."

"Farewell, Lord Kutsai! I shall follow the Eagle."

"Ay—I knew thy mind. I fear for thee. Nureddin, thy companion, was seen stealing a pearl necklace from the spoil found in these tents, and now he waits at the *yamen* gate."

Clasping his hands over his breast, the Cathayan philosopher bent his head, turned, and strode from the pavilion. Sir Hugh heard chariot wheels rattle away, followed by the hoofs of the escort. After a while, bethinking him of Nureddin, he went forth to stand by the

guards and look around the camp, rejoicing in the sunlight and the brisk wind.

In the cleared space before the entrance Nureddin hung. His curling beard was sadly limp, his shaggy head rested strangely on one shoulder. Going closer, the crusader saw that he was bound to a stake by a cord passed under his arms.

The astrologer's mouth was open, the tongue hanging upon one side, and from his throat protruded the end of a pearl necklace that had strangled him.

At the end of a week Sir Hugh was roused from sleep before sunrise by a young warrior who held an iron lantern close to his eyes.

The visitor wore a sheepskin jacket and heavy woolen breeches thrust into high deerskin boots. His forehead was bound with leather strips, to which was attached a hood that covered his features except a pair of alert black eyes.

"Khoudsarma!" He raised his hand to his lips and forehead. "My lord! A command hath come for thee."

He spoke fluent Arabic, and Sir Hugh, rising at once, saw that he wore no weapon but a short saber. Around his throat hung a silver falcon tablet, and a leather wallet—insignia of a dispatch rider.

"Is thy strength mended?" he asked earnestly. "I have orders to guide thee, but I may not wait for thee to pick thorns from thy skin or to make fires."

Sir Hugh, drawing on his mail hauberk, looked up suddenly.

"My horse Khutb——"

"Ay, the Master of the Herds hath an order to forward the gray stallion by the first northbound caravan. He will be led, not ridden. Be thou at ease as to him, for no one horse—nay, not Afrasiab's own—may carry thee upon the road we take."

He held out a long wolfskin surcoat with a hood.

"Snow is in the passes, my lord. Subotai bids thee hasten."

Two horses were waiting for them—a slender Arab pacer that the courier mounted, and a big-boned Persian charger. Sir Hugh bound his surcoat on the crupper of the saddle and noticed that saddlebags were already in place. He wondered why there was no escort and where they would get fresh mounts, until a mandarin of Cathay came up with a lantern and handed the Mongol rider a roll of paper bound with red silk.

This the courier put into his wallet, and the mandarin made a note upon a tablet, the guards stepped back, and the two riders trotted through the shadowy masses that were the pavilions of Muhammad's camp. At the outer sentry post mounted archers drew aside at a glimpse of the silver falcon.

Without a word the young Mongol bent forward, the bells attached to his girdle jingling, tightening knee and rein, and the pacer began to glide away from Sir Hugh. He touched the charger with his spurs, and they went forward at a gallop, the horses snorting, the men chilled by the frost in the air, watchful of the darkness into which the gray ribbon of the road stretched.

The sun came up in a haze, and the day grew no warmer, but the steady riding stirred Sir Hugh's blood,

and he felt at peace with the monotonous world on either side of them. Not a living man was to be seen, though there were villages in the clearings by tranquil streams. Through the blue haze he could make out a dark ridge, white on its summit, and—although they pushed the horses hard until noon—the mountains drew no nearer.

When they came suddenly upon a company of Mongols escorting some camels northward, the courier pulled in and dismounted, taking the best horse he could find among the warriors and giving Sir Hugh the next best. Here they were given drinks of mare's milk and a little cheese.

"I am Arslan of the Uighur *orda*," the young rider vouchsafed as they started off, again at a gallop. "Until the last grass I carried the *yamkh*¹ from Kambalu."

"Do the Muhammadaans make trouble for thee upon the road?"

"At first they shot arrows; now they have gone away."

"Is it far to the *Orluk*?"

"Ay, far!"

"Is he in the mountain passes?"

"We will know when we find him." Arslan glanced at Sir Hugh's big body and the heavy sword askance. "*Akh*, thou art weighty. Thy horses will fall behind."

This seemed to trouble the carrier of the *yamkh*, because he shook his head from time to time and glanced impatiently at the sun. He was careful, however, to pull in and breathe his horse every little while.

"What was the command of the *Orluk*?" Sir Hugh asked.

¹Post.

"To bring thee alive and unhurt to the Horde. They have come upon the tracks of the Sultan."

"The Shah? Where?"

Arslan pointed to his left.

"At a place called Hamadan. He wore the garments of a pilgrim, and there were many with him. A *gur* khan scattered them, and learned afterward that he was the Shah, Muhammad. Then the Eagle took up the chase. It led north, into the foothills."

Sir Hugh thought that Kutsai, after all, had the easier road. Nothing was more certain than that there would be hard fighting where Muhammad fled.

A little after sunset they arrived at the first station of the post route—a group of heavy wagons bearing dome-shaped felt tents. A score of Mongols seated around a dung fire greeted Arslan respectfully and stared at the crusader.

"It was in the command, O Nazarene lord," said the courier, as he dismounted and went to sniff at the pot boiling over the glowing dung, "that thou shalt sleep for three hours during the night. Eat now, and then sleep."

And he muttered to himself as if begrudging the waste of precious hours. Well content, the crusader drew near to the fire and explored the simmering pot with his poniard, spearing strips of mutton until the first ache of hunger was satisfied. Then one of the warriors handed him a wooden cup, and he ladled out the savory broth, quaffing mightily.

"Health to ye, messires," he smiled, "be ye paynim folk or wolf-men!"

The lined, bronzed faces of the nomads turned toward

him silently, and they watched with intense curiosity while he quenched his thirst and then washed hands and face in fresh, cold water. Some of them rose and made place for him close to the embers. Rolling himself in his fur surcoat and laying Durandal against his side, the crusader lifted his eyes to the stars, trying to pick out the Great Bear among the constellations that glittered in the cold air. Close to the ground, his ear caught a distant monotone of voices and a measured treading of hoofs from the outer darkness where the Mongol herders were singing as they rode around the horses of the station.

Then the stars seemed to lift to an immeasurable height, the Bear became distorted and took on the shape of a flying dragon. Almost as soon as his shoulders touched the ground, Sir Hugh had fallen asleep.

And still the warriors gazed stolidly at the mighty body of the knight, the sword that was longer than any they had ever seen—at his white forehead and the thick beard and hair the color of gold.

“What chieftain is he?” they asked Arslan, who was still eating methodically.

“*Akh!* A wandering chieftain who cannot find the trail to his tribe’s grazing ground.”

“He has shoulders like a bear.”

“True. He is strong.” Arslan wiped greasy hands on his sheepskin and squatted nearer the embers. “And yet, O my brothers, he cannot eat without sitting down, as ye have seen. Nor can he sleep without stretching out—thus, instead of gripping the saddle as a man should.

When he rises up, he splashes in cold water like a buffalo in a watercourse on a hot day."

"*Hai!*" exclaimed the listeners.

"One merit he has," Arslan went on, mindful of his own importance. "Alone among the men of the Horde he knows the face of the Shah whom we seek."

They nodded understanding.

"He who rides down the Shah will be honored greatly—he will be given rare horses and the baton of a *gur* khan. From all punishment he will be free—even from the death punishment nine times. So the Eagle has promised."

Arslan assented, one eye on the stars and the treetops.

"That is good. But it is better to carry the *yamkh* over the roads of the world."



CHAPTER XV

BEYOND THE RANGES

THE next day Arslan's bearing changed. He went on at a gallop as before—they had taken an extra horse from the station—but he bent to the side to study the ground he passed over. At times he reined in, to look closely at strange marks in the earth. After watching him for some time, Sir Hugh understood that they had left the highroad and were following the trail of the Horde. Certainly a multitude of horses had been over the ground before them.

And the aspect of the country had changed. They had

climbed steadily, and swirling mists shut out all view of the heights above them, the plain that lay behind them.

They passed through dense timber—poplars at first, and bare gray beeches that gave place to dark masses of fir.

At times the croaking of ravens was heard overhead, and the flutter of great wings. Arslan grinned under his leather hood.

"*Ai*, Nazarene, this is the pass. The birds choose the lowest path through the mountains."

Although Sir Hugh saw them not, the young Mongol said that flights of duck and herons had swept over the forest. The wind rose as the short day merged into cloud-dimmed twilight and rain began to beat into their faces.

"Where is the station?" the knight asked when it was utterly dark and the wearied horses began to lag.

"Where is the moon?" retorted Arslan, irritated at their slow progress. "It is where it is, and we are hanging back like women bearing burdens."

He dismounted to feel the ground underfoot and the horses stood with lowered heads and heaving flanks. Presently he appeared beside Sir Hugh and shouted above the rush of wind in the forest mesh.

"My lord, if we take thy three hours of sleep in this place, we will not come to fresh horses before daylight. Wilt thou go forward?"

"Lead, then," assented the crusader grimly.

The rain had changed to sleet, and he drew the fur hood close about his throat, settling himself in the saddle and dropping the rein over the saddle horn. Better in such a storm to let the horse pick its own way.

Snow whirled down on the two men and the three horses that plodded over a bare shoulder of the range, above the timber line. It was no longer dark, because the white surface of the ground revealed boulders and the occasional twisted shape of a stunted tree. The wind no longer sighed overhead; it screamed and tore at them and rushed off to howl through unseen gorges. And the horses went forward more slowly, with hanging heads.

"They will not face the storm!" Arslan came to Sir Hugh's stirrup and shouted above the blast of the wind. "This night the *tengri*, the demons of high and desolate places, are on the wing. Hark to them."

The rain had soaked through Sir Hugh's leg wrappings, and the increasing cold numbed his feet.

"Dismount!" Arslan barked impatiently. "Lead thy pony."

Stiffly the crusader swung down, stifling a grunt of agony as the blood started to course through his feet. Taking the rein over his arm he stumbled after the Mongol, who plunged ahead, stooping over the snow as a hound quests for a scent.

The ponies, sheltered somewhat by the bodies of the men, quickened their pace a little. Sir Hugh found that when his limbs were warmed he was able to keep pace with the warrior easily, in spite of the weight of the sword.

They climbed interminably, and only the comparative evenness of the footing convinced the crusader that they were still on the trail made by the Horde. Then they began to descend, and the third pony suddenly galloped ahead.

"*Akh!*" cried the courier. "He knows. There is something before us. Let us mount to the saddles, and the horses will find it."

For a while they dipped down, and the force of the wind increased. The snow seemed dryer—instead of large flakes it beat against them in hard particles that smarted on cheek and forehead.

But the wind had cleared long stretches of snow, and here Sir Hugh made out huddled forms of horses and men. On the far side of these bodies the snow was piled, and it seemed to him as if a caravan caught by the blizzard had lain down to sleep. Only the bodies were twisted and sprawled sometimes one upon the other. Arslan paused to examine them and said they had not been plundered and so must be Muhammadans slain by the Horde in passing.

Then one of the horses neighed, and the other turned sharply to the right. In the driving snow a cluster of Mongol dome tents took shape, behind them a black huddle of horses crowded together, tails to the storm.

Arslan lashed the felt covering of a *yurta* with his whip, shouting shrilly.

"Out, ye squint-eyed devils—out, sons of a dog tribe! The post to Subotai Bahadur waits!"

He reënforced his whip with kicks that threatened to topple over the wicker frame of the tent, until dim figures crawled out of the entrance flap, and a torch flamed dazzlingly in the glitter of the snow. Sir Hugh noticed that smoke curled from the tops of the domes, and he thought that the guards of the post station had been snug enough.

While fresh horses were being saddled Arslan came to his side and bowed, touching his hands to his forehead.

"Three hours of sleep was commanded, my lord, that is true. But thou canst sleep very easily in the saddle, if——"

"And it was also in the command to bring me alive to the Horde," laughed Sir Hugh. Strangely, he no longer felt any pain and did not want food. "Go forward, if thou wilt. I will not fall behind."

"Akh!"

Arslan showed his white teeth in a hearty grin and hastened off to bully and lash the men of the station. He had food—barley cakes and warm milk—brought to his companion, and sheepskins to wrap around the knight's legs and feet once Sir Hugh was installed in the saddle of a shaggy pony. The little steed grunted, feeling the weight of its rider, but made off nimbly after the others.

A dozen Mongols accompanied them, at Arslan's order, to point out the trail.

"Eh, my lord," he shouted in Sir Hugh's ear, "the wolves of these mountains showed their teeth. The riders of the black hats attacked the rear of the Horde, to carry off horses."

"Where is the Horde?"

"At the heels of Muhammad."

"And where is he?"

Arslan glanced into the drift beyond the circle of leaping torchlight and shook his head.

"Heaven knows."

The warmth of the dry sheepskins and the inner glow

of food filled Sir Hugh with delicious drowsiness. He could still hear the creaking of saddles, the spluttering of the pine torches, but the wind ceased to beat against him, and he must have slept, because he roused suddenly, aching in every limb. His horse had stumbled and nearly thrown him.

He opened his eyes and ceased to feel drowsy. He could see the black forms of the riders, the trampled snow of the trail. The blizzard had ceased, and dawn was breaking to his right. And beneath his right foot was an abyss, still veiled in darkness. From a thousand feet below him ascended the murmur of a rushing torrent.

His horse had stumbled within a foot of the precipice.

Thereafter, though Arslan slumbered tranquilly, propped in the high peaked saddle, Sir Hugh kept wide awake. They were rounding a ridge that seemed to be one of the high points of the pass—he could see the snow summits of the range stretching away to the right.

From dull red to glowing crimson these peaks changed, and then to flaming gold as the sun's rays struck them. Another moment, and the snow-covered slope shone with intolerable brightness.

Arslan woke with a grunt, dismissed the escort, and whipped his pony to a trot.

"The third day," he cried, "and we are not up with the standard."

As he spoke he pointed below them and, shading his eyes, Sir Hugh made out hundreds of black dots moving northward. Here the precipice had yielded to a long slope, boulder strewn and carpeted thick with soft snow.

The riders who had gone before them had followed a traverse down the slope, winding back and forth a weary way to the bottom, some five hundred feet below.

Refreshed by sleep, Sir Hugh surveyed the sharp slope and dismounted.

"We can lead the horses straight down."

Arslan's nostrils expanded, and his slant eyes glimmered.

"Akh!"

He shook his head, but swung down as Sir Hugh went over the side, drawing the pony after him. Once started, the horse crowded down on the crusader. A hundred feet or so they made safely, then the man stepped on ice under the snow and lost his footing.

He began to slide, turning over and over, kicked by the struggling animal, until he loosed the rein and shot downward. By degrees the snow, wedged in front of his body, slowed his progress, and he came to a stop among a mass of boulders. Rising and shaking himself, little harmed—for the mail hauberk and the wolfskin surcoat swathed him completely—he beheld Arslan shoot past, caught between the forelegs of his pony.

The Mongol and his mount had gained considerable impetus, and their slide lasted nearly to the bottom of the slope where they brought up in some brush.

Sir Hugh ran and slipped down, laughing heartily as he watched Arslan get up and shake himself and pull the snow from his neck. The courier glanced up at the trail they had left, felt of his wallet, and looked long at his companion. Arslan's lips were bloody, and his pony limped.

"What is thy name?" He demanded abruptly.

"Hugh," the crusader responded.

"*Hui*," the Mongol repeated, and grinned. "*Hui-hui*, the swooping hawk! They named thee well. Come, let us get fresh horses from these laggards."

The two had arrived at the tail of the horsemen who were escorting the few pack animals of the Horde. Without delaying to eat, the courier selected new mounts and set out at a gallop. They could make fast time now, because the trail was trodden down, and the descent through the forest was easier going. They began to pass masses of the heavy cavalry of the Horde, the warriors drawing out of the road at sound of the courier's bells. Often, too, they came upon dead and exhausted horses and heard in the depths of the forest the howling of wolves.

Sir Hugh drew rein with an exclamation of wonder. The forest had thinned out, and he had come to the edge of a plateau. Below him there was no snow, but fertile fields and vineyards, and beyond that miles of tall rushes, bending under the breath of a warm wind.

And beyond the rushes there stretched to the skyline the gray waters of a mighty sea. He could hear the pounding of the distant swell, and the air in his nostrils was heavy with salt.

"Come!" cried Arslan. "We have not found the standard."

"It is the sea!"

"Ay, the sea. It will be there on the morrow."

Reluctantly—for he was feasting his eyes on the wide circle of the shore and the barrier of mountains that

girdled it as far as the eyes could reach—Sir Hugh spurred after his escort.

By noon they had passed other companies of Mongol archers, all trotting toward the shore. Here the sun was warm as in Rai, the grapevines still green. And about them—aroused by the multitude of horsemen—clamored all the birds of creation.

In the marshes stalked flamingoes and gray herons. Overhead in the willow and poplar growths resounded the clatter of crows and magpies and cormorants—and upon the branches sat in somber silence brown eagles and ruffled vultures.

"They will not go hungry this night," laughed Arslan, lifting his tired, bloodshot eyes.

Solitary among the flights of other birds, Sir Hugh observed slender falcons wheeling and dipping along the shore, and above these great swans that passed southward, long necks outstretched.

Over the surf swooped and screamed white-breasted gulls. The crusader watched one dart down suddenly and come up fluttering upon the swell with a fish glistening in its claws.

"It is the Sea of the Ravens!" he said under his breath. "God grant it lead me to a Christian land."

Arslan glanced at the shore indifferently.

"It is vast and wide, but there are no sails upon it. The water is fit for fisherfolk, the land for warriors."

"No man of my people has set eyes upon this sea before."

The Mongol grunted.

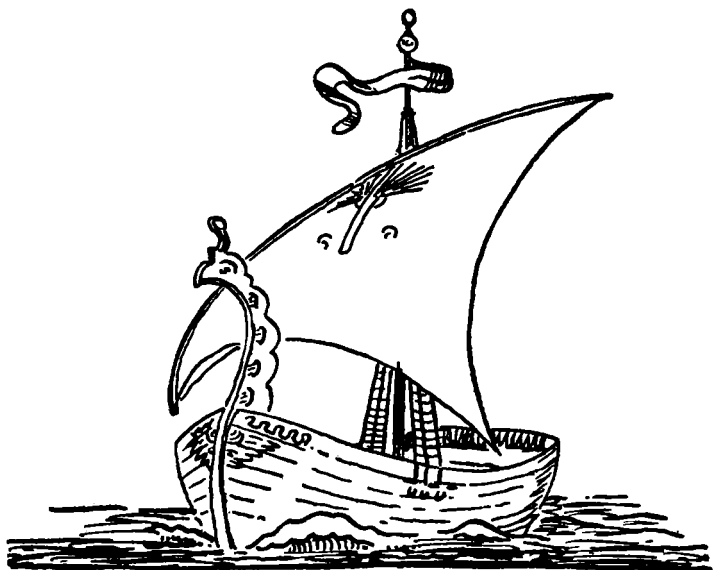
"Then, if thou live to tell of it in thy *serais*, the wise

men and merchants of thy place will mock thee, saying, 'Lo, this is an idle tale of a dog-born-dog!' " He nodded reflectively. "It is better," he added philosophically, "to bring back gold and silver things, even ivory."

All at once, he lashed his horse with his whip and uttered a shrill cry. They had rounded a promontory on the shore, and ahead of them he saw some five hundred Mongols urging on their jaded beasts. Far in advance of them galloped an unmistakable figure, beside the standard bearer—a stalwart warrior with flaming red hair.

"Aside, ye men of the Horde!" growled Arslan. "Make way for the bearer of tidings from the great Khan Genghis."

But, as the Mongols made way for them, and they were able to see the road ahead, Sir Hugh's gray eyes quickened with interest. The road swept out to the shore's edge, and here on a point of land that stretched far into the sea stood a walled city, its domes and minarets rising against the cloud-flecked sky.



CHAPTER XVI

THE END OF THE ROAD

THAT morning the *Shah-im-shah*, the King of kings, had come to Istar, the westernmost stronghold of his empire, the very gate of Islam.

Unheralded and almost unattended, he had entered the house of the governor and seated himself in the guest room—whispering to himself, his head swaying on shoulders that had once been heavy and strong, his eyes dulled with fever.

Even the governor, who had seen Muhammad in Samarkand, did not recognize the wasted man in the mud-

stained garments of a *hadji*, though Muhammad extended to him the emerald seal ring of Kharesmia. But Omar had proof of his master's identity, and this proof he showed the Istarians, opening the seven chests that held the blue diamonds, the long ropes of pearls, the treasure of the Throne of Gold.

"The *Shah-im-shah* hath need of a boat—a boat with sails," he announced to the men of Istar, who were filled with wonder. "He goes upon a journey, out to sea."

It was Omar's plan that his master should take ship at the port of Istar and find sanctuary upon one of the islands of the Sea of the Ravens. The Horde that had followed him through the great cities of Islam and across the salt desert, and had trailed them into the mountain ranges, would not be able to pursue upon the water.

"Thou art safe beyond all mischance, my Sultan," he said to the silent Muhammad. "I go to make ready a ship."

Restlessness gnawed at Muhammad, and he went to the roof of the *dar*, the governor's house that overlooked the shore. Here the *kadis* and the grandees brought him wine and mastic and good things to eat, and he gorged them, sitting in the sun. It was pleasant in the sun, and the breath of the sea was cold.

He thought that he would not go upon the boat for a while, though Omar sent a servant with word that all was ready. On the island would be no terraced roofs like this, no such throng of courtiers, or people in the streets who had come to stare at the Lion of Islam.

Muhammad looked back at the mountains that had caused him such suffering. The summits were hidden by

clouds, but here the sun filled him with warmth, and the scent of the vineyards struck pleasantly into his nostrils.

Then came Omar, urging that the sail had been hoisted on the boat—a single-masted fisherman's skiff was the largest to be had—and his men were waiting to cast off. Muhammad was too tired to want to move. Perhaps he had a little fever.

Surely Omar had sworn that he was safe. He would sleep for a while and then go to the *hammam* bath. The boat would still be there after another hour or two——

It was late afternoon when Muhammad was roused from his stupor, and the throng on the roof had disappeared except for Omar, who was gazing steadily toward the shore.

"My Sultan," he cried, "the hour of our going is at hand."

He pointed toward the shore, and the first thing that Muhammad noticed was that the Istarians were all hastening through the streets in the same direction. The wall was crowded with men holding drawn scimitars, and the gates were closed.

On three sides the wall of Istar ran down to the sea, but on the fourth a long neck of land stretched back into the hills. And the road that ran from the shore along the peninsula to the gates of Istar was covered with rising dust. Through the dust could be seen masses of horsemen, moving at a gallop, plying their whips. From the mass uprose the horned standard of the Mongols.

Then did Muhammad know the fear of a hunted thing. His flushed forehead became damp, and a mist

spread before his eyes, hiding the dust and the road. His heart quivered and leaped, and in his nostrils was the scent of death.

"Come," repeated the minister, pulling at his sleeve. "The way to safety lies open."

Subotai, the *Orluk*, did not draw rein as he galloped under the wall of Istar. He had cornered his quarry, but he had no means of laying siege to the last town of the Kharesmians.

The Muhammadans, accustomed to raids of the hill tribes, took this rush of the Horde for mere defiance and expected the Mongols to draw back as swiftly as they had come. From the rampart rained down taunting shouts—arrows flashed, and javelins flew among the horses.

Wheeling his white charger so abruptly that he almost crashed into Sir Hugh, who rode behind him, the *Orluk* darted toward the nearest gate, throwing high his right arm.

The Horde, that had followed him as hounds press upon the leader, converged on the gate silently and divided in two. Some three hundred bowmen began to trot back and forth a stone's throw from the wall, plying their shafts at the parapet on both sides the massive oak portal. The others did not rein in until their ponies were jammed up against the wall.

For a moment the missiles of the Kharesmians wrought havoc among the close-packed warriors. Then the arrows from the mounted archers cleared a space of defenders. The Muhammadan bowmen dropped with

shafts through throat and brain—the shields of the spearmen availed them not.

“On the lances!” shouted Subotai, rising in his stirrups. “Cast the lariats! On!”

The warriors nearest the wall stood on their saddles, others dismounted and pushed their lances up to the parapet. The long shafts had been bound together near the head in pairs, and when the butts were planted on the ground, the points caught in the mortar. More lances were brought, and the Mongols who could not get near the wall at the point of attack drew long, pliable ropes from their saddle horns. These ropes, noosed at one end, they were accustomed to cast upon running horses, but now they whirled the loops over the crenels of the battlement and let the ropes hang for the eager hands of their comrades to grasp.

Climbing upon the shoulders of the nearest warriors, swarming up the lances, hauling themselves by the lariats, the Horde ascended the face of the wall—pierced by spears from above, shattered by mace and scimitar, they fell back bleeding.

The shafts of the lances became slippery with blood; horses, mangled and trodden, screamed and reared. Like the surf rushing against high rocks, the tide of men rose and sank, while the deep-throated shout of the Mongol onset rolled forth.

“Hour-ra—hour-ra!”

Subotai had launched his attack without waiting for more Mongols to come up, before the Istarrians could recover from their surprise. Half his men lay dead

around him, but a score of swordsmen had gained a footing on the wall, and others swarmed after them.

"The gate!" cried the *Orluk*.

His men on the wall heard, and ran down the steps that led within. They fought their way to the gate, and a dozen of them turned savagely on the Muhammadans while two Mongols lifted down the massive iron bars from the sockets. The dozen had dwindled to five when the gates swung open.

Meanwhile Subotai had called in his bowman, who had suffered little. The *Orluk* reined his charger against the oak portal, listening to the struggle within, and when the bars were down the weight of a hundred horses forced open the gates.

When his detachment was in the streets, Subotai called a score of riders to him, leaving the others to hold the gate. On the distant shore he had seen the first of the heavy cavalry of the Horde coming up at a gallop.

His eyes glowed with a greenish light as he watched the throngs of disordered Muhammadans, and his thin lips smiled as he gathered up his reins, speaking to Sir Hugh for the first time.

"*Hai!* The fox is in his hole, and we will dig him out."

When Arslan had interpreted this, the crusader shook his head.

"Thou wilt not find him."

Subotai pulled the battle ax from his girdle, and his white teeth ground together. "We found his trail. He is here. Look!" He pointed to a body lying near the fore-feet of his charger, a tall Kharesmian with a haggard

face and henna-stained beard, an arrow buried deep under his heart. "The jackal lurked by the gate."

Sir Hugh recognized Omar, the minister of the Throne of Gold.

"Thou wilt not find him," he said again, "because he will flee in a boat."

When this was explained to the Mongol he muttered under his breath and struck his horse with the flat of the ax. Lifting his arm, he called to the detachment that had drawn up around him to shield him from the arrows of the Muhammadans.

They galloped through the street that emptied before them, and swept into narrow alleys, crashing over merchants' stalls, leaping ditches and skirting garden walls until they emerged into an almost deserted alley that led down to the end of the promontory upon which the city stood.

Here was neither wall nor harbor. A stone watch tower rose from a huddle of fishing huts. And here, at the end of a wooden jetty, a sailing skiff was moving out from the shore.

Three or four men were in the skiff—one hauling up the stone that had served as anchor, another making fast the sheets of the square sail. Crouched in the belly of the boat was Muhammad.

The Mongols, urging their weary horses toward the jetty, saw him—saw that two of his companions wore armor and the *khalats* of nobles. Then a puff of wind caught the boat, the sail filled, and it began to move more swiftly, rising in the swells.

The wind was offshore, and the skiff heeled over as a

Kharesmian took the steering oar and headed out to sea. The first Mongols reached the jetty and reined in, reaching for their bows and sending arrows flashing toward the fishing craft.

Some of the shafts struck the skiff, but in a moment more it was out of range. Subotai turned and spoke a single word to his warriors.

One after another the Mongols leaped their ponies into the water. Slipping from the saddles, they clutched the horses' tails, striking at the heads of the animals that tried to turn back to shore.

Horses and men moved steadily after the skiff that was drawing off slowly under the light breeze. Sir Hugh, breathing deeply, could not take his eyes from them.

"One has gone!" he muttered to himself after a moment.

And he wondered whether the followers of Muhammad would have jumped into the sea at the command of their lord. Knowing that the beasts must be tired, he waited for them to turn back.

After a while he knew they would not come back. Only five or six were visible, on the breast of the swell, following the skiff. They seemed to be closer to it.

"*Akh!*" cried Arslan, pointing.

One horse and the head of a warrior were still to be seen, and the watchers on the jetty strained their eyes into the twilight. Subotai lifted his head, and drew breath between clenched teeth.

"*Ahatou!*"

He raised his hand and let it fall.

The solitary rider had disappeared under the swell,

and only the skiff was visible, moving sluggishly into the gathering mists. For a while the *Orluk* was sunk in meditation, paying no heed to the tumult in the streets behind him where the Horde was seeking him earnestly.

For an entire summer he had ridden in the track of the Shah, without rest. He had fought times without number; he had stormed cities and galloped through unknown kingdoms to hunt down the lord of Islam, and now he was confronted by the sea. It was the first time this nomad of the Gobi had beheld the sea and the boats that went forth upon it.

He turned back from the jetty and went to look at the few fishing craft drawn up on the beach.

"Will these go over the water like that yonder?" he asked Sir Hugh, and Arslan interpreted.

"Nay," the crusader pointed out, "the bottoms have been stove in. They would sink."

Subotai looked up. Muhammad's skiff had changed its course and was lost to sight.

"It leaves no trail. How can it be followed?"

"Along the shore," the crusader suggested, "there must be other boats. The wind is dying, and Muhammad is still near."

The Mongol turned on him swiftly.

"Canst make a boat follow, on the water?"

"Ay."

"Take a *chambul* of bowmen. Go, and seek!"

Wheeling his charger, the *Orluk* galloped back to the fighting, and presently Arslan, who had accompanied him, reappeared with some thirty warriors, saying that they were under the orders of the crusader.

It was utterly dark on the shore of the Sea of the Ravens. Only on the promontory of Istar did lights gleam, and from the quiet that prevailed Sir Hugh judged that Subotai was master of the town.

He had sought through the dusk for fishing villages, and had found only abandoned huts in the forest of rushes. Arslan he had sent back for lanterns, and the Mongols he had divided, to search the shore in both directions. They had gone off like hunting dogs, questing in the shadows and—though he reined in and listened—he could no longer hear them splashing in the mud near him. His pony was played out, and he dismounted, to sit and wait for lights.

Muhammad had escaped, that was certain. But Sir Hugh wanted a boat for his own use. If he could get food and water from the Mongols at Istar he meant to embark on this sea——

Raising his head, he listened, thinking that the archers were coming back. A slight sound came over the water, a bird rising from the rushes, or the whisper of the swell.

Then he heard a creaking of wood and a murmur of voices. Men splashed through the shallows on foot, making as little noise as possible. The crusader sat where he was until the shore was quiet, and then rose to investigate. Somewhere the faint creaking and slapping persisted, and presently he made out a vague shape against the stars—a shape that moved to and fro and changed as he watched.

Toward it he made his way, going knee-deep into water, and parting the rushes that rose over his head. His hand, outthrust, touched solid wood, and he knew

that the thing that had come between him and the stars was a sail. He could feel it now and see the outline of the mast. A reek of foul water and rotten fish was in his nostrils, and a man rose up beside him from the bottom of the boat.

"*Wallahi!*" The man had stooped to peer at Sir Hugh, and the crusader gripped his arm. "Who art thou?"

"Death," whispered the knight, "unless thou keep silence."

As his eyes searched the boat he made out, in the starlight, another figure outstretched. Still gripping his captive, he bent down and drew in his breath sharply. From a bloodless countenance the dark and sightless eyes of Muhammad seemed in that illusory light to seek his.

"Ay," said the man he held, "that was the Shah. It was written that he should not go upon the sea."

Sir Hugh touched the head of the prone figure. It was cold, and the hands and feet moved idly with the swinging of the skiff. And yet the garments were not disordered, nor could he make out any wound.

"What befell the Shah?" he asked.

The solitary occupant of the boat sighed and answered with the resignation of his race.

"It was the hour appointed. No Mongol arrow touched him. A fever was in him, and perhaps fear weighed upon his spirit. When he watched the horsemen jump into the sea after him he said no word. After the hour of the *namaz gar* he died. Who art thou?"

When Sir Hugh remained silent, the Muhammadan went on sadly.

"This also was to come upon our head. Why should

we go to the island? *He* lacked even a shroud for burial. We came back—to dig his grave in his own land.”

Beside the body of the Shah Sir Hugh had seen half a dozen chests, and the one nearest the servant of the Shah was open. Even in the starlight the gleam of precious stones and the white shape of pearls were unmistakable. And the cover of the open chest had been split and pried off with an ax.

He looked around and thought he saw the ax near the slippered feet of the Muhammadan who had remained to guard the body and the treasure when his comrades went to the shore—who had been taken unaware by the quiet approach of the crusader.

“Not in his own land,” Sir Hugh made answer, “for the Mongols have taken Istar.”

“We did not know.”

The lean arm of Muhammad’s follower grew tense under his grasp, and the knight reflected that these men had found themselves masters of the wealth in the chests. They had put back to shore perhaps to bury Muhammad, but undoubtedly to seek for horses. They had left a man to watch the boat, hidden in the darkness and the rushes. Sir Hugh had heard the others go past him after the boat reached the shore.

“Who art thou?” the man asked for the third time.

“The foe of thy shah!”

Pulling the Muhammadan toward him, Sir Hugh caught the man in his arms and cast him among the rushes. Then he thrust the skiff out into deeper water, wading beside it until it drifted clear of the rushes. With

a final shove he hauled himself in over the bow and went to the steering oar.

Working this oar back and forth, he turned the bow of the skiff to breast the swell. There was a little air stirring, and he sought for the sheets, making them fast to the thwarts. Then he sat down with the steering oar in his hand, to think.

Of all those who had gathered at the caravan *serai* in the salt desert nearly a month ago, he alone had lived to reach the Sea of the Ravens. Omar had been struck down by a Mongol arrow, and the Shah had perished from exhaustion and fear.

The head of Muhammad, rocking with the motion of the skiff, rested between his feet. The precious stones of the Shah were at his side, but Muhammad was beyond need of them.

Sir Hugh counted the chests. There were seven, and if all held such jewels, the treasure of an empire was in this skiff—reeking of fish, on the shore of an unknown sea.

That he himself was still alive he owed to the Mongols. And he thought of his companions of the caravan track, of the reckless Khalil, the wise Kutsai, and the Eagle. He thought about Subotai, the Eagle, for a long time.

He had his boat at last—he was beyond the Muhammadan frontier—but he had pledged allegiance to the Mongol lords. After he had considered all these things, Sir Hugh took up the oar and headed the skiff toward the lights of Istar.

When he came within hail of the jetty, the crusader loosed the sheets and drifted in to the shore where some

Mongol warriors stood guard with blazing torches. Seeing the skiff, they came to the water's edge and looked at him silently as he poled the fishing craft in.

"*Subotai Bahadur!*" he called to them, and one departed at a run.

Meanwhile the crusader beached his boat and stepped out on the sand. The warriors were talking among themselves, watching him, until horses appeared in the nearest street, and the *Orluk*, with his officers and the courier Arslan, came down to the water. Subotai pulled in his charger at the bow of the skiff and observed the body within. He bent down in the saddle and studied it, then spoke curtly to Arslan.

"What man is this, O Nazarene?" asked the courier.

"Muhammad Shah."

Subotai's blue eyes glowed, and he raised his right hand, his great fist clenched.

"Proof!"

Sir Hugh lifted the Kharesmian's arm, already growing rigid, and pointed to the signet ring. Then he picked up the opened chest and dumped out on the sand a glittering flood of precious stones. Subotai swung down from the stirrup, glanced casually at the jewels of the Throne of Gold and put his hand on the face of the dead man.

"Life is gone from him." He struck the hilt of his saber with an open palm, as if sheathing the weapon. "*Hai*—the hunt is at an end."

The warriors who pressed about him murmured assent, their dark faces triumphant, and from a group of Istarrians who had drawn near there rose a low wail of lamentation.

"His treasure availed him not," growled the Mongol leader. "He died without a weapon in his hand, and in a boat. Better for him if he had never gone upon the sea." Abruptly he turned to Sir High. "And thou—what dost thou ask of me?"

"My horse Khutb. He will come up with the caravans."

"And what more?"

"Freedom, to choose my road. I go to seek an enemy in the Western world."

Subotai folded his arms on his broad chest and fell silent. When he spoke it was to the nearest officer, who dismounted swiftly and stood by the stirrup of his mount, a black mare. Then the *Orluk* asked a question of the crusader.

"Why didst thou come back from the sea?"

"My life I owed to the Horde, and now I have paid the debt."

When Arslan had interpreted this, Subotai made response in his slow drawl.

"*Hai*, thou art mighty in battle. Thou hast kept the saddle with a rider of the *yamkh*, untiring as a hawk. Thou art without fear, since thou hast gone alone upon the sea. Come, then, to my house as a guest."

Swinging himself into the saddle of the officer's mare, the Mongol conqueror motioned to Sir Hugh to mount his own charger.

"*Hai*, the command of the great Khan was that I should go into the Western world when Muhammad was slain. Come thou with me and we will open up a path for our horses."

Sir Hugh picked up his rein, and made his decision without hesitation.

"Ay, so."

Before turning back to the city the leader of the Horde glanced a last time at the body in the skiff that grated against the stones of the beach. Something like a smile touched his hard lips.

"Kutsai would have kept thee, to make marks on his map; but I shall take thee, to shape a new world."



CHAPTER XVII

RABBAN SIMEON

THAT winter Subotai went into camp. He had need to rest his men and replenish his horse herds. He had only some twenty thousand Mongols with him. And Genghis Khan had given him command to march on, after the death of Muhammad Shah. To go round the Sea of the Ravens into the west, and to conquer a place called Europe where the Christians lived. Genghis Khan and the Horde had broken the power of the Moslems, and now they would overthrow the Christians who lived in that far corner of the world.

So Subotai, the Eagle of Genghis Khan, went into winter quarters upon a plain on the west shore of the Sea of the Ravens. Here he had grasslands, to graze his herds, and a wide river to water them, and timber enough

for the fires. His men set up their domed *yurts* of leather and felt, that looked like beehives scattered over the brown plain.

With the coming of snow and the cold that would freeze the watercourses and harden the snow crust, Subotai meant to begin his march again—the long march of ninety degrees of longitude, from the great wall of Cathay into Europe. He knew that the first thing to be done was to make a passage through the mountain barrier that he could see to the west of his camp. Already the peaks of this range were white with heavy snow. Some men called the range the *Khaukesh*, or Caucasus. Others called it the Gate. There was a road through the mountains that would bring him out upon the level plains again, far to the north and the west.

All this Subotai learned from questioning the Moslem peasants who served him as captives, and from the wisdom of Kutsai the Cathayan prince, who had been summoned back to the army of Genghis Khan at Samarkand. But Subotai wanted to know everything about this new road and the people who dwelt in the west. Much he had learned from Sir Hugh, and more from a certain Rabban Simeon, a traveler and physician—who was also a spy of the Greek Emperor, Theodore. Rabban Simeon was silent and shrewd, and neither Subotai nor Sir Hugh knew that he served the Emperor.

On the tent pole of his *yurt* the Eagle had hung the banners captured from the Moslems, and he himself sat on a horseskin by the fire, while a score of his higher officers—broad-faced scarred Mongols, veterans of a dozen campaigns, and hawk-eyed nomad chieftains—sat

on either side the entrance in their wadded coats, their hands on their knees, listening in silence to all that was said.

Before the fire knelt Rabban Simeon.

"Our hearts," observed Subotai, "are hard as yonder mountains, our sword edges are sharp, our horses fleetier than the wind. What, then, will hinder us from riding into the lands of the Far West?"

"True it is," said the brown Syrian tranquilly, "O Lord of Men, that your horses can find their way over any path, even in the deep snow. Yet here, above you, lies a barrier not of earth but of living men."

"What men?" demanded the Mongol general.

"The Georgians."

As Subotai remained silent, Rabban Simeon went on, choosing his words carefully because he had long since discovered that the red-haired Mongol knew more than he chose to reveal. "The Georgians are men of the mountains. Their home is this great Caucasus, and they will defend their home with their lives. They are brave—they fight on foot with axes and straight swords."

Still Subotai kept silent.

"Long ago, the Persian amirs," resumed Simeon, "tried to conquer the Caucasus. Then the hosts of Islam tried, after the day of Muhammad their prophet. They also failed. For the Georgians, like the Armenians, are Christians—although barbarians. In their mountain fastness they still worship the Cross that came to them in the day of the Apostles."

"What matters this—to me?"

"It matters, O Lord of Men, that these Georgians will

not submit to a conqueror. They have never submitted. They are shepherds and forest men, ignorant and proud."

"I seek no war with them. I will lead my Horde over the snow road, before the heat of the spring makes torrents of the water courses and softens the snow."

Rabban Simeon bowed his head. This did not please him, because he had been sent by the Emperor Theodore to do his utmost to turn the Mongol army away from the frontiers of the Empire. By plotting, by bribery, and if need be by murder, he was to put obstacles in the way of this advance guard of Genghis Khan. Now, he did not think that he could influence Subotai against the western march. If the Horde meant to move into the West, Rabban Simeon planned to stir up enmity and war between them and the Georgian mountaineers. And the Syrian was a master of plots. He blinked his mild brown eyes.

"Eh, the Georgians are brave, but they are fools. They will not believe that the Mongol Horde will pass without doing them harm. They will defend their city, Tiflis."

Drinking from the wine goblet at his side, Subotai shook his head. "The order of the Khan," he said, "was to go *through* the ranges, and discover what lies beyond."

"The Negropont—the Black Sea lies beyond. The Horde will find no path over the sea."

Subotai's green-blue eyes gleamed. He meant to march around the sea. "It has been told me," he said, "that the lord of this far sea is a great prince, the equal of Muhammad Shah. He has one mighty city Constanti-

nople, and a summer palace like Xanadu on the border of Cathay. Is this true?"

In spite of his quick wit Rabban Simeon hesitated. He shrank from mentioning the wealth of Theodore to the covetous Mongol.

"True," he admitted. "The summer palace is the Golden Chersonese. It glows like fire upon the sea, for it lies at the end of a tongue of land, with walls like cliffs. It hath gardens and shining alabaster, and the very trees are silver, and the song birds are fashioned of gold and precious stones. Ay, it was built by Mithridates, who once fought with the Roman Cæsars. But how can it be approached, except in ships?"

Again the Mongol drank gravely from his cup. "*Kai*—we reined our horses through the great wall of China—we tore down the ramparts of Samarkand. And we will find our way into this Golden Chersonese."

Clutching his beard, Rabban Simeon cried out. "*Ai*—bethink thee! The Greeks have more thousands than thou hast hundreds. Even now they prepare and watch the Horde. Nay, I have heard——"

"Thy words are foxes that run first one way, then another." Subotai was either angry or amused.

"Only listen! There was one sent among you to lead the Horde astray. He is this Christian knight called Hugh."

Subotai's eyes turned green as he stared at the spy. "I have seen him. When he is angry he growls like thunder; he bites like a camel. He has kept faith, and his word is not smoke."

"Indeed," Rabban Simeon recovered his composure,

"he is a warrior, but a Christian. Is his heart not with his own people in the West?"

For a moment Subotai pondered. And Rabban Simeon, who had seized upon Sir Hugh to draw the Mongol's attention from the Empire, held his breath.

"We will try his faith," said the Khan slowly. "If his word is no more than smoke he will be broken like an old and useless arrow. Now I have talked enough."

And Rabban Simeon, touching his fingers to his forehead and lips, withdrew from the pavilion of the Eagle.

"Tell me one thing truly," observed Subotai, to the listening officers. "Hath the Swooping Hawk gone among the Christians of these mountains?"

The Khan of Almalyk lifted his head. "I have heard, O my *Orkhon*, that the Swooping Hawk walks often, alone, toward the hills for the time it takes the sun to pass half across the sky. But what he does yonder is not known to me."

The Mongols spoke of Hugh as the Swooping Hawk, after the courier Arslan had given him that name. Subotai clapped his hands and gave an order to the captain of the guard. "Send men who will search for the Swooping Hawk, wherever he may be, and bring him swiftly to me." To his officers he added, "Either Rabban Simeon or the Swooping Hawk is not to be trusted. It is time we made test of the Christian warrior."

The embers of the *yurt* fire still glowed, and Subotai slept not when the entrance flap was lifted and the tall crusader stood before the Mongol. His deep-throated

salutation roused the chieftains who were slumbering on the benches.

"*Ahatou!*"

His long sword had been left without the pavilion, as the law of the Horde ordained, but when he lifted his arm the wolfskin fell away and revealed the chain hauberk, and loose coif of a crusader.

Subotai motioned him to approach, and looked full into the gray eyes of the stranger.

"Hugh," he said, and spoke the name as if it were the whirring of wings, "you were not at my side. You were not in the *orda*. What then did you seek?"

"A road."

Subotai nodded and waited. In the last months the knight had learned to understand the speech of the Mongols and to answer in simple words.

"A road leads," explained the crusader, "from the river Kur to the mountain villages. It was told me that we may go by this road to the summit of the pass."

"Have you spoken with the men of these hills?"

"Ay, one knew the speech of the Arabs."

"Good!"

Subotai scanned the lean face of the man called Hugh—the corded throat, the strongly marked jaw and forehead—with appreciation. There was beauty in the dark countenance framed in its mane of tawny hair, and pride in the poise of the head, but the Mongol weighed only the direct glance of the eyes, the strength of mighty arms. He drew from his girdle a tablet a little smaller than his hand, a silver plaque on which was etched a falcon and a few words of Chinese writing.

"The *paizah*," he said bluntly, "the tablet of command for an envoy of the Horde."

"Ay."

Hugh knew that this falcon tablet would obtain for the bearer fresh horses, guides, and escort, or any amount of food.

"Take it," went on Subotai. "I have a task for the Swooping Hawk. Go before the Horde as ambassador. Go first to the khan of these mountains. Say to him this: 'Our horses are swift, our arrows sharp, and our hearts hard as yonder mountains. It is ours to command; his to obey. Let him not molest us when we pass over the roads of his kingdom.'"

"I have heard." The crusader fixed the words in his mind and then spoke boldly, "The men of the Caucasus are not sheep, to be driven; they will stand their ground like watchdogs. Better to offer them conditions of peace than to lose many warriors, many horses."

Subotai grunted, a little astonished. The Horde was not in the habit of offering terms to foes with weapons in hand. But he realized the necessity of a clear road over the passes.

"*Kai*—so be it. Say also this, 'If the khan of the Georgians keeps his sword in its sheath, his arrows in their quivers, we will do likewise.'"

Unversed in writing and contemptuous of promises that needed to be traced on paper, the Mongol had made his pledge and would abide by it.

"Go, Hugh, show the tablet of command to the *Gurkhan* of the Almalyk bowmen; take two hundred warriors for escort, and mounts with filled saddle-bags."

"O Khan," said Hugh, "that is too many and too few. Quarrels would come between my men and the Georgians. Better to go with two than two hundred."

Subotai glanced keenly into the gray eyes of the Christian, and remembered the warning of Rabban Simeon.

"There is peril upon the road," he growled. "The Georgians may attack thee."

"It may be so."

"Return then to me, for I have need of thee," added Subotai. "Alone among the men of the Horde thou hast the tongue of the Western peoples. *Hai*, thou wilt be the voice of the Horde, even to the Greek Emperor in his palace of Chersonese."

The crusader uttered an exclamation, and his hands gripped the belt until the stout leather creaked.

"I have loosed thy chains," the Mongol said calmly, "and the road is open to thee. Remember only—we have sworn brotherhood."

"*Kai*, it is so."

When the knight had lifted his hand in leave-taking and had passed from the *yurta*, Subotai summoned a warrior from the shadows behind the fire, a short and stalwart Mongol who walked with a swagger and wore about his forehead the leather band that was the mark of a courier.

"Go, Arslan," Subotai commanded, "with the envoys. Look and listen with the eyes of a ferret and the ears of a fox. The Swooping Hawk speaks plain words. He is a thunderbolt, and I have need of him. Stay at his back, unless he betrays us or harm threatens him. If so, ride hither without dismounting for food or drink."

And then with a word or two for the officers who still drank mare's milk and listened to the drone of a blind minstrel, Subotai Bahadur went to sleep, simply rolling himself up in a corner of the rug, near the fire. Utterly without fear or repentance or uncertainty, he slept quietly—as few commanders of cavalry divisions could have done in hostile country a thousand miles from their support and base of supplies.

Nor would it have troubled him in the least if he had known the Horde would be on the move sooner than he or anyone expected.

There was snuffing and stirring in the black mass of the horse herds, and here and there thin smoke began to rise against the stars from the openings at the tops of the *yurtas*. A mounted patrol moved wraithlike across the trodden snow with only a creaking of stirrup leathers.

It was the dawn hour.

Sir Hugh of Taranto stepped from his small tent, drawing tight the buckle of his belt, glanced at the stars in the north, and greeted the two riders and the stocky, fur-wrapped courier who held the rein of his gray war horse.

"Ahatou noyon! Hail, chieftains!"

The two mounted Mongols lifted their hands, sparing of speech. Mist of the horses' breathing was in the air, and the crusader's charger neighed as he swung into the saddle.

"A good sign, *bahadur*," cried Arslan, the dispatch rider, running to his own pony.

"Good!" echoed one of the chieftains.

Hugh picked up his reins and glanced a last time at the familiar outlines of the encampment of the conquerors who had come over the earth from Cathay, at the towering poles of standards topped by horns and by drooping horse and yak tails, at the passing patrol, and the black domes visible under the gray streak of the eastern sky.

Hung about his throat by a silver chain, Hugh bore the tablet of command of the *Kha Khan*. In mute evidence thereof the two chieftains had come first to his tent. His was the leadership of the embassy. He adjusted the heavy sword at his side and clasped steel-mittened hands on his saddle horn.

"Fair Lord Jesus," he whispered, "Thou knowest I bear a pagan talisman of power, and my word is passed to the lord of these men. The road before me is dark. Guide Thou my arm!"

Then he settled his helm on his head and turned to the three silent figures behind him.

"Forward, ye men of the East!"

The gray charger tossed his muzzle at a touch on the rein and surged ahead, scattering mud and snow with broad hoofs. The three fell in behind, galloping toward the dark rampart of mountains still invisible in the mist.



CHAPTER XVIII

THE ROAD OF THE WARRIORS

EVEN Arslan, who liked to gossip about omens, was silent as they climbed above the mist and crossed the last open ridges. At first a few venturesome beeches and thorn thickets appeared, and then the gaunt sentinels of the higher timber—young oak and hornbeam, followed by the mass of blue fir and towering deodar, interlaced with the dark stems of giant creepers, and broken here and there by the fall of a monster, now buried under a mound of snow.

Squirrels chattered and barked at them, unseen, and somewhere the wind sighed in the forest mesh. A cluster of wild boar broke across the road, grunting and plowing through the drifts.

"*Ai!*" cried Arslan, "there be no watchers here—only beasts."

But the Khan of Almalyk, a handsome man, with the thin nose and square chin of an eastern Turk, slapped the curved saber at his hip and pointed to the side of the road.

A rough crosspiece of wood projected from a mound, and beside it other objects peered out of the snow—a miniature shield, a tiny wooden horse. Arslan bent down to look at it.

"A grave. They have given him a shield to bear and a horse to ride in the world of the dead."

The crusader held up his hand for silence. Sounds carried far in that frosty air, and above the monotone of the wind he had heard the tinkle of a silver bell, or so it seemed. But when he had listened he knew that it was a woman's song.

The three others—their ears were keen—heard, and looked at him inquiringly. It was Hugh's task to lead them; theirs to follow. And the crusader had no wish to leave an outpost behind him when he climbed toward Nakha, the first village of the Caucasus.

So he reined his gray stallion past the grave and bent his helmed head under the laden branches of the evergreens. When the wind blew toward him he caught the note of the song more clearly, and with it a whiff of damp wood smoke. The words of the song he could not understand, but it was swift as the rush of a brook under ice.

Arslan muttered something about the *tengri*, the spirits of high and distant places that rode from peak to peak on the wind. Presently the song ended abruptly, and the

crusader reined his charger into a trot. The Mongol horses moved silently as ghosts over the forest bed, but the big gray trampled down hidden branches, and Hugh knew the mountain folk were not to be taken by surprise. He trotted into a grove of giant deodars where smoke curled up through patches of sunlight.

A score of men, springing up around the fire, were running toward him, drawing knives and axes and poising short javelins.

"Weapons in sheath," he cautioned the Mongols, who had drawn up beside him, and called out in Arabic:

"Ho—the leader of this pack!"

"*Hai!*" answered the twenty promptly, and a spear whistled past his ear. They seemed to be hunters, stalwart fellows in bearskin *burkas* and ragged leg-wrapping; but among them gleamed bronze helmets and a shield or two. They came forward snarling like wolves and with no hesitation at all.

Hugh singled out the best armed of the lot, a handsome giant with the straight nose of a Greek and the deep, piercing eyes of the mountain-bred, a man whose close-cropped head bore no helmet, but whose long limbs were clad in full Turkish mail covered with a white linen cloak embroidered with tiny crosses.

"Back," he cried, "if you would live!"

The tall warrior only growled and made at Hugh, when a cry, a single word, clear-pitched as the note of a silver bell, halted all twenty in their tracks. Hugh looked past them and saw a woman perched on the shaft of an uptilted cart—the woman whose song had been arrested by his coming.

"Hail, pagan Lord!" Her fresh young voice greeted him in liquid Arabic. "Yield thee and thy men! Cast down that great sword!"

"*Yah bint*——" responded the knight. "O girl——"

The singer stamped a slender booted foot upon the wagon shaft.

"O boy, these men obey me, and if you do not, they will roll your golden hair in the snow."

To gain a clearer sight of him she stood up on the shaft, swaying, a guitar poised against her hip. Over slim shoulders fell gleaming brown hair, unbound, and her eyes were surely blue.

"*Tzigan*," whispered Arslan who understood Arabic, and knew most of the byways of Asia. Had he not carried the post to Kambalu? "Gypsy."

So much was apparent from the red velvet vest close-bound over her breast, the white buckram skirt that came no lower than her knees, and the soft ornate morocco boots.

"Ay, so," she nodded, admiring the knight's gray stallion. Then she sprang down from the wagon and pushed through the men, who objected instantly and noisily, until she stood at Hugh's stirrup and searched his face with keen eyes. "Am I not queen of my people? Dismount, if you would speak to me."

Weapons were lowered, and Arslan ceased to look like a cat watching a ferret's hole. The mountaineers had seen that the three warriors were followed by no more.

"*Bayadere*," said the crusader calmly, "O singing girl, do you always set upon envoys like dogs in an alley?"

"Envoys?" She caught at the word and glanced at the

skin- and lacquer-clad Mongols scornfully. "Whence and whither?"

"From the chieftain of yonder Horde."

"By what token?"

Smiling at her insistence, the crusader drew the falcon tablet from the breast of his fur surtout.

"A-ah!" She drew nearer to ponder it. "That is a strange thing. What says the writing?"

The Khan of Almalyk, who was a veteran of the Horde, an Uighur and something of a scholar, had explained this to the crusader.

"By the strength of Heaven, whoso fails to render instant obedience to the bearer shall be slain!"¹

To Hugh's surprise the singing girl flushed, though her eyes still lingered on his face—eyes that were puzzled and more than angry. And she spoke quietly:

"That is a poor jest. Though a pagan, I had thought you a lord of Cathay."

A smile touched the wide lips of the crusader.

"Not one or the other am I."

"What message bear you—if you are an envoy?"

"*Bayadere*, the message is for the King of the Georgians, and to him will I render it when I have reached his court." Hugh motioned toward the warrior in Turkish mail. "Ask him if he will lead the way."

The singing girl considered a moment and addressed her followers in a swift rush of words that might have been so many sparks, to stir their restlessness. They thronged around her, arms and voices uplifted, until she

¹The actual wording of the *paizah*, or tablet of command, given to officers of Genghis Khan.

silenced them by walking to the fire and beckoning Hugh.

"My lord Ambassador," she said, "I have told my men that you have yielded captive to us. And still Rupen—" she nodded at the giant—"has sworn that he will cut you to your knees, for that you spoke to me from the saddle. Do not anger him again, and be thankful that he cannot understand your words."

Hugh swung down from the stirrup beside the man called Rupen, and there was not an inch of height to choose between them. The crop-headed mountaineer glared at him, fingering his wide leather girdle from which hung a short ax and a curved *yataghan*.

"No quarrel seek I," said the crusader. "In this I serve another. But warn your wolf pack, girl, to keep their distance from my men, or they will have wounds to lick."

"Rupen is no guide for you," responded the Gypsy. "I have sent for Shotha Kupri, a Georgian prince. Abide here until his coming, for the shepherds and the villagers would not suffer three pagans to pass far up the road."

Hugh advised the Mongols to dismount and sit by him at the fire. The singing girl vanished into the forest, but Arslan came to gossip.

"*Noyon*," quoth he, "it is true that some of this band are like to horse-lifting Gypsies; it is also true that others wear costly mail. Look! Here are huts and a cart, but where are horses, goats, brats, crones, and dogs? *Ekh!* It is too clean, this place."

Hugh had noticed that the man Rupen assuredly was no Gypsy. He sat on a log near at hand and glowered, tapping the iron-braced shaft of his ax whenever he

thought he was noticed. But when the sun left the grove and the air grew chill, he ordered the fire stirred up, and brought to the four envoys bowls of broth and bread with an air of remembering that dogs need not go hungry.

Darkness closed in on the band, and Hugh sat in thought, pondering the task before him—the lack of a written message, the ignorance of the men of the Caucasus as to the Mongols, and the difficulty of conversing in Arabic. When he looked up, the girl of the red boots was kneeling beside him.

"I have brought you hot spiced wine from the village," she said, lifting a jar and pouring steaming liquid into a great copper bowl. "After the saddle, a cup."

Hugh raised the bowl in both hands and uttered a deep-throated "Hail!" And he pretended not to notice that two of the Gypsies came and squatted behind him in the shadows. He did not think he would be attacked before the coming of the other Georgians, and in any case Arslan, who seemed to be dozing in the wagon, was watching what went on at his back. In the Caucasus, he meditated, anything was better than to show fear.

"Your servant," remarked the Gypsy, "says you are called the Swooping Hawk. Why do you wear your hair long? It is more beautiful than mine!"

Gravely the eyes of the crusader dwelt on her, the first woman he had seen unveiled in many years, since he had turned his back upon Constantinople to fight his way to Jerusalem.

"God gave you beauty," he said.

"And a voice," she assented, shaking back the dark

mass of loose hair, "that makes the warriors draw silver and gold coins from their wallets. *Akh*, but it is dull when snow closes the roads."

"The way to Tiflis is open."

She glanced at him fleetingly.

"Why go to Tiflis? Many go and few ride back."

"Is it not the city of the Caucasus?"

"Ay—of the mountains. But it is *our* city, and pagans and infidels find no welcome."

"How long is the way?"

"For a Gypsy, a day and a night and a day. But a stranger will find his grave more easily than our city." And, as Rupen had done, she touched the ivory hilt of a slender knife in her girdle and nodded emphatically. "You are not like the other Mongols. Why do they call you the Swooping Hawk?"

She repeated the name, and it seemed to puzzle her. "Nay, once I saw a lion in Sarai. It was big and sleepy. You are like that lion. But it is foolish to go toward Tiflis. It would be much better to tell me your message, and I would send it swiftly. The winds bear *my* messages." And, chin on hand, she chuckled at him, like a child with a delightful secret. "Do the Mongols bring war or peace?" she asked idly.

"Your king shall hear."

"You are as stupid as the lion, that only roused when it was hungry or angry. The Armenian merchants say the Mongols are evil spirits who see in the dark."

"Neither angels nor demons are they."

"Perhaps they are magicians. Do they seek cattle or tribute?"

Hugh laughed under his breath.

"*Bayadere*, come to Tiflis and you shall hear."

"*Akh*, you will grieve that you did not tell me."

"What manner of man is your king?"

The singing girl smiled at him suddenly.

"Come to Tiflis and you shall know."

Nor would she speak to him again, sitting tranquilly on the bearskin beside him, head cradled in her fists, her eyes roving from man to man, not so much a Gypsy queen holding her court as a girl child with a plenitude of playmates. And when Shotha Kupri, a grizzled nobleman, came swinging into the firelight, followed by a line of short and shaggy warriors, her eyes sparkled with anticipation of merriment to come.

"Make the salaam of obedience, O *Thawad*," she called to the grizzled prince, "before this envoy of the mighty Khan. Not to do so is to die. So it is written on the tablet."

The grim Georgian planted his legs before Hugh and breathed heavily.

"By——, that prowler!"

"Nay," cried the girl at once, "he bears a message to the king of the Georgians."

Before Hugh could be more than puzzled by the casual way in which the Gypsy spoke of the reigning monarch, Shotha Kupri growled at him again.

"War or peace?"

The crusader stood up, gripping hands in his belt.

"Prince of these people, will you tell me the armed strength of your bands? The roads by which they cross the mountains?"

"God forbid!"

"Nor will I tell to you the words of the Khan."

The singing girl wriggled with delight at the Georgian's chagrin. But the old warrior was a man of expedients.

"What would you?" he asked.

"Go to Tiflis."

"By the Horned One, no pagan spy shall go to our city!"

Hugh shook his tawny head quietly.

"No pagan spy. For ten years I have fought the paynim, under the standard of the Cross."

"*Hai!*" Shotha Kupri raised his shoulders and held out gnarled hands. "You come out of the East, with accursed Mongols at your back; you speak the tongue of the thrice-accursed Arabs. Shall we trust you?"

"And yet," mused the singing girl, glancing from the mighty crusader to the old chieftain, "his hair and eyes be unlike the Muslimin. Nay, his sword is a strange weapon."

"Proof!" demanded Shotha Kupri.

"Who are you, my Lord Hugh?" asked the Gypsy girl.

Hugh looked around at the circle of bearded faces that hemmed in the three, and seated himself, his sword across his knees. He told them the story of his wandering, to Jerusalem, and of his capture by the Horde.

Then he faced Shotha Kupri squarely.

"O *Khawand*, the message I bring is the choice between peace and war. I must go to Tiflis."

Hereupon the warriors began to argue among them-

selves in their harsh voices, and Rupen made no secret of his enmity, while Shotha Kupri seemed dubious, until the singing girl silenced them and answered swiftly and musically, so that Hugh wondered at the quietude that came upon them.

"We have never seen a Frank before," she assured him simply, and added eagerly: "Now I will let you tell me of the wars in all the world, and the lords of men, and how they bore themselves in battle, because it is clear to me that you have served long, as you say. And," she shook her dark head sagely, "you are both foolish and arrogant—and such men do not lie."

"The tale is not easy to believe," put in Shotha Kupri. "These men of Cathay are magicians. Perhaps they have altered one of their number to the semblance of a Christian."

Rupen thrust forward and uttered a curt word, and the old prince smote his thigh.

"True! In Tiflis there are Greeks who will know whether this man lies."

Hugh smiled a little.

"My Lord, have I not said that the Greeks are my sworn enemies?"

"Ha! It will not save you from the test. Come!"

But when Hugh left his hut the next morning he found Arslan squatting in the snow holding the reins of his charger in readiness for the road. The good-humored little Mongol had spent the remainder of the night with the wine cup among the Georgians.

"*Noyon*," he whispered, pretending to adjust a girth

buckle, "the Gypsy girl is ill pleased because you go to the city. She scolded all her men, and now she is gone again, taking a swift-footed pony from the herd. She has a whim."

And he shook his dark head soberly, while Hugh suffered the gray stallion to thrust its soft muzzle into his palm.

"Ay, *she* sniffs out secrets," Arslan added. "Her whim is to hear tales of war. Her name is Rusudan, and when she sings these Georgians come and stand guard over her. They are dogs, but they are her dogs."

Hugh peered through the mist and smiled.

"Shotha Kupri is a prince of this realm."

"So are the sheep herders and the tenders of cattle. They are all her slaves. You can sleep in the saddle beside Shotha Kupri, but watch for the coming of Rusudan, for that will be the hour of the commencement of happenings."

It was a strange country, this of the Caucasus. They rode that day, thirty Georgians and three envoys and Arslan, past Nakha in the forest, and by other villages perched on crags and girdled by rude stone walls. And the men and the dogs of these hamlets streamed down to stare at them and shout encouragement to the captors, defiance to the Mongols.

But when they reached the summit of the wind-swept pass, Hugh saw that the trail wound down to a broad valley. In the valley the sun gleamed again on the frozen Kur, and when they left the last of the timber behind them Shotha Kupri led them to two waiting sledges.

Four horses were harnessed to each, and two Geor-

gians sat astride the horses. And here Shotha Kupri bade them leave their own mounts and sit in the sledges. In this way faster time would be made, and the chargers would be spared. So said Shotha Kupri.

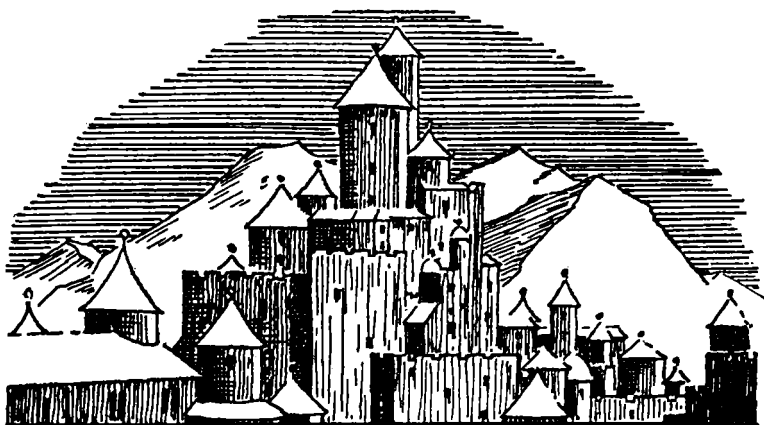
But Hugh noticed that he was to ride with the Georgian in the first sledge, Arslan perching behind on the runners. The horses, likewise, were to be taken from them. So he sought out the Khan of Almalyk and the other gaunt and silent Mongol, who had uttered never a word and had roused only at the prospect of a fight in the deodar grove.

"My brothers," he said in their own speech, choosing the words with care, "we go henceforth upon two *kibitkas* without wheels. I say to you: Draw not your weapons, lift not your hands against the Georgians. This is the *yassa*, the order."

"It is the order," nodded the Khan, but the other Mongol looked up the valley, so wide that the ranges on either hand seemed like low hills.

"*Kai!*" he grunted. "The road is wide; there is no barrier. The Horde will race up the valley like a wolf scenting a sick stag."

And, with the indifference of his race, he climbed into the sledge beside Rupen.



CHAPTER XIX

SNOW

SPEEDING over the gray valley, Sir Hugh pictured to himself an English countryside, and the longed-for sight of a Christian stronghold, with lord and liegemen, and white-skinned women, unveiled, giving zest to the night with their laughter or praise. Loneliness is like a fever, rising suddenly in the veins of a wanderer.

Not for two years had he heard the ring of a Frankish voice. His comrades lay, some in graves, some shattered and forgotten.

Wrapped in his wolfskins, Hugh smiled beside the silent Georgian. He himself, most like, was forgotten now by all save the Greek Emperor, who had hunted him out of the Holy Land. No wife or children or henchmen in Frankland would remember Hugh, who had sewn

the Cross on his shoulder when he was a lad in his 'teens.

The wooden runners squeaked over hard snow, and a bitter wind whipped the upfling of the horses' hoofs into his face. The long twilight had ended, and clouds banked low overhead. Shotha Kupri peered about him and grunted when they changed horses at a village. The wind was rising, and the blackness above seemed to press down on the gray ground.

"Snow," he muttered. "It will not be good, this night."

Nevertheless, he gave command to go forward, and the sledge circled down to the frozen bed of the river. Here they were a little sheltered, but even Arslan, who had the eyes of a wildcat, could not guess where the Road of the Warriors might lie. Dry flakes whirled down from the sky, and the manes of the horses whipped out to the left, while the riders turned up the collars of their *burkas* to shelter their faces.

Hugh's feet and hands grew chilled, and when he wrapped the furs more closely around him the warmth made him drowsy. His chin dropped on his chest and he slept.

How long, he did not know. When the sledge stopped in front of the lighted windows of a cabin, he roused and saw that the horses were being changed again. Bells jangled, and the Georgian couriers shouted, and before he could ask a question they started off into the wind. White domes that might have been haystacks flitted past, and then the veil of snow hid everything.

It seemed to the crusader that he had more room in the seat than before, and that the outriders were different men. Abruptly he turned and looked behind him.

Arslan was no longer perched on the runners. And the horses that galloped after the sledge bore armed warriors. Of the other vehicle and the Mongols there was no sign.

Hugh clapped a heavy hand on his companion's shoulder, and then, with an exclamation of surprise, peered into the face hidden under its fur hood. Even in the storm he was conscious of a faint scent of jasmine, and in a moment more he was certain that the eyes looking up into his belonged to Rusudan, the Gypsy.

The horses' manes and tails still tossed to the left, so they were still going forward—unless the wind had changed—and he did not think Shotha Kupri would have quitted the sledge unwilling.

"Where are my men?" he asked bluntly.

"*Ai*, your hand is heavy." Rusudan's slender shoulder moved under his fingers and released her. "Are they *my* men?"

Sudden anger rendered the crusader heedless.

"Stop and wait for them, or you will know pain."

The dark eyes under the hood searched his face in the murk of the storm.

"Is this the courtesy of a warrior of the Cross? Your men were kept at the last village. Rupen and his *abreks* have care of them."

Hugh stood up at once, casting off the fur lap robes, letting in the drift and the wind, and Rusudan, who seemed able to read his thoughts half-formed, mocked him.

"Go and seek in the snow! Neither road nor village

will you find. Am I to bring spies into Tiflis? Nay, the agreement was that you alone should come."

"If harm comes to them——" Hugh thought of Subotai and the Horde that was beginning to weary of eating and sleeping.

"You will be alone. Are you afraid? Fear is no friend in the Caucasus."

Hugh swore roundly under his breath, by good Saint George and the Archangel Michael.

"Then sit down," quoth Rusudan, pulling at the robes. "You are letting in the snow, and my men will think you are afraid."

Hugh resumed his seat and pulled the robe over the girl, who was shivering under the bite of the wind.

"Hath all the Caucasus," he asked grimly, "sworn fealty to Rusudan?"

"To Rusudan. Is not every Georgian a Gypsy at heart?"

"Even Shotha Kupri?"

"The *thawad* loves me. And Prince Rupen—both of them."

"And they also, who ride behind us?"

Rusudan gasped and then chuckled.

"O stupid lion of the Nazarenes—they also, all twenty." And she lifted her clear voice in a call, as a huntress might urge on the dog pack. At once a gruff shout came back to them against the wind. "O lion that sleeps and growls! Not Hugh but Gurgaslan the Tawny One should be thy name. Why did the Mongol chieftain choose you for envoy?"

"Because I can speak with the people of these mountains and the Greeks beyond, if there be need," said the crusader simply.

"Why do you always speak the truth?"

A gust that swooped down from ice gorges fifty miles away buffeted them and drove the dry snow into throats and sleeves, and touched their bodies with utter cold. Hugh knew that it was true that he could not find a village or even keep to the road if he left the sledge.

When he could draw a free breath again he laughed.

"Such is the law of Genghis Khan."

"Who is he?"

"The most terrible of emperors, who hath conquered half the world. Ay, the master of the Horde."

Rusudan found food for thought in this and asked an unexpected question:

"Is Genghis Khan with the Horde down in the lower valley?"

"Nay. Perhaps in Samarkand, or Ind, or Cathay—who knows?"

"But you are a knight of the Cross!"

"Ay."

"And what is the law of Christendom among the Franks? Do they also speak the truth always?"

"Not always, little Rusudan."

Hugh laughed again and explained as if to an inquisitive child the vows that must be taken by a youth of western Europe before he could wear the belt and the gold spurs. And Rusudan, throwing her wide sleeve before her eyes, bent closer to the crusader, trying to read his face in the whirling white drift.

"*Akh*," she made response, her mood changing as swiftly as the gusts of the storm, "to serve God in all things—that is good. And to render fealty to thy lord. But for the rest, to draw weapon for the weak in a quarrel or to utter only what is truth—one who did *that* would not live long here—" she swept her arm across the outer darkness.

And she added thoughtfully:

"A camel must choose his own gait, and a lion his own path."

Though the sledge lurched and creaked, and the horsemen went forward to search for the road they had lost, and all the devils of the storm screamed at them, Rusudan seemed pleased with events.

She sang under her breath in time with the jingling of the harness bells, until the ceaseless pelter of snow made her drowsy, and she cuddled back in the fur robes, leaving the crusader to his own thoughts.

And Hugh wondered how little else she had told him that was true, and why she had taken Shotha Kupri's place. Bending over her to adjust the robe about her, he was aware again of the flower-scent of jasmine, more delicate than musk. Under long lashes deep in the shadow of the hood, eyes both eager and curious searched his face.

Rusudan was as good as her word. Late the next afternoon, when the storm had drifted away over other ranges, they left the Road of the Warriors with its strings of long-haired camels, its bands of Circassians and wild Alans—all heading west and all truculent and

quarrelsome, until they heard Rusudan's voice—and turned away from the river into a grove of evergreens.

When the outriders dismounted, the singing girl left the sledge and motioned for Hugh to come with her.

Sword in hand, he walked beside her to a stone church hidden in the grove—a strange little church, for all it bore a cross carved above the arched entrance—with a round tower and only narrow embrasures for windows.

"Nay," said Rusudan, "we of the Caucasus follow Christ, as our fathers have done. See, the chapel is like to a guarded tower. Have we not defended our faith and our churches with the sword?"

Hugh looked up at the emblem chiseled in stone, worn with age and strange in form, and his eyes lighted.

"Surely this is the door of Christendom!"

"Ay, the gate. Come!"

Rusudan pushed open the iron-barred door and closed it after them. The gray light of the winter afternoon hardly penetrated the narrow openings, but under the vault of the tower a huge candle gleamed, and toward it the girl made her way, taking the crusader's hand to guide him.

The wall at the base of the tower was a pattern of tile and mosaic, brightened with holy pictures in their gilded frames. Rusudan paused beside a granite slab, and the knight, bending forward, saw that a helmet and shield and sword lay upon the stone. There was gold inlay on the steel casque, and the blade of the curved sword was clean and bright.

"I take care of them," Rusudan whispered. "I come

here more often than to the great Malaki by the palace. This is the tomb of George Lasha, my brother."

Hugh bent his head.

"May God give rest to him. In life he bore good weapons."

The girl tossed back the dark mane of her hair and smiled proudly.

"His foes knew his anger. Dear Christ, he was young, that he should be laid under the earth!"

Hugh understood vaguely that this girl of the mountains, who sang before the warriors and pried into secrets, could not be old. At times he thought her a child of sixteen, escaped from the embroidery frame and the teachings of a priest; and again he told himself she must be a woman of mature years.

"Upon the road, Hugh," she said gravely, "you did not trust my words. *Akh*, now you must talk with others. But to-night you will see my scarlet *kontash* and silver fillet. My brother was king of all the clans, scion of Karthlos, first among all the Georgians."

"He was king!" The crusader stepped back a pace, and his brow knit in thought. "And who now holds the throne?"

"Ivan—John the Constable is Protector. He is the leader of the army. I have no other brother, and I am too young to sit on the throne of Tiflis."

Many things came into Hugh's mind: the girl's escort that had made such a fierce stand when the Mongols appeared; the anxiety of Shotha Kupri; the respect that greeted her upon the road.

"They call me," went on Rusudan, who had an uncanny knack of guessing his thoughts, "a Gypsy, forsooth. Because I go to the hunts and like the saddle better than a carriage and—because of many things."

She sighed, as if there were many pleasant things that a sister of the king might not do.

"I was visiting Prince Shotha's family," she went on, "at his castle on the Kur, when a shepherd brought tidings of the Mongols and their great camp, and I begged old Shotha to let me go to the outer camp where some of his men watched the doings of your Horde. He would not consent, but I begged. At last he agreed, if I would not make it known in Tiflis. John the Constable is a harsh man, and he would not forgive old Shotha that I had been near peril. O good Saint Demetrius, Rupen and Shotha were wild when you came out of the forest!"

And she laughed so gleefully at the memory that Hugh laughed with her. In truth, he had come with scant ceremony before this child of a ruling family.

"*Akh!*" she cried, her mood changing. "Rupen has sworn he will challenge you to edged weapons and stretch you on the ground. It would be a sin to slay an envoy, and I told him that you were under my protection."

"If he seeks me," put in Hugh bluntly, "it is not my wish to claim protection. Tell him so."

Rusudan's small lips puckered.

"*Ei*, I do not want either of you killed. Men are like stupid old boars that tear one another and do not care what happens to all the rest."

"Princess," the crusader asked gravely, "why did you take Shotha Kupri's place in the sledge?"

"Why? The road was not safe for you. Shotha Kupri has feuds with other clans; even a robber would not lift hand against me."

"For thy favor I thank thee."

"And now tell me the message of the khan. I wish to know."

Hugh considered, frowning.

"I crave thy pardon, Princess Rusudan. I may not tell it save to the ruler of the Georgians, and he, by thy tale, is one John the Constable."

Rusudan's blue eyes flashed.

"O fool—thrice fool that thou art! Tall, bearded simpleton! At first thy bold bearing and great sword made me think thee a paladin, a wise and courteous lord—thy coming an omen——" She stopped abruptly, with a grimace. "Do you *still* think I am lying to you?"

"Saint George!" cried the knight with utter sincerity. "Not so!"

"Then," went on the girl quietly, "come to the audience this night and deliver thy message to Ivan."

Hugh sought for words, feeling as if he had plunged in full career against an array of mailed riders. Before he could speak, Rusudan had turned away from him and was kneeling before the candle, her hands clasped against her breast, her lips moving in prayer. From the wall strange saints looked down at her with expressionless eyes.

When she had finished the prayer, Rusudan drew the fur hood over her head and went to the door; nor did she again offer her hand to guide the crusader.

"I believed *thy* tale, when others did not," she said,

when he strode to her side. "Now I go to Tiflis. Wait, and one will come to guide you."

When he had opened the door and would have followed her out to the sledge, she motioned for him to remain in the chapel. The waiting Georgians closed around her and were lost to sight in the gray twilight among the firs.

Standing in the door, leaning on the broad hand guard of his sword Durandal, the crusader waited, until a spluttering torch came into view down another path and disclosed a single warrior leading toward him a white charger, ready saddled.



CHAPTER XX

THE MESSAGE

HUGH followed the man toward Tiflis. The torch made deeper the night mist, and his guide was silent as the chapel of the ikons wherein lay the body of the late king. They halted at a wall of gray stone until a postern door opened and bearded spearmen peered at them curiously; then they plunged into alleys where lights bobbed forth and disappeared, and the smells were of mastic and charcoal and steaming rice. Below them somewhere a river swirled and roared, and ice crackled.

The night was full of sound and half-seen shapes—a queer little priest with a full beard and rosy cheeks and a veil that fell from his sugar-loaf hat to his plump shoulders; a bold-eyed Jew clutching his *shuba* about him with one hand and dragging a laden donkey with the other.

All the men who thronged the narrow streets bore weapons, and all ceased talking to stare after the crusader with his heavy sword. Then they crowded past the stalls of merchants—Armenians selling embroidery beside hawk-nosed Moslems who sat among gleaming *yataghans*, and leather, tasseled shields.

And the snatches of talk that reached his ears seemed the very gossip of Babel, harsh Arabic mingling with plaintive Persian, and an oath compounded of all the saints in the Greek calendar. His guide turned aside from the alleys and plunged up into deeper mist. The tumult of the river and restless men subsided, and Hugh could hear distant church bells chiming slowly.

He saw that the road they ascended was hewn out of sheer rock and was full of turnings. He guessed it was the ramp of a castle, before they reached a stone gate and passed under the jaws of the lifted portcullis. In the half darkness of an outer courtyard the guide laid hand on the charger's rein.

Hugh listened to the steady tramp of men-at-arms along the parapet over his head, and he drew a long breath of satisfaction. After years of wandering he stood at last within the walls of Christian folk.

A young Georgian emerged from a door with a serving knave bearing a lanthorn, and the crusader was led through the halls of the donjon to a chamber where a fire glowed on the hearth and the Georgian esquire-at-arms brought him food and wine and a silver basin of water.

"The mighty lord," he said in barbaric Greek, "awaits you. Eat, therefore, and robe yourself."

Hugh satisfied a huge hunger, but change his apparel

he could not, lacking other garments than the ones he stood in, and the eyes of the Georgian widened when he rose in his worn steel hauberk and stained leather gambeson and wet leg-wrappings. Even the steel of the light helm he carried on his arm was dark with oil and weathering, and had more than one dent in it.

"Lead, youth," quoth Hugh, picking up the sword Durandal in its stained leather scabbard with his free hand, "to this mighty lord."

In the hall of the donjon a hundred pairs of eyes paid tribute to the fairness of Rusudan, child of the race of Karthlos, Keeper of the Gate.

Armenian elders, Georgian *thawads*, and Circassian and Avar chieftains from the higher ranges, and the many vassals of Ivan, whose family ruled the domain about Tiflis—all these were standing in the rushes of the lower hall. The upper end of the hall was raised, and covered with rich carpets. Oil lamps flared and smoked in their niches in the wall that was adorned to the rafters with weapons and heads of boar and stag.

The long table had been cleared of food, and the three men who sat in converse, glancing from time to time at the entrance, were sipping wine from silver goblets. The central figure was John the Constable, Protector of Georgia, who alone of the three wore mail.

Small of stature, he sat erect, seldom moving hand or head, and the weapon bearer behind him held a short black ax. Like the ax, the face of the constable was broad and unchanging. A daring man and obstinate.

"The envoy of the Khan!"

So cried the young squire, stepping into the hall. The uproar of talk died away to a murmur. At one end of the table an aged Katholicos in black robe and glittering cope set down his goblet of wine and stroked his beard.

Opposite the priest, Rusudan turned her head to look down the hall. Troubled and anxious she might be, but gave no outward sign of it as she sat, her high-backed chair raised a little above the others, her clasped hands hidden in long embroidered sleeves of whitest linen, a scarlet over-robe hanging from her thin shoulders, the mass of her brown hair penned by a silver fillet studded with square turquoise. Against her breast was the weight of a great emerald cut in the form of a shield. Silent she must be, for John's was the power, but in the admiring eyes of the assembled chieftains she was the child of their king and the seal of their loyalty.

At Hugh they stared angrily as he advanced to the steps of the upper hall and bent his head to John the Constable, who acknowledged the salute curtly.

An Italian at the left of the protector rose and greeted the crusader courteously.

"John of Georgia bids me welcome you to Tiflis, Sir Envoy."

Hugh saw that this was a Genoese, punctilious in finest linen and velvets, his dark curls oiled, his eyes shrewd—a man who would take much and give little.

"To John the Constable," said Hugh at once, "I bear greeting from Subotai Bahadur, marshal of Genghis Khan."

When the Italian, who was called Della Trevisani,

had translated this, Hugh was bidden to come to the table, where he stood facing the constable.

"It is passing strange," observed the Genoese, "that a Frankish knight should find service in the pagan Horde."

To this Hugh made no answer.

"And where," went on Trevisani, "is the warrant of your mission?"

Hugh touched the falcon tablet at his throat, and the constable looked at him curiously.

"The protector," Trevisani hastened to explain, "is pleased to say you have the bearing of a warrior—a noble who hath seen service in war."

The crusader inclined his head, and John the Constable spoke again.

"Where is the message of the Mongol?" the Genoese interpreted. "Is it written in Arabic?"

"It is not written. It was said to me."

"Ha! And what?"

Trevisani bent over the table eagerly, and the throng of chieftains, sensing happenings, crowded closer.

Hugh faced the Lord of Tiflis.

"Thus says Subotai Bahadur: 'Our horses are swift, our arrows sharp, and our hearts hard as yonder mountains. It is ours to command; the Georgians', to obey. Let them not molest us when we pass over the roads of their kingdom.'"

When he had done, Trevisani started, and hesitated before translating. When he had rendered the message in harsh Georgian, the swarthy face of John the Constable grew dark, and he snatched at the ax in the hand of his weapon bearer.

"Was that all?" the Genoese asked.

Hugh glanced at Rusudan who was sitting bolt upright, her cheeks the hue of the scarlet robe.

"Subotai pledges this," he answered quietly. "If the Georgians will swear a peace and keep it, the Mongols will do likewise."

"Has he written *that*?"

"He cannot write," Hugh explained, "nor can any of the Horde, except the captive, Rabban Simeon. But he will not violate his pledged word."

The Georgians had been muttering their rage, while John the Constable crashed the flat of his ax upon the table and set all the goblets to dancing. The patriarch raised a quivering hand and seemed to bless the tumult, while Rusudan twisted her fingers in her white sleeves, her eyes shining.

It was John the Constable who thrust back the unruly nobles and stepped to Hugh's side.

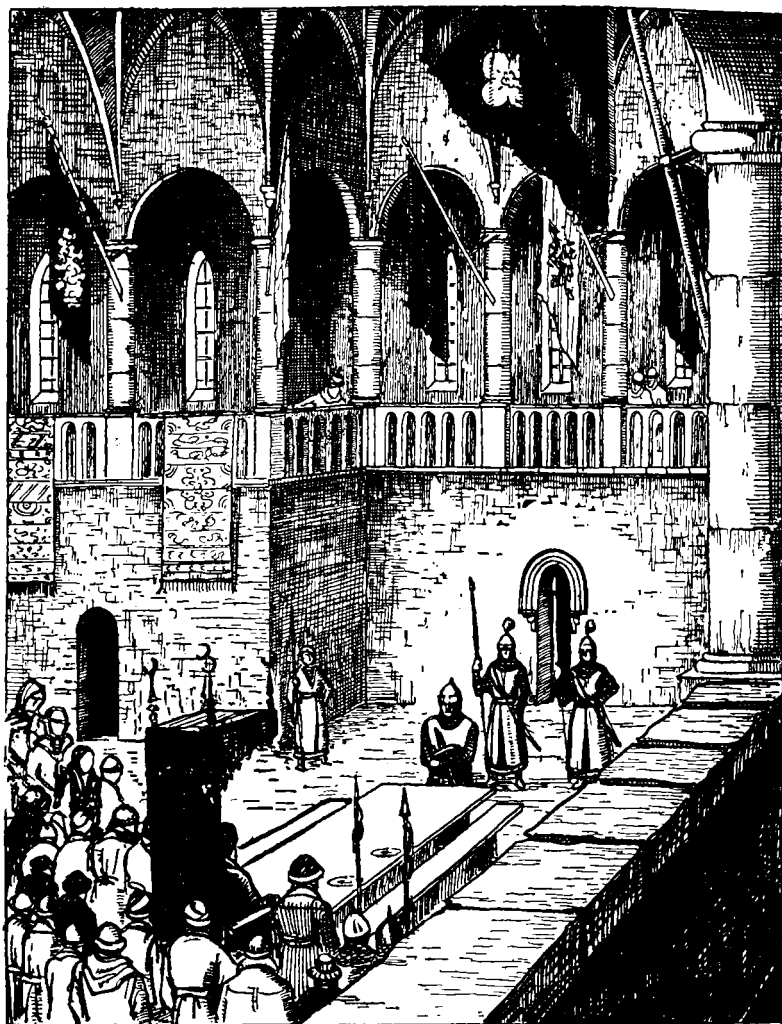
"Bold are you," the modulated voice of the Genoese translated the grim words, "to bear such defiance. Hearken, now, to the answer."

The tumult quieted while warriors and serving knaves alike held their breaths to listen. The constable signed to the third man at the table, and together they went to stand at Rusudan's chair and talk, low-voiced. Hugh uttered an exclamation when he looked more closely at John's companion.

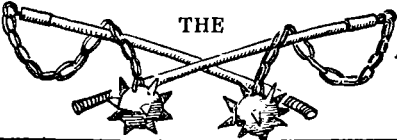
The Georgians around him nudged one another, and a bearded noble whispered to his neighbor:

"The ambassador of the Emperor."

The officer of the Emperor! Hugh had heard there



HUGH FACED THE LORD OF TIFLIS



were Greeks at Tiflis, and surely this was one of high rank. So much he knew by the man's white cloak edged with scarlet, by his leggings bound with gold cord, and the jeweled medals that gleamed on his chest. Rusudan spoke to the twain, but her glance went over the throng and rested on Hugh defiantly.

She lifted her head and cried one word, and the hall rang with the approval of her chieftains. Fifty swords were snatched forth and raised overhead, and the warders at the door, taking heart from the sight, began to clash their axes against their shields. Rusudan stood up, and the Georgians cried her name until she stretched out her hands to them, tears in her eyes.

"Thus," observed Della Trevisani at Hugh's ear, "is the pagan Khan answered. You will perceive, my Frank, that it means war."

Rusudan summoned her women and swept from the hall, and at every step the warriors cheered her. Though Hugh watched the girl's every motion, she ignored his presence, and shrewd Trevisani saw the knight's lips tighten.

"Ha, my Frank, a firebrand, that royal child. The constable makes the decision, but it is for Rusudan that these mountaineers would willingly be hewn in pieces—or boiled and salted down, for that matter."

Meanwhile the constable approached the envoy.

"No need of delay," he said curtly. "If the Mongol ventures into the mountains he will be driven out by our swords."

Hugh lifted his hand.

"My lord," he responded slowly, "God give you for-

tune of your choice. You have spoken bravely—and heedlessly.”

“Rusudan hath spoken, and the nobles have echoed her choice. Messer Frank, you will bear our answer hence on the morrow.”

“Lord Prince,” he said bluntly, “men say you are wise in battle. The Horde is not like other foes. Is the answer yours—or a young girl’s, echoed by her henchmen?”

The broad chin of John the Constable thrust out and his powerful hands gripped the ax.

“By the tomb of Tamar—it is mine! What would you, Frank?”

“This! I have seen the host of the Moslems melt away before the onset of the Horde. Take thought, my lord Constable, for your villages and the lives that are in your charge.”

“Now, by all the saints!” John the Constable laughed harshly. “Doth a warrior cry truce?”

“Ay, so.” Hugh folded his long arms on the hand-guard of Durandal and looked into the faces that pressed close to him—like his own, bearded and scarred and weather-worn. “Messers, many days have I spent in the Horde. And I know there is a mighty power in the Mongol onset. They reck not of death, nor do they yield them captive. They seek no war with ye, but mean to find a way through the mountains. I say to ye, wait—for two days or three—and do not answer out of hand.”

When this was interpreted by the Genoese, the men murmured anew.

“Truce with pagans is not to be thought upon!”

“A renegade! Look that he play not the part of a spy.”

"'Tis said he was a warrior of the Cross. He bears no sign upon him—no device upon shield or shoulder."

But the regent of Georgia smote the flat of his battle-ax against the table.

"Ho, in three days shall the Khan be answered fittingly! And you, Sir Conscience Keeper, will know our mind."

In a corner tower of the donjon Trevisani and the Greek ambassador burned low their candles, sitting late over a board of chess.

The eyes of the Genoese played restlessly over the miniature warriors of ivory and ebony, wandered to the curtains of the door, to the flickering candles, and swept ever and anon over the dark and lean countenance of Choaspes the *strategos*, the general of the eternal Emperor. Choaspes was *strategos* of the Caucasus region, the eastern frontier of the Greek Empire. And the edge of his white silk cloak was dyed so deep a scarlet that it looked more like the imperial and forbidden purple.

"Your high Excellency," observed Trevisani, pushing forward one of the tiny horsemen that were the pawns, "is listless this night."

"By the wreath and the belly of Bacchus," murmured the Greek, "I am colder than a Hyrcanian tiger, if ever there were such a beast."

He drew a sable wrap over his shapely shoulders and cursed the brazier that gave out, as he truthfully said, more smoke than smell, and more smell than heat.

"To think, Messer Antonio, that my galley is laid up at the Golden Chersonese, with fat Philipo killing flies

and drinking my best Cyprian, his only worry the price of slave girls at Tanais and the vagaries of the dice box. He always was unlucky, but now he hath all the best of it."

Choaspes had the full throat, the curling lips, and the level eyes of a Greek, but the ruddy color under his swarthy skin bespoke Persian blood. He was rather proud of his slender hands, which were adorned with rings of matched opals.

"The Chersonese," he sighed, "would be gay just now with the New Year's feasts, and I hear the Emperor is there to take the mud baths."

"The health of his eternal Magnificence is not of the best?"

"By Hercules, no!"

"Ah, but is not your Excellency's illustrious family the Comneni, who are the bulwark of elder Rome and the empire itself in Asia? If a successor to Theodore Lascaris—may he live for ten thousand years!—is to be chosen——"

"It will be in the Chersonese, my dear Messer Antonio, where no doubt the very knowing princes are this minute—" he smiled at the merchant—"attending the sick man. A bulwark, Messer Antonio—and I felicitate you upon the apt simile—is never crowned."

"And still, your Excellency will reflect that a bulwark is venerated when it stems a flood."

"Of course. Theodore Lascaris sits on the throne of the Cæsars because he cut to pieces an army of Seljuk Turks two years ago."

Antonio della Trevisani surveyed the slumbering servants and smiled.

"At Antioch? I seem to remember that some hundreds of Frankish crusaders won that victory for the eternal Emperor. None of them lived to tell of it."

Choaspes's glittering hand moved over the board and shifted his king from an ebony to an ivory square, safe from the attack of the Genoese' bishop.

"*Ehu!* One lived, but not to tell of it. We sought him and hunted, and a Syrian traced him as far as Jerusalem. There was a price of one thousand *bezants* on his head, but even the Jews never unearthed him."

"Why the price on his head?" Trevisani was interested.

Choaspes fingered the goblet at his elbow and sipped a little wine.

"Eh, we are exiles here among the *barbaros*, you and I, Messer Antonio. Boon companions, you might say. Still, though two years have passed—" he smiled—"let us say that his most compassionate Majesty desired to reward this solitary Frank fittingly, this young Norman, who was, as I remember, most wayward and daring as an offspring of Mars and Diana—assuming that Diana ever had offspring."

"A thousand *bezants*," quoth Messer Antonio, fingering his lip, and not perceiving that the Greek had led the talk skillfully from his own political ambitions and the possible death of the Emperor. "A goodly sum——"

"That was never paid."

"A foolhardy youth. Well, the Frank who has found

sanctuary in the Mongol Horde is quite the opposite—stoic and cautious.”

“Too stupid to lie and too stubborn to keep silence. The other ventured rashly against the Seljuks with his eight hundred barbarians, whereby all but he, the leader, left their bodies on the field.”

Choaspes knew well enough that the eight hundred crusaders had died because Theodore Lascaris, the Greek Emperor, had sacrificed them; but he did not intend to admit as much to the merchant.

“A bold man is usually honest,” commented the Genoese, who was a judge of character, as all money-lenders must be. “What does your Excellency think of his warning?”

“Ask the Sibyl—ask the astrologers. These Georgian mountaineers are barbarians; the Mongols, savages.”

“And horsemen. Is it not true that cavalry cannot maneuver in mountain passes?”

“True, Messer Antonio.” Choaspes laughed and sipped again of his wine. “At least, if I am denied the solace of the Golden Chersonese, I shall be amused by the coming battle.”

Trevisani breathed an inaudible sigh of relief. Though the *strategos* was an exquisite, a fop in dress, a cynic in philosophy, he understood thoroughly the waging of war.

“Your Excellency,” ventured Trevisani, “must appreciate the urgent necessity of keeping the Mongols out of—the Empire.”

“I do. The gods have arranged the matter beautifully. *Ehu*, the fire-eating Georgians will destroy the man-eating Mongols.”

It was the duty of the *strategos* to watch the passes of the Caucasus and to keep his finger on the pulse of the Georgians. The day was long since past when the legions of Pompey and Justinian had made their camps in the shadow of the mountain girdle of Tiflis.

"Our interests lie together in this," murmured the merchant. "John the Constable must not make truce with the invaders."

The *strategos* raised his eyes.

"Our interest?"

"You promised him the aid of the Empire," observed Trevisani. "How?"

The *strategos* bent over the chessmen. He had no armed strength with him at Tiflis, and little at Trebizond, the nearest Greek port. In various wars the Georgians had served under the standards of the Empire, loyally, because the Holy City of Constantinople was still the Mecca of their faith. Nevertheless, Georgia was a kingdom and jealous of its liberty.

"Ask, in the Chersonese," he said slowly, and Trevisani sank back in his chair. It was not well to inquire too closely into the secrets of the Emperor.

"And yet," resumed the *strategos*, "here in the Caucasus a child has done my work for me. The chit Rusudan has fired the blood of these mountaineers. She is old enough to delight in the love of men, and too young to dread the sting of wounds."

Trevisani glanced at his companion shrewdly.

"Eh, a tearing little beauty! Her eyes have not missed you."

"But they, my good *Comptor*, are not yet the eyes of a woman. And she is a mere bundle of whims and—affection. She hugs the flea-ridden hunting dogs and sheds tears with the Gypsy wenches."

"And still, she is beautiful—" Trevisani wagged his long head knowingly—"as shining gold."

"A poor simile. Say, rather, pallid, edged steel that wounds when you grasp it."

"Eh—eh!" Trevisani filled his goblet and stood up. "I yield the game to your Excellency. My king is lost. Let us empty a cup—to success."

"To victory," smiled the *strategos*, "for—the Emperor."

He thrust back his chair and reached for the flagon of wine. Even as he did so, a gust of icy air entered the embrasure, and the candles flickered, dying to pinpoints under the blast. Silver crashed and tinkled on the chess-board, and when the candles flared up again the two men saw the flagon on its side and red wine flooding the miniature battlefield.

"A fair portent!" cried the merchant. "Here is blood among the pawns."

But Choaspes, drawing clear his cloak from the dripping wine, shivered a little.

"These accursed winds!"

Trevisani, taking up a candle, withdrew; and no sooner had the merchant reached his own chamber than he felt in the wallet at his girdle and drew forth a roll of thin parchment no larger than his finger. Over this he bent eagerly, tracing out the delicate Syriac writing.

To the merchant Antonio at Tiflis, greeting. Know, most generous patron, that I, Rabban Simeon, have met with the man you were seeking in the Eastern caravan roads. Know that he is without doubt the Frank whose death is desired by the eternal Emperor. He is to be recognized by his yellow hair, his gray eyes, and the straight sword he bears. The search was long; the reward to be bestowed by your generosity is certain. I send this by the hand of Daim, the Circassian horse dealer, who has been promised ten dinars.

This missive had reached the worthy Della Trevisani at the last harvest time. Since then he had heard no more from the Syrian physician, who had been seeking patiently for news of the wandering crusader.

"One thousand pieces of gold," the Genoese murmured. "And now this Frank hath come to Tiflis. But the proof of his death must be sure. Either his head—or he must be taken to the Emperor a captive."

And Messer Antonio fell to musing. It was not a simple matter to cut the head from the stalwart shoulders of this Frank who was, besides, serving as ambassador of the Khan. Messer Antonio did not wish to see Sir Hugh return to the camp of the Mongols. He decided to tempt the crusader to journey with him to Trebizond, and to take ship for the Chersonese. Once on shipboard he could be disarmed and chained and so brought to the Emperor.

"Though time presses," he reflected, "if the Emperor lies ill."

He rolled up the parchment and sought his couch, well content. He was even more pleased two days later, when

a rumor in the town assured him of the constable's final answer to the Khan. It had been sent down the valley, this answer, in a basket. And the basket held the severed heads of the two Mongol envoys who had been detained outside Tiflis. Messer Antonio now saw his way clear to claim the thousand pieces of gold.



CHAPTER XXI

THE WIT OF MESSER ANTONIO

RUSUDAN was restless, and this morning her maids exasperated her until she dismissed them all and snatched up an ermine coat, a green silk kerchief, and a pair of shapely morocco boots. The kerchief she bound around her head, knotting it loosely over one ear, and the boots she slipped on with the ease of long practise. Though there was a mirror of polished bronze near the door of her chamber, she did not pause to glance into it. But Rusudan looked bewitching, and this was because she was excited. Her eyes grew deeper and wider, and a half-smile of anticipation touched her lips. The silver heels of her boots clinked merrily on the flagstones of the outer hall.

Rupen of Kag, who had come to Tiflis that morning, was waiting to greet her, and with him she talked earnestly for half the turning of the sand glass in the ante-chamber.

"Send Messer Antonio to me," she demanded. "Nay, go and seek him and bid him come to me upon the wall."

Having rid herself of the Prince of Kag, she went more slowly to the balcony overlooking the great hall, and thence by a dark flight of steps to a certain stretch of the parapet between the two gate towers of the donjon. Here, from the courtyard below, she had often seen the Frank standing.

The door of his chamber opened out upon this part of the wall. And Rusudan, seeing no one here, glanced beyond the wall, down the valley.

It was a clear morning, and every detail stood out against the snow—the gray dome of the great Malaki church beside the castle, the deep gorge to the left where the icebound Kur wrestled and tore itself free over the rapids by the lower town. And the twisted streets, sprinkled with red roofs, with ancient stone walls and the bell towers of chapels—all far beneath the castle wall.

Tiflis was in truth the Gate of the Caucasus, and the castle was the key of the gate. To the right rose a cliff of brown limestone, and across the gorge of the Kur its very twin, a thousand-foot ridge that was dwarfed by the more distant forested slopes rising into the clouds. And above the clouds Rusudan could see the summits of the loftier ranges.

Here, at the castle, the valley narrowed to a gut. Below, it widened steadily, until the Kur appeared to be no more than an inanimate gray serpent stretched in the snow.

To Rusudan the sight was as familiar and as beloved as the icy wind blasts that flushed her cheeks and

tore at the mass of her dark hair under the kerchief. Before the door of the Frank's chamber she hesitated a moment, and mocked ceremony by knocking upon it vigorously.

The door opened, revealing the crusader, his sheathed sword in his left hand.

"*Ai*," cried Rusudan, "do you always bear a weapon?" And then she made shift to speak in the *lingua franca* that she had picked up from the Greeks. "Sir Hugh, I greet you well. It is time for you to go upon the snow road."

"Is the constable ready to reply?"

"Yesterday he sent his answer." Anxiety darkened the blue eyes of the girl, and she motioned the knight to come closer. "It is over—finished. Now you are free to go on to the sea, and the ports of Frankistan. You must go—now!"

Hugh shook his head gravely.

"Nay, Princess Rusudan, I shall bear the answer of your lords to the Mongols."

"But the—answer is sent, down the valley." She stamped upon the hard-packed snow impatiently. "Oh, you are very stupid, Sir Hugh of Taranto. Messer Antonio told me your name. He is ready to depart for Trebizond with a caravan of linen cloth and ivory. He promised he would take you."

She turned to greet the merchant, who had drawn near and stood waiting to be summoned.

"What message did John the Constable send?" Hugh asked bluntly, and the Georgian lifted her head proudly and not a little defiantly.

"War—without truce or any mercy!"

The crusader nodded.

"My horse has been brought into the castle. Now I must ask your leave to depart to the Horde."

Rusudan's expressive eyes looked a volume of questions.

"But why? The caravan would take you, Sir Frank, to your folk. You have been seeking a way out of the pagan land. Why would you ride back?"

And Messer Antonio, whose lean brown face betrayed nothing at all, glanced at the crusader sharply.

"Because, my lady, it was the order of Subotai Bahadur that I should return to the Horde."

"And do you, a knight of the Cross, obey the commands of a pagan lord?"

"He released me from the Horde, bidding me come back. That shall I do, taking with me the Mongols who await me in the lower valley."

Rusudan and the merchant were silent, and presently the girl went to the parapet and stood looking down upon a swarm of sparrows that clamored around the niches in the gray stone.

"Is it your wish to leave Tiflis?"

And Hugh made answer gravely.

"Ay, so."

Rusudan whirled around and faced him angrily.

"Know, then, that your pagan comrades have been sent to their Khan. But I will not suffer you to leave Tiflis—nay, though it is an ill place, and bleak and barren, and its people barbarians."

And, having spoken, she was gone into the stair en-

trance, leaving the crusader astonished and the merchant thoughtful. In no more than a moment Messer Antonio altered his plans and approached his companion pleasantly.

"The wine, you say, is excellent, Sir Hugh, and—the moods of a young girl past understanding. In another hour her Highness will be of another mind. Meanwhile—" his keen eye followed the figures of a group of warriors down the ramp—"let us to a tavern to sup and talk."

Now, as they threaded the alleys that led to the tavern at the river's side, the thoughts of both men were on Rusudan. Antonio della Trevisani reflected that Rusudan was no longer a child; she did unexpected and unlooked-for things. The Genoese was a keen observer, and he felt sure that Rusudan, who had formerly paid John the Constable the careless reverence of a young animal, now watched him and the *strategos* with puzzled eyes.

"Eh," he said to himself, "our maid is growing up. She has wild blood in her, and it angers her now that others should give orders to her people."

Rusudan smiled upon Choaspes often and led him to talk of the imperial court and the Golden Chersonese. But the shrewd Genoese did not think she had any love for the *strategos*.

"The maid learns to dissemble," he meditated. "By the saints, that is nothing strange in a woman, but in a barbarian Georgian it is a miracle."

And it seemed to Messer Antonio that Rusudan, who had just now stormed at the Frank, had bidden him first to go from her presence and then to stay, was fond of the

tall stranger. Messer Antonio glanced up covertly at the dark profile of the crusader, framed in its tangle of yellow curls, at the clear gray eyes and firm-set lips.

"Eh," he whispered under his breath, "either he is a very clever spy or he is telling the truth. And he is not clever, because he does not see that Rusudan makes much of him. Hmm."

The crusader, Messer Antonio decided, would carry out a purpose doggedly, would not be swerved from his determination to go back to the pagans. And this was as unexpected as it was unwelcome to Messer Antonio.

So the Genoese quickened his steps, following with his eyes the tall figure of Rupen of Kag who was bound, no doubt, for his favorite tavern kept by a Bokharian near the street of the leather workers, where the din of the Kur drowned the curses and clatter of all too frequent broils. And Messer Antonio smiled, preparing to play a delightful little game, in which there was no slightest risk to himself and an almost sure profit in sight.

Striding beside him, Hugh hummed, deep-throated, a snatch he had heard Rusudan sing:

*"'Arg my falcon is quick to see
Quest and quarry, and swift to go
Beyond the clouds, and back to me—
Does he love me or not?
How do I know?"*

In the mind of the crusader was a warm delight. It was pleasant in this mountain hamlet; the gay surcoats and colored boots of the people struck his fancy. He

stared at one of the jolly little priests in sugar-loaf hats and smiled at a ragged girl who was carrying a gilded candle toward the great church of the Malaki. And Rusudan——

He would be well content to abide in Tiflis for a few days. It would not be so pleasant riding back alone, as with that wayward Gypsy Rusudan, even in a storm.

“*Arg my falcon is quick to see——*”

“Come!” Trevisani stooped under the lintel of a clay hut with horn windows, deep in the shadow of the hill. And the merchant shivered as if the breath of the river ice had touched him.

A score of hillmen and Circassians sat on the cushions by the stove against the wall, and no one made way for the twain from the castle. Rupen of Kag paused in the act of casting off his heavy *burka* and eyed them insolently. Then he threw himself into a chair at the head of the one table, and the men who sat by him greeted him volubly.

But there was silence when Trevisani and Hugh took the two empty chairs beside Rupen, who ordered a great beaker of Shiraz wine from the tavern keeper and lifted it with a stentorian “Hail!”

The Circassians began to whisper among themselves, and an Armenian lad who had been tuning a guitar laid it across his knees and stared at the men around the table. Rupen emptied his beaker, drew his sleeve across his mustache and looked both angry and ill at ease.

“My lord,” Trevisani whispered to him, “this is scant

courtesy. My companion the Frank is a belted knight, and mighty are his deeds. 'Tis said no man can stand against him with the sword."

"Hide of the devil! What is it to me?"

"True," nodded the Genoese. "He hath the immunity of his mission. Still, his message was insolent."

"*Tfu!* It was answered in the right way." Rupen surveyed the unconscious crusader with grudging admiration. "Well, his courage is proof."

He emptied his second beaker with a grunt of satisfaction.

"May we meet when the weapons are at play."

"By the blessed body of San Marco, what a pity it is that this Frank should be set free to aid the pagans!"

Rupen ran a calloused hand through the bristle of his hair.

"True, a pity!"

"Better to slay him with the others. Then the pagans would know beyond peradventure that the men of the Caucasus have no fear of them."

"That is so, Messer Antonio. And yet the order of the constable—" Rupen slapped his broad belt—"bade me cut off the heads of the two in my charge and send them down the valley. Thus it was done. About this Frank nothing was said in the order."

"Is it certain?" Trevisani's eyes were fixed on the big mountaineer's belt. "There may have been something said."

"Nay, by Tamar! And yet a priest read it to me."

"So? He may have mistaken a word."

"A-ah!" Rupen pulled forth a scrap of soiled parch-

ment and wrinkled his brow over it, though he could decipher not a word. "Here is the order sent by the constable."

He watched eagerly while the merchant glanced over the missive.

"True," murmured Trevisani. "The priest read aright. Surely the constable meant to deal with this traitor in his own way. And yet——"

"What?"

"The Frank is a *mhendruli*—a sword bearer of prowess—and Rusudan hath befriended him. Who would dare lift hand against him?"

"By the graves of Ani—I dare!"

The thin lips of the merchant puckered; he fingered the slip of parchment and eyed Hugh covertly as the crusader quaffed spiced wine with relish.

"Your companion envoys, my Lord Frank, were well entreated by Prince Rupen. *He* sent them back to the Horde."

"Ay, so," Hugh assented.

"He sent their heads in a basket strapped to a donkey's back."

And quietly Hugh set down his bowl of wine.

"They were slain?"

"Here is proof!" Messer Antonio held out the parchment as if it might be a shield to protect him against the grief and anger that smoldered in Hugh's eyes.

"The Khan of Almalyk," the crusader whispered, "lord of fifty thousand swords, and the other that bore a tiger tablet."

"The third—the servant—escaped."

Hugh turned the bowl slowly in his powerful hands. Arslan had fled. He would have stolen a horse from the herd and have gone to the Horde without pause for rest or food—he, the dispatch rider who had carried the post from Kambalu. Ere yesterday he would have reached Subotai's *yurta* with the news. Hugh had been powerless to prevent the slaying of the envoys, but Arslan could not know that.

"It was easily done," smiled Trevisani. "They knelt to the sword with empty hands; nor did they defend their lives."

"By the Cross!" Hugh remembered the order he had given the Mongols, fearing a brawl between them and the Georgians. With two dead, and the manner of their death told to the Horde, his mission was at an end. And there was no slightest doubt that Subotai would require his life as retribution.

Nor could he go now in any case beyond Tiflis to the sea, whither Rusudan—for an instant he wondered whether the princess had known of the slaying of the envoys, and had wished to send him away where safety lay. But no, the girl was heedless. It had been a whim.

Then he looked around the table and was aware that the warriors were staring at him, and Rupen sneering. His lips tightened and his brow cleared. His mission ended, an end there would be also of words. One blow he could strike to justify himself.

Thrusting back his chair, he drew a steel gauntlet from his belt and threw it at the feet of the Prince of Kag. His hand closed on Trevisani's shoulder, and the merchant winced.

"Say to this lord," Hugh bade him, "that he may have my head also—if he lives. Say that I will meet him within the lists afoot or horsed, with whatever weapon he chooses and upon whatever day. Upon his body will I requite a foul wrong and an unknighly deed."

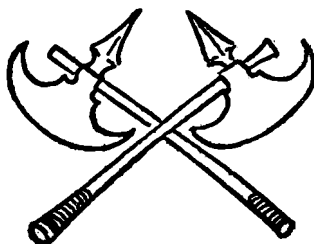
"God's wounds!" roared the Georgian. "What care I for lists and barriers? Let him look to himself, the dog!"

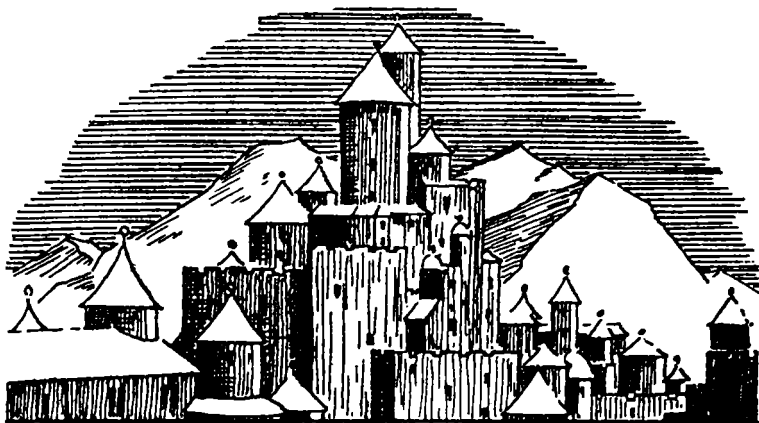
His right hand whipped free the heavy *yataghan*, and his left hand gripped the table's edge. A heave and thrust, and the table went over, bearing with it a pair of hillmen who were tardy in getting out of the way.

"Stay!" cried Trevisani, dancing with anxiety, and with one eye on the crusader's great broadsword. "Challenge the Frank with axes."

"Now!" Rupen cried, heeding the advice. "Only let it be now, with axes and shields. Look—the ground is level and the snow is hard."

"Ay, so," said Hugh.





CHAPTER XXII

BLOOD IN THE SNOW

MESSER ANTONIO, who had seen Rupen wield an ax in the lists before now, was filled with satisfaction. He had little doubt of the outcome, in spite of the crusader's strength, because he knew that the handling of the heavy battle-axes—short in the shaft and broad in the edge—was a different affair altogether than swordplay, and Hugh was a swordsman.

With the ax there was no parrying. Nor would the chain mail in which each warrior stood be proof against a full blow of the tempered axes.

Eager hands had brought two stout shields of polished steel from the street of the weapon makers.

Messer Antonio shivered under his velvet coat as he stepped out of the tavern door. No priest had been sum-

moned to shrive the adversaries, or any herald to order the fight. It would be swift and terrible, that was sure.

But even in these few moments the tidings had spread from alley to wineshop, and a throng of *abreks*—mountain peasants—tramped through the snow to the cleared space by the river. They stood in a hollow square, the mist of their breathing rising into the air. From the river came the sound of ice grinding and churning in the rapids below them.

"This Frank," muttered a bearded noble from one of the northern passes, "is not as others. There is power in him."

"How power?" asked a blacksmith who had pushed into the front rank and stood arms on hips, his heavy shoulders covered with a bearskin.

"Strength to wield this sword," explained the *aznaur* grimly. He had been given the mighty blade of Durandal in its leather sheath to hold, and he had been weighing it with amazement. "Take it in thy hand."

"No, by the Cross of Ani! 'Tis said the sword hath a spell upon it, and certain it is that the blade was not made in these days. Well for the Lord of Kag that he does not face such a weapon. Look, he knows what he is about—treading the snow to test its firmness."

The Georgian had examined his shield, which was triangular in shape and very little bowed. He settled the steel cap firmly over the mesh of his mail hood, so that the nasal and cheek pieces came well down. He glanced up at the sun and slipped the leather loop of his ax shaft around his wrist.

Hugh stood quietly at the other side of the square. All at once he lifted his shield.

"Because I am an envoy to this court," he said, "blame might come to the Lord of Kag if I should fall. Hear me! I hold him blameless, for I was the challenger."

"You will fall," growled Rupen.

"As God wills," cried Trevisani. "Begin, messers."

A deep sigh that was half a shout ran through the spectators as Rupen of Kag paced forward quickly. He took short steps, planting his feet firmly. His shield was raised and tilted in front of his chest.

Twice Rupen struck Hugh's shield—clashing blows that dented the steel. He edged forward and lashed out at Hugh's head, only to check the sweep of the ax in mid-air, for the crusader had stepped back swiftly. To miss a blow with the ax was to invite a return cut that might lay him on the ground.

"See!" The smith nudged the bearded hillman. "The Frank gives back."

But the warrior was too interested to answer. Hugh had begun to attack, and the strident clang of steel echoed in the river gorge. Always Rupen met the ax-edge with his shield, turning the face of it slightly, so that the crusader's weapon never met it fairly. Once, as they passed through deep shadow, the smith saw sparks leap, and he swore softly.

Steam was rising from the mailed forms of the two men; they shook the sweat from their eyes when there was an instant's pause in the play of the axes. And always Rupen invited Hugh to attack.

And a murmur swelled in the throng, a murmur that rose to a hoarse shout.

"Such blows were never seen!" roared the bearded Georgian, without taking his eyes from the axes that flashed now without cessation in the sunlight. Ha——"

A corner of Rupen's shield had cracked, and at the next blow it flew off. But the crusader's shield was badly dented, and the arm that held it was growing numb from the sledge-like impacts.

And now the Georgian pressed the attack with the utmost of his strength. Only once had the crusader's weapon met his shield fairly, but the shock of that blow had cracked the steel, and Rupen feared that another such blow would break the bones in his arm.

He had meant to tire his enemy and then smash in his guard. Now it seemed to him that the crusader would never tire. And never had Rupen faced a man who could strike such a blow. The muscles of his left shoulder were strained, and his whole side ached. If his shield were split it would be the end.

Both men were panting; they leaped forward and staggered back, and the *clash-clang* of the axes grew more deafening.

"Ha!" gasped the Georgian. "For Rusudan!"

He sprang against the crusader, shield meeting shield. He shortened his grasp on the ax and cut savagely at his foe's head. The edge of the ax dented the steel cap, and blood flowed down over Hugh's temple.

Again Rupen repeated the maneuver, and as Hugh gave back, the Georgian's ax flashed down under shield and armpit. The edge smote the steel links over Hugh's

heart, driving them through the leather jacket and into the flesh. A bone cracked.

Rupen shouted hoarsely. He was weary; his veins seemed afire, and his knees quivered. But he saw the crusader's face turn white under the blood when his ax smote the dented shield. Movement was agony to Hugh, and the shock of the blows made his head swim. His ears rang, and it seemed to him that the trampled snow had turned the hue of blood.

Still he did not cry out or groan. He was able to hold up the battered shield. The two men circled, the din of the axes unceasing, blood spattering from their limbs.

"A moment more," the smith whispered under his breath. "No more than a moment."

He had seen the crusader's ax glance against Rupen's right arm, and the steel chain mail break asunder.

Rupen's bare arm flashed down and up—up and down. His eyes glared into the set face of the crusader. And it seemed to Rupen as if the gray eyes bored into his brain like points of steel. Since the first blow they had not swerved, nor did they change expression, save that—and Rupen growled, though the pulse was hammering in his throat—now the crusader's lips smiled.

For the end was at hand, as the smith had said, for one or the other.

Sheer fury gripped the powerful Georgian. He sprang forward, his right arm quivering over his head. Midway in his leap he was stopped, his ears ringing with the impact of tortured steel. For the second time the crusader's ax had struck squarely on the Georgian's shield.

Though he felt no hurt, Rupen groaned, staggering

back. He, the axman, the skilled fighter, knew that now there was no hope for him. The blow on the shield had numbed his left arm from fingers to shoulder, and he could no longer raise his shield.

Back he staggered, making no outcry save the hoarse groaning that welled out of his throat. He saw the crusader leap toward him, and he made an effort to parry with his ax the shining steel that swept down.

Rupen was struck where the throat meets the shoulder and, though the mesh of his Turkish mail held together, the bones of his shoulder were crushed in, the sinews torn apart. He was dashed to the ground, and lay motionless.

From the silent spectators Trevisani emerged and bent over the figure outstretched in the crimson snow.

"Eh," he muttered, "if he lives he will never take weapon in hand again."

Hugh cast away his ax and stepped toward his fallen adversary. Then his knees bent and he went down with a clash of steel, and lay with his hand pressed to his side.

The Georgians thronged around the two champions in silence. They had seen a duel with axes that would live always in their memory, a duel whose story would be told again in after years throughout the Caucasus.

Shotha Kupri, making his way through the almost deserted street of the silversmiths, was hailed by a thin figure that hastened through the trampled mud.

"Messer Antonio," he growled, "what is this?"

"Madness!" cried the Genoese. "San Marco be my aid! The Frank hath slain Rupen in a duel with axes and lies close to purgatory himself. But he is mad; he is be-

side himself. He asks to be put in a horse litter and sent down the valley——”

“With axes!” Shotha Kupri’s shaggy brows lifted incredulously.

“As God lives. Hasten, good my lord, hurry your steps. The *abreks* think he is dying, and besides, they are minded to humor him because he wielded his weapon like a devil. But he must not pass down the valley. He has seen too much in Tiflis.”

“Humph!”

Shotha Kupri wasted no breath in words, lengthening his stride until he pushed through the multitude by the river and came upon a sight that would have turned a weaker stomach.

At once he ordered Rupen to be borne to the castle on his own *burka*. Then, after a glance at Hugh’s face, he knelt down and felt the crusader’s side, nodding grimly when the wounded man gritted his teeth.

“My horse,” whispered Hugh.

“Nay. Three days of riding in this case and you will greet the angels.”

The shadow of a smile passed over the knight’s wan features.

“Better to go now than be found here by the Horde. My Lord of Nakha, I must go upon the road.”

Shotha Kupri shook his head and gave an order to several of the warriors, who brought forward a stout cloak and lifted Hugh upon it.

“Cold binds the lower valley,” said the *thawad* bluntly. “And you, my lord, will not sit a saddle until your bones knit.”

He signed to the warriors, who started off toward the castle, the man from the northern passes trudging behind with the great sword Durandal.

The swaying and jolting as they climbed up the rough ramp brought the red mist again before Hugh's eyes, and when he tried to raise his head it seemed to him as if he were plunging down a road that became darker and darker, until dazzling flames appeared on every side. The rumble of Shotha Kupri's voice became a roar, and he came to rest in darkness and silence.

After a while he was sure that this abyss was a place of torment, because iron fingers pressed and pulled at his injured side, and a wave of pain swept through him. Bones grated within him, and his skull felt as if it were split asunder.

From a vast distance he heard Shotha Kupri's voice.

"By the saints, such scars have I never seen!"

He was glad when the torturers ceased their labors and he could sleep. But he woke to feel his feet and hands benumbed with cold. This time he could open his eyes; he beheld a spluttering torch and smoke that swirled around the figure of a mild-looking Syrian and another form clad in black velvet. He was sure that these must be Rabban Simeon and Antonio della Trevisani. And he was angry because it seemed to him that they were the torturers of this place. He heard a woman's clear laugh and raged inwardly because Rusudan mocked him.

Cool hands touched his forehead, and the pulse that beat in his throat was like Rupen's ax upon his battered

shield. The hammer strokes grew louder, though he felt the relief of water in his throat.

Rusudan was singing softly. He knew not the words of the song, but the melody was restful as the ripple of water over stones. Her voice called him without ceasing; still he might not see her or lay hand on her.

"My lady!" he cried.

And though his whisper was hoarse as a raven's note, the song ceased. In darkness and silence Hugh sought for the maid, aware of the faint scent of jasmine that clung to her hair.

The fever still raced through his veins, and he thought that a lamp had been lighted, only the torture place had changed its aspect and was quite certainly a vaulted room. And Rusudan was bending over him. No fingers stroked his forehead. Instead, cool lips pressed against his closed eyelids and his cheek.

For a while Hugh lay quiet. Surely that *was* a light, and the torturers were gone. Someone lay beside him on the bed, because he could hear the even breathing of sleep and could see a figure covered with a linen robe.

He moved his hand and felt heavy tresses of unbound hair. The form near him stirred, with swiftly indrawn breath. Then a little laugh that did not mock him.

The light moved and vanished, and Hugh was left alone, the scent of jasmine still on the pillow and coverlet beside him.



CHAPTER XXIII

THE EVE OF BATTLE

THE fever had left the crusader after three days, and for the rest of the week he slept mightily, eating more and more heartily, until the Georgian youths who served him ushered in Shotha Kupri in full mail, a shield on his arm and snow still clinging to his fur *burka*. He stood by Hugh in silence, and then stripped off the bandages that bound the wounded man's left arm to his side.

Hugh saw that the flesh was bruised and lacerated from armpit to waist. Shotha Kupri grunted.

"It is healing, by God's will. I am no physician, but

Rusudan would not let the Syrian Rabban lay hand on thee."

"She came here?"

Shotha Kupri tugged at his bristling mustache.

"Am I a tiring woman, to know the coming and going forth of my princess? Praise God that thy bones have knit."

"Was Rabban Simeon here?"

"Ay, that he was. Like thee, he came hither from the Horde. With Messer Antonio he has taken horse for the Western trail." The *thawad* stared at Hugh, shook his grizzled head, and fingered the ax in his belt. "A pity thou art friend to the pagans and unfriend to us. If aught befalls—mark me—if there be peril, thy gray stallion is in the stable by the north wall."

So saying, he strode from the chamber, leaving the crusader thoughtful. That evening Hugh asked one of the pages whether the Princess Rusudan was in the castle.

"Nay, my lord, she rides with John the Constable. The mailed host hath moved from Tiflis now that the standards are lifted."

Hugh, bethinking him, remembered that for days he had heard unwonted bustle in the courtyard and the town below—the neighing of horses, the blare of trumpets and distant shouting. Even now he was aware of a creaking of carts, a jangling of trace chains that dwindled in the distance.

That evening the bells rang out in chorus, the giant bell of the church near the castle adding its sonorous boom to the chiming. Hugh had been left to himself, but

when he heard singing in the town below he rose and went to look out of the embrasure.

The ice-chilled air of the mountains swept in, and he sniffed the odor of pines. A round moon peered through drifting clouds, outlining upon the snow the shadows of a procession moving up the hill toward the church.

He searched the throng for Rusudan, but she was not there. Nor did he see any men except the patriarch and his priests.

He knew that the women were going to the great church to pray for the mailed host of the warriors. The chiming of the bells ceased as they entered the arches of the Malaki, and Hugh heard a slight movement behind him. Turning, he beheld a slender figure in the doorway of the chamber.

"Your Excellency," said Hugh, "seeks me?"

Choaspes glanced at him and nodded good-naturedly.

"As you see. I come to felicitate the Jerusalem pilgrim that he is still numbered among the living."

"For such courtesy am I beholden to the noble *strategos*."

The Greek inclined his head, lifting his right hand in a graceful gesture, his left hand pressing the folds of his scarlet cloak to his breast.

"Do you indulge, Messer Frank, in the sport of kings—the pagan game of chess?"

Hugh shook his head silently.

"A pity—I vow to Saint Bacchus, it is a pity. Trevisani gone, the wild little Rusudan out in the snows, this court of barbarians becomes exceeding dull."

He sighed and glanced at the crusader idly. Yet with

that glance he weighed Hugh in his mind. The *strategos* was neither lazy nor effeminate, though he looked both. The frontier officer of an empire must be able to judge men, and in this respect Choaspes was not a whit behind Trevisani.

"By all the gods!" Choaspes leaned on the embrasure ledge, allowing Hugh to see that his left hand held no weapon. "A land as barren and hideous as its people. The women, however, are not always ugly."

"I have seen men less honorable."

"*Ehu!* I forgot, you are new come from the pagan land."

"I did not mean the men of Cathay." Hugh frowned a little. "In their way they do not lack faith."

"You have lived among them, Sir Hugh. And that brings me to my point. At the court of Theodore, in the Golden Chersonese, there was a rare welcome for him who brings fresh tidings or a new tale. This Horde out of Cathay savors of the magical—of the powers of darkness. By Venus her girdle, I swear it is the host of Gog and Magog! The tale of it would divert the Emperor and win you favor."

"Ay, so."

"And perchance bring my name to the imperial remembrance." Choaspes laughed good-naturedly. "'Tis my duty to forward the news of the Caucasus. Come, what say you to a purse for the road, a pair of my followers to serve you and, at the end of the road, the Golden Chersonese. Faith, I envy you."

Hugh looked out upon the moonlit valley. Trevisani,

Rusudan, and now Choaspes had tried to persuade him to journey to the Emperor's court.

"No need, my lord. My road lies down the valley."

The dark eyes of the *strategos* dwelt an instant on the falcon tablet that gleamed at the knight's throat.

"*That* will avail you little, Sir Hugh, for Mongol envoys have been slain, and perchance your life is forfeit. I have talked with Rabban Simeon, who tells a tale—a strange tale, mark you—of a certain oath of brotherhood that passed between you and the pagan chieftain."

"The tale is truth."

"Ah." The shapely fingers of the Greek wandered from the cross of glowing opals on his bare chest to the silver chain that held the dagger sheath to his girdle. "Well, Simeon and Trevisani are far away. And I—" he smiled—"I wish you well, Sir Hugh. A gallant spirit—mark me! Yet consider well, if it were bruited in Tiflis that you have sworn a secret oath to this lord of the pagans, and if the fortune of the field should go against the Georgians, why, they might tear you limb from limb or set you on a stake to wriggle out your life. A caitiff's fate, unworthy a girdled knight. Bethink you, and seek sanctuary with the Emperor."

Hugh smiled. Save within the portals of the great church whence came the faint refrain of song, sanctuary for him there was none.

"In the fiend's name," quoth Choaspes, "what will you do?"

"Ride to the battle." The scarred fingers of the crusader closed in his beard. "My lord, when steel clashes

and the arrow flights whip the air, there is an end of doubt, and a man may know the will of the Seigneur God."

"My lord, you are in no case to back a horse."

Choaspes shrugged a shoulder; then turned at a sound behind him, his fingers slipping the slender dagger from its sheath.

The other door had opened, though no one stood within it. Upon the stone floor, drawing himself toward them by use of one arm and by the thrust of a leg beneath him, Rupen crawled.

His left shoulder and arm were bound with bloodied bandages, less white than his haggard countenance from which dull eyes turned slowly from the Greek to the crusader. When he moved he panted, and once as he lay prone he pointed a quivering finger at Hugh and spoke.

"Rusudan."

The knight took up the lamp and, going in the other chamber, saw a pallet bed, the blankets fallen to the floor. Here behind the massive stone partition Rupen had lain.

"Rusudan," the wounded Georgian growled again.

"The fever is in him," said Hugh. "Come, my lord Strategos, we will aid him to his couch. My strength avails not."

"Nor my inclination," observed Choaspes. "'Tis a heavy animal, and means you no good."

He lingered a moment contemplating the two who had fought such a duel not many days ago, and then left the chamber. But Hugh shouted for the serving knaves, and

the youthful squire appeared. With his help Rupen was drawn back to bed, but no sooner was he in the blankets than he gripped the squire and spoke, low-voiced. The boy flushed and crossed himself upon forehead and breast.

"Lord Frank," he said, "Rupen of Kag saith this, 'The priest who came to shrive him brought word from the Malaki. The Horde hath crossed the Nakha ridge and rides up the valley of the Kur. John the Constable hath arrayed his standards in battle order, and before two nights the issue will be joined. And the Princess Rusudan is with the Constable.'"

"In two days!" Hugh's right hand caught the lad's shoulder. "Go, you—order my horse saddled."

The crusader turned to Rupen. The ax-man had crawled from his bed in spite of pain and tormented pride to give this message to Hugh. For an instant the crusader wondered why Rupen had not made his appeal to the *strategos*. Did he trust the Greek?

Rupen loved Rusudan with all the savage jealousy of the mountain breed. But he had crawled to the man who had worsted him in single combat—with his own weapon—thinking, perhaps, that Hugh of all men might be of aid to Rusudan.

The bleared eyes of the wounded giant were fastened intently on his late antagonist, as if Rupen wished to make more clear to Hugh the necessity of safeguarding the princess. Scowling and mute, his very earnestness and the pain that wracked him made his message eloquent. His drawn lips parted and he uttered a single word:

"*Gaumerjuba!*" And again: "Be victorious!"

This was the salutation of the Georgians, and Hugh had heard it often.

"May victory be with thee," he responded gravely.

Whatever the result of the battle, he must ride now, and ride swiftly to draw Rusudan out of the path of the Horde. Until this was done he could not rejoin the Mongols. He turned from the bed to seek sword and surcoat and found the Georgian squire still standing in the shadows behind him.

"My horse!"

"At once!" But the squire lingered, and spoke with flushed face, "My lord, some say you have fellowship with the magicians of Cathay, and others that the sword in your hand hath a power beyond human might. Alas, I know not. Yet when the fever was in you the high-born Rusudan tended your hurts. She cherished your life. My lord, protect her from the Horde."

As if frightened by his own daring or believing that Hugh might summon up some ally of the realm of darkness, the boy hurried off on his mission.

The sunken and bleared eyes of Rupen echoed the pleading of the young Georgian. The axman would never lift weapon again in battle. He had felt the strength of the crusader's arm, and in spite of pain and brooding he had no reproach for Hugh.

Nor did any man of the castle try to stay the knight when he donned his furs and the squire girded upon him the sword Durandal. Except an old castellan and some men-at-arms, all Georgians had left the place.

The gray stallion neighed at his approach, thrusting a soft muzzle into his neck and snorting. But when Hugh

had climbed into the saddle, wincing a little, the powerful charger tossed his head and stood motionless, ears twitching.

"Eh," muttered the serf who had groomed the horse, "it cannot be true that this lord of Frankland is a fiend, because the stallion hath no fear of him."

"He is not like other lords," replied the squire.

They opened the barbican gate, and Hugh rode forth, pacing down the long ramp and through the darkened alleys of Tiflis. When he had left the outer hamlets behind he passed a grove of firs and beheld among the trees the moonlit tower of the chapel where the dead king lay, and beneath the tower the fleeting gleam of a candle.

Throwing his weight upon his right stirrup and slinging the sword—that seemed to have gained weight since his illness—he loosened the rein and let the charger trot, setting his teeth at the first stab of pain.

In the uneven road he could not push forward faster than at a trot, but after a while he was warmed through, and the stab in his side became an ache. Only he had to hold the reins in his right hand.

Toward morning he began to pass lines of carts drawn up by the road, and then an outpost where warriors slept by a roaring fire. The sun rose unseen, and a gray murk filled the valley. He drew rein at a camp of stragglers where a bearded ruffian was wiping the inside of a pot with a fistful of bread and munching the bread. He glanced up at the silver head-band of the knight's horse and the gold inlay upon the hilt of his sword.

"How far is the camp?" He rubbed his fingers on his

surtout and pondered. "Eh, Lord, it is nearer than a day's ride and more than half a day's."

"Is the Horde in sight?"

The prophet of war screwed up his eyes and fingered his beard.

"Some of it is. By ——, I have seen the Mongols fight before now! Ask the kites and the wolves where the rest of the Horde lies hid. But please to dismount, good my lord."

Hugh knew the breed of these men—the speaker was a Bokharian. Horse traders, outwardly, who waited behind the lines to glean spoil from the slain and the wounded. He gathered up his reins and went on.

The Bokharian proved to be at least a sagacious prophet, because at noon Hugh came to the top of a ridge and saw before him the full array of the Georgians.



CHAPTER XXIV

THE VALLEY OF THE KUR

THE clans of the Caucasus stretched as far as the eye could see, from the bank of the frozen Kur to some low hills covered with pines. They were moving down the valley, away from Hugh, in masses of a thousand or more grouped around the standards and the banners of the princes. As they marched they sang and clashed axes and swords against their shields.

All in the main battle were on foot, even the chieftains. But Hugh saw that the constable had kept apart in the rear of the warriors a body of horse—Circassians.

These, too, were in motion, the ponies plunging into drifts and kicking up a smother of snow when they trotted. A bleak wind swept the valley and the gray sky hid the sun.

Beyond the line of the Georgians Hugh could see the Horde clearly—the black patches that were masses of horsemen. The distance was too great to make out any standards, and Hugh counted the black patches. There were ten, and he knew that each numbered a thousand. They were advancing at a walk.

Though he searched the whole valley, even the low banks of the icebound river and the timbered foothills on the far side, he could not discover any other Mongols. The ten thousand looked no larger than so many flocks of sheep in the vast basin between the ranges.

Hugh urged on the tired horse, passing through the last camp of the Georgians, where slaves and peasants with their carts stood at gaze. Here were visible the thatched roofs of a hamlet, and when the crusader passed near by, stalwart mountaineers stared at him and shouted joyfully:

“Eh, Lord Prince, make haste or the onset will be over. 'Tis said the steeds of the accursed Mongols are helpless in the snow.”

“Their bowstrings will be damp! Satan is opening his gates for them.”

So the varlets of the camp cried out, beholding the goodly charger of the stranger and the gold inlay of his sword. And Hugh, who could have answered that the Mongol ponies were accustomed to snow and even to digging beneath it for the scanty forage of dry grass, and that the Mongol bowstrings were silk or waxed cord, passed on in silence, heavy with misgiving. The somber sky was like a pall over the valley, and the bitter wind whispered of death.

He had not reached the Circassians before sudden tumult resounded on his right. Toward the foothills patrols of the invaders were retiring before the steady advance of the hillmen. But the shouting and clash of steel meant a charge.

Evidently the Mongol onset was repulsed, because Hugh, hastening on, saw presently the bodies of warriors outstretched and a few riderless ponies galloping off, while groups of Georgians clustered around the wounded, and the clamor dwindled to a hum of voices.

No one paid him any attention, and he sought anxiously for the standard of the constable, or for sight of Rusudan or Shotha Kupri.

Before seeking Subotai in the Horde he meant to warn Rusudan to leave the field—no easy task. She should never come into the *mêlée*.

Here were only bands of hillmen, ax and spear on shoulder, striding forward through the snow that was often knee-deep, shouldering and pushing to win nearer the front ranks that had halted.

The reason was clear in a moment. A roar of voices drowned all other sounds, and Hugh rose in his stirrups. The Mongol center was in motion—a long line of riders trotting toward the Georgians, followed by other lines that plied their bows from the saddle. Arrows whistled into the close-packed mass of Georgians, who answered with crossbows and, in a moment, with a flight of javelins.

Stung by the flying steel, the shaggy ponies of the Mongols began to rear and plunge before the first line crashed against the spears and shields of the Georgians.

Still the arrows whistled. Hugh heard the clash of armor when men dropped near him, heard the oaths of their comrades who pressed on, heedless of hurt, with the single thought of closing with the horsemen.

They did not lack courage, these men of the Caucasus. Harried by shafts that tore through their leather shields and the chain mail beneath, they wielded their swords and heavy axes, and the line that had yielded at first, stood firm.

The Mongol charge had been broken. The *tumans* were drawing away, scattering in groups without formation and apparently without leaders.

Hugh, who had seen these same veteran divisions crash through the chivalry of Islam, could not believe them broken; but the impatient Circassians tossed scimitars and spears over their heads.

And then Hugh saw the constable sitting a white horse with cloth-of-silver caparisoning, and beside him the Princess Rusudan, her cheeks aglow with excitement, crying to the mounted escort that hemmed her in—the youthful nobles, sons of the chieftains.

Heads turned inquiringly toward the crusader in tarnished steel, upon a sweat-soaked charger flecked with foam. Rusudan saw him and cried out, started to draw her rein toward him, but checked her brown Arab and waited his approach.

He raised his right hand and spoke:

“Princess Rusudan, where is the aid promised by the Emperor? I saw none in the camp or the array of battle.”

She smiled, pointing down the valley with a slender ivory baton tipped by a little crown of gold.

"What need of them? Surely the eternal Emperor hath pledged us aid, but, alone, we have cast back the pagans."

"Ay, so."

Rusudan's dark hair whipped across her eyes, and she tossed her head impatiently, her eyes dancing with the almost unbearable exhilaration of earth's utmost game.

"If God had spared my brother to see this day!" And she gazed up at Hugh earnestly. "*Ai*, your wound is not healed. Why are you in the saddle?"

And the crusader, leaning on his saddle-horn, besought her with outstretched hand:

"Ride hence. This is an ill place for a maid."

"Did you come to tell me that? So the Constable hath said, but I will not sit with the women."

"You have seen one charge. Stay for no more."

"I will *not* go."

"The real battle is not yet," answered Hugh patiently.

Rusudan beheld the pallor in his lined face, and hot scorn made harsh her clear voice.

"Is this the paladin who bears Roland's sword—who hewed his way to the Sepulchre of the Lord Christ? I cry you shame, Sir Hugh! Oh, you were quick to draw weapon in an alley brawl over the cups."

She had seen the truth, that Hugh of Taranto was afraid. But of what he could not say himself. A heavy foreboding lay upon him—the fear that the Horde would

still ride over the clans of the Caucasus and the bright head of Rusudan would lie in trampled snow and blood.

The nobles, urged by fresh excitement, were clamoring around her now, but she reined the Arab to the gray stallion.

"Look up, Sir Craven. You will see that even a maid may strike a blow against pagans."

A horn resounded near the constable, who had been watching the retreat of the Mongols intently. A chieftain had come up to him, a bearded Circassian who checked his steed with a jangle of bit-chains and thudding of hoofs and pointed down the valley beseechingly. The wild horsemen, held in restraint, were growing resentful of inaction, and the Circassian *crâl* had come to beg for leave to charge. With a nod, John the Constable gave the order.

The Circassian wheeled away as a hawk skims from a thicket, and his men, guessing the command—or resolved to await no command—put their horses to a trot and a gallop that carried them in full career past the princess and through the clans of the main battle, who parted to let them by.

"Forward with me!" Rusudan cried to the youths around her, and they shouted above the clamor of the Circassians. The nobles of Rusudan's escort joined the mass of riders, but Hugh leaned over and gripped her rein.

"Nay!" he cried, realizing her purpose.

"Loose my horse. Back, I say!" Rusudan struggled to free her rein, then let it fall and snatched the light scimitar from the silver sheath at her side. In her anger she

trembled, whispering so that he scarcely heard, "I will strike!"

And the scimitar swept up, and down toward his throat, for he made no move to release her. The steel whistled in the air, and was checked in the mid-stroke by a mailed hand that held it firm.

John the Constable had heard the rasp of the blade in its sheath and had come to Rusudan's side. He forced the weapon from her hand, thrust it into its scabbard, glanced from the raging girl to the crusader.

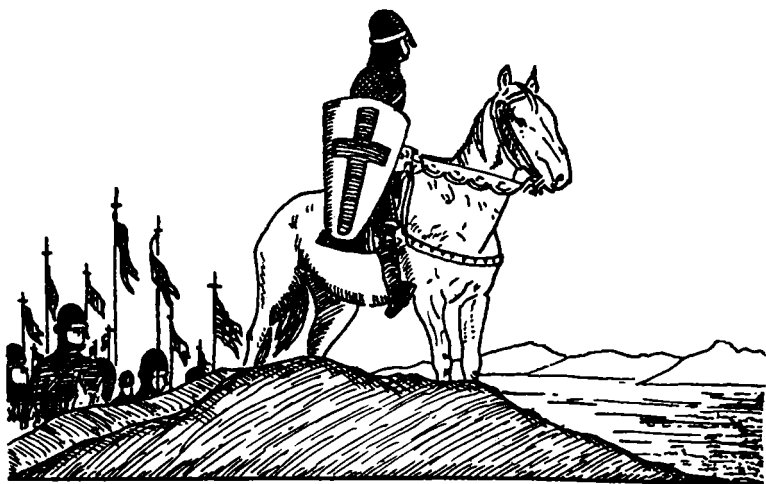
"Nay, little Rusudan," he said smiling, "there will be blows enough struck this day. Nor will I permit you to go forward into peril. See, the pagans give way before our horse."

The onset of the Circassians—daring riders, loving well just such a charge as this—had carried them into the retreating squadrons of the Horde. Only Hugh noticed that no arrow flights greeted the constable's cavalry, and that the Mongols scattered to the sides rather than fled ahead.

The array of the Circassians began to divide, some turning after the Mongols toward the hills, some spurring at the bands withdrawing to the river. Before long the fighting had broken up into smaller groups and the Mongols were using their bows at last at close quarters.

Seeing this, some of the clans began to run forward from the main array of the Georgians to aid the cavalry. The rest of the warriors on foot were stripping the enemy dead, and even building fires to warm themselves and to heat wine.

To the watchers it seemed that the battle was at an end, and John the Constable had taken the helmet from his head, when some of the men near him cried out. They were pointing at the river. From the forest on the far side long lines of Mongol horsemen were emerging.



CHAPTER XXV

CHOASPES MOVES

SUBOTAI THE EAGLE led these squadrons. He had summoned the best of the Horde, the mailed riders of the Merkit tribe and the black-clad Almalyk swordsmen—in all ten thousand—and had taken them at night into the forest, crossing the Kur unseen, fifty miles from the scene of the battle. He had followed gorges and cattle trails, sending scouts ahead to slay any herdsmen or villagers who might be in his path.

So his first squadrons had come up that morning to the heights overlooking the Kur and had descended cautiously, screened by the thick pine growth until they were within a few bowshots of the river.

The Georgians, who had seen the other portion of the Horde in front of them, had paid no attention to the far bank of the Kur where there was no road. Even when Subotai's cavalry appeared they did not think the Mongols could cross the river ice.

But there had been many days of bitter cold, and the nomads who had roamed yearly the bleak lakes and frozen rivers of the steppes knew well enough when ice would bear them and how it must be crossed. They deployed in long lines, a lance length between riders and an arrow's flight between the ranks. They moved out upon the white surface of the river at a walk.

Nor did they hasten when the Georgians of the left flank raced to the bank. But their arrows began to whip the mass of hillmen, and when the first rank reached solid ground the shafts of the second rank flew over their heads, wreaking destruction among the Georgians. And above and below the Georgians the cavalry gained a footing unmolested, because the hillmen could not reach the bank in time.

Once across the Kur, the Mongols closed up into solid squadrons and trotted in upon the scattered clans. This time there was no withdrawing. When the arrow flight of a moving squadron swept a group of Georgians, men were cast down as if a blast of wind had struck them.

Their left flank was cut to pieces by arrows and ridden down, and John the Constable, hastening toward the river, ordered the center of his clans to face about.

"Form on the standards!" he cried as he galloped. "Hold your ground. Ax and shield!"

He sent riders to bid the Circassians withdraw and

form again. But the Circassian cavalry never reached him. Only a scattering of the tribesmen came back to the standards. The rest, their horses wearied by plunging through the snow, and cut off by the first division of the Mongols, fought desperately with scimitars and began to flee toward the hills.

Of the young nobles who had surrounded Rusudan and who joined in the charge of the Circassians not one was seen alive again. The veteran Mongols, noticing the splendor of their kaftans and shining helmets, slew them with arrows and lances.

Nor did the constable return to the knoll where Rusudan sat her horse, with pallid cheeks and tense lips.

The gray sky darkened, and the wind ceased. The mountain wall became a blur of shadow and mist. Twilight drew its veil over the scene. In this vast arena multitudes of shapes moved over the snow, and the hoarse roaring of men, the neighing of horses, and the clatter of steel stunned the girl.

"The real battle begins," said the crusader quietly.

He had been peering into the shadows, following movements of men unseen by the overwrought maid. He knew that the main body of Georgians, nearly twenty thousand strong, was holding its ground in a half-circle on three sides of them. And he saw where Mongol lancers were pushing around the left of this half-circle, seeking the rear of the constable's array.

Somewhere in the mass of the Horde, Subotai Bahadur sat his horse—man and beast garbed in black lacquer—peering into the obscurity with eyes that seemed to pierce the darkness. Colored lanterns of horn and

paper, as large as barrels, hung on the points of long spears, transmitted his orders to his men.

When a lantern was raised or lowered or swung from side to side, a squadron leader somewhere in the groaning and shouting press of fighters commanded his drums to sound—and every rider of that squadron, hearing the roll of kettledrums, pushed forward or freed himself from his foes to gallop to his comrades. And always Subotai shifted his squadrons farther and farther around the Georgians' flank—the dreaded *tulughma* or swoop that reached an enemy's rear.

"Come," said Hugh.

He reached out and took the girl's rein in his good hand.

It was the hour of darkness before moonrise, and the crusader, listening to the tumult around them, thought that the Mongols had drawn farther away toward the hills. Little fighting was going on near them. In the distance were heard the shouts of the hillmen and the mutter of the drums of the Horde.

"Nay," Rusudan stirred and drew a deep breath, "I will not forsake the *mkhendruli*—the warriors."

"Faith," growled the crusader, "is there a man, save these few beside thee, that knows you are still on the field? Child, they would give their arms and heads to have you safe in Tiflis if they knew."

"I am not afraid."

"Come!" he said again quietly.

She turned to peer into his eyes beneath the helmet. Then she spoke to the score of nobles and mounted squires who had remained at her side. They closed in

around her with drawn weapons, and Hugh led Rusudan's Arab into the darkness.

Until now it would have been madness to try to escape toward the city, and, though the nearly frantic Georgians had urged her to fly to the hills behind them, she had not stirred. Now, there was no knowing what lay behind them. For an hour the valley of the Kur was like an arena with the lights turned down, the actors moving unseen.

One of the escort urged Rusudan to try to find a strong body of the clans, but she shook her head.

"Can they outpace such cavalry? Shall I burden them with fear? Nay, they might take us for pagans and loose javelins at us. I trust the Frank."

The horses, except Hugh's gray stallion, were fresh, and his charger was still able to gallop. Before starting, Hugh had thrust Rusudan's loose hair under her hood and had drawn the hood down about her eyes, so that the keen eyes of the Mongols might not recognize a woman—and for another reason.

They passed by knots of fallen men, and here and there a figure dragged itself through the trampled snow, moaning or crying for aid as the riders swept past. Wounded Georgians, who would watch jackals tear at the bodies of their comrades in the hours of that night.

Rusudan shivered, burying her face in her hands. Hugh, looking into the shadows ahead of them, swerved now to the right, now to the left. He could make out companies of Mongols who had dismounted to rest their ponies and wait until moonrise.

Again they plunged past warriors afoot, who sprang

aside with lifted sword or ax, shouting hoarse defiance. When the horses slowed their pace and the snow surface loomed unbroken, Hugh thought they had passed beyond the Mongols.

Already the sky over the eastern ranges was filled with an orange glow; the moon would be shedding its light into the valley. The Georgians began to cast about for the road, whipping on their horses.

"Where the ground is dark, the road will be," said one of them to the princess. They stumbled into gullies and skirted thickets until they came to a ridge and what seemed a low growth of trees. But this dark blur was moving toward them.

"Stop!" Hugh whispered, and Rusudan reined in, her followers doing likewise.

From the dark patch came the creaking of saddles, the faint clicking of wooden bow cases, and the mutter of voices. Hugh felt that the girl was reaching for the scimitar at her side.

The dark spot on the snow was a large party of Mongols, evidently a patrol, and they must have seen the Georgians.

"*Noyon!*" Hugh called out. "*Ordu orluk*—an officer of the marshal's regiment!"

The rattling of bow cases ceased, and the patrol reined in.

"*Ahatou noyon!*" a deep voice made response.

The Mongols moved away, merging into the shadows under the ridge, and Rusudan shivered. When they reached the top of the ridge, Hugh put his charger to a gallop. They were on the road, and in a few moments the

haystacks, topped with white cones, of the hamlet appeared, and then the village itself, clear in the moonlight.

In the road by the tavern that Hugh had passed in the morning stood a sleigh with four horses and a mounted escort. From the sleigh stepped a man in silvered mail, a scarlet cloak wrapped around his shoulders. He glanced at Hugh and started when he beheld Rusudan's Arab.

"The princess! A golden candle to the good Saints Sergius and Bacchus! Her Highness will be pleased to dismount and avail herself of my sleigh."

Choaspes had come down the valley to watch events, and had lingered at the inn, loath to leave warmth and wine for the bitter cold. And the tidings he had gleaned of the battle had not inspired him to go on. He had traveled slowly, and his horses were fresh. The Georgians urged Rusudan to follow his advice.

"My Lord the Strategos!" she cried. "Have you word from—of——"

Her voice was choked by something like a sob, and Choaspes swept his hand around the deserted hamlet gravely. Fugitives were pushing past them. All the huts were dark.

But Rusudan would not move from the saddle until a Georgian officer galloped up on a staggering horse. He was without helmet or shield, and his reins hung over his saddle horn. He swayed from side to side as if drunk, and cursed when one of Choaspes's Greeks checked his horse.

"Woe to the sons of Karthlos! Woe! Broken are the clans—slain are the chieftains!"

"What of the Constable?" cried Choaspes.

The wounded officer, unheeding, lashed his horse and plunged on, shouting over his shoulder:

"To Tiflis! Let him save himself who can."

And he was not lost to sight before warriors began to appear on the road and over the fields, lurching as they walked, their shoulders sagging—some pushing forward in silence, some shaking broken weapons at the cloudless sky. Beholding them, Choaspes took Rusudan's stirrup in his hand:

"Come, my lady. Time presses."

His followers were moving restlessly, climbing into their saddles and gazing down the valley into the haze of moonlight that might reveal the dreaded Mongol lancers at any moment. A contagion of fear was in the air. Moreover the Greek men-at-arms did not wish their horses to be seized by the fugitives.

Rusudan stirred and stretched her arms toward the figures that stumbled through the snow.

"My people!" she cried, her dark eyes tearless.

Long did Choaspes look into her face, no longer that of a mischievous girl, but of a woman who feels her helplessness and the pang of suffering.

"My lady," he said, with sudden purpose, "the arm of the most magnificent Emperor is long and strong to aid. Come!"

Rusudan allowed him to help her from the saddle and to prepare a seat for her in the sleigh beside him. The drivers snapped their whips and the harness bells jangled. The Greek and Georgian riders closed in after it, and

no one paid any heed to the crusader, who stood by his spent charger.

Once Hugh thought his name was called, but the sleigh and its escort gathered speed and soon vanished among the cottages. He put his hand on the heaving flank of the gray stallion and glanced at hanging muzzle, the blood-shot eyes.

"Eh, my brother," he said, "you must rest before we take the road."

He led the horse across the inn yard into the dark shed and loosened the girths. Then he searched until he found hay piled in a corner, and with a handful of this he rubbed down the horse, spreading a little under the foam-flecked muzzle. The charger had eaten all the snow that was good for him. Hugh threw a pair of saddle-cloths over his back and left him for a moment to enter the tavern, where candles still glowed on tables cluttered with black bread and joints of meat.

From the remnants of food Hugh cut some morsels with his dagger and filled a bowl with wine from one of the kegs. He went back to the shed and sat down beside the horse. For a night and a day and part of another night he had not eaten. The ache of his wound made him so weak that it was an effort to put the bread between his teeth. When he had drunk a little wine, he set the bowl before the charger.

An hour later the horse, that had lifted one foot and was sniffing at the hay, tossed up his head and neighed. Hugh heard the clinking of bit chains and the soft stamping of hoofs outside the inn.

He looked from the shed and saw a cavalcade of horsemen in the road, and recognized the white charger of the constable. The lord of Tiflis was examining a slender staff in his hand, an ivory staff tipped with a fragile gold crown, now trodden and broken.

Seeing this baton of Rusudan, the crusader approached and stood by the stirrup of the chieftain.

"The princess," he said, "hath taken the road for the city with her attendants and the Greeks."

When this was explained to the constable, he clasped his hands together gratefully and breathed deep. His steel-linked hauberk was ripped and slashed about the arms and shoulders, and the winged crest was gone from his helmet.

"God did not give victory," he said.

The clansmen in the street, leaning on their spears or binding up cuts in arm and leg, heard him and answered.

"Eh, *thawad*, we will hold the castle. We will not be driven from behind walls!"

For a while the constable waited, mustering the men who flocked into the village, asking for tidings. Hugh heard that most of the Georgians had taken to the hills, where they had made an end of pursuit with their axes and javelins. The clans had been broken but not slaughtered. And these men around the constable showed no fear of pursuit, because they knew that experienced warriors guarded their rear. When a thousand had assembled in the hamlet the constable took the road to the city.

The chieftain of the Caucasus was of the breed of stubborn fighters who are more dangerous in retreat than in

a charge, and Hugh understood why the Moslems had never won to Tiflis.

"Will they attack the city, think ye?" the constable asked the crusader.

"Ay, if it lies in their road. Otherwise they will not waste men. They are picked warriors, and they mean to pass beyond the Caucasus."

To this the constable made no answer. It seemed to him that the Mongols must desire the sack of the city and, besides, he did not see where else they would go.

And Hugh in his turn asked a question—

"The princess—will she seek safety in the cities of the Emperor?"

"Nay, she is of the hills—she will not leave us, for another land."

And the chieftain pointed up at the forested heights outlined in the red glow of the setting moon.

But it did not happen as he had foretold. Within an hour the mass of warriors ahead of them parted, and an armed peasant galloped up to the constable, reining in and casting himself on his knees at a distance.

"Ivan Vartabad," he cried out, "terror has come to the castle!"

"How?"

"*Akh*, it is not to be known how. Men lie lifeless in the western gate as if wolves had got in."

All the Georgians within hearing stopped and held their breath, while John the Constable asked whether the castle were lost. Had the pagans reached it?

"Impossible that they should have reached it," groaned the peasant, holding his head. "They were not

seen in the town. But there are many dead in the western gate—*aznaurs* and Greek swordsmen. Grigol of Thor hath his skull split——”

“Rusudan—what of her?”

“With my eyes I saw the daughter of Karthlos ride up the ramp into the court at the hour when the moonlight passes from the dome of the Malaki. Now only God knows where she has gone, because the eyes of men cannot see her.”

The constable gripped short his reins, and the peasant sprang aside when the white horse plunged forward.

“In the name of the Father and Son, make way!”



CHAPTER XXVI

THE TRAIL OF THE HORDE

IT WAS high noon before the fate of Rusudan was known. The castellan who lay, as the peasant had said, in the courtyard with his head split open by a sword, could tell nothing, and those within the castle were certain of only one thing: The princess had come to the barbican gate with the *strategos* and his followers. In the courtyard there had been talk, and suddenly the clatter of steel. In that hour before dawn the place had been

in darkness, and the frightened servants had seen lanterns moving about swiftly, and the horses led from the stables.

But Rupen of Kag, who had been listening at his window, knew the truth. Choaspes had insisted that Rusudan go with him beyond Tiflis and seek sanctuary in Trebizond, and she had refused. Then the Greeks had overpowered her few attendants and had led out every good horse from the stables. At the western gate they had met Grigol of Thor, the castellan, who had mustered a few men-at-arms when he heard the clash of weapons. Evidently the Greeks, who were in full mail, had ridden down the Georgians and had escaped from the city before dawn. They had carried off Rusudan.

The wearied men who mustered around John the Constable took up pursuit, finding horses where they could. Shotha Kupri went off to rouse other bands in the forest.

They came back late that night with sagging shoulders and scowling brows. They had not gained even a sight of the Greeks. Whether he had planned this move beforehand, or had taken measures for his own safety, the *strategos* had collected relays of fresh horses twenty miles from Tiflis and would be nearing the gates of Trebizond within the lines of the empire before the hillmen could overtake him. Nevertheless, Shotha Kupri had pushed on with some Gypsies.

The constable and the few surviving chieftains could not leave the castle, because the Mongols might move against him any hour. Scouts from the forest reported that the Horde had gone into camp in the very hamlet where the Georgians had been quartered before the bat-

tle. And the remnants of the clans were drifting into Tiflis with their families and cattle and sheep.

On the following day Mongol patrols advanced as far as the chapel in the firs and scanned the walls of the city. The constable labored ceaselessly and without sleep, and the Georgians doggedly set to work carrying sheaves of arrows to the walls and making ready the cressets for lighting—if the attack should come at night. Not a man from the Kur to the castle keep who would not have given his life to have Rusudan safe among the clans. They knew that if she could be brought back, Shotha Kupri would manage it.

“Nay,” said the *mkhendruli* now and again, “the Emperor has pledged aid. It cannot be that *he* will permit harm to come to the daughter of the Karthlos.”

“And yet,” some responded, “the Greeks went against Grigol of Thor with edged steel.”

They shook their heads and hastened to new labors. It was the first time that a ruler, or the child of a ruler, of the Caucasus had left the mountains. The noblewomen prayed hourly in the Malaki, and the chieftains sat with weapons in their hands.

At the end of the week the Mongols had not come, but Shotha Kupri appeared in the hall of the keep where the *thawads* sat at meat.

One glance at him, and some groaned, others took their heads in their hands.

“The Greeks are beyond the hills,” said Shotha Kupri.

“The Princess?” demanded John the Constable.

“With them, bound to a sleigh. From the *strategos*, a

letter." Shotha Kupri held out a roll of parchment that the lord of Tiflis opened eagerly. It was in Greek, written on the back of a leaf torn from some priest's manuscript, and he gave it to the old metropolitan to read.

But for a moment the churchman fingered his beard, saying nothing.

"'Tis addressed to Ivan," he explained, "and the message is—secret."

The constable, who had been striding back and forth behind the patriarch's chair, halted as if pricked by steel.

"Read! I have no secrets."

The old man inclined his head.

"Choaspes, Strategos of Anatolia, to John Lord of Tiflis and high Constable of Georgia—greeting. This is a time of trouble, and they who are wise will not lack fortune at the end. Thy name hath been extolled by friends at the court of the Eternal Emperor. Favor will be shown the Keeper of the Gate. The girl Rusudan, last of the Lasha lineage, is more fitted for a camp of vagabonds than a throne. Under the care of the Eternal Emperor she will meet no harm. Meanwhile a strong hand is needed in the Caucasus. Drive out the barbarians, and thou wilt earn a reward greater than that given the conqueror of Mithridates the Parthian."

"In God's name," cried the constable, "what means this?"

The patriarch sighed and mused a while.

"My son, the message was to thee."

"A hundred devils! Little skilled am I in statecraft or

the writing of missives. To my mind, Choaspes tries to draw a bough over his tracks."

"More, Ivan. He promises more. He has carried the princess of the royal line from her people. Perhaps he will hold her hostage. Surely we must send emissaries to the *monocrator*, the Emperor."

Shotha Kupri, who had been standing in silence, lifted his hand.

"Long have we served the Cæsars of Constantinople. We have bowed to them and sent our sons to man the legions. We have held the Gate. What was our reward? The Georgian and Circassian girls were taken not seldom and sold as slaves, not only to Greeks but to dog-believing Muhammadans. Now the Greeks have taken Rusudan. It will not avail to appeal to the Emperor. I say, 'Go with naked swords.'"

"Ay!" cried the brother of Grigol.

"Shotha Kupri hath said well," echoed others, nodding eagerly.

But John the Constable smote the head of the ax in his belt.

"Then tell me—who is to go? Where are the chieftains who will journey to the Chersonese with swords and leave the hamlets and the women to the pagans?"

There was silence at this, and a muttering of rage at their helplessness.

"The Greeks would have made you king," cried the eldest of the Orphelians.

"Choaspes has tricked us with words," responded John the Constable, his brow darkening. "Eh, he is wiser than we. Did he not bid us to move down against the Horde?"

"And you added your word, John of Tiflis. Now the wolves of the Kur are coming down from the timber to gorge themselves on the bodies of the *mkhendruli*. They will lack graves, our brothers."

At this they glared, one at another, remembering old feuds. The missive sent by Choaspes had been a brand that kindled suspicion and resentment among these men who had seen their kindred slain not many days since. Choaspes might have thought that the constable could be tempted, or perhaps he could not refrain from mocking the chieftains.

The patriarch lifted both hands to quiet them, but John of Tiflis stretched out his bare right arm on which were wounds still unhealed and undressed.

"Is that the hand of a traitor, my brothers?"

Shotha Kupri stepped to the table, broad and surly as a scarred boar with broken tusks.

"By the cross of Ani, you have held the standard with a firm hand! Traitor you are not, nor can the written words of Choaspes make you otherwise. Because the Greek dared not stand before us and say with his lips what he hath written down. Did he take his weapon in hand in the snows of the Kur? He did not, and that is the truth. Now let one who is wise say how we are to rescue Rusudan!"

They all looked at the patriarch, but he shook his head moodily.

"We cannot leave the walls," muttered one of the Orphelians.

"If we could," added the constable grimly, "what then? There are two roads to the cities of the Greeks—

one from Trebizond and the ships of the Great Sea. But the ships are manned by Greeks. The other, by the northern passes through the steppes."

"We cannot open a road, that is clear," nodded the Orphelian. "We must trust in cunning, like a fox."

And they turned again hopefully to the patriarch, who sighed and clasped his hands.

"There is no gift but from the Almighty. Pray ye to Him who is greater than the Emperor."

"For the ages of ages," muttered Shotha Kupri. "Yet, as for cunning, a lamb will suckle a lioness before a Georgian will overmatch a Greek in cunning."

And John the Constable gripped the parchment between his fingers, tearing it into fragments and casting them into the fire.

Though they talked until the most weary let their heads fall in slumber on the table, they could not think of a way to reach Rusudan. Calamity had come upon the Caucasus—first the Mongols, then the loss of their princess. Unwonted things were happening, and they were troubled.

They were utterly astonished when a shepherd ran into the hall the next day with word that the Horde was moving. But not upon Tiflis. He had watched from the forest across the Kur, and the riders of the Horde had been crossing on the ice, driving the herds of cattle and captured horses.

He had waited until he saw the first detachments enter the foothills. The Mongols were heading toward the north and the unknown steppes.

It was several days before the Georgians would ven-

ture out of Tiflis. Having been tricked once by a feigned retreat, they feared the empty valley as much as the camp of the Horde.

That day Hugh came before the council of the princes. He wore full mail, and some of the chieftains noticed that the falcon tablet was hung around his throat. They looked at him with attention and more than a little respect.

Shotha Kupri had taken his part, and they had heard that he had brought Rusudan safely from the battlefield of the Kur. If Rupen, who had been crippled by the crusader's ax, had no blame for the wanderer, they bore him no ill-will.

Rabban Simeon had been talking to the Armenian merchants, and it was rumored that the Emperor of the Greeks had offered a thousand pieces of gold for the head of the Frank. Since the flight of the *strategos* feeling had been bitter against the Greeks.

"He came to us from the pagans," Shotha Kupri declared, "and he bore himself boldly. He warned us of calamity, and it happened as he had said. It is clear that he is no spy, but a man who has seen more than one battle. He knows his own road. Let him go and come as he chooses."

Now Hugh greeted them, and asked leave of the constable to go from Tiflis.

"Whither?" the chieftains demanded.

"To the Chersonese."

Bethinking them of the thousand pieces of gold, they mused a while. If the Frank wished to put himself within

reach of the executioner of the Emperor, that was his affair, not theirs.

"It was said in the castle," remarked the Constable, "that you have sworn an oath of fellowship with the lords of Cathay. Is that true?"

"True."

"And you will go to the court of Theodore as an envoy?"

"Nay."

"Well, you are free." John of Tiflis nodded and pulled at his mustache. "Eh, Sir Hugh, we would well that you abide with us. Here you will not lack for bread and meat and wine."

"For your courtesy, my lord," Hugh made answer, "I thank you. But I have far to go."

That day he rode from the western gate of the citadel, Shotha Kupri escorting him as far as the edge of the forest before turning back.

"Go with God, Sir Hugh. Remember that the merchant Trevisani may be in Trebizond, and he is no friend to you."

Hugh smiled, looking down the narrow track that ran through the forest mesh.

"Nay, I have few friends, Lord Prince. But I have the sword Durandal, and that will serve me well."

Shotha Kupri watched the crusader until he was lost to sight around a turn in the trail; then he sought Rupen and found the ax-man sitting by the door of Rusudan's vacant chambers.

"Eh," said the master of Kag slowly, "the Frank came

many times to share a cup with me. It is clear to me why he fares forth to the Chersonese."

Shotha Kupri considered this in silence.

"The Father and Son know," went on Rupen, "that I held Rusudan dearer than life. Messer Antonio tricked me with words so that I challenged the Frank, and he struck me down. Choaspes sought her, hiding his desire from all eyes, because he was clever and wary as a fox."

"May the fiends tear him!"

"Satan will not fail to greet him, if the Frank comes within sword's reach of him."

"Choaspes has power from Satan himself."

"That may be, but the Frank would dare twist the devil's tail. Much is clear to me that is dark to you. From the hour that his eyes beheld her the Frank loved Rusudan."

Shotha Kupri looked up in surprise.

"Eh—he gave no sign."

"Because it was a torture to him that he was bound to serve the Horde."

"And now?"

"Since Choaspes carried off Rusudan, the Frank hath spoken no word. He walked the battlement between the towers, and of nights he paced his chamber. At first he tried swinging the long sword to test his strength; then he would exercise the stallion down by the river. Wisely he waited until he was fit for the *khoda*—to take the trail. When that day came, he went. He will rescue Rusudan or—take vengeance."

This thought filled both the hillmen with grim satisfaction until a shepherd named Arak who had been

watching in the heights sought Shotha Kupri and told a strange tale.

He had sallied forth with his dog and had taken the road chosen by Sir Hugh. He had followed the knight's tracks to the place where Shotha Kupri had turned back. A league or so beyond, the tracks of the stallion left the trail and entered the forest.

This had puzzled the shepherd because the road was too plain to lose, and there were no signs of wolves. The tracks wound through the timber and dropped into a gorge that led north. Avak followed the trail and found himself ascending toward the distant summit of Kasbek.

Here other tracks joined the prints of the stallion's hoofs—a half dozen ponies, evidently with riders. The shepherd made a circle and picked up the trail of the riders, tracing it up to a camp in a stand of firs overlooking Tiflis.

He was certain that the six horsemen were Mongols because there were broken arrows and *kumis* sacks around the ashes of the fire. So he went back to the place where the Mongols had intercepted the crusader. He found where they had halted the first night, and it seemed to him that the stallion had been tethered with the other horses.

A few leagues to the north the tracks of the seven riders entered the broad trail of the Horde, where in the multitude of marks of cattle, men, and carts Avak had lost all trace of the seven riders.

"Beyond doubt," he insisted, "they followed the Horde."

It seemed to Rupen and Shotha Kupri that the cru-

sader had lied to them, because he had turned from the Trebizond road to go after the Mongols. A patrol left behind to watch the Georgians had picked him up by agreement or by chance. They remembered that strange lights had been seen in that portion of the hills after darkness, and Shotha Kupri thought of the lanterns used as signals by the Mongols in the battle of the Kur.

But more than this they did not learn, because the Gate was closed and the paths of the Caucasus were impassable to men for a time. The spring thaw was setting in. The ice began to go out of the rivers, and a rush of muddy waters filled the valleys. The streams fed by melting snow during the hours of day roared and swirled down from the heights.

Only at night could these streams be crossed, and even then the soft snow afforded treacherous footing. Except for the hunters and the *abreks* who went out to look for stray cattle, the Georgians remained shut up in their hamlets, and no word reached them from the outer world.



CHAPTER XXVII

THE WILL OF THE EAGLE

AND what," asked Arslan, "shall I say to Subotai Bahadur?"

The little Mongol looked more like a Turk than ever, because he had managed to plunder a Bokharian's horse caravan and had taken for himself shagreen boots, and a turban of sheer blue silk sewn with pearls. Moreover, the lot of a patrol leader suited him well. He had killed a sheep every day and had dined off the fat of the tails until his broad cheeks were puffed out like puddings.

"What order was given?" Hugh inquired.

Arslan counted off on his fingers that were rank of grease and mutton.

"One—to watch for pursuit and bring word of it. Two—not to lose any horses. I have three times the number given me. Three—not to get drunk. There were wineskins in that caravan, and after we had emptied all the skins we rode through the forest with torches and shouted, but took no harm. Four—to look steadfastly for you and bring you direct to the Eagle."

"Then you have obeyed all of the order but one part. I saw the light of the torches the night you were—" Hugh smiled—"drinking."

"But without harm, O Swooping Hawk. We *all* woke up in the *yurta* and groomed the ponies the next day."

"Still, the order was not to get drunk."

"*Aya tak*. Thus it was. And yet he who gave the order did not know there would be wineskins."

"It would be better not to mention the wine."

"Much better. But Subotai Bahadur will be glad because I am bringing you. He thought you were vanished, like a stone cast into deep water. It may be in his mind to bind your arms and set you on a stake or wind you with straw and light you as a torch at night. How should I know?"

Hugh still smiled, but his eyes were thoughtful.

"Tell to Subotai Bahadur the truth—that I sought your camp and came back to the Horde of my own will."

"That is truth."

Although the trail of the Mongols was broad and clear it was by no means easy to follow. Arslan and the crusader had to descend deep gullies that the cavalry had

crossed by bridges of timber that were taken up and carried in sleds, to be used over again. For days they skirted the mighty shoulders of Kasbek, working up into higher altitudes where the vultures flapped away from the carcasses of cattle that had died by the way.

Bands of Circassian horsemen were combing over the fields, as hornets buzz around a broken hive. If Arslan and Hugh had been seen they would have been hunted down without mercy. They hid in the timber. Arslan could not resist bringing in some stray horses that wandered too near their covert. It seemed to Hugh as if the Mongol could never get horses enough.

His idea of a good pace was to go at a free gallop, singing and snapping his whip. Occasionally he would call a halt to change saddles to fresher beasts and to cast around for tracks. Whether he guided himself by the stars or had an animal's instinct for sniffing out the road, Hugh never knew. The crusader's wounds were troubling him in the damp night air, but he did not ask the Mongols to rein in, and by the time the crescent moon was out of sight he saw they were on the track of the Horde again.

When the sun forced its way into the gorges and the steady *drip-drip* began from the forest growth, Arslan saw no reason to halt. He said he was tired of hiding out and wanted to be able to sleep all day in the saddle and hear the news of the world that reached Subotai's division from the dispatch riders of the great Khan.

At the last of the northern passes they came up with the standard of the Horde. Subotai was kneeling on a

tiger-skin in the snow, gazing with satisfaction on the scene below him. Behind him, his officers were silent. One held the rein of his black charger; another his sword.

"This is the true Gate," said Subotai at length, and they assented.

But the voices were barely heard, because on their left hand a swollen river roared over a series of falls, and the spray rising above it formed a deep rainbow that stretched from cliff to cliff of the gorge. Under the arch in the sky could be seen, thousands of feet below, the unbroken green of the northern plain.

But it was the pass itself that filled the Mongols with awe. The red rock walls rose in serried columns, pillars of basalt, shot through with gleaming porphyry.

In all the pass grew no trees or shrubs. From three to four thousand feet above their heads the tips of the gigantic colonnade seemed to brush the clouds. And the howling of wind in the spaces above mingled with the reverberation of the falls.¹

Beside the river a line of riders was making its way slowly down, following the precarious path from ledge to ledge. And the warriors who were waiting their turn to descend looked about uneasily, believing that this colonnade of stone had been fashioned by giants and that the tumult of the falls was an angry voice threatening them.

"There is a writing on the stone behind the *Orluk*," said one.

Subotai had chosen to seat himself in the break of a ruined wall, his curiosity aroused by lines of granite

¹This must have been the pass of Dariel, called by the Romans the Caucasian Gate, or Iberian Gate.

blocks and fallen pillars nearly covered with rubble and the débris of the cliff. He had asked the Cathayan and the Syrian *rabbans* to read the inscription in the rock, but they had not been able to do so.

"This was once a citadel," said Subotai without hesitation, "and the man who built it knew his business. See, it commands the road."

"Still, there be spirits of the air in this place," murmured a noble of Cathay. "Surely there are devils."

The creaking of the carts, the snapping of whips, and the bellowing of the remnants of the cattle—all these were caught up and echoed back and forth between the cliffs. A horse neighed, and the rocks screamed and whined again until the sound dwindled away to a whisper among the crags. The Mongols glanced upward and shuddered. Thunder and echoes were the two things they feared on God's earth.

Probably if Subotai had ordered the kettledrums sounded the drummers would have obeyed, but they were praying that the Eagle might not give such an order.

Subotai, impervious to devils, glanced at the throng of prisoners and grunted softly. In front of the ruins the courier Arslan was standing, and by him the crusader.

"*Hai!*" Subotai's green eyes gleamed. "What word do you bring?"

Arslan advanced, touched his forehead, lips and breast, and pointed to the small herd guarded by his men.

"The Georgians do not stir. I have many horses."

"They are yours. What of the Swooping Hawk?"

"He came to us with one horse. He was wounded."

When Subotai nodded for him to approach, Hugh

came forward, conscious of the exclamations of the officers.

"Where is the chieftain of Almalyk? Where is Gutchluk?"

"Slain," Hugh responded briefly, his eyes intent on the broad face of the Mongol, terrible with anger.

"And you live! *Hough!* You will join them in the shadowland. You will be cast into the rushing water, and after this hour you will cease to be."

"If that is your will." Hugh was aware of warriors moving toward him from behind, and he knew better than to touch his sword. "But we have poured water on our swords, Subotai."

Instead of answering, the Mongol ground his teeth and rocked on his hips, the red hairs of his thin mustache bristling over his blue lips.

"*Hough!* I sent four thousand Georgians out of the world. They will remember that they cut off the heads of my envoys. We came among them as wolves among sheep. Now——"

Hugh spoke suddenly, pointing his finger at the Mongol, who was working himself into a murderous rage.

"Have you forgotten the order of the great Khan?"

Sheer surprise at the interruption kept Subotai silent, though the veins in his temples began to throb.

"The order was that you should go to the Western world," Hugh went on.

"Speak!"

"You have turned your reins to the north."

"Ay, to avoid the great water, the sea. We cannot go upon the sea. I will find the road again, though dust

storms rise and magicians make their veils in the air.”¹

“But you cannot find your way to the Golden Chersonese, which is the city of the Emperor, because it lies between land and the great water.”

For a moment Subotai pondered this, remembering that the captive tribesmen had been able to tell him nothing of this rich city—at least, they had all told him different tales, vainly hoping their lives would be spared. Hugh, watching him with every faculty alert, interrupted his meditation.

“Have you seen the Sign?”

Subotai glanced at the rainbow and at the crusader inquiringly. Hugh was pointing at the block of granite upon which the lettering was carved.

“What says the Sign?” the Orluk asked, moved by irresistible curiosity.

The officers, who had been hanging on the words, sat down to listen the better. Hugh could not read the half-effaced inscription, but he knew it must be Latin by the form of the letters.

“The meaning of the Sign is that this was once a post of the Empire, and beyond this point lies peril for an invader.”

Subotai contemplated the débris that nearly covered the ruins and grunted.

“Is there much gold in the Chersonese? How much?”

“A hundred camels could not carry it away, nor a hundred men the precious stones.”

“*Kai!* I have seen more than that. Some men say the

¹Mirages. The Mongols were acquainted with this phenomenon in the Gobi.

Chersonese is a castle and a garden built at the end of a neck of land running into the sea. Across the neck is a wall. Do they lie?"

"Nay, it is so."

"And in the sea around the castle are *yurtas* that float on the water and carry men about."

"Ay, ships."

"We would break our teeth on the wall, and the *yurtas* of the sea would carry the Greeks away before we entered the castle."

Hugh smiled, because he knew that Subotai had been questioning captives, that he longed to take the city of the Emperor.

"Once," he said, "Subotai Bahadur told me the strength of a wall is not in the thickness of its stone but in the men that defend it. I know the Emperor and his hired soldiery."

Once more curiosity quenched the anger of the Mongol.

"Speak!"

"There is a way to carry the wall that bars the Chersonese from the land—ay, though the wall be high as four lances—and to ride in among the Greeks before they can flee in their galleys. Not ten men of the Horde would die."

Subotai, with another Mongol general, had forced his way through the great wall of Cathay by a stratagem. Now his eyes gleamed.

"What is your plan, O Swooping Hawk?"

It was the first time he had addressed the crusader by his Mongol name, and Hugh answered boldly.

"Give me Arslan and a ten of warriors. I will fare to the Chersonese, and when the hour comes the gate in the wall will be opened. It would be your part to approach unseen at night with a *tuman*."

"How will you seize the gate?"

Hugh folded his arms on the hand guard of Durandal, outwardly calm enough, though he was strung to feverish tension within.

"If Subotai Bahadur has given command to put me to death, I can do nothing."

"I have not given the order." For a moment the Mongol looked at the crusader without blinking, and men heard again the roar of the falls and the overtones of the echoes. "A devil is in you! Before, in the valley of the Caucasus, you were like a man hesitating between two roads. Now you are like a rider who grips the saddle and looks far ahead."

"Ay." Hugh laughed deep in his throat. "The way is clear."

"Good. Then tell me the plan."

"Where many listen it is not good to talk."

Subotai grunted impatiently and motioned his followers away. Hugh squatted down beside him, smoothing a place in the snow and drawing upon it with his dagger point while he talked. The Mongol rested his hands on his knees and bent his head to see the better. He seemed not to notice that his companion had drawn steel within arm's reach.

When Hugh had done, the dagger still rested in his fingers, and Subotai meditated for the time that water takes to boil.

"You have many foes in the Chersonese," he muttered, pulling at his mustache.

"So may you be certain that the gate will be opened."

Again Hugh laughed under his breath. He knew the strength of the Chersonese, where a suspicion-ridden Emperor exiled himself to be safe from attack. Somewhere in the Chersonese he would find Rusudan.

He knew that Subotai wished him no ill. The fate of the Mongol envoys slain by the Georgians would be fresh in Subotai's mind, and there was no knowing how the Eagle might choose to satisfy his anger upon the crusader. If Subotai refused his advice it would be because the Mongol suspected him, and if so, there was no least doubt what would happen.

Suddenly Subotai struck his gnarled hands together.

"*Kai!* There is surely a devil in you, Swooping Hawk. I wished to learn your plan so that the way would be open to me. Now I see that, alone among the Horde, you can open the portal of the Chersonese." And he uttered the phrase that pardoned an offender against Mongol law, "You are without blame."

Hugh sighed from the depths of his body and slipped the dagger back into its sheath.

"Would you have stabbed me if I had said otherwise?" the old Mongol asked suddenly.

"I would have held the knife to your throat and tried to escape."

This evidently amused Subotai mightily, because he threw back his head and chuckled, all the wrinkles in his bronze face coming to life.

"Oho-ho-o! The cub would spring at the lion."

Without the slightest stiffening of muscles or sign of what he was about to do, his left hand shot out and closed on Hugh's right forearm. Before the crusader could tighten his muscles against the pressure the iron fingers of the old warrior were grinding the steel rings into his flesh, twisting the sinews and making the bones move in their sockets.

"Thus," he said, "it would have been."

The swift action roused him and put him in a pleasant mood.

"We will ride to the Chersonese, you and I. I will see that long sword at its work. We have been sitting too long like women milking camels." He stood up and roared an order. "*Tugh!*"

The standard pole with its nine ox-tails was raised, and his horse led forward. The Mongol drummers, with a desperate glance skyward, sounded the long roll that was the summons for the officers to come to their commands. And, straightway, the echoes roared as if a thousand drums were thundering in the air.

"But I will give no more than ten men," Subotai muttered. "They who are sent with you do not come back."

The Horde advanced into the northern steppe, leaving the snow and descending into the shallow valleys. It entered a wilderness of lush grass and abundant game. And the horses, thinned by a winter in the mountains, began to grow round-bellied.

The herders sang once more as they rode around the mass of horses at night; hunters went out from every regiment and came back with bear, deer, and even some

of the wild buffalo that ranged the fringe of the Caucasus and seemed to the Mongols to be the cousins of the yak of Tibet.

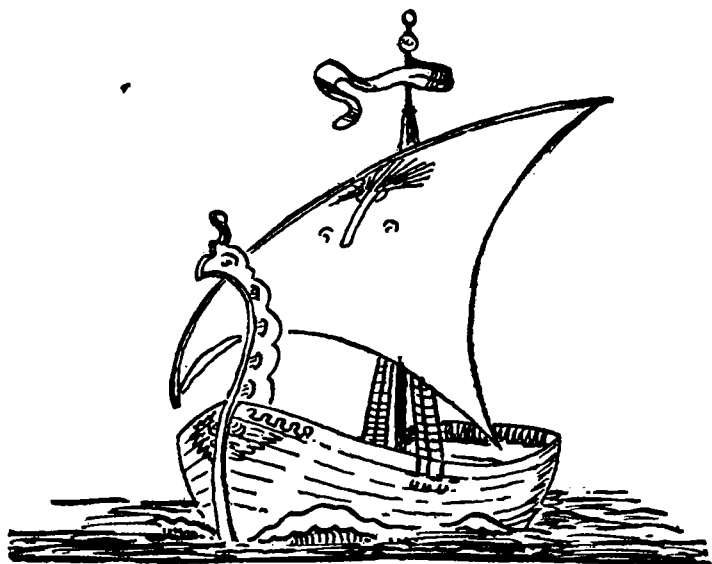
Here in the open plain the riders were at home. They scattered in groups of two or three thousand, so the animals would have good grazing, and they guided themselves by the stars until the advanced scouts rode in to report a multitude of tribes assembling to meet them.

Then couriers were sent to the scattered units of the Horde, and the *tumans* formed for battle. Subotai learned that the new foes were Alans—he called them Aärs—and Kumanians, nomads like themselves, who had drifted out of Central Asia in past ages, but softened by the milder life of the southern steppes.

These same steppes had grown brown. The fierce winds of midsummer whipped the feather grass, the black earth was cracked and coated with powder-like dust, before word of this battle reached the outposts of the Greek Empire. Then it was whispered that the Mongols had crushed the stalwart Alans and had driven off the wild Kumanians as hawks drive quail apart.

Some of the Kumanians had fled to the Russian dukes, and the host of the Russians was mustering to stem the Mongol advance with its swords.

On the whole this news was pleasing to the Emperor, who had long been troubled by the raids of the Kumanians and the half-pagan Slavs. And as time went on, with no further word from the steppes, he felt certain that the invaders from Cathay had been hurled back or so decimated by fighting that they had withdrawn into the barrens from which they had come.



CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MOST MAGNIFICENT

THEODORE LASCARIS, inheritor of the last of the realm of Constantine, had been greatly cheered by the visit of his Arab physician that day. Although there were skilled doctors among the Greeks in the palace, Theodore trusted the disciple of Avicenna more than his countrymen. And the Arab *hakim* had told him that the fever had left him. The long illness that had kept him on his couch for nearly a year would soon be at an end.

"*Ehu!*" The Emperor raised himself weakly on his

arm. "Three hundred gilt candles I vow to Hagia Sophia. Eh, Rusudan?"

The girl who sat among the slaves bent her head. Her hands moved over the embroidery stretched on its sandalwood frame.

"What sayest thou, Rusudan?"

"God gives."

"Ay—ay." Lascaris crossed himself hastily on forehead and breast. "Exalted be His name for the ages. But the worthy Saracen is a truth speaker. Recovery is sure."

Rusudan bent lower her dark head so that the sick man could not read her face though he tried. The other women whispered among themselves.

"Bring me wine—a little, cooled by snow—Rusudan."

The supple hands of the Georgian ceased their task, and she stuck the needle upright in the cloth, rising to go to an inner chamber where the chief of the eunuchs sat. She returned with a goblet of Venetian glass and knelt by the couch of the sick man.

"Taste!" he ordered.

As she had done many times before, she sipped a little of the wine and held the goblet so that Theodore could watch her face until he was satisfied the wine had no poison dissolved in it. He could see her very clearly because it was near the hour of vespers when the sun, sinking into the sea, filled the long gallery of the palace with a ruddy glow.

Even the carpet was tinged by this glow, likewise the heavy canopy of Tyrian purple over the couch. The head of the Emperor, bloodless in its pallor, was faintly flushed; flesh had fallen away from the bone so much

that the aspect was that of a skull, for his hair had been clipped close.

"Eh, Rusudan," he murmured, "thou dost hate me, without doubt. A self-willed barbarian, an unwilling captive, and a scornful attendant. Thou hast mocked the worthy *strategos* until I do believe he was moved to make thee a gift to me. I bear with thee because no one would give thee gold to do harm to me."

The downcast eyes of the girl gleamed resentfully.

"A daughter of the Lashas accepts no reward for service."

"Then surely the Lashas are descended from Olympus! Hmm. The eunuchs all complain of thee for good reason, I doubt not."

Something like a smile wrinkled his lips. Rusudan had all but knifed to death an Egyptian eunuch who had tried to punish her. The incident delighted Theodore, though he had the dagger taken from her.

And he noticed that the Arab physician talked with her but would not speak to the slave girls.

"Many Lashas have died in defense of the lord Emperor," she made answer quietly.

He motioned for her to give him the goblet, and drank slowly, taking no heed, apparently, of her words. Theodore was resourceful and utterly merciless, and these qualities had kept him safe from assassination for twelve years. Even his distant cousins, the Comneni, feared him, though he did not doubt they plotted against him. As for Choaspes, he fancied the *strategos* of the Caucasus was too indolent to be unpleasantly ambitious and, besides, had been absent a long time from the court.

His informers reported that Choaspes did nothing but hold revels in his galley and row from villa to villa along the coast, squandering money among his intimates.

"Yet Choaspes," he remarked suddenly, "is not wont to give away anything he cherishes."

He leaned back on the mass of cushions considering her. A girl too slender for perfect proportion—too wide in the lips and chin for perfect beauty—her dark tresses contrasting charmingly with her fair skin; too impulsive to hide her likes and dislikes, and inclined to weep when she was alone, though not before others. She had nursed him faithfully, and understood the Arab's instructions easily.

And when she sang she could drive away this weariness that came on the heels of the fever.

"Take thy cithara, Rusudan," he said, "and sing."

Obediently the girl put away the goblet and picked up the instrument, seating herself on the threshold of the balcony at a distance from the couch. Her clear young voice soared within the chamber, rising to the dome of mosaic-work that pictured angels grouped under a gold cross.

*"'Arg, my falcon, is quick to see
Quest and quarry and fly back to me——'"*

The Greek slaves, trained to the lute and to gentler harmony, fidgeted and smiled, wishing to show their disapproval, but Lascaris relished the savage undertone of the Gypsy song.

Many times had Rusudan repeated the song, and when

she had finished she half closed her eyes, leaning her head against the marble pillar, thinking of anything but the whispering women and the glow of sunset on the yellow marble. It was months since she had quieted Hugh in his fever with that same song.

As she meditated she was aware of another singer, a man with a lusty voice and none too sensitive an ear. For a while she could not catch the words; then she remembered that it was an Arabian air, and one she knew very well, though the singer improvised the words.

“*‘Ask for the stars,
O Miriam!
I will pluck them for thee,
For Miriam.’*”

Some of the Greek slaves heard it too, and went out on the balcony to look down at the sea.

“It is the young Bokharian,” one of them whispered.

“The slave dealer?”

“He rows all around the quays and even dares come near the palace itself. Hark to him!”

“*‘Ask not the moon,
Sweet Miriam,
For that I have pledged—
To Zuleika!’*”

When the other women had gone in, Rusudan stood up, tossed the dark mass of her hair back from her throat, and sauntered out on the balcony as if seeking the cool air that came off the sea in the evening.

A hundred feet below her a small barge rowed by Negroes was making the circuit of the promontory on which the palace stood. On the cushions in the stern was visible a figure in a striped *khalat* and a broad turban of gleaming blue silk.

Rusudan thought she had seen such garments on a horse trader who used to come to the castle at Tiflis, but when the singer looked up she knew this was not the man. He had round cheeks and no beard at all. The little thrill of hope that had risen in her at the familiar refrain and the Moslem garments died.

The barge went on its way with even strokes of the oars, keeping its distance from the rock because it was forbidden any craft to approach near the promontory.

Upon this great mass of rock the palace of the Chersonese had been built, its walls of yellow marble rising sheer from the slope of the stone. Here and there towers peered above the many roofs of the miniature city. Rusudan had heard from the Greek slave girls, who seemed to know everything, that the rock under them had been honeycombed by the waters of other ages, and passages descended into its depths—passages that led to chambers where the torturers of the Emperor kept their instruments.

She had been told that long ago the ship of Jason and his Argonauts had sailed under this promontory, seeking Colchis. Others said that Mithridates, the lord of the Bosphorus, had been wont to sit in a throne carved in the summit of the rock, to review his fleets of galleys. She noticed that some of the columns of the porticoes were

Roman work, and that the yellow marble was certainly very old.

Many times she had thought of trying to escape; but anyone who leaped from the balconies would be dashed against the jagged slope of rock. Besides, at night the guard boats of the Genoese patrolled the promontory.

As for trying to make her way to the shore, that was impossible. Eunuchs guarded the quarters of the women, and Greek spearmen guarded every corridor and wall that led to the one gate of the palace. From this gate a narrow path ran along the ridge to the shore, in places not wide enough for a man to pass a horse.

At the far end of this neck of land was a massive wall flanked by towers rising from the steep cliff of the shore. This wall was a citadel in itself, always held by several companies of archers and men-at-arms under a trusted officer. No one could come out to the palace or leave it without being scrutinized.

Rusudan knew every detail of the shore, with its wide half-moon harbor filled with galleons from Genoa and clumsy craft of Constantinople, with swift little caïques plying among them, and the pleasure galleys and barges of the Greeks drifting from cove to cove.

Beyond the masses of painted wooden houses that lined the waterfront were rolling hills. But they were utterly unlike the giant Caucasus, and they did not comfort the lonely Rusudan.

Now that the sun had set, the glow left the marble walls. Rusudan shivered, listening to the drone of the swell below her. The palace, with its spearmen in silvered mail, its barefoot slaves and throngs of whispering men,

seemed to the girl to be a gigantic prison, and he who lay on the couch under the purple canopy in the dusk appeared to the girl to be not its master but one of its multitude of slaves.

Rusudan really felt sorry for Theodore. She could hear him now, talking low-voiced to someone—a slender Lombard in hose and damask doublet, who knelt on the carpet, shielding his eyes with his arm as if from a dazzling light.

Because the Emperor must have forgotten her presence on the balcony, she kept very still and listened. The Emperor was asking for news of the city, and the Lombard surely was an informer.

"No furs have come in from the northern trading posts, our agents say, may it please your august Majesty. There has been fighting on the Dnieper."

"So near? The tribesmen?"

"May your Clemency be enlightened! The savage Russians of the northern forests were slaughtered and scattered by the pagans from Cathay—the Horde, as it is called."

"Ah." Theodore was silent a moment. "I remember Choaspes described them to me."

"Some say they are the spawn of Gog and Magog, the soldiers of Antichrist come out of the deserts."

"They will not leave the steppes. But send Kallinos to me."

To Kallinos, commander of the mounted archers, the girl heard Theodore give orders to station outposts in the hills and to arrange a beacon where the highroad from the North came within sight of the Chersonese five

miles distant—this in case the pagans should send raiding parties down toward the sea.

Then Rusudan slipped away into another corridor, past the guards of the women's quarters, to her chamber that was next the apartment of the Domastikos, the chamberlain who was charged to watch over her.

An oil lamp burned near her pallet—she must always have a light in the room—and a wrinkled Scythian woman, with the marks of slave bracelets still on her arms, glided from the shadows.

"Come, Kyria, I have prepared rose-sweetened sherbet and stuffed olives and rice with——"

"But I am not hungry."

"Kyria, if you do not eat sweets you will not become plump and beautiful."

Rusudan took up the bronze mirror on the ebony stand by her bed and looked at herself for a moment. Then she went to the window, throwing herself down on the floor and resting her head on her arms.

She could still see the port with its anchored ships, and for a while she watched a curtained galley that moved slowly seaward. Lanterns were hung about the deck of the pleasure craft, and she heard the lilt of a woman's voice and the clear melody of a harp.

"That is the boat of Choaspes the mighty lord," observed the woman behind her. "He sends daily to ask of your health."

"He has a sheep's heart and a lying tongue," declared Rusudan suddenly.

"*Ai*, he is not a hard master."

Rusudan watched the boat move away toward the

villa of the *strategos* and heard the chant of men's voices, rhythmical and sure—of men indolent and happy and full-fed—and the chant was an invocation to the gods that had once been worshiped when Greece ruled this shore, seeking forgetfulness in its paradise.

But Rusudan, remembering many things, buried her dark head in her arms. The Scythian, watching her covertly, began to eat the dainties prepared for her mistress.

Arslan flung a handful of silver at the blacks who had rowed his barge, watched them scramble for the coins, and swaggered away down the stone jetty, one hand on his scimitar hilt.

He sniffed the reek of fish frying in oil in a cookshop, but hastened on without pausing until he dived into the dark alleys of the Genoese quarter, and came to a mud house without windows but with a spacious courtyard where a group of hawk-faced and turbaned warriors lay in the sand around a fire.

They greeted him with growls, and he grinned as he answered them.

"What! Ye have eaten—there is wine! Sleep and grow fat!"

Still, they were not content and said so.

"Then take service with the Greeks." Arslan chuckled. "Nay, it is not ten days that we came hither over the sea, the Swooping Hawk showing the way. Before then ye made moan because the boat went up and down and side-wise, as is the manner of boats. And before that ye were weary of waiting. But *he* is not weary."

"Is there word yet?" asked one.

"In this place is the talk of many lands. *Kai*, I have learned the price of Cyprian wine and of men with black skins."

The warrior cursed, and another rose up to stretch and spit. Arslan had chosen his followers from among the Uighurs and the Almalyk Turks, and the result was a fair resemblance to Muhammadans in dress and bearing, but he dared not trust them in the streets and he found them less patient than steppe wolves.

He had come to the Chersonese by night and had rented the house near the waterfront without much trouble, having gold as well as silver. A Bokharian bringing slaves from the Caucasus might readily desire secrecy.

"We be weary of sitting on carpets," another warrior complained. "Let us go to the horse market."

"And be sitting on stakes for the Greeks to stare at. Only the nobles ride in this place."

It irked Arslan that he had to make his way around on foot, and that he could not pick a quarrel.

"Detachments of cavalry have gone forth," he observed thoughtfully, "and there is talk of guarding the roads. The time appointed is not distant."

When they would have questioned him more, he went into the house, stepping over three Circassian women asleep on the carpet. They were young and not ill-looking, and Arslan had brought them to play the part of slaves—himself the dealer.

Behind the curtain of the inner room he confronted Hugh.

"It is true," he said, "she is in the castle, out in the

water. Yesterday I talked with the beggars by the sea gate and learned nothing. To-day I rowed around the palace and saw her face among other women."

"Beyond doubt?"

"She sang of the falcon, as in the Caucasus."

"Did she know your face?"

"How can I tell? It was high, the balcony. *Wai-a!* Twenty javelin lengths and impossible to climb." Arslan appeared to meditate on other balconies and other women. "A guard shouted at us to go away. At night there are boats with lanterns."

"You have done well." The eyes of the crusader brightened. "To-morrow you must go to the outwork of the palace and say that you wish to tell the young nobles about some new Circassian slaves. Give silver, but do not let the Greeks see gold. Ask no questions, but if you can get within the palace itself, look at everything and count the guards. Fail not to salaam to all the servants and kiss the ground before the *amirs*—the nobles."

Arslan grunted, but the prospect seemed to please him.

"And have a skiff brought to the garden of this *yurta*," added Hugh. "A skiff with two oars."

"Why?"

"It would not be safe for you to be seen around the rock again. I have watched from the roof. Few go near it. But I will take the skiff and go alone at the same hour."

"Nay, too many in the place know your face."

"They knew me before I had this." The crusader touched the scar on his cheek.

Arslan scrutinized his companion shrewdly. Hugh's

red-gold beard had been shaved and his long hair clipped. His gambeson and mail had been discarded for a wadded robe and a sheepskin shoulder cloak with a hood that could be drawn up over his head, but the poise of the long body, the stride of a man accustomed to spurs and authority, were not to be concealed by the scar of the sword cut that ran from eye to chin.

"Nay," he said again, "in a boat there is no hiding. Have we come to the Chersonese to free a single woman or to prepare the way for Subotai? It is our task to open a road, and that was the *yassa*."

"It is my task to open the gate—yours to obey."

"That may be—" the broad face of the short Mongol grew stubborn—"but if you are slain, how am I to finish what is barely begun?"

For answer Hugh drew the falcon tablet from the breast of his robe, and Arslan nodded.

"The *paizah* of authority—ay, so. But it is no part of our duty to go out in a small boat under the eyes of a hundred Greeks for a word with a captive Georgian."

"Hearken and remember this," Hugh said quietly. "If Subotai can seize the Chersonese he will have silks and ivory, red leather and precious stones, horses and gold and other things past counting. But I will find Rusudan, and she will be mine."

Arslan yawned and stretched his arms and looked around for his blankets.

"It is all one to me. But it is useless to try to trick the Greeks. Even an Armenian could not do that."



CHAPTER XXIX

DUSK

ARSLAN came back from the promontory gate the next day very well pleased with himself and wearing the inquisitive look of a hound that has scented game—though he himself reeked to the evening skies. He had visited a barber in the bathhouse by the square, and his cheeks had been touched up with rice dust, his head drenched with attar of roses.

At the palace he had beheld undreamed-of magnificence and a multitude of human beings that bewildered him. He was thinking of the tales he would tell his men,

as he crossed the square again—the open square of the rambling city, called the plaza by the Genoese, who liked to gossip under its poplars.

It was very quiet in the plaza, though groups of seamen and soldiers were thronging around the doors of near-by taverns. Arslan saw a Greek horseman gallop across the garden plots, plying his whip.

As he passed through the alleys leading to the waterfront he noticed that the shop doors were closed and few people were visible, but in the shadow of the warehouses, where the smell of sour wine hung in the air, he observed men in armor and heard the *click-click-click* of crossbows being wound.

“Eh,” he thought, “such is the custom of this place—all the watchmen assemble in one band and go around with lights and noise so that even the dogs run from them.”

It amused him a little, this need of locks and armed men, for in the Horde the tent dwellings were always open, and thieves unknown.

But here in the city of the Emperor were Goths and Bulgarians of the army who preyed upon the Greeks, and Genoese who exacted usury from all.

When he entered the courtyard of his house Arslan looked up in surprise. His men were sitting around a pot of mutton stew, dipping in with their fingers, obviously in high good-humor. Some were whetting the edges of swords, others sorting arrows and tightening the grips of shields.

“What is this?” he asked.

They wiped their hands on their breeches and crowded around him.

"How are we to know?" one said. "We heard talk of horse herds entering the hills, and surely Subotai Bahadur comes."

"Ye heard talk!" Arslan echoed grimly. "Not here."

"In the taverns, where these people go to drink wine, instead of sitting with guests in their *yurtas*. We were weary of this pen, and we did not go far. Is there word from Subotai the *Orluk*?"

"Nay, the time is not yet."

His followers fingered their weapons and muttered. "Then perhaps there is a war among these people."

"Why?"

"A *noyon* mounted on a white horse of good breed reined into the yard of the wine shop and summoned warriors to him. He gave them money, and they beckoned up others who went with them from the tavern."

"Dogs!" cried the Mongol. "Could ye not eat and sleep without scratching up an ant-hill?"

Very angry was Arslan, because it seemed to him that his men had brought suspicion on the house.

"The Swooping Hawk will lash ye! *He* is not as formerly. He does not jest any more, and often he sits thus."

The Mongol rested his chin on both hands, frowning.

"*Kai*," nodded a warrior. "At such times he holds his sword across his knees."

"When he came to us," went on Arslan reflectively, "he was seeking a road back to his tribe. He bore the great sword that had prevailed against his enemies. Now he has found the road, and he is at the very door of his

country, but he cannot show his face because the lord of these people has put a price on his head."

"And there is a woman."

"Truly, a young woman with soft lips and dark eyes. But now she is a favorite of the Greek Emperor."

Arslan shook his head sagely.

"He has been out on the water a long time," observed another. "With the two sticks of wood he pushed the little *yurta* out toward the palace until we could only see a speck under the rock."

"And then?"

"And then we—we were weary."

Arslan muttered angrily and went to the flat roof of the house to look for the skiff. The sun had set, and the galleys at the quays and the long promontory itself were a shadowy outline upon the gleam of water. Arslan looked back at the hills before leaving the roof, and uttered an exclamation. He hastened down to the courtyard, his *khalat* flapping around his short legs.

"The Sign!" he cried. "Look!"

They gathered around him and peered at the line of hills behind the city. A few stars were visible, but within the break of the hills where the highroad lay, three red eyes winked at them, faint and flickering in the near-darkness.

"The signal of Subotai Bahadur," they assented.

Arslan had instructed them to watch by turns during the nights for the lighting of three fires on the ridge five miles away. This would mean that a detachment of Mongols had come down from the steppes, moving by night until this last day, when the horsemen would press for-

ward, changing from pony to pony, outpacing the news of their coming.

"Ye know the plan," exclaimed the stout little Mongol. "Subotai Bahadur will gallop down the highroad as a bat flits through darkness. When he sees the first hamlets of the city he will order the drums to sound. Before then we must be at the gate in the wall that defends the neck of land and the castle at the far end."

"Ai-a!"

"That was the plan. The Swooping Hawk will lead us. We will go by the alleys and gardens—I have marked the way—to the gate and lie hidden until the drums sound. Then we will run forward, and the Swooping Hawk will call out to open the gate—that there is danger. Perhaps they will not open the great doors, but they will let us in through the little door to hear the message. Then must we draw our weapons and drive away the guards—in the mid-watches no more than a score are awake—and open the great doors, holding our ground until the first riders of the Horde come up. After that we will see. I think we can reach the palace itself before the dogs of Greeks are astir."

It was a hazardous plan, depending on the prompt arrival of the Mongols after the signal, and the tricking of the guards. How long twelve men could hold the open gate against the swarming Greeks, Arslan did not know. But he had confidence in Sir Hugh; and he knew that the moments between the roll of the drums and the arrival of Subotai's riders would be few indeed.

Other cities had the Mongols taken in just such fashion, in the darkness.

"If he sees the signal he will return. But if he is taken by the Emperor's men——" Arslan groaned and clutched his belt, trying to reason out what he should do.

The Mongols, after lighting the fires, would rest an hour, to make sure the signal was seen. In less than another hour they would be in the Chersonese. Arslan wondered how long the fires had been going before he saw them.

"Listen," one of his men whispered.

Outside the courtyard there was a sound of hurrying feet, and low-pitched voices—a movement of armed men, he knew, by the weight of the tread and the clinking of steel. When the sounds dwindled down the alley he drew a long breath of relief.

But there were other sounds that puzzled him—the galloping of horses hither and yon, a buzz of talk as a door was flung open; somewhere a trumpet blared.

The hair quivered up the back of his neck when he went to the roof again. Unless his eyes deceived him some of the galleys that had been anchored farther out were in motion toward the shore. And from the palace a long line of torches were coming along the ridge, toward the very gate that was to be their object of attack.

Meanwhile the bustle outside the courtyard grew louder. With the darkness, the Chersonese seemed to be astir. Arslan uttered a prayer to long-forgotten gods and thought of the furnaces and irons of the Greek torturer. Then he heard his name called. Sir Hugh was in the courtyard.

The crusader had entered from the alley and was swiftly putting on his mail hauberk, thigh-pieces, and mit-

tens. He drew the coif of ringed steel over his head and belted on his sword, while the Mongols clustered around him silently.

"The Genoese are mustering in their quarter of the town," he said. "Men under arms hold the plaza."

"Why?"

Hugh shook his head. He had rowed close to the promontory, until crossbow bolts whizzing past his head had driven him away. The sun was setting then, and he noticed the stir in the city. Heading into one of the quays, he walked through the plaza and noticed bands of men under arms. But he had met with silence rather than outcry.

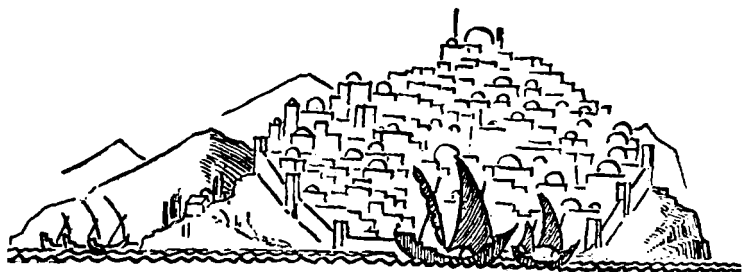
"We have seen the three fires in the hills," cried Arslan.

The crusader jerked tight the buckle of his belt, turned to look at the signal that flickered through the darkness. Running to the garden wall, he stared out at the bay—at the torches that were thronging from the castle. The Mongols followed him expectantly, as dogs press close to the heels of their master.

Listening to the tread of feet in the alley, he gripped the hilt of Durandal and tried the blade in its sheath.

"By the splendor of God," he said laughing, "there will be many to keep us company at the gate."

He went to the door, flinging it open, and strode into the darkness. The eleven warriors followed him.



CHAPTER XXX

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

THE restless stirring of the city had not penetrated to the palace. Late that afternoon the courtiers still sat about the fountain that tossed its scented spray into the hot air of the central inclosure. Some of them dined or gossiped. The yellow marble walls still gave out the heat of the sun's rays.

Imperial guardsmen in silver scale mail chatted at the foot of the long stairs that led from the court of the fountain to the Emperor's chambers, which were on the side farthest from the land.

They greeted familiarly the slender figure of the Arab *hakim*, Abu Bekr, in his immaculate white cotton robe and hood, as he made his way into the presence.

"Thanks to thine arts, the Most Magnificent gains in health."

The Arab brushed his fingers against his forehead and answered enigmatically.

"What Allah hath done is well done."

He passed through the outer corridors and salaamed low at the threshold of the chamber that opened upon the balcony over the sea. A glance at his patient showed him that Theodore seemed comfortable.

At that moment the Emperor was talking with several nobles. But he soon tired of that, and Abu Bekr asked them to leave the sick man. Then the physician felt Theodore's pulse and squatted down on the carpet by the couch, thrusting his hands into his sleeves, dignified and silent.

"Recovery is sure?" questioned the Emperor, who spoke Arabic well.

"What is written may not be changed, O King of the age. But all the signs are favorable."

"Now am I at ease," Theodore fingered his thin lips. "Thou, *hakim*, and the girl Rusudan cause me no anxiety. The others all come to beg for something."

He gazed at the Georgian captive with pleasure, because he took delight in beauty and knew it when he saw it. Often he had thanked the gods that Choaspes had seen fit to make her a hostage. He did not quite know what Choaspes planned to do with the Georgian, but it was advisable not to have a young woman on the throne of one of the most warlike of the frontier peoples and, besides, he might arrange a marriage for her—with a Greek.

And he wondered what Rusudan could find to think about as she sat by the window of the balcony, watching the water with eager eyes.

"The wine, Rusudan," he said.

After a moment's hesitation, she rose and went past

the giant Ethiopian who stood, motionless as the onyx pillar of the doorway, with his hands folded on the hilt of a bared scimitar. Whenever any one entered or left the chamber the Negro moved his head a little and looked at Theodore. But he had grown accustomed to the Georgian, and he did not move as she brushed by him, merely breathing deep, as a dog does when half asleep.

She filled the Emperor's goblet from a jar brought by a little deaf-mute girl, and at the same time the *domastikos*, who was the chamberlain of the palace, offered her the tray with Theodore's supper. The sick man had asked for seasoned food, and the tray held a dish of rice curry.

Rusudan smiled, because the *domastikos*, in his high cap of cloth-of-silver and his curls glistening with oil, always amused her. Since she had the favor of the sick Emperor, the officials of the palace always bowed profoundly to her and addressed her as Kyria.

"It is a wonder," murmured the Greek, "that any woman should have such color without henna stain, and such clear eyes as the most fortunate Kyria."

Rusudan looked at him without answering, and the Greek seemed uncomfortable, perhaps because she gave the silver tray to the little girl to hold. While she knelt by the couch beside the deaf-mute slave Rusudan's thoughts went out to the water. She did not taste the wine as she usually did before the Emperor drank of it. And as soon as he had emptied the goblet she hastened to the window.

For an hour that afternoon she had watched Hugh in his skiff, not daring to go to the balcony while the eyes

of the Greeks were on her. His face had changed, and in his sheepskins he must have looked to the guards like a fisherman.

But Rusudan knew him by the turn of his head, the thrust of his powerful arms, and his way of lifting his chin. Not many rowers dared come near the palace, and no fisherman would have sat calmly when a crossbow bolt whipped past. Rusudan hardly breathed until he had drifted out from the rocks.

Even then she fastened her eyes on the skiff, noting greedily every swing of the man's shoulders, every slight motion that might mean he had seen her, though he could not have done so within the chamber, at such a height.

Since she had been brought to the court she had heard the story of the crusader who defied the Emperor, and whenever she saw the Genoese, Trevisani, she thought with dismay how she had urged Sir Hugh to seek safety among the Greeks. She understood now that this man would not turn aside from peril, and she told herself that he had come to the Chersonese to seek her.

At times her veins were chilled by the fear that he might be recognized and given to the hands of the silent and beast-like torturers who awaited the summons of Theodore in the passages below the palace. She had seen captive women who screamed at the sight of these men.

But now she quivered with exultation, and her heart sent the blood beating through her body; she could rejoice in his daring, and it seemed to her as if all the men in the chamber must guess her secret—that she had seen

the man she loved, and that somehow he would come near her and she would hear his voice.

Now the skiff was no longer visible, and all the shore was veiled in ruddy twilight. Rusudan rested her head on her arms, her lips half smiling. And then she caught her breath, hearing close behind her a groan that seemed to have come from an animal rather than a human being.

She looked around. The deaf mute still knelt by the couch holding the tray on her arms, but the eyes of the Negro were rolling wildly, and on the couch Theodore lay, tearing at his body with quivering fingers.

"Poison!" he grunted. "It is burning me!"

He flung himself over on his side, coughing and retching and crying for Abu Bekr.

Rusudan stood by the couch, voiceless. The Arab leaned over the Emperor, one knee on the couch, and touched his throat. He seized the chin of the struggling man and looked swiftly into the contorted face. Then he stepped back, glancing at the empty golden dish that had held the rice curry, and at the Georgian girl.

"No man may escape his fate," he said calmly. "For *him* it is the hour appointed, and for thee and me—the All-Wise knoweth."

"You must save him!" the girl cried. "Bring wine."

But Abu Bekr merely shook his head. He turned and went to the other end of the carpet and knelt, bending his head and stretching forth his hands, palm down.

"*Haram dar pishat*," he said under his breath. "The sanctuary is before thee, and lo, there comes a day of days when the believers shall count their joys."

He was facing toward the south, preparing to meet the end of life and oblivious of other matters. Into the chamber thronged the *domastikos*, the captain of the guards, and frightened slaves.

Theodore's lips were drawn back from his teeth, and foam dripped from his mouth.

"Kallinos! Daim! Choaspes! They have poisoned me."

The officers and slaves were staring at him, mouths agape. The glow of sunset had faded from the room, and the purple canopy turned from crimson to a dim black.

"*Ai!*" cried the *domastikos*, wringing his hands. "Your sacred Clemency—your supreme Magnificence——"

He tried to make the Emperor lie down, with fumbling, ineffective movements. In the corridors women were wailing, and more people pressed into the room.

"In this day the righteous and unrighteous shall number their deeds——" the murmur of the Moslem reached Rusudan's ears.

Then Theodore thrust the *domastikos* aside and pulled himself to the edge of the couch, the sweat running from his head, his body jerking with cramps.

"The torturers!" he gasped. "Make the girl speak. She brought wine—she knows!" And he pointed at Rusudan.

"She would not taste of it!" screamed a woman slave.

"The barbarian hath slain the Emperor," cried the *domastikos* loudly. And the women, who had long been jealous of the favor shown Rusudan, echoed his words in shrill voices.

After that there was more tumult outside the room,

but those around the couch kept silent, listening to the heavy breathing of the man who wore the imperial purple. A change had come over Theodore; his eyes were sunken and heavy. He lay prostrate, and his hands kept pushing at the silk covering as if he would raise himself up. Rusudan found herself speaking, very slowly:

"I am guiltless. The wine was given me by this child, who is innocent."

"Thou didst not taste it!" the *domastikos* mocked her.

"The Arab saw. The poison was in the food, not the wine."

No one answered her, and she saw that many of the guards were gazing at her curiously. Rusudan thought that Abu Bekr had known nothing of the plot and that others, unseen, had put the poison in the strongly seasoned curry. Theodore had been very weak.

Hands grasped her shoulders, slid down to her wrists, and she felt a leather cord touch her skin. With all her strength she struggled to free her arms and then to tear herself loose and run to the balcony, to escape the torture by leaping into the sea.

The hands tightened, pressing into her flesh, and the cord was drawn fast. An arm reached around her, slipping the cord about her knees, which were bound and lashed to her wrists. Then she ceased struggling and lifted her head.

"Confess—tell who gave you the poison," demanded the captain of the guards.

"She will not speak—now," retorted the *domastikos*. "She is stubborn."

"No woman can endure the pain," muttered the Greek

officer in the silvered mail, biting his lips. "Better that she named the assassins."

"I know nothing," cried Rusudan, "for I was seized by traitors and brought among you. Ask of the men who have watched their lord dying and have taken thought only for the torment of a captive."

"Begin," said the *domastikos* dryly.

An iron band was slipped over Rusudan's head, and she felt it clasped close upon her hair. She made no effort to see the man who held her; instead she turned her head toward the Greeks, and though there were shadows under her eyes and her lips trembled a little, she spoke to them clearly.

"I will be avenged, and the sword that strikes you down will know no mercy!"

Impatiently the *domastikos* made a sign. Rusudan felt no pain, and she stood very still. The hands moved around her head, and the iron creaked. Then two tiny points of steel pressed into her temples behind the eyes. The girl's body stiffened, and she cried out.

"Again!" a voice demanded.

The points of steel turned slowly, boring through the skin, and blood dripped into her lips. Agony surged into every nerve, and she strained forward. The arms of the torturers caught her and held her upright. They pulled away the strands of damp hair that had caught in the screws when she struggled.

"Again!" commanded the *domastikos*.

But Rusudan did not hear his voice. She lay unconscious in the arms of the torturers, and the *domastikos* turned his attention to the figure on the couch. Then

for the first time one of the men who held Rusudan spoke.

"He is dead."

There was a stir around the couch. Someone laid a hand on the face of Theodore Lascaris, and the unseen women wailed anew. But a tumult arose in the great courtyard, and scarcely a moment had passed before a name was shouted by many throats.

"Choaspes! Choaspes reigns! Long life to the Emperor!"

The officers in the death chamber exchanged glances, anxious, suspicious, or exulting. No one touched a sword, and the *domastikos*, who had watched their faces to good effect, held up his arms.

"The army has chosen the successor to Theodore. Who is better than the scion of the Comneni?"

When no one answered, he turned briskly to the guards nearest him.

"Look to that woman. Take the irons from her, or she will not gain her senses. Then begin with the torture again until she confesses."

The Greeks were pushing from the room. The *domastikos* thrust his way among them, his cap askew on one ear, his face flushed. No one paid any attention to the body on the couch except the giant black who still kept his post, breathing heavily.

Running down the marble stairs, the *domastikos* forced his way through the guards who were grouped around Choaspes. The *strategos* was mounted, and the cloak over his shoulders was purple edged with gold that

gleamed in the torchlight. Bending down, he listened to the whisper of the *domastikos*—

“May your Magnificence live for ten thousand years——”

Choaspes spoke impatiently, and the chamberlain nodded.

“It is finished—all. The Arab was cast from the rock.”

“And you have—a captive?”

“The gods were kind! Theodore himself cried out to torture her.”

“Who?”

“Rusudan.”

Choaspes started, then was silent a moment.

“The little Gypsy! By the throne of Bacchus! Well, she was a barbarian.” His eyes quested through the court, searching faces. “The Bulgars and Goths in the other wing of the palace have held out against us. They are surrounded and will be cut down. Trevisani holds the plaza, and his galleys the waterfront. The mob is wild and knows not what to shout. Toss silver freely among them and they also will cry, ‘Choaspes!’ ”

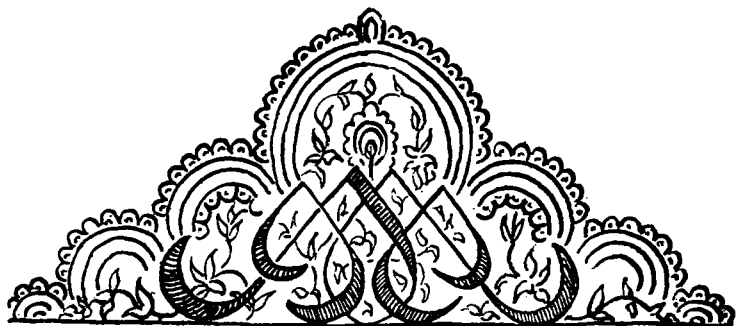
He gathered up his reins that were heavy with silver-work and tassels. The charger he bestrode, a white Dalmatian, edged sidewise and snorted, sensing the excitement of the throng of men. Already that evening Choaspes had ridden him through most of the Chersonese, giving orders to his sympathizers and broaching wine kegs for the mob.

But Choaspes listened to the clatter of steel and the hoarse outcry in the barracks by the gate courtyard. The barbarians who served Theodore had seen their leaders

bound and led away, and had taken to their weapons. In a few moments the fighting lessened, and a Greek lieutenant came to report that the way was clear for the new Emperor to ride into the city.

Then Choaspes gave command for the trumpets to sound. He was exceedingly anxious to win over the thousands in the port before some of his cousins might form a faction against him.

Of Rusudan he did not think again save that it would be diverting to watch the torture of the young girl. It was necessary, now, she should be made to confess that she had given the poison, and Choaspes never questioned necessity.



CHAPTER XXXI

THE SALUTE TO THE KHAN

SIR HUGH thrust his way through a growing crowd until he came within sight of the wall that barred the approach to the palace, and no one tried to oppose him, because all the Chersonese was hastening toward the plaza and the waterfront and this same gate at the land end of the promontory. Besides, after a glance at the crusader, men were at pains to make way for him.

So he reached the first tower and pressed forward until he could see within the gate itself. The massive doors were pulled back and wedged in place by a mass of shouting humanity. A double line of Greek guards with plumed helmets and gilded shields were trying to keep the mob out of the roadway. And up the road companies of armed men were passing into the city streets—Nubians with long bronze shields, grinning in the torchlight; dark-faced Kumanians on restless horses; and men-at-arms in the livery of the Comneni.

Arslan and his ten warriors had managed to keep behind the crusader by dint of curses and drawn swords, and now they gazed at this parade of an emperor's soldiery, bewildered and uneasy.

It was no easy matter to find out what was happening.

"The beacon was seen in the hills," a perspiring seaman explained to Sir Hugh, and others contradicted him at once.

"Nay, a village is burning."

"There were three lights—by the eyes of the gods, a portent!"

"Thou hast licked the cup o'ermuch, Paulo. The Emperor is dead, I say."

But even the most drunk of the throng realized the truth when Choaspes walked his horse under the lifted portcullis of the gate, and the guards shouted his name. There was muttering among the townspeople, and an oath from the seamen. Dread impelled them to shout with the soldiers, but there was a real roar of enthusiasm when the nobles following Choaspes flung handfuls of silver and gold among them.

"Glory to the Christ-loving monarch! May he live for ten thousand years!"

"Hail, the Comnenus!"

"Choaspes, our kind lord."

At the same time the crowd began to surge and try to follow the nobles. Sir Hugh grasped Arslan's shoulder.

"The gate is open," he said quickly, "but ten thousand men are awake and armed. If Subotai has come he will

have no more than a thousand. Go and find horses. Go swiftly to the highroad beyond the town and warn him. Take this for a token."

He ripped the falcon tablet from his throat and thrust it into the Mongol's hand.

"I am going to the palace."

Arslan and his ten melted into the hurrying throng, and the crusader strode to the postern gate and caught the attention of the sentry by whirling him around with steel-meshed fingers that bruised his flesh.

"Is Theodore dead?"

"Ay, by poison." The man twisted, and grew subservient when he could not free himself. "May it please your Mightiness, the barbarian girl Rusudan gave the poison."

For an instant the gray eyes under the dull steel of the helmet were blank, and then the Greek beheld them blaze with sudden anger. He reached for his sword, and the crusader's other hand crushed his wrist.

"What have they done to her?"

"She has been given to the torture."

Sir Hugh flung the Greek against the granite wall, and before any others could stay him he kicked open the postern and stepped through it, swinging it shut behind him.

The guards on the other side paid little attention to an armed man running toward the narrow road that led to the palace. Choaspes's following had passed under the gate, and the motley throng that pressed on the heels of the soldiers made way promptly for the crusader, who had drawn his long sword and had cast away the sheath.

Out on the narrow ridge there were groups of servants who hurried toward the shore anticipating loot, and such of them as bore torches turned to look after Sir Hugh. Unexpected things were happening in the Chersonese that night, and it was not wise to ask questions. Occasional torches guided him along the road where a false step meant a plunge down the bank into the water. He ran swiftly, drawing deep breaths and thrusting forward the weight of the heavy weapon.

It was a quarter of a mile out to the first gate of the palace. Presently he forced himself to walk slowly until he could breathe evenly and the pulse ceased to hammer at his throat. Before him was the lighted portal of the wall, and he knew he would have need of all his strength if he would reach Rusudan.

In the entrance courtyard no one looked at him because the guards and slaves were busy stripping gold armlets and bits of silver work from the bodies of the Goths and Bulgars who had resisted the new Emperor and now lay outstretched on the tiles, their braids of hair bloodsoaked.

Sir Hugh paced through the corridors and turned into a long hall lined with statues on black marble pedestals. Here he halted, uncertain, until he sighted the fountain in the glow of oil lamps that burned in bronze tripods at either side the wide stair that led to the far wing of the palace. He went toward the fountain and found himself in the open central court facing two spearmen who were filling goblets from an opened keg, their bowed iron shields laid aside.

"What man art thou?" one of them hailed him.

He turned in his stride, and they caught up their spears, drawing back before the fury that twisted his lips and scarred his brow.

"O fools," he laughed, "to ask!"

He slashed down with the sword, splintering the spear shafts, and, stepping forward, slew one with a cut over the breastplate.

The other fled, and the crusader picked up one of the heavy shields, thrusting his arm into the leather loops.

Eunuchs in green and blue robes and black slaves had gathered at the head of the stair when they heard the clash of weapons. When Sir Hugh leaped up the marble steps two javelins flew down at him, and these he caught on the shield. The creatures out of Asia shrilled at him, standing their ground until he cut right and left with the massive blade of Durandal.

The slaves screamed and fled as if from death itself, but the long-limbed warrior in mail ran one down, seizing him by the throat.

"Where is the captive, Rusudan?" he asked, and repeated the question in Arabic.

The slave pointed, voiceless, down a corridor to an open door. Sir Hugh's fingers tightened on his throat and then released him, and the slave fell to the floor.

Over the threshold of Theodore's chamber the crusader stepped silently. One glance showed him Rusudan lying on the silk carpet, the dark tangle of her hair spreading over her throat and breast. Beside her rested a brazier, and before this a pallid man in stained leather was sorting over little iron rods, thrusting them into the glowing coals to heat.

Sprawled on the floor, or standing behind the torturer, eight Greeks watched with avid eyes, until one glanced toward the door and, beholding the man in mail with the five-foot blade bared in his hand, sprang up with a warning cry.

“Ware ye!”

The crusader sprang in on them, and the mighty blade of Durandal flashed in a wide circle. The first Greek was dashed against the couch, his light, silvered mail rent, and his body hewn from throat to thigh. The torturer, looking up, was struck between the eyes and rolled and slid along the carpet as Sir Hugh wrenched his weapon from the crushed skull.

This instant's delay gave the seven a chance to cover themselves with their shields and rush in. But the crusader leaped aside and slashed, and leaped away again, as an Arab fights, striking and warding at once.

No time for the point—the edge of Durandal bit through the gilded leather shields of the guards, through the light steel rings, and smote them to the floor. Their weapons clashed on him as he whirled, glancing from the ever moving shield or the lowered helm of tempered steel.

Three of them lay lifeless, though Sir Hugh bled from shoulders and thighs. The other four gripped him close, one man clutching his knees and another his sword arm.

He dashed his shield into the face of a Greek who advanced on him with lifted ax. He raised his right arm, drawing up the guard who clung to it until the man's feet cleared the floor. Lifting high the point of Durandal,

he brought the massive ball of the pommel down on the helmet of the Greek who held his knees.

A blade struck his throat, rasping against the tight-drawn coif, and he staggered against the wall. The edge of his shield he thrust under the chin and the snarling lips of the warrior who had fastened on his sword arm, and the man gave back.

"Satan is in him!" gasped one of the surviving three.

Until now there had been not a moment's respite, but when the Greeks saw the bodies of their comrades motionless on the great carpet they howled and ran to the doors and clattered down the corridors.

Hugh knelt at the side of Rusudan and placed his hand on her breast. He stroked with clumsy, quivering fingers the dark spots on her temples and drew back the disordered tresses from her throat, seeking for wounds. His lips moved soundlessly as he clasped her hand and found it warm and supple.

Springing up, he lifted a clenched fist and shook it at the tiled dome that gleamed above him.

"She lives! Dear Seigneur God, she lives yet!"

And, beside himself with joy, he sent his deep-throated battle shout down the echoing halls.

The lifeless eyes of Theodore Lascaris—he who had hunted the crusader out of Jerusalem into the barren land—were turned upon a scene of carnage and of untold happiness. Rusudan, reviving, stirred and looked up into the drawn face of the man she loved and felt his arm under her shoulders.

Her eyelids quivered and opened wide. She lifted a weak hand and touched his cheek and dry, hot lips.

"My Lord Hugh——"

And beholding the brazier so near, and the body of the torturer, she caught at his hand. Because pain still racked her and the dread of the last hour had not loosed its grip upon her, she wept.

"Dear God—that I should bring you to death!"

But when men appeared in one of the doors, whispering and staring at them, and the crusader, arising, took his sword in hand, she laughed, seeing the Greeks draw back.

"*Gurgaslan*," she cried softly. "My lion, they fear thee."

No others came, and presently the crusader found the doors and embrasures empty of faces. He went to the balcony and heard nothing moving. Then for a while he considered, frowning.

"There is no good in waiting. Little Rusudan——" and he smiled at her—"there is hope in going forth. Be the end what it will—'twill come the sooner."

Rusudan raised her head and pressed her lips to his, and whispered against the mail coif.

"Let us go forth—so it be together."

"Ay, together." And, stooping, he lifted the girl high upon his shield arm.

They left the chamber of the Emperor with its dead, and passed down the corridor, finding it empty of foes. The crusader listened and heard movement at the foot of the great stair. Turning once to make certain nothing was behind him, he gripped tighter the sword and strode to

the head of the marble steps. And there he stopped, his whole body rigid.

The courtyard was full of Mongols.

Torches gleamed on the yellow marble of the walls, and the horses of the nomads were stamping restlessly on the tiled floor. Some were drinking from the fountain. At the foot of the stair preparing to dismount was a group of *noyons*, Subotai at their head.

A hundred eyes recognized Sir Hugh and took instant note of the beauty of Rusudan. It was too late to draw back now, and he faced the issue squarely. Not a Greek was in sight, and these riders were certainly masters of the palace. Before Subotai or anyone else could ask the girl of him, he spoke.

"Subotai Bahadur! The gates were open, the way to the palace was clear."

Subotai, resting on one stirrup, loomed in the torch-light like a giant satyr in black lacquer. Sir Hugh did not know how he had arrived in the courtyard; but the Eagle's eyes were blazing.

He had seen the bodies in the outer court, the dead Greek at the stair. The few others who had remained in the palace after Choaspes forsook it had been crowding around the Emperor's chamber, and they had fled into cellars and hidden passages in the rock beneath. It seemed to Subotai as if this solitary man in armor who came forth sword in hand, bearing in his arms a beautiful captive, had made himself master of the place.

"*Hai!*" he growled. "You have spoken boldly. Now hear my answer."

He pointed with satisfaction to the rich tapestries of

the corridors above them and the gold plates that gleamed in the walls.

"All this is mine! Men came to me in the darkness bearing the falcon tablet of the Swooping Hawk, saying my enemies were many, their standards lifted for battle."

The deep voice of the Mongol began to drawl as he related his deeds of the night.

"I listened to the warning. Yet I pressed nearer to see my enemies. I rode my horse into the alleys, and still the alarm was not given. I looked with the eyes of a ferret for a trap. There was no trap. The Greeks were drinking and making outcry along the shore, blinded by many lights."

There fell a pause, as Subotai's mind lingered on the aspect of that shore—the multitude of many races speaking many tongues, making outcry for no visible reason; the warriors mingled with the women and the slaves; and here and there dark figures looting while nobles in shining garments cast money to the throngs to earn their cheers. Never had Subotai beheld so fair an opportunity for a charge or such rich booty.

"Of what avail is a multitude when there is no chieftain? We slew from afar with arrows the khan who sat on the white horse. He died like a hare, and we took his horse. His men formed here and there. Some fled to stone *yurtas*, others to wooden houses upon the water."

Sir Hugh could picture the affair—the close-packed bands of Mongols loosing arrows as they galloped, the astonished and terrified Greeks, the rush to safety within the villas and warehouses and ships.

"Men will say of this night," added the Eagle,

"Subotai came with swift horses, escorted by naked blades. He scattered the sparks of war and trampled on chieftains; he sent the young to join the old, and he purged the earth of the weak.

"I have crossed the rivers of the Western world; I have seen all things. I have taken much gold and many precious objects, but the pasture lands are poor, the horses weak. The men mistrust one the other and do not hold to their spoken word. It is time for me to go back to tell this to Genghis Khan in Cathay. Besides, the Greeks will swarm out to-morrow, and I mean to be clear of the town."

He considered Sir Hugh in silence for a moment.

"Why did you send back to me the falcon tablet? Why do you keep for yourself such a fair captive? We have poured water on our swords. Come, then, to Cathay. There will be power, then, in your words, and your children will be spared the death punishment for all generations."

"Nay, Subotai. It is time for me to go to my homeland."

The Mongol nodded; he could understand that.

"When you ride to the grazing land of your tribe, O Swooping Hawk, the old minstrels will sit by you, making songs of your deeds, and there will be feasting."

But Sir Hugh smiled, bethinking him of the lot of a returning crusader—begging his way through hostile lands, shouldered aside by the cavalcades of merchants, railed at by innkeepers who might have hastened forth to bow to his stirrup when he first rode from the cities of Europe with the Cross sewn to his shoulder. He thought

of going back among strange faces, to find his property in the hands of others, and himself forgotten—with only the tale of his own suffering to tell—if children and those who had not wearied of the word "Jerusalem" would listen.

"Nay," he said again. "I shall take the *yuria* of the sea and return to the Caucasus."

At the sound of the familiar word Rusudan stirred and would have questioned him, but he was watching Subotai, grim of eye and tense of lip.

"I have found what I sought," he said.

"She is fairer than other women," cried Subotai. "She will bear clear-eyed children. Yield her to me."

Deep in his throat laughed Sir Hugh.

"Before I yield her I shall take life from her, Subotai. And your men—they who live—will tell of the end of the Swooping Hawk."

With pride, for it is not given to many men to bear a Rusudan in their arms, he advanced down the broad marble steps, his eyes menacing, his sword gripped firm, his shield covering the girl, her dark hair flooding over his shoulder.

Beholding him so, in rent and battered mail, as he moved down toward the waiting throng of riders, Subotai's green eyes glowed, and he reined back his horse. His lips parted, and he seemed to struggle inwardly with words. Greater than his disappointment was his delight in such daring. Again he backed his horse, speaking over his shoulder to his men, who pulled their ponies aside until a lane was left clear before the crusader.

When he strode among them, a hundred arms were

tossed weaponless over wild heads and crests, and from a hundred throats a roar went up:

"Ahai—ahatou—hai!"

It was the salute to the khan, only given to men who were honored above all others.



