

# Harold Lamb

## The Mighty Manslayer

By the author of *Hannibal*, *Genghis Khan*,  
and *The Curved Sabre*



# Harold Lamb

## The Mighty Manslayer

This is great storytelling in the finest Harold Lamb tradition, and is additionally blessed with the living, breathing, absolute historical authenticity of the author's great biographies.

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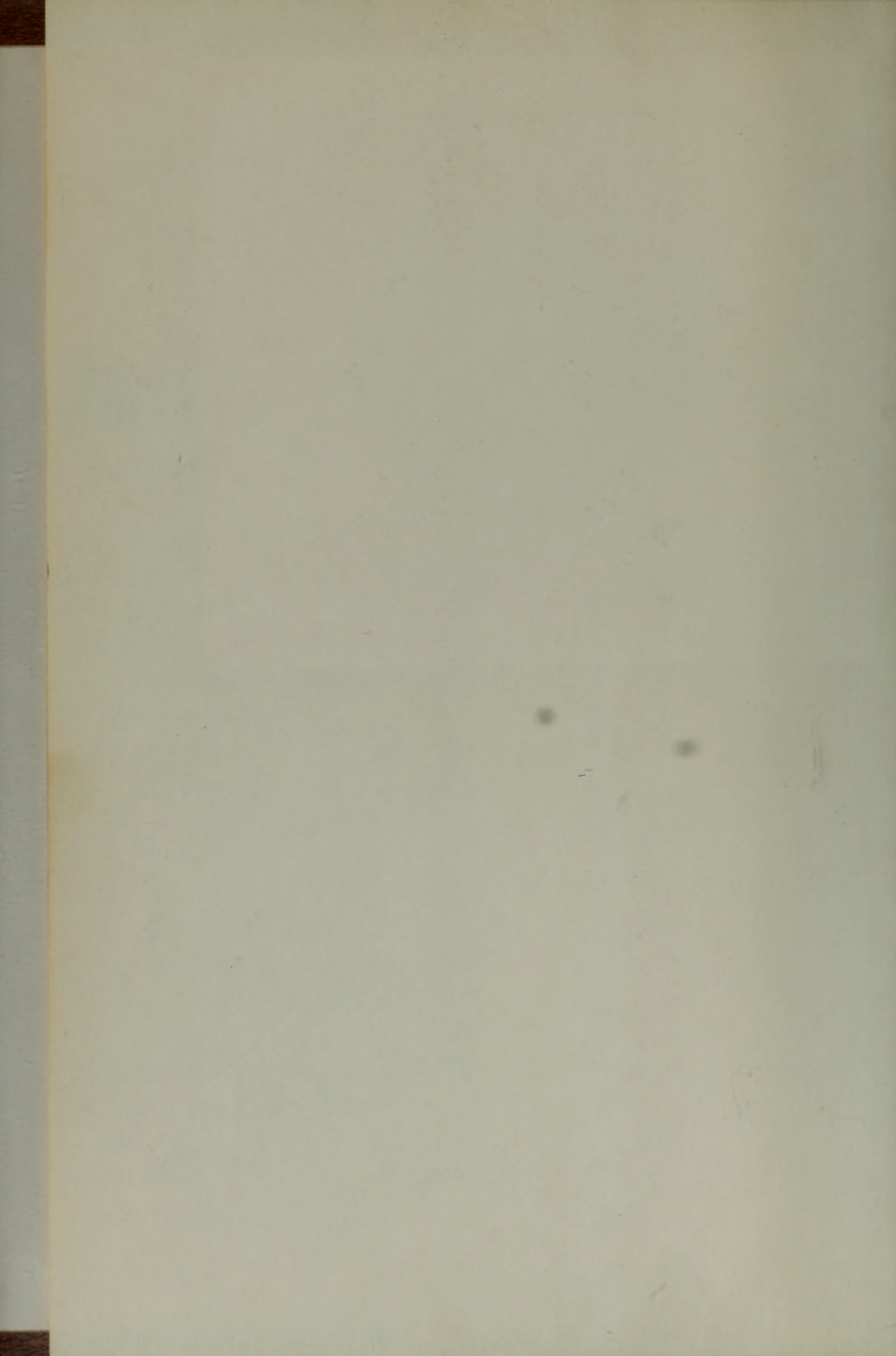
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popular—the mystery of far off lands, the echo of times past, the arduous challenges which try men's courage—are once again blended together to make this an intense and exciting collection of short stories.

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BY HAROLD LAMB

Harold Lamb

Author of "The Mighty Manslayer"

THE MIGHTY MANSLEY

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BY HAROLD LAMB

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Harold Lamb

THE  
MIGHTY  
MANSLAYER

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC., GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

1969

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THE  
CITY OF  
NEW YORK  
OFFICE OF THE  
COMMISSIONER OF  
THE LAND OFFICE  
ALBANY, N. Y.  
JANUARY 1, 1881

TO THE  
HONORABLE  
THE SENATE  
AND  
THE ASSEMBLY  
OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK  
IN SENATE  
JANUARY 1, 1881

REPORT OF THE  
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THE SECRETARY GENERAL

## Publisher's Preface

These stories were among the first to reveal the late Harold Lamb's mastery of historical adventure. As with those previously collected under the title *The Curved Saber* (Doubleday, 1964), they appeared in the old *Adventure* magazine over the decade between 1916 and 1926.

Unlike most of Mr. Lamb's later works these episodes are not based on actual historic personages. The two Cossacks, Khlit and Kirdy, foster father and foster son, are imaginary. So are the details of the events, battles, scrapes, and encounters the stories describe. But the background and general history are true, rich, and real. *The Mighty Manslayer* is set in Russia and Central Asia from the reign of Ivan the Terrible through the appropriately named "Time of Troubles" in the early seventeenth century. Russia was, through this period, becoming barely stable after centuries of Tartar ravages; China, to the east, was a far stronger power. Between the two, in Central Asia, lay the swarms of nomadic "pastoralists," the declining but still ferocious Tartars, and the Christian Zaporogian Cossacks, "the Watchdogs of the Ukraine," whose delegated responsibility was to serve as the vanguard of the advancing borders of what was to become the nation we today know as Russia.

There was never a stranger, more exotic frontier. Persians and

Jews, Chinese and Arabs, Turks and European adventurers found themselves cast up along its reaches, earning their precarious livings and dyings from camp to camp, tribe to tribe, city to fortress city. In this barbarous milieu, Khlit and Kirdy glide like fish through water fighting and beguiling their way from the Moscow of Boris Godunov and the false Czar Dmitri to the cities of China.

Khlit is a wily old loner, ever ready to hang up his fabled saber, but, like a gunfighter of the American West, is somehow never able to. Kirdy, more guileful in his youth than his foster parent, must travel a harder road than Khlit, but has the strength, skill, courage, and brains to do so. Both, however, are heroes in the oldest sense of the word: fighting magnificently for the best causes they can find, not infrequently their own survival.

The publishers have made no attempt to revise the late Mr. Lamb's work, which appears here just as it did half a century ago, complete with dashed omission of words which there would be no objection to seeing in print today. As one might suspect of so tumultuous a time and a place, there has been little narrative history of individual encounters in Khlit and Kirdy's stamping grounds during their era. For most of us, Mr. Lamb's fictional account will be a worthy and excellent substitute.

M.B.H.

## Khlit

When the noonday sun struck through clouds and fell upon the saber on his knee, Khlit made up his mind it was time to eat. Putting aside the sheepskin rag with which he had been wiping specks of rust from his weapon, Khlit drew from the pocket of his coat several hard barley cakes. These he broke over the silver heel of his boot and munched. Thus did Khlit satisfy his noon-day hunger.

All the forenoon, seated beside one of the streets of the Zaporogian Siech, as the Cossacks of the sixteenth and well into the seventeenth century called their isolated war encampment—an island midway between the Russian and the Tatar banks of the great river Dnieper—Khlit had been polishing his cherished saber, a curved Turkish blade, of Damascus forging. That morning, when he had awakened, after a night of wine-guzzling, Khlit had heard rumors of war bandied about the kurens, or barracks, and like the scent of game to a wolfhound, the tidings had set the warrior to nursing his sword.

Peering out under shaggy brows, the keen eyes of the Cossack, which every now and then sought the river, noticed a stirring among the kurens. Knights of the Siech were gathering in groups, to learn if there was truth in the rumors. As the hammering on blacksmith forges became louder, young Cossacks sprang to horse.



Khlit sat still, sheepskin hat on the back of his sunburned head, bald save for the long scalp lock that trailed over his shoulders. His gray sheepskin coat was flung back under the rays of a midday sun, a broad leather belt making it fast at the waist. The warrior's costly nankeen breeches of brilliant red were tucked in his heavy boots. A short pipe stuck out from under his long gray mustaches.

In Khlit's mind the matter was clear enough. He could not understand why comrades bickered and bayed like dogs about war when all the Koshevoi—Ataman, their leader—needed to do was to say the word and forth the Zaporogian Siech would fare, thousands in number, the flower of the world's knighthood, ready to take the field against Turk, Tatar, Pole, or other foe of the Orthodox Church.

Why, wondered Khlit, was there any hesitation, when their godfather, the Czar himself, had appointed them watchdogs of the Ukraine and the Russian land? Watchdogs of stout heart and good red blood did not lie in kennels and stuff their carcasses with food. Nor did they wait for an adversary to come to the kennel door and poke a stick at them before they sallied forth. Why then, the Cossack asked himself, did the flower of the Ukraine linger on the island encampment in the middle of the wide Dnieper and waste the strength and sinews of the young men in mimic battles suited to the entertainment of women, not full-grown men?

In a people where few grow old before cut down by an enemy sword, Khlit had been fortunate to survive many wars. The old knight had marched into Poland and he had laid waste the territory of the khans hundreds of versts away across the Volga. In his cottage in the village of Rusk he kept treasures of these campaigns, weapons wrested from the unbelievers, ransoms gleaned from wealthy Turks, and pillage from sacked towns. But the eyes of Khlit did not turn toward the cottage. They searched the distant banks of the Dnieper where foes might be found. If his thoughts wandered to home, it was to the young Cossacks



who were coming to the Siech from the village that day, and especially to Menelitz, his foster son who would join him before sundown.

A shout from a nearby group attracted his attention. Several Cossacks were crouched over dice, and a burly warrior who seemed to have met with bad fortune stood up with a curse. Hesitating a second, he tore off his heavy coat and boots and threw them on the ground. His sword had been claimed by his adversary as payment for all debts, and he signified that he would wager his coat and shoes against the sword, which he was loath to relinquish.

Those in the ring about them peered at the dice casually as the big Cossack threw, and one clapped him on the back with a loud laugh as the result was known. He had won.

Next the Cossack wagered his coat and shoes against some gold sequins of his adversary, a thin, hook-nosed warrior with a scarred cheek. He lost.

Refusing all offers of further wagers, the Cossack thrust his sword in his belt and marched off up the street, swaying a little from the effects of drink. Coming abreast of Khlit he halted irresolutely.

"A health to you, noble sir," he muttered, raising a huge hand in drink-solemn greeting. "You are of the Rusk kuren? I know you among many, Khlit, bogatyr. That son of a devil's dog, Taravitch, diced me out of coat and shoes. And with the young Cossack brood coming from Rusk to our kuren tonight."

"Have you other boots, or money to buy them? There is talk of war," said Khlit after a moment's inspection of the other, whose face he now recognized.

"Hey—money?" The giant shook his head and grinned. "I gave the silver in my heels to the Jews for corn brandy last night. I have not the smell of a sequin."

"Then say to the hetman of our kuren," replied Khlit, "that I bid him give you boots and whatever you may need. There will be war, and the Siech will march."

"Hey—that is good," chuckled the Cossack. "I shall swagger before the striplings tonight."

"You can thank your sword for it, offspring of swine," explained Khlit, "for you would not lose that. A Cossack and his sword are one until death."

The giant shook his head, as though he did not grasp this piece of wisdom. Staggering, he went on his way, but no more wine was to pass his bearded lips. The magic word "war" was a talisman that brought the light of anticipation to his bloodshot eyes and purpose to his heavy steps. When the Siech went to war no drunkards were tolerated.

Khlit looked up a second time to find Taravitch, the successful gambler, watching him. Khlit mistrusted Taravitch, for the hook-nosed Cossack was a person rare among the folk of the Siech, a shrewd getter of money. To the open-handed warriors money was only a means to wine and weapons, to cherish it for itself was a symptom of the malady that afflicted the Jewish camp followers. Taravitch was known to be a winner at dice or other games, a hard bargainer, and a heartless creditor. Many of the Cossacks had been poor and worse than poor for years at a stretch for owing Taravitch money.

On the other hand Taravitch had no love for Khlit, whose name was coupled with much soil and riches, and who was forever urging the men of the Ukraine to war, when the camp proved more profitable to Taravitch. If the truth were known, Khlit wasted no words of ceremony in speaking of the gambler, and some of these remarks had come to the ears of the other.

Several of the Cossacks who had been watching the dice stood beside Taravitch and contemplated Khlit as the latter, his meal ended long since, wiped at his saber with the sheepskin cloth. Finally Taravitch was moved to speak.

"Hail to you, Khlit," he said, mouthing his words and watching the other the while. "Do you polish your saber to show the young men who come to the Rusk kuren at sundown today? Or

are you ready to give it to a better warrior and return to your cottage with the women?"

There was a laugh at this from the watchers, but Khlit did not even look up.

"I have heard," continued Taravitch, "that the young men from Rusk are not as fine a lot as when we smoked our pipes in the ruins of Anatolian churches. Devil take them! None of the lot will come to camp as we did; like a good knight, with a brave display."

As it is the first test of his knighthood, the manner of a strippling's coming to the Siech for the first time, when he is of age, is taken as a measure of his bravery. If he comes gaily appareled and well mounted with a crowd of companions and makes his horse go through feats before the hetmans, he is well received. If he enters camp timidly, or shows any fear, he is held in dishonor by the Cossacks.

"Health to you, Taravitch," responded Khlit carelessly. "Do you watch when the son of Menelitza, my foster son, comes to the Siech. It will be a sight to brighten your heart. He is the offspring of a bogatyr—bred from a stock that excelled in courage all in our Russian land."

"Nay, Khlit," said Taravitch, his eyes narrowing as when he seized an advantage at dice. "The young Cossacks are weaklings. They are schooled in books and weaned by women. There are none in these days to leap their horse over the palisade about the Siech, breaking both their necks as Borodagy did once, or to come bearing a whole cask of wine on their shoulder for the Koshevoi Ataman and the hetmans."

"We will see, Taravitch," said Khlit.

"It will be poor sport," replied the gambler in scorn. "Perchance your Menelitza will have courage enough to ride a horse and make the beast stand on three legs before us. A woman's feat!"

"The son of Menelitza," said Khlit slowly, "will come to the Siech as no other before him has come. You will see—"

"Hey!" Taravitch swung round on the spectators, but his

glance still measured the old Cossack. "What nonsense are you mouthing? Do you think we are children, to believe that? Your precious Menelitzza will come with a crowd, and none can tell him from the others!"

"The father of Menelitzza ran his horse through a Tatar camp to fetch me from the grasp of the khan," said Khlit, unmoved, "and Menelitzza will show you a feat of daring that will warm the hearts of the old men."

"A wager," cried Taravitch, "that Menelitzza, who comes to the Siech at sundown, will not surpass all others in a feat of daring! My Arab stallion against a hundred sequins of gold. Ha, old fox, where is your valor?"

"No man has asked that upon the battlefield, Taravitch," replied Khlit, "but you shall have your wager. Only it will be a man's wager, not a child's plaything."

He paused and looked up calmly at the circle that pressed about them.

"In my house at Rusk," he went on, "are fifty goblets of silver and gold taken from the enemies of the Siech, Persian carpets several in number, rare swords from Turkey, four horses of the finest blood. Also Polish trophies and gold-chased armor, with a thousand sequins of gold. All this will I wager against your coin of five thousand sequins and your Arab horses. Come now, are you a staunch wold, Taravitch, or a rabbit that dives into his burrow when he sees a man?"

Taravitch gazed at the Cossack as if fascinated. His eyes narrowed as he wet his lips. The riches Khlit had mentioned, he knew to be in the cottage at Rusk. Also, if Khlit pledged his word before witnesses the promise was good. Yet never had the gambler staked the bulk of his wealth on any one throw. The prospect dazzled him.

"Menelitzza comes today, Khlit?" he asked, weighing his words.

"He has promised me," assented the old man.

"Then it is a wager." Taravitch turned to the watchers, who gaped at him. "You have heard the terms," he cried, "and the

wager—that Menelitza comes today to the Siech as none other has come before him. The wager is offered and accepted.”

## II

The sun, which had been high, was nearing the Russian bank of the Dnieper when the burly Cossack who had been befriended by the old Khlit returned to the spot and found his benefactor seated where he had been before. The bright saber still reflected the sun's rays. Khlit glanced up as he approached. The Cossack was again without coat and boots.

“Devil take you,” Khlit said affectionately. “Can’t you keep a coat upon your fat back? But tell me, is there any news of the approach of men from Rusk? It draws near sundown.”

“Hey, old sword-eater,” growled the Cossack, “I have heard of the wager you made. News of it has got from one end of the camp to the other. The noble knights are all watching to see the result. Nay, I gave your coat and boots away to one who needed them.”

“Have the men from Rusk been sighted?”

“Hey? I don’t know. Taravitch was talking about it to the knight who has charge of the ferry and the good man said he’d be flogged with a saber if the Dnieper wasn’t rising and jumping about with the wind so much that it were a perilous task to take out the boat from shore. Besides, the oars are lost. So the fine fellow who pilots the boat told me.”

“Lost!” Khlit’s glance flickered over the Cossack. “Devil take the rascal, has he but the one boat? Where are the others?”

“Away up the river, Khlit,” responded the big warrior with a hearty laugh at the discomfiture of his friend, “and old Father Dnieper is growling to himself and gnashing his white teeth at the wind. Did Menelitza swear he would be in camp this day?”

“He swore it on a holy image, Waggle-Tongue,” Khlit made



reply, inspecting his sword. "And Menelitzta does not waste his words for love of hearing himself bray. He will come at sundown."

The Cossack gazed at Khlit's shiny black boots admiringly.

"So you say, Khlit, bogatyr," he mused, "and the noble sirs maintain that good sharp sword, or well-loaded pistol. Still, how can the son of your comrade arrive here when the ferryman has drunk two dozen glasses of corn brandy with that slimy lizard of a Taravitch, and Father Dnieper is shaking his hair in anger?"

"Did Taravitch make the ferryman drunk?" demanded Khlit thoughtfully.

"Aye, with corn brandy. And the oars are not to be found—"

"Did Taravitch hide them?"

"Hey? Most like. If a warrior will do one mischief he will not hold his hand at two. He has you by the scalp lock, Khlit, and your riches are as good as in his pocket."

"It is not sundown."

"Nay, but the sun kisses his bed behind the mountains. Already the crowd of noble sirs who have gathered in the center of the Siech to watch for the fulfillment of your wager say that you have lost. Talk turns to the rumors of a Tatar khan seen near Rusk. Hey, but that is good news."

"Then we will hear it," declared Khlit.

Sheathing his sword, he tightened his belt and strode along by the giant, his gray eyes almost hidden under shaggy brows, his hands thrust idly in his pockets. As he went, Cossacks turned to look after him, for tidings of the great wager had stirred the interest of the Siech. Groups gathered in the center square of the Siech made way for him until the pair stood within arm's reach of the Koshevoi Ataman and the hetmans who were discussing the appearance of the Tatars in the Ukraine.

"The khan has spread his wings near Rusk, Khlit," said one of the hetmans. "The Tatar dogs took a batko of the Orthodox Church and burned him for the village to see. That was an ill



deed. They have also burned our churches. The Zaporogian Siech girds itself for war."

Khlit tugged at his mustache with pleasure.

"That is a good word in my ears, noble sir," he grinned. "Are all the worthy knights in favor of setting out?"

"Nay, Khlit," the hetman shook his shaggy head, "there are many who say the burning of one batko is not enough to make the Siech set out. Methinks they are the dogs who like to lie in the sun and scratch. They say the messenger who brought the tidings lies, and that it is a plot of those who want war."

"Who is the messenger?" demanded Khlit, frowning.

"Yon fellow in the big cloak and new boots. He came to the camp in sore plight. He swears the Khan is near Rusk."

Khlit's gaze fell on a slender Cossack, dark-skinned, who stood quietly before the Koshevoi Ataman, watching the warriors around him curiously. The stranger seemed not to interest Khlit.

"Hey," said the giant, "he is the vagabond I gave my coat and boots to. He came to me near the ferry—"

He was silenced by murmurs from a group of Cossacks who stood near, and who began to address the Koshevoi Ataman. One of their number thrust through the crowd hastily and Khlit pulled at his mustache as he recognized Taravitch.

"A word to the Koshevoi Ataman," cried Taravitch in a loud voice. "This man who says that he comes from Rusk this afternoon lies, for no man has come from the shore to the island."

"How is that, Taravitch?" asked Khlit quickly.

"It is true," persisted the gambler. "I know, for early in the afternoon I saw the ferryman asleep by the shore, so filled with wine he could not stand. And there are no other boats. So no one could come from shore across Father Dnieper. Look!"

Taravitch pointed, and the Cossacks looked out over the river. The red glow of sunset flamed on the tossing crest of the waves, with here and there a white fleck of foam. The wind from the west slapped their faces and pulled at their beards. Truly, Father Dnieper was in no gentle mood. Taravitch, who loved better the

tranquillity of the Siech than the hardships of war, smiled as he felt the amazement and concern of the gathering at his words. He had made his point. Already he had won, he felt, a huge wager from the wise Khlit, and now he went on to drive home his plan to discredit the messenger.

The giant Cossack stepped forward, but Taravitch was before him.

"You can see for yourselves, noble sirs," he said eagerly, "that not even one favored by God could cross these waters. No man has ever done that of himself. And it is known that the ferry has not been used—"

"You hear, noble sirs," the deep voice of Khlit broke in, "what he said. No man has ever done that. You have heard the words of Taravitch."

"Aye, it is the truth"—the gambler shot a puzzled glance at the warrior—"and so the man who says he comes from Rusk lies—"

"Not so, Taravitch," Khlit cried again. "Listen to me, noble sirs. The messenger tells the truth. He is a man of honor, and he is of Rusk."

He strode forward and clapped his hand on the young Cossack's coat. With a twist he flung it from the other's shoulders. The undergarment of the messenger showed strangely dark and heavy, and Khlit with another wrench wrung a stream of water from his sleeve.

"This is Menelitz, noble sirs, son of the bogatyr," he cried. "He has brought you tidings of war from Rusk. When there was no boat to bring him to the Siech, he swam through the waves. Many saw him swim ashore, and gave him coat and boots."

The young Cossack's face flushed red with the gaze of the throng and he would have stepped back, but Khlit held him firmly, searching the crowd with his gray eyes.

"This is Menelitz," he said again, "who has come to the Siech as none other before him. Is there any Cossack now who would speak of lies?"

Silence greeted him, until broken by the Koshevoi Ataman,

who announced that the Zaporogian Siech smelled war and that the swords of the knights would no longer be rusted.

That is all of the tale of the coming of Menelitza to the Siech, save perhaps for the word of the giant Cossack, who repeated afterward that that night, when the Siech was in slumber, he, being one of the watchmen, saw Khlit drag a pair of oars in the Siech—belonging to the ferry.

Khlit glanced around and, seeing no one near him in the gloom, carefully replaced some furs which had concealed the oars from discovery during the day. Following him, the Cossack saw Khlit carry the oars to the ferry, which lay on the shore, and place them inside.

When the noble sirs heard that, they laughed and told the big Cossack he had been drinking corn brandy, and when they asked Khlit, he also laughed and said the man had been drinking corn brandy.

## Wolf's War

Khlit was angry. Very angry was Khlit, he surnamed the Wolf, and the Cossack of the Curved Saber by his enemies, Tatars and Turks. Khan Mirai Tkha would set extra watchmen about his herd of cattle at night, if word had come to him that Khlit was gripped so hard by the little devil of rage.

For no one in the Zaporogian Siech, the war encampment of the Cossacks along the bank of Father Dnieper, not even the Koshevoi Ataman himself, was better known to Khan Mirai Tkha than Khlit, the Wolf. And what the Tatar chief had learned, he had learned too late, to his cost, for it was the way of the Cossack to strike without warning. Wherefore Khan Mirai waited with patience for the time when Khlit should strike too soon or too late and the ancient score would be wiped out.

For no khan of the sixteenth century had more spear points at his call than Mirai Khan, great-grandson of the leader of the Golden Horde, not Yussaf himself, who was called prince of princes.

Now that Khlit's mustache was white and the muscles on his arm lean, the Cossack knew that the score between him and the Tatar had grown to the point where, on either side, it must be wiped out. Wherefore he was angry. For against his wishes the entire body of the Zaporogian Siech had departed to fight the

Poles to the west, and with them had gone Menelitzza, his foster son who had come to the Siech to win place as a warrior.

The Poles, Khlit considered, were less worthy foes for Menelitzza than the Tatars, so when he was overruled by the atamans, he felt that it was a mistake the Siech would pay dearly for, and for the first time he sulked at home when the Cossacks set out.

Another reason for his ill temper was a woman. Menelitzza, instead of knightly fame for the joy of good blows struck and received and the hot smell of battle, had told him that he planned to return an approved knight of the Siech to win a woman for wife. Women Khlit regarded as part of the baggage of Poles and Turks, useful otherwise in making and serving wine and in cooking food.

He had offered to get Menelitzza a half-dozen Tatar women to cook and prepare wine for him but the boy had persisted in his plan to win a certain woman of a nearby village, one Alevna. When Khlit asked Menelitzza, in deep sorrow, why he wanted a girl instead of himself, the Wolf, for comrade, the boy could give no other reason than that Alevna had black hair and curling lips. Wherefore was Khlit now sitting, to his deep disgust, on his horse at the threshold of the sloboda of Garniv, where Alevna lived. He had come to see with his own eyes what manner of person was Alevna, the black-haired beauty, and to satisfy his curiosity as to why Menelitzza favored her, above six others.

It was doubly offensive to Khlit to seek out a woman and to ask questions in a village where he was little known. But he sat his sheepskin hat on the side of his head, lit his long-stemmed pipe, and, with his knee carelessly crossed in front of him, trotted into the village street. As he went, his gray eyes under shaggy brows searched out the women for a possible Alevna.

He drew rein before a group of girls chattering in front of a cottage, on the doors of which were painted pictures of the good saints driving devils into purgatory. This, Khlit judged, was the house of a worthy Christian. A slender, dark-haired girl in a blue

dress with gold ornaments and a necklace of silver coins had already caught his eye.

She was not as large as her companions, who had coarser features and hands—evidently maidservants—but she ordered them about with great dignity, flashing a delighted smile as she did so and pushing back her mass of black hair. She glanced long and curiously at the dusty Cossack sitting on his horse by the cottage gate.

"Which one of you sparrows," said Khlit gruffly, "is the beauty, Alevna?" The maids were silent with sheer surprise, but Alevna ran to the gate, opened it, and confronted Khlit with flushed cheeks.

"Old man," she cried, stamping a booted foot, "are you blind with dust that you cannot see me?"

"I saw you," growled Khlit, puffing at his pipe. "Can you tell me which is Alevna, the black-haired beauty?"

The girl came near to the horse with knitted brows.

"What do you want of Alevna?" she asked angrily. "That is my name. I never saw you before, old man."

"You see me now, little wren," answered the Cossack. "I am the foster father of Menelitzza, the young Cossack who swam the Dnieper to come to the Zaporogian Siech, and who desires you."

Alevna did not appear to take kindly to this speech, which Khlit had taken pains to make mild and conciliatory because he wanted to watch the girl, not frighten her away.

"Then you are Khlit," she said quickly. "I know about you. The Cossacks went away and you stayed behind to sleep on your stove, for fear of the Poles. Or it may be just because you are old, and the young men are better fighters. Menelitzza has chosen badly when he made you come wooing for him."

The Cossack's pipe slipped in his teeth from surprise. He, Khlit, to come wooing a girl for another man! He to be accused of sleeping when the Siech marched! But Alevna was taking revenge for his early remark. Warrior as he was, Khlit was not



skilled in word battle, being content to let one word do the work of two.

"The women of the village are talking about you," continued Alevna, hopping on one foot in delight, "and they said how you talked against the Koshevoi Ataman himself when he ordered war against the Poles—"

"Bah!" Khlit's voice took a lower note. "The Poles are but meant for the swords of the Siech to sharpen upon. They are like sheep. The real foe of the Ukraine is there, across Father Dnieper."

Two dimples showed in Alevna's red cheeks.

"So that is why you sit in your house on the hill looking across Father Dnieper, old man, to see if you can find any enemies. That is all you are good for, now, isn't it—that and to come paying suit to young girls—"

A titter of laughter broke from the maids at the gate. Khlit shook his head like a wolfhound that is bitten about the ears.

"My house on the hill has much booty in it," he growled, "from my enemies. And the Tatars know the name of Khlit so well they come not near it, though there is the ransom of ten hetmans inside."

"You need more than money, old man," said Alevna mockingly, as she stroked his horse's neck, "if you want to woo a girl, with your face. I had heard that Khlit was a mighty warrior. I am disappointed."

"Menelitz is strong," he said. "He desires you. What he desires he will get."

"Then it will be another wife," cried the girl. "I will not marry him!"

Khlit puffed thoughtfully at his pipe and leaned closer to her. His glance bored into the girl's brown eyes.

"Are you afraid of me, wren?" he asked.

"No," said Alevna seriously.

She advanced to the horse's side and placed both arms across the saddlebags, her smiling, fresh face within a foot of Khlit's

shaggy countenance. Brown eyes peered into gray for the space of a minute. Khlit's hand shot out and closed firmly around the girl's white throat. Just a little, his fingers tightened. One of the maids screamed. But Alevna did not cease smiling.

"You are not afraid now?" questioned the Cossack. "I might kill you."

"No," she said.

She felt safe, being a woman and beautiful. Arrogantly she said, "Will you know Alevna now?"

Khlit dropped his hand and gathered up his reins.

"Yes," he said. "You have a snub nose."

Whereupon he trotted away up the village street, without a backward glance at the dark-haired beauty he had come ten miles to see.

## II

The passing of time did not assuage the anger of Khlit. Tales were brought to him at his cottage overlooking the banks of the Dnieper of how the army of the Siech fought the Poles, and old women did not scorn to mock at Khlit because he was not with the others.

To tell the truth Khlit did not much heed the tales of fighting on the Polish border. His thoughts lay in another direction, across the river. From childhood Khlit had heard tales of the Tatar Horde, of Nogai, grandson of Teval, seventh son of Juchi, leader of the Golden Horde.

He had seen towns laid in smoke and ruins from one end of the Ukraine to the other, when the Krim Tatars marched, and he knew how followers of the Great Turk incited the ever ready horsemen of the East to try the strength of the Cossack armies. Year by year he had faced the flying hosts of swarthy horsemen who discharged clouds of arrows as they advanced or re-

treated and he had seen the ground covered with bodies of good Cossacks.

Such memories were not lightly forgotten, and Khlit waited at the door of his cottage, his eyes searching the river for what he knew would come—a sally of Tatar horsemen across into the Ukraine, in the absence of the Siech army. To get him food, he went to the river with a pronged spear and returned with fish, which he baked in smoke and ate. Only at midday he slept and then, like his Tatar enemies, with one eye open.

It was during one of his midday naps that Khlit learned the news he had been waiting for and expecting with the wise knowledge of a fisherman who is sure of his prey.

He had not many visitors at the cottage, partly because he was wary about making friends, and partly because Cossack folk held him in some fear, wherefore they lost no chance to mock at him because he had not gone with the Siech.

So it happened that he was instantly alert when there was a patter of hoofs on the rough trail leading to his cottage, and a small, bent figure came into view mounted on one horse and leading a pack animal. By its gray cloak and wizened brown face, Khlit recognized the figure as that of Yemel, a Jewish merchant, who spoke all tongues and ordinarily haunted the path of the Siech, as full of news as a squirrel, news gleaned from Kiev to Tatory.

“Hail to you, Khlit,” cried Yemel, climbing down from his horse and seating himself on the tree trunk beside the Cossack. “I have some rare gold ornaments taken from the Polish towns by our brave Cossacks. Perchance, noble sir, you would like to exchange some trifling things for them.”

Yemel rambled on describing his goods, his bright little eyes attentive on the Cossack's impassive face, and throwing out occasional hints that he was thirsty and corn brandy was excellent to the taste. Khlit motioned to the hut, whereupon the Jew jumped up spryly, and reappeared with a full beaker of brandy, at the same time wiping his lips. Khlit did not fail to

debit Yemel with two beakers instead of one, but he said nothing until his guest had done refreshing himself.

"A fox does not play tricks without reason, Yemel," he said finally. "Full well you know I trade not in spoil, which I take by the sword. In your jackal brain there is something you would tell—for barter I care not—so, Yemel, speak or be gone."

"Aye, noble sir," chirped the merchant, his eye brightened by the drink, "as always, your words are the very coinage of pure gold in their wisdom. You might add that the jackal does not come to the lion's den without reason. Honor me with your attention, bogatyr, for Yemel scorned to believe what he heard in the villages, that Khlit, he of the Curved Sword, the Wolf, had stayed behind to sleep when the Siech—"

"Enough!" said Khlit impatiently. "You have news?"

"For your ear alone, Khlit," admitted Yemel, "for we two are wiser than the whole Zaporogian Siech."

"Spawn of the devil," said Khlit mildly, "do you link your name with a Cossack? Is your blood the same as mine?"

"Nay, Khlit," broke in the merchant hurriedly, "I said not that. Do not believe that of me, noble sir. I meant that my word was for the ear of one wiser than all the Siech. Just a little moment and I will tell it. Khan Mirai Tkha has gone upon a hunt."

Khlit's gaze flickered over the Dnieper and back to Yemel.

"The Khan, who loves the chase of the stag," continued Yemel, "has taken many horsemen as beaters and crossed the Dnieper in his hunt. Truly, it has been a great take, for I have come this day from the spot where the stag was found. Khan Mirai is a great hunter."

"Aye," said the Cossack.

"He hunted the stag into the streets of Garniv, just across the river," explained the merchant. "And his horsemen who were beaters surrounded the village. It is a pity that the Zaporogian Siech wars against the Poles, for Khan Mirai hunted well."

"Were many slain?" queried Khlit.

"All. I saw the scalp-locked bodies of Cossacks strewing the

street like fish in the bed of a brook which has run dry. Khan Mirai has returned across the river with many slaves and much booty."

"Aye, he is a good hunter." Khlit bethought him for a moment. "What of Alevna, she who was the beauty of Garniv, the black-haired one? Was she among the slain?"

"Nay, Khlit, Alevna is missing. They say she was among the slaves, being beautiful, in spite of her temper. What a pity!" Yemel shot a calculating glance at Khlit. "The news of the Khan's great hunt is not as old as the sun today. Truly, I hurried here with the tidings, for I said to myself that Khlit should hear. It has cost me much trade, for you will not barter, only give. They say you are more generous than Yussaf, prince of princes—"

"Peace!" muttered Khlit, impatiently. Jerking his thumb over his shoulder, he added, "Go to the hut for reward, Yemel. Select one thing. If it be too fine I will take it from you and rip your hide for payment. If it be too little you will cheat yourself. Choose!"

Rid of the chattering merchant, Khlit knitted his brows in thought. The coming of Khan Mirai did not surprise him. He had been looking for it. It irked him that he had not seen the Tatars cross, even ten miles down the river. For them to escape unfollowed was to Khlit a sin of the first magnitude. Yet, with the army away, who was there to follow into the land of the Horde after the swift horsemen of the Mirai tribe?

Another thing Khlit meditated on. The Tatars had taken Alevna, the woman who had come between Menelitza, his foster son, and himself. Well and good, he thought. A woman always bred trouble, and Alevna he had read as a great mischief-maker. Now he was well rid of her.

With Alevna disposed of, Menelitza would return to his cot in Khlit's hut and eat and drink and fight as a Cossack should. But—Khlit shook his head—suppose Menelitza became very angry when he learned that the girl was gone? Young men were un-



reasonable as wild horses. Menelitzta might even go so far as to blame him, Khlit, for the loss of the girl.

Khlit filled his pipe and considered the question with great care. It was true that the foster son would be saddened by the news from Garniv, as he had joined the Siech to win knightly fame so that he could claim Alevna for wife. It was, furthermore, quite possible that Menelitzta would try to go after the Tatars when he returned, which would be dangerous, as well as useless, it being then too late. Alevna was desired of Menelitzta. She was, in a way, his property.

That being the case, Khan Mirai had despoiled Menelitzta of something he coveted, which was the same as saying that he had despoiled Khlit. Which was not to be permitted. Would the women begin saying that Khlit had been robbed by the Tatars and had slept in his hut like a swine-tender? There was no telling what Menelitzta would say when he got back.

At this point in the Cossack's meditations, Yemel emerged from the hut, having been inside a full hour. The merchant's face was wet with excitement. In one hand he held a Turkish scimitar with jeweled hilt and chased-gold scabbard. In the other was a silver beaker with an emerald of considerable size set in the handle.

Khlit looked up and scowled.

"Hey, dog," he growled, "said I not one thing, and you have two? Do you love your skin so little you would try to cheat me?"

"Harken but a moment, noble sir," wined Yemel, clutching his treasures. "You did tell me to fetch one thing, but if it was too much I could have nothing. So, to make sure of pleasing you, I brought two things, one little and one big, to allow you to select my reward. If the sword is too much, I will take the small beaker, and be gone."

"Then the sword is more valuable than the beaker?" inquired the Cossack thoughtfully.

"Assuredly, noble sir," Yemel cried. "You can see its pure gold and fine jewels for yourself. It is too great a gift, I fear,

even for your munificence. Of a truth, I did wrong to bring it. I must take the beaker."

"Nay," returned Khlit, "you can have either. Did I not promise the one you want? At once, dog!" Yemel's agitated eyes traveled from sword to beaker and back again. He gripped both for an instant. Then he flung down the sword, clutching the beaker to his breast. A smile twitched Khlit's gray mustache.

"You lied, Yemel," he growled. "For the jewel in the beaker is worth two swords, and you were not blind. However, I have a mind to deal lightly with you. Take the beaker. You might have had thrice its value, for there are other emeralds within. Hey, come with me to the Tatar camp, and you shall have ten miles its worth."

A wail broke from the merchant at this news, silenced by a wave of the Cossack's hand. Gathering up the gold sword, Khlit went into the hut. Yemel watched him with the despairing eyes of one who was punished beyond his deserts.

The merchant had gone, and the sun was low in the west when Khlit again emerged from the cottage. This time he was dressed in red morocco boots, long svitka or coat, a wide leather belt from which his sword hung together with gold tassels, and a high sheepskin hat, from the back of which his gray scalp lock reached to his shoulders.

He went directly to the stable behind the hut, saddled and bridled his horse, filled his saddlebags with mealcakes and tobacco, and sprang on his horse. For a moment he searched the river with his glance, and then urged his horse forward in the direction taken by Khan Mirai.

### III

Next day's sun saw Khlit riding steadily along the steppe on the trail of the riders of Mirai. The level plain, covered with

lush grass and with only occasional ravines where trees and undergrowth offered shelter, was not a favorable place for concealment. What there was, Khlit made the most of with customary caution, for he was already far into the country of the Horde where a captured cossack was a dead Cossack.

For various reasons the old warrior had come alone on his quest to gain Alevna. There were few Cossacks left in the villages. The pick of the fighters were in Poland. And Khlit was not the man to encumber himself with clumsy assistants. Likewise, it would have been impossible for many men to travel unseen across the steppe, and such force as he could have mustered would have been too small to encounter the full strength of Khan Mirai's thousands.

Khlit knew from experience that the Tatars were dangerous foes, wary, swift to act, and more merciless even than the Cossacks themselves. The Horde were roaming folk, carrying their houses with them on wagons and going from place to place to obtain good grazing for their herds of cattle and horses.

Yet, if he had considered his quest impossible, Khlit would not be where he was now. His ability to think clearly into the future had kept Khlit alive until his hair was gray, when few Cossacks lived to middle age. Khlit, reasoning coolly, saw that he had certain advantages. He knew the land of the Horde from previous forays after cattle and horse. He was familiar with the Tatar way of fighting, which was deadly to strangers. Also, Mirai's men had a wholesome respect for the name of the Wolf. And they did not suspect he was following them.

Although he had been riding fast, Khlit had seen nothing of the Tatars by midday. The steppe appeared deserted, except for the deer and hare that fled at the sound of his approach. When the midday sun beat down on him, Khlit slipped from his horse, leading the animal into a grove of oaks that bordered the trail he was following. He seated himself on the turf, took some mealcakes and dried fruit from his saddlebags and prepared to eat his first meal of the day.

He had scarcely set his teeth into the first cake when he knew that he was no longer alone on the steppe. Farther along the trail a horse whinnied. At the first sound Khlit sprang to his own animal and wound his neckcloth about the beast's nostrils lest it should make answer to the newcomer. Then he trotted to the edge of the grove to get a view of the stranger.

Khlit had not seen a Tatar for some years, but he did not mistake the little figure seated easily on a steppe pony trotting down the trail. The man's swarthy face peered out under his pointed helmet. A cloak was thrown loosely over his coat of mail, a quiver of arrows at his back, his bow in a case at the saddle.

Evidently the Tatar was not suspicious of enemies, for he was singing a low, chuckling song, glancing occasionally to right and left, more from force of habit than watchfulness. Khlit crouched in his cover and scanned every movement of the rider.

The latter's course took him to within a few yards of the oak trees, and he went by with a careless glance into the grove. Khlit did not move until the Tatar was well past his retreat. It was his first sight of prey in many months and his nostrils opened eagerly, while his gray eyes narrowed.

When Khlit did move, he lost no time. Trotting out, very quietly for a man of his size, into the trail, he covered the distance between him and the rider. As the latter, startled by some sound, or by a glimpse of a moving shadow beside him, turned in his saddle, Khlit's arms closed around him in a crushing grip that the Tatar strove in vain to break.

The Cossack had caught his enemy's lasso from the saddle as he grasped him, and when the two fell to earth Khlit made quick work of binding the smaller man securely, pinioning his arms to his side.

"Eh, Flat-Face," he grunted, standing upright and adjusting his coat, "a sword is needless when a fool rides recklessly over the steppe. You are a nasty-looking villain. I think I may slay you after all."

The Tatar made no move, his small eyes fixed intently on

Khlit's every movement. The latter crossed his arms and stared down at the bound man thoughtfully.

"Hey," he said, "I need a messenger to the great Khan Mirai. You know what I'm saying, devil take you, in spite of your rude stare. Tell Khan Mirai that Khlit, he called the Wolf, the Cossack of the Curved Saber, is following the trail of the Horde, and he will not leave until the Khan presents him with a gift. A gift of the girl Alevna, taken from the village of Garniv. Tell your leader if he does not hand over the girl, the Wolf will bring death and woe upon the tribe. Aye, great woe."

He assisted the man to his feet and helped him into the saddle, first carefully removing sword, bow, and arrows.

"Bring back your answer to me here, Flat-Face," added Khlit. "And think not of treachery against the Wolf, or you will do little more thinking."

Khlit struck the horse on the flank, and the beast started quickly back along the trail. The Cossack watched it for a moment, then took a mealcake from his pocket and began his interrupted repast. He did not sit upon the turf, however, for he led his horse out to the trail and trotted after the Tatar.

Khlit had had time to eat many meals, and he had, in fact, smoked many pipes, by the time that the other appeared again. This time the Cossack had staged his welcome in a different spot, some two miles nearer the Tatar camp. He had selected a place near the trail where he had a good view of whoever might return, and at the same time be safe from observation himself. A turn in the trail around some rocks screened him.

He saw the Tatar making his way along the steppe alone, but his glance was fixed on the distance, not on his late foe. Apparently the man came unaccompanied, but Khlit was not one to believe in the good faith of anyone until convinced by his five senses. Which was fortunate, for as the host made out nearly abreast of him, the Cossack made out several helmets and spear points coming up the trail a good distance in the rear.



It needed no second sight to convince him that other riders were following their friend with no good intentions toward him—Khlit—and, as before, he acted swiftly.

As before, he let the Tatar pass by him a short distance, when he wheeled his horse from cover and sprang after him. The unfortunate rider heard the hoofbeat, and turned his horse with the quick skill of his race, feeling in the quiver at his back for an arrow.

But Khlit had not misjudged his distance. As the Tatar fitted arrow to bow, the Cossack's horse struck him and dashed his own horse to the ground at the same instant Khlit's heavy sword found his head. Horse and rider alike were cast to earth, and the Cossack wheeled away from the trail with a flourish of his curved sword.

"Hey, that was good, very good," he chuckled to himself, as he put several miles of steppe between him and the spot where the Tatar lay. "Now Khan Mirai will know that the Wolf is following him, and that the Wolf is Khlit."

#### IV

The heart of Khan Mirai Tkha, great-grandson of Juchi, leader of the Golden Horde, was not light within him in spite of his successful raid on the Cossacks across the Dnieper. He sat in the sun, his legs crossed under him, his armor laid aside, stroking his black mustache and gazing moodily about the camp of the tribe.

There were many reasons why Khan Mirai should have been carefree, for he had rejoined the main encampment of the tribe with booty and slaves. The host of the Mirza Uztei-Kur, which the Khan was honoring with his presence, was located in a grassy basin, a mile or so in extent, surrounded by a ring of wooded hills.

Nothing better in the way of an encampment could have been

desired. And the Khan's own quarters, the leather and silk pavilion mounted on a wagon drawn by fifty horses, was richly furnished with Mongol draperies and Persian rugs.

But there was a thorn in Khan Mirai's side—Khlit, the Cossack Wolf, who had followed his riders from the Dnieper far into the land of the Horde, past the Kartan Mountains where no Cossack had set foot before, was still in the vicinity, and, in spite of every stratagem the iniquitous brain of Khan Mirai could hit upon, was still unharmed. And he had set his mark upon the Tatars.

Wherefore, it would not need a shaman, or conjurer, to tell that the Khan was irked. For a Tatar lives by mare's milk and flesh, and by fighting, and the Khan was visiting one of his subject tribes who looked to him to deal with the Cossack pest.

To add to his discomfort, that morning when he stepped from his pavilion he had seen seven crows fly across the encampment, and heard their croaking. Khan Mirai knew by this that some misfortune was not far away. It might be possible to ward off the misfortune by aid of the tribe shaman. If this pending misfortune were in any way connected with Khlit, it should be dealt with at once, by all the skill of the conjurer and the intelligence of the Khan, with Mirza Uztei-Kur.

The Khan saw the squat figure of the mirza approaching him and made room on the wagon step for the leader of the tribe.

Uztei-Kur was more at ease on a horse's back than on his bowlegs. He stood perhaps five feet in height, with heavy shoulders, a face broad and yellow as a full moon, and slanting beads for eyes. Unlike the Khan, Uztei-Kur was in mail and bore his scimitar. Men said he slept thus.

He did not greet his chief, merely pulling out a pipe which he filled from the Khan's tobacco jar. A pitcher of soured mare's milk had made up the other's breakfast, and this Uztei-Kur emptied with several gulping swallows. Both were silent for a space, waiting for the other to speak.

"Have you news of the Wolf?" asked Khan Mirai at length, speaking what was on his mind.

"Aye," muttered Uztei-Kur between his lips. "Yesterday we had news of Khlit who calls himself the Wolf. Truly, he was bred of the devil's jackal. It was when we chased a stag in the woods to the west. As we passed under the brow of a cliff a heavy rock bounded down. Two were crushed and another had his backbone cracked, so we left him to die. The stag escaped us."

"Did you see Khlit?" queried the Khan.

"Nay, who else could it be?" demanded Uztei-Kur, baring his teeth, which were pointed as a jackal's.

His eye wandered over the crowded encampment and came to rest on his companion.

"Khlit is hanging around until he gets the woman he asked for. I have seen her. She is worthless to us, for she has the temper of a serpent and the fury of a tiger. None can touch her. Why not give Khlit what he wants and get rid of him?"

"Heart of a lizard!" Khan Mirai spat into the dust at his feet. "Know you not that Khlit is worth a hundred Alevnas to us? Make him slave and we can taunt the Cossacks without measure. He is a prize worth the sack of Garniv."

"Then hunt him down," growled the mirza, whose mind could hold only one idea at once. "And call me not a lizard, Khan Mirai, if you would not find a lizard can sting. I have hunted Khlit for days, without finding more than his horse's dung. Consult your shaman, whom you love as a camel loves a spring, and learn how you may snare the Wolf."

The Khan puffed at his pipe. He was not of Tatar blood alone. He came of Mongol ancestors, and had the tall body and slit eyes of his kind. The mirza he looked on as a dog, to be whipped to obedience, who knew and cared nothing for the arts of the conjurer or the sacred books that had been part of the treasury of the Golden Horde.

"Today," he said, not without hesitation, "I saw seven crows fly over the tribe. And I have heard that yesterday the shaman

walked alone in the woods as he does when a battle is near. But what battle can come to pass here? And now the shaman wears his mask, another sign that he is disturbed."

"Aye," said Uztei-Kur without emotion, "the double-faced one sulks in his house today."

"He can tell us," decided the Khan, rising to his feet, "whether it will be possible to trap the Wolf. If so, we shall ask him how, and out of his wisdom which is allied to unseen potencies he will announce a trap. If he declares that the oracle believes we cannot trap the Wolf, then we will give up the girl, perhaps. But the shaman is very wise. He will devise a trap."

Khan Mirai caused it to be known in the camp that they were going to consult the conjurer, and should be undisturbed. The Tatars were not inclined to disobey the command, for they held the conjurer in wholesome fear, and for the last day he had sulked and spoken to no one, besides wearing his mask, which was a bad omen.

Threading through sleeping camels, the two leaders came to the wagon-house of the man they sought, in a cleared space near one side of the camp. The pavilion was like the others, save for a narrow opening at the dome-shaped top and curious engravings around the leather sides, representing forms of animals and birds, with many crows.

Truly, Khan Mirai discovered, the shaman was sulking. For he called for many minutes at the entrance before the conjurer emerged, wrapped from head to foot in a red cloak, and wearing his mask.

## V

Although Khan Mirai had consulted the conjurer many times before he never lost a feeling of awe when he stood before the dark entrance to the house, where so many strange images

were hung from the walls. The wizard himself impressed the Khan, for he was a wizened little man, scarcely as high as the Tatar leader, although the latter was standing on a lower step. A peculiar smell, like that of dried poppies, crept into his nostrils and he turned his eyes away as the figure in the red cloak bent its mask in the likeness of a dog's head upon him.

When he had made known his business and received the grudging assent of the shaman to enter, Khan Mirai stepped inside with Uztei-Kur, and, groping his way through the blackness, seated himself cross-legged upon some antelope skins.

"Tell us what we have come to know, Shaman," he said, "concerning the Wolf, and you shall have sequins of gold to buy herbs and stag's antlers."

The shaman gave vent to a curious chuckling sound at these tidings, and for a space moved about in the darkness—for he had closed the leather flap over the door—making his preparations for the coming oracle.

Abruptly, he jerked the flap from the vent at the top of the pavilion, allowing a ray of sunlight to descend into the center of the house. In this light he stood revealed in all his conjuring attire. He wore his dog's mask, but the red cloak was discarded, and a myriad of iron figures hung from his body. Iron snakes twined down his legs, iron horses in miniature hung from his arms, with tigers, jackals, birds, and fishes.

The cascade of little images covered him completely, and every move he made was accompanied by a loud clanking. In one hand he held a stick. Before him was placed a wooden drum.

Khan Mirai looked on with satisfaction and not a little awe, as at something he was accustomed to, but with which he was not entirely at ease. The mirza had drawn back into the shadows. Slowly at first, then more rapidly, the shaman began his ritual, every move being followed closely by the Khan.

With his wooden stick the conjurer beat methodically on the drum, facing first toward a huge pair of stag's antlers on one side of the house, then toward an elephant's head mounted in



some fashion and stuffed into lifelike semblance, and then toward a serpent, similarly mounted, dimly to be seen in the semi-darkness.

As he proceeded, the cadence of blows on the drum became quicker, the shaman struck up a dance in which his iron cloak rattled and clanked, and accompanied himself with a muttered shrieking, looking now toward the vent in the top of the house. More and more rapidly he danced, wielding his drumstick and shrieking with the full strength of his lungs. As he did so, the Khan leaned forward breathlessly, his eyes fixed on the ridgepole which was visible through the opening.

When the clamor was at its utmost, the shaman suddenly whirled with a loud cry, and pointed to the opening at the top of the house. The Khan sprang to his feet, and as he did so the conjurer fell to the floor and lay motionless beside the drum.

"Did you see?" whispered Khan Mirai to the mirza. "The crow came and sat on the ridgepole. Never have I seen the shaman in such ecstasy. The prophecy will be, without doubt, more wonderful than ever."

"For twenty summers," returned Uztei-Kur disdainfully, "I have sat in the gloom and watched, and I have never seen any crow alight on the ridgepole. If it is indeed the great-grandfather of the ravens—"

"Hush," whispered the Khan, "the shaman is returning to consciousness. It has taken only a moment for the message to reach him."

Both men were silent as the conjurer stirred, moved his arms, and sat up. Crouching on his haunches, he drew his red cloak about him, and stared at them from behind the dog's mask.

"I have heard," he cried in a hoarse voice, "the words of the raven that has given of wisdom—to the first khans of the hinterland—to the great Genghis Khan—to Kublai Khan, lord of mountains—to Yussaf, prince of princes, from whom it came to the camp of Khan Mirai Tkha, great-grandson of Juchi, leader of the Golden Horde, at his summons. In my ears poured

the wisdom greater than the locked books of the treasury of Pam, more just than the words of the Dalai Lama, he of the mountains."

The conjurer stretched his hands before him as if clutching some imaginary object.

"The wisdom concerned the Wolf who follows the track of the Khan—it tells of a trap that may be set. This is the wisdom—the Wolf is cunning, but he is vain of his strength—Mirai Khan may go alone to where the rock fell from the mountain and seek for the slain stag. He will find the Wolf by the stag. He can tempt the Wolf into a trap. Out of his pride, the Wolf will come, and Tatar eyes shall see the Wolf ride into the encampment of Mirai Khan."

## VI

Now Mirai Khan, although he, like most of his people, held the shaman in awe, was no fool, or he would not have been leader of the Tatar riders. After turning over the words of the conjurer in his mind, he decided that after such a successful trance, the message of the raven must be unusually pregnant, wherefore it behooved him to follow the given advice, as his father and father's father had done before him.

Yet because he was wary, he went to the spot Uztei-Kur named to him, where the rock had fallen from the cliff, mounted and armed. And he went stealthily, approaching through the wood, not from the plain, at a walk, eyes and ears alert for signs of danger. For the shaman had said he would find Khlit, by the stag.

He found time to wonder, as he went, why the stag should be lying in the wood. For Uztei-Kur had said plainly that the deer had escaped him. Khan Mirai was aware, however, that it

pleased the shaman to cloak the wisdom of his words in riddles. He was prepared to find something else at the spot.

But he was not prepared to find the body of a dead Tatar, stiff in the grass, for he had forgotten what Uztei-Kur said, that one of the hunters had been crippled by the rock and left to die. By the body he halted warily, for he saw the rock, a boulder about the height of a short man's belt. For many minutes Khan Mirai did not move. His gaze went from the body to the underbrush about him, and a frown gathered on his swarthy brows.

His keen ears had caught the sound of movement near him in the wood, just where he could not tell. Something was approaching, and the sound told him that the approach was gradual and quiet, not the careless trampling of a deer or wild horse. Khan Mirai reached back into his quiver, fitted arrow to bow, drew his small target over his left arm, and waited for the sound to materialize into view.

He had half expected it, yet he gave a soft grunt of surprise when a horse and rider pushed quickly through the undergrowth into the clear space by the boulder, and Khlit confronted him. The Cossack lounged in his saddle, as he guided his mount to within a few paces of the Tatar. In one hand he held a pistol, of Turkish design.

Khan Mirai had last seen Khlit when the Tatars tossed him bound into a tent to await torture at their pleasure, many years ago. Khlit had escaped then, because a reckless Cossack had ridden through the camp with another horse, at night, and released him, at the cost of his own life.

The Cossacks were surely devils, thought Khan Mirai, for they cared not for their lives in battle. Khlit was older now, but the Tatar did not mistake his scarred face and broad, erect figure.

Neither spoke, for to do so would be to give the other advantage. The Tatar had his bow bent and ready, but so was Khlit's pistol. An unreliable weapon, but then the arrow might also miss its mark and Khan Mirai was in no mind to meet the onset of the Russian's heavy steel and whirling saber. So each

measured the other in silence, while their mounts pawed the turf and strove to get their muzzles down to the grass. It was Khlit who broke the silence.

"Have you come to count your dead, Mirai Khan," he said, "to look for a stag that was slain in a hunt? Have you seen one?"

"One of our own was slain," spoke Mirai Khan.

"Aye," said Khlit grimly. "Here at your feet. Two others were slain at the same time. It was a good hunt. Does it please you? Every day some of the hunted do not return to camp. For I, Khlit, am a hunter."

"Your death will be the hunt, Khlit," returned Khan Mirai. "If not today, very soon. A prophecy has been uttered, that I would find you here, and that you shall be brought to the encampment. The first part has come true, soon the other will be true."

"Who spoke the prophecy?" asked Khlit with interest.

"A shaman, in holy convulsions. His words are truth, O caphar, more true than an oath you swear on that little gold ornament you carry."

The Cossack knew Khan Mirai referred to the cross he wore around his neck.

"Was not my promise true also?" he asked. "Eh, that death should sting the tribe like a wasp, if the girl were not given back to me?"

The Tatar scowled.

"Why is Khlit, he of the Curved Saber, eager to gain a woman?" he said contemptuously. "The girl is scarce grown, and with a temper like a vixen."

"Harken, Khan Mirai," said Khlit. "The woman is not for me. Years ago when you had bound me, a Cossack rode through your camp and loosed me, being slain in the doing. His son I have made my son. And his son desires the girl Alevna for wife. Wherefore I have come for her, to pay the debt I owe."

Khan Mirai considered these words and saw a light. Verily,

the shaman was potent beyond all foreseeing. For he had told the Tatar that Khlit might be tricked through his pride. And there was the solution.

Khlit, so reasoned the Tatar, was under blood debt to free the girl. So closely was Alevna guarded in one of the wooden houses—none except the Khan and her guards knew which—that it would not be possible to rescue her, even if Khlit were able to gain the camp. So Khlit, failing to terrify him, Khan Mirai, must buy her at a price, and that price should be himself. Gladly would the Tatar surrender a thousand Alevnas to see the Cossack bound before him.

“So, you have come to pay a debt, Khlit?” he asked, watching the Cossack narrowly. “Good! I swear to you that there is but one price that will buy Alevna. If you would clear your debt, you must buy the girl with yourself. Do that, and Alevna shall choose a horse and ride free into the steppe.”

Khlit considered this with bent brows.

“The debt must be paid,” he said. “But I do not trust you. When I see with my own eyes Alevna ride free into the steppe and none follow her, I shall be ready to say that you will receive your price”—he hesitated only for a moment—“and then I will ride into the encampment in the plain. This is how it may be done.

“Soon, I shall light two fires on the hills to the west. When you see two smokes arise late in the afternoon give Alevna a good horse. I shall watch her go from the camp past the hill out to the steppe and lose herself to view. Think not to trick me. Then, before the sun kisses earth and the blackbird night flies over us, I will ride into your camp, as the father of Menelitz rode when he lost his life.”

The Tatar studied his foe.

“Do you swear that on the gold token?” he asked finally. Khlit held up the miniature cross in his left hand.

“I swear it,” he growled. “Devil take it, when did Khlit break his word?”



Khan Mirai knew that the Cossack's promise was better than other men's. Moreover caphars did not lightly, strange as it seemed, perjure themselves when they swore an oath on their token. When the Tatar remembered the prophecy of the shaman he felt elated. The conjurer had sworn that Khlit would ride into the camp. Had not the first part of the prophecy come true?

Yes, Khan Mirai thought that the dice of the gods were falling as he wished. To part with the girl was a slight price to pay for the chance—the probability—that Khlit would do as he promised. Of course the Cossack might come galloping with drawn sword. Khan Mirai expected this. But he would be overpowered. The thought of Khlit bound before him settled the question.

"It shall be as you say," he snarled, his eyes alight. "I shall look for the smoke."

"Aye," said Khlit, "so be it."

The parting of the two warriors was not lightly accomplished. Each urged his horse slowly backward, watching the other. It was not until they were a good bowshot apart that Khlit wheeled his mount and disappeared into the wood that had sheltered him so long from the eyes of the Tatar riders.

Khan Mirai lost no time in leaving the spot, with a last glance at the dead man, and hastened to present a gift of gold to the shaman, who, as he expected, was still lying in the wooden house after his convulsions, which must have been severe, as two prophecies had been made, and each had come true.

## VII

When the two columns of smoke rose from the western hill and drifted with the wind over the camp, Khlit watched a girl's form ride past in the distance.

His eyes were keen, and he could not mistake the figure on

an Arab mount, whose poise and movements were those of Alevna. Even the tilt of her dark head he recognized, as she looked back at the Tatar camp, and the eager flush of her cheek when she saw freedom before her.

Khan Mirai had kept his promise. Now he would expect Khlit to keep his word.

But Khlit was in no hurry. He watched Alevna until the girl disappeared down a ravine. He scrutinized idly the herds of cattle which were grazing near the foot of the hill between him and the camp. He even tried to count the horses which he saw wandering about the plain riderless, their manes whipping in the brisk wind, their heads lifting alertly at the slightest sound.

The scene was pleasant, revealed by the level rays of the sun, sinking over the steppe to the west. Khlit considered it with appreciation, stroking his gray mustache. It had been several days since he had talked with Khan Mirai and he reflected that the Tatar was probably impatient at the delay. But Khlit was not to be hurried. He had not lit the fire until he was ready.

Now he scanned the smoke thoughtfully as it floated over the plain, dwindling to a narrow thread and then vanishing. The lives of men, he mused, were like smoke, gathering size and strength at first, then fading rapidly. Like smoke, they drifted where the wind blew, until there was no wind.

There was nothing to prevent Khlit from mounting his horse and riding away in security back to the steppe, to the banks of Father Dnieper and Russia. The path was open. Night was coming on, and the dark would conceal his flight. Yet he stayed.

Menelitz's father, Khlit reflected, had shared bread and salt and wine with him. Nay, he had shed his blood for him. And the opportunity was offered now to pay back the debt. Khlit did not bother to wonder whether Menelitz's father would know of it. It was sufficient that the debt could be paid.

The words of the shaman were true, although Khlit had not wasted a thought on them. The pride of the Wolf would lead him into the Tatar camp. His pride was such that he could not

give the Khan the chance to say that he, Khlit, had turned his back upon a foe and broken his word. Yet, Khlit mused, the shaman had said nothing about the cunning of the Wolf. At least he had heard Khan Mirai say nothing of it. And that cunning was very great.

The sun had almost touched the earth and Khlit rose and stretched himself as a dog does, first one foot then the other. He loosed his saber in its scabbard. Stopping for a moment to light his pipe, he went to his horse and very carefully ran his hand over saddle and bridle, feeling for any weakness. The horse, fat and strong from good feeding, whinnied and touched his shoulder with its muzzle. Then Khlit returned to the fire.

For the last time he cast a keen glance over the plain. The camp of the Tatars appeared as usual, but the Cossack noted bodies of horsemen darting about here and there, and others among the camels and wagons. All the Tatars except a handful of horse-tenders were near the encampment. Khlit noticed this preparation for his reception without emotion. He had not expected Khan Mirai to do otherwise. Then Khlit acted.

Stooping over the fire, he caught up a half-dozen kindled sticks and sprang to his horse. The animal snorted and reared at the flame, but Khlit gained its back, and by hand and knee urged it down the slope of the hill, riding swiftly between the trees. In both hands he held the brands.

The horse needed no further urging than the smoke at his ears to stretch into a frantic gallop, and at that pace Khlit slipped from between the trees to the surface of the plain a half mile from the camp.

With the wind whipping his svitza about him, Khlit guided his mount on a course along the edge of the wood, which took him parallel to the camp. As he went, he dropped his smoldering brands into patches of the dry, waist-high steppe grass and watched the wind fan the spots into widening circles of black, out of which smoke poured up and tongues of flame shot.

He was unmolested in his course, for the few horse-tenders

had drawn near the camp, loath to miss the spectacle of the Cossack's arrival in the camp.

Dropping the last of his brands, Khlit wheeled his horse straight for the herd of cattle, which already was alert and watchful of the smoke and flames. As the wind drove the black clouds toward the beasts their uneasiness grew into panic. Running together they began, horses and cattle alike, to move toward the camp. Little was needed to start them into blind fear.

That little was supplied by the careful Khlit.

With his horse at a free gallop the Cossack drove into the throng of beasts erect in his saddle, waving his heavy sheepskin coat and shouting at the top of his voice. The animals nearest him broke into a gallop, others accompanied them. The cattle tossed their heads, and here and there Khlit saw a horse rear upon the back of another, or the broad horns of a steer upflung. Closer and closer the frightened cattle pressed together, until he was forced to climb on the back of his horse to avoid hurt to his legs.

Another moment and the great herd of the Tatars was in full flight, with the roar and crackle of flames at their backs, toward the encampment.

The Tatars who were near the herd had not been idle. Several of them had pushed into the front of the throng, trying to turn the beasts to one side. Some went down, others were carried along in the resistless mass of several thousand beasts. Shouts, arrows, and waving cloths were useless in attempts to control the herd, now that the patches of fire in the rear had been united and spread out on either flank. The herd had smelled smoke and fear drove them on.

Jammed in the center of the herd, where he had taken his place at the start of the mad race, was Khlit. Such aid as he could give to his horse he did, with his sword, keeping the pressure endurable by mercilessly cutting down the cattle around him.

Probably no one but a Cossack could have been sure of his seat and his horse alike in the herd, but Khlit wasted no thought

on either. Puffing at his pipe, his sheepskin hat thrust on the side of his head, he had eyes only for the camp as the herd crashed into the first streets. The wagon-houses were scattered at first, with crouching camels thronging the streets.

At the advent of the herd the camels scrambled clumsily to their feet and joined the flight. Houses crashed over on their sides at the first impact of the herd, which now split up and lowed through the openings, crushing Tatar riders who did not keep pace with them and pounding underfoot anything living which got in their way.

Thus did Khlit ride through the Tatar camp, as he had promised.

Arrows were shot at him from a distance, but none of the Tatars succeeded in getting near him, owing to the herd. The arrows missed their mark. Indeed Khlit was soon lost to sight in the clouds of smoke which swelled around the camp. The confusion grew into a tumult of bellowing beasts and shrieking women and children in the houses, who, comparatively safe from the herd, dreaded fire.

Once near the farther edge of the camp, Khlit saw a strange thing. From one of the wagons sprang a weird figure, masked and clothed in a mass of hanging iron images that clashed as he ran. In his arms were clutched some bags which he did not abandon, even when he essayed to mount a horse in the tumult. Looking back over his shoulder, Khlit found that the shaman was lost to view in the smoke.

All the Tatars had seen Khlit enter the camp, but very few saw him leave. By the time that the herd had gained the open space on the farther side of the camp the smoke had descended like a pall over the plain. Such Tatar horsemen as had escaped hurt, and had not been borne away by the rush of beasts, were forced to fight off the advancing flames. Some wagons were put in motion. Others were abandoned. None had time to follow Khlit.

Far into the plain on the other side raced the herd, only



stopping when they could run no farther. Then the beasts separated and came to a halt, trembling and panting. Khlit slipped from his mount and, leading the horse, lost no time in gaining the nearest shelter of woods.

Once, as he climbed the hill that separated him from the steppe, Khlit looked back at the smoldering plain, smoke-covered, strewn with exhausted cattle, at the wrecked wagon-houses and the Tatars, dimly seen in the twilight, put to their utmost to keep the flames from the camp; then he turned his face to the steppe.

## VIII

Khlit sat again in front of his house, watching the surface of Father Dnieper. As usual, he was alone. And he was turning over many things in his mind.

The Cossacks of the Siech had returned from Poland. Menelitza had come with them. The boy, as Khlit expected, had won fame as a fighter. He was an approved knight. Yet Menelitza had not come to see Khlit nor had the old Cossack sought out his foster son.

As Alevna had not known of Khlit's battle for her, or of the ride through the Tatar camp when he rode with the herd before the flames, the news had not spread in the Ukraine, for he himself had said nothing. Yet, out of his wise knowledge, Khlit foresaw that a tongue there was no stopping would tell how the ride was accomplished and the camp of Khan Mirai thrown into a chaos of blood and flame.

That, he thought, was fitting, for the raid upon Garniv should not go unavenged and it would gladden the hearts of his old comrades to know how Khlit had made the Tatar chief pay the price of his daring.

As before, Khlit's shaggy head lifted alertly at a sound ap-

proaching—a patter of horse hoofs and a jingle of bells. Seeing that it was only Yemel, the Cossack sank back on his seat while the Jewish trader brought his pack animals to a halt and sprang to the ground.

“Ha!” said Khlit, surveying him amusedly, “I thought you had left your carcass where it would do no more harm.”

“No thanks to you, Khlit, I am here,” snarled the trader. “Murderer, mad Cossack, do you value lives as little as cattle?”

“Less,” smiled Khlit, “in battle. Did you not reap spoil enough without whining for gold and jewels—”

“My pay!” gasped Yemel. “Noble sir, I have your word! Ten times the value of the costliest emerald. Did I not sleep in the wagon-house with the man I had killed, to take his place? As God is my witness, the Khan and mirza came to the house and sat on the body of the dead shaman while I danced to keep their mind from the taint of the place.”

Khlit threw back his head and laughed long. Yemel seized his chance.

“Did not I make an excellent shaman, noble sir? Well for you I knew the Tatar camp as a dog knows his kennel. Did I not serve you well, carrying out your plans, even as you said? And the pay is little for such a risk.”

Khlit waved his hand toward the cottage.

“Take what you can carry away, Yemel,” he answered. “I need not such things. For I shall be alone now. Menelitz has taken Alevna to wife.”

Just for an instant the Jew glanced curiously at the old Cossack, somber now and gazing out over the waters of Father Dnieper. He made as if to say something, hesitated, noting the sadness in the Cossack’s eyes, shook his head shrewdly, and, taking a heavy bag from his pack horse, vanished quietly inside the hut.

## Tal Taulai Khan

The gates of the monastery of the Holy Spirit rolled slowly back upon themselves. A cassocked priest of the Orthodox Russian Order thrust his head into the narrow opening and gazed upon those who sought admittance to the monastery, which stood in the mountains overlooking the waters of the Dnieper and formed a place of refuge for travelers in the early seventeenth century.

He saw, scattered along the road winding up to the monastery gates, a throng of horsemen accompanied by some carts. The riders he recognized as Cossacks by their astrakhan hats and wide sheepskin svitzas. They were impatiently waiting for the gates to be opened, and the appearance of the priest's sturdy head and shoulders was greeted by a wild shout.

"Hey, the batko!" they roared. "Look how he pokes out his shaven skull, like a baby vulture—come and take a drink of brandy, batko, it will warm your frozen bones! Hey, he must think we are ugly, he makes long faces at us!"

Several of the riders spurred abreast of the carts and jerked beakers of brandy from servants who acted as teamsters and winedrawers. Most of the assembly were drunk, the priest knew, for it was a good two days' travel to the Zaporogian Island—the encampment of the Cossack army—and when the Cossacks

rode to escort a fellow member to the monastery it was no crime, as in time of war, to drink on the march. Wherefore few were sober, and he who was too old to serve longer in the army, and who sought peace in the monastery, was least sober.

"Stand forth, Split Breeches!" rumbled the riders. "Let the batko see how tall you are, and fat. Devil take the man, where is he—"

At the command of his companions a powerful, gray-haired Cossack pushed to the front. Although he must have swallowed enough brandy to cripple a camel, he sat steadily in his saddle until he had waved farewell to the others. Then he spurred up to the gate. The priest drew himself up sternly.

"Who is there?" he demanded.

"Cossack, batko!" growled the warrior.

"What do you seek?"

"I am come to pray for my sinful soul."

Dismounting, the Cossack stepped toward the gates, which opened wider at his approach. Opened and then closed behind him. His horse, separated from his companion of years, stood patiently where he had been left. Somewhere in the monastery, chimes, which were wont to sound at evening, echoed melodiously.

At the sound several of the Cossacks removed their astrakhan hats and crossed themselves. Others sought the brandy wagons, to begin the march back to camp. They had come out of respect to the one they called Split Breeches, who was too old to fight and who sought to end his life in the monastery. The farewell accomplished, they departed the camp where there were whispered tidings of war with the Tatars across the Dnieper.

To the free Cossacks, a summons to war was as the scent of game to a trained wolfhound. Wanderers, seekers of adventure, born fighters, they lived by the sword. When one was born the father laid his sword beside it, saying—

"Well, Cossack, here is my only gift to you, whereby to care for yourself and others."

Fighting without pause, it was rare that a Cossack lived to be as old as the one called Split Breeches, or another who had

just filled his beaker at the brandy wagon and held it up for a toast. He was tall as Split Breeches but lean, his scalp lock gray, and his bushy eyebrows overhanging narrow eyes and high cheekbones. His red morocco boots were of the finest stuff, and tar had been smeared over his costly nankeen breeches to show his scorn of appearances. A high sheepskin hat was perched over one ear.

"To our Russian land, and a speedy war!" he cried.

"Khlit has said well," several responded.

"The horde of the Khan is gathering. Without doubt there will be war—"

"But Khlit will not be there," spoke up a Cossack who wore a hetman's attire from the outskirts of the group. "He has fought through too many wars already, devil take him, and he has outstayed his time in the Siech."

The tall Cossack straightened his hat and, without an instant's hesitation, spurred through the crowd to the speaker. Throwing down his beaker he pointed out over the Dnieper to the farther bank—territory of the Tatars.

"Hetman," he growled, "think twice before you say that Khlit, he called the Wolf, Khlit of the Curved Saber, is too old to ride with the Siech. He who rode alone through the camp of Mirai Khan is not ready to seek the gates of a monastery."

The hetman, who had spoken hastily, was not prepared to take back his words; as a chief of a kuren his speech held weight. Moreover, he had reason for what he said. And the Cossacks knew that Khlit's years were above those of any other in the Siech. Measuring glances with the angry veteran, he replied:

"This is not a time to think of the past, Khlit. War is upon us, and the men from the hills across the Dnieper say that hordes beyond the Krim Tatars are marching to the riverbanks. The name of Khlit of the Curved Saber has gone through the Ukraine to the Salt Sea. But we must fight with our arms, not names. And your arm is lean. Have I spoken the truth, noble sirs?"

The Cossacks, slightly quieted by the sight of the monastery,



listened carefully. The incident had assumed the air of a council. And the warriors were jealous of their rights to decide for the welfare of all in a council. Before any could reply Khlit spoke.

"Mirai Khan would shake in his boots for joy if the word came to him that Khlit was humble. Is it the will of the noble sir to give pleasure to Mirai Khan and the ranks of the Flat-Face? The monastery doors are for weaklings and men who have tasted too much blood."

Several of the Cossacks nodded assent but the majority were thoughtful. They were not given to much thinking—that they left to their leaders. Moreover, the hetman had said that Khlit was old, and the monastery was at hand. Many would like to say that they had seen the last of Khlit of the Curved Saber. Cossack usage was not to be put aside, and usage ordained that old men seek prayer for their souls.

Khlit, keen to judge the feelings of men, and crafty as a war-scarred wolf, saw that delay and debate would not aid him. Cossacks never waste time in quibbling. Inwardly, he laughed, and waved his hand around the assembly. "Come, noble sirs," he shouted, "do you order Khlit to the monastery? How will you fight the Tatars then? What is the decision of the assembly? Come, we are not old women, what is it to be?"

With his fate hanging in the balance—for the word of a council was law with the free Cossacks—Khlit scanned the faces of his companions and his heart sank as he failed to recognize a friend. All were young men, strangers, and few were from his kuren. The hetman was an acquaintance, but Khlit suspected that the officer was not free from jealousy.

Instead of replying at once the warriors glanced at each other and muttered uncertainly. The monastery was near. Yet the name of Khlit of the Curved Saber was known to them all. Finally one voice spoke up.

"The monastery," growled the hetman. "The monastery!" shouted others, and the assembly cried its assent.

Khlit wasted no time.

"So be it—the monastery," he snarled. "But one fit for a warrior. Tell your leader that Khlit has gone—tell the Koshevoi Ataman that he of the Curved Saber has sought a place where no other Cossacks have been. Get back to your kennels, dogs!"

Still fuming, he wheeled to the hetman and drew out his whip.

"You have put the old wolf from the pack," he said bitterly, "and you will find many jackals among the pack. When you tell the Koshevoi Ataman what you have done, he will send for me. But a wolf does not run with jackals. Rather, he goes alone until he has silenced the whimpering of the jackals. Hey, alone!"

Before the others could respond or move, the veteran Cossack had swung his horse from the throng. Leaving the winding trail to the monastery, he darted forward down the slope of the mountain. It was not long before he was lost to view in the trees.

The chimes had ceased their tocsin when the Cossacks again caught sight of Khlit. A mile below them his horse was swimming out into the swift waters of the river. Beside his horse, one hand in the beast's mane, another steadying his powder and pistols on the saddle, Khlit was swimming. Horse and rider were headed for the farther bank of the Dnieper, beyond which lay Tatar.

## II

It was in winter, the year of the ape, according to the Mongol calendar, that Tal Taulai Khan, Chief of Chiefs, leader of the Black Kallmarks, told his wives that he was tired of them. Instead of killing them and obtaining others from Circassia, Georgia, or Astrakhan, Tal Taulai Khan began a hunt through the mountains that separated him from the lands of the west.

The Grand Khan of the Kallmarks knew no bounds to his kingdom. The wall that girded China, Sabatsey, the Land of Dogs, was no bar to his entrance. His horsemen thronged to the shores of

the Salt Sea. When he hunted, the chiefs of the country came to pay homage. If they neglected to do so their towns were sacked. To make easier the royal pathway, the commander of his armies, Kefar Choga, made, as they went along, a road that was wide and level. If a gorge was to be crossed a bridge was built. If the hunt delayed long in one spot pavilions were built of solid tree trunks and ebony.

It was the will of Tal Taulai Khan to hunt, and never during his life had the will of Tal Taulai Khan failed to achieve its purpose. That it was winter made no difference. The cold in the mountains of the Black Kallmark land was great. Snows were deep. Passage, for ordinary travelers, was impossible. Yet Tal Taulai Khan announced that it was his will to hunt to the summit of the mountain called Uskun Luk Tugra in Kallmark tongue, or Pe Cha in the speech of the Mongol Tatars, which signified the "roof of the world."

Nothing else would be worth the while of Tal Taulai Khan. In the woods that girdled the slope of Uskun Luk Tugra he had heard from an Usbec Tatar that there were noble stags, while on the summit of the mountain was a frozen lake on the shores of which gleamed at night a curious fire the color of emeralds.

In appearance Tal Taulai Khan was true to his descent, which was from Genghis Khan, leader of the Golden Horde, and the chiefs of the Mongol Tatars. He was taller than most of his followers, impassive of face, with the narrow eyes and high cheekbones of his breed, massive in figure, with a wide, firm mouth, black mustaches, and a heavy chin.

Men spoke of him as the leader of three times a hundred thousand horsemen. Tal Taulai Khan desired above all things to be waging a war. In the year of the ape, however, the peoples on his borders were quiet, so the Khan declared that he would hunt. Whereby came the great hunt of Uskun Luk Tugra, when the rivers that came from the mountain were red with blood on their frozen surfaces and Kallmark warriors drank the blood of dead enemies to keep the life and warmth within them,

owing to the cold which smote them when they ascended to the roof of the world.

The Khan's impassive eyes had shown a gleam of interest when he questioned the bonzes, who were servants of the god Fo and came to his court from the Dalai Lama through the land of the Great Muga, as to the success of this hunt. They had made reply that it was written in the sacred texts of the god Fo that hunting was honorable for such as the Grand Khan, and that in the year of the ape he would hunt such game as he had not met with before.

Wherefore the zeal of Tal Taulai Khan, who had some respect for the words of the bonzes, was great for the hunt, and the death of ten thousand horses the first cold night's march was only an incident in the advance of his horde toward the west of the Kallmark land and the summit of Uskun Luk Tugra. It is so related in the annals of one named Abulghazi Bahadur Sultan.

### III

Great was the pride of Khlit of the Curved Saber, whereby great was his anger. As he rode east he cursed hetman and Cossack who had called him fit for the monastery. To Khlit, inmates of monasteries were no more than suckling swine. To be ordered hence by the hetman of his kuren, or barracks, was more bitter than the dregs of arrack, the Tatar wine.

Khlit was not blind to the fact that if he had appealed to the Koshevoi Ataman, the decision of the hetman and the hasty council by the gate of the Holy Spirit might well be overruled. Once when his arm was stronger, he had been hetman. Age had lost him his rank. But such an act was not agreeable to Cossack pride, the pride of an old hetman. The matter, to Khlit, called the Wolf, was simple. Some Cossacks, jealous or hostile, had driven him from the Siech. They must live to regret what they had done.

During the weeks of travel to the heart of Tataria this thought fastened upon the mind of Khlit, even as the sun began to circle farther to the south and the night cold became keener. The Cossacks who had cast him out at the monastery had not seen the last of him. The time would come when they would see him again.

Khlit knew that the Tatar hordes were gathering for war, and his instinct told him that it was directed toward the Ukraine. Where war was, Khlit was at home. He did not intend to join the ranks of the Krim Tatars, servants of Mirai Khan, for an old score lay unsettled between the Khan and Cossack, and Khlit's head would have honored one of Mirai Khan's tent poles.

But beyond the Krim Tatars, his ancient foes, were the Black Kallmarks, of whom he had heard, but who had never set eyes on Cossacks. It was to the Kallmarks Khlit rode. So great was his anger that it carried him swiftly over three wide rivers, the familiar Dnieper, the Don, and the Volga.

Khlit's anger cooled, as his own danger grew. Riding by night and keeping well to the north, he passed the land of the Krim folk in safety. Tatar horsemen were gathering at the valley camps, he noticed, leaving their herds on the hills. Isolated riders met the Cossack and after keen scrutiny of his horse and weapons, rode by with a backward glance until out of pistol shot. There is a saying that a Tatar's hand goes quickest to his sword. Yet Khlit's aspect commanded respect, and hence the right of way along his journey. Once only did he stop a rider.

During the first days of his journey the Cossack had the good luck to kill a stag with a pistol shot. Some time he spent in cutting the meat from the carcass, drying it in the sun, and placing it under his saddle, between the leather and the back of his horse, where friction and heat would keep the meat tender and warm. He had dismounted to eat a strip of his meat and smoke a pipe in a slight depression along his path where he would not be visible from the steppe.

Khlit's ears were not dulled with age, or he would not then



be alive, and when he heard a rattling as of saddle trappings and weapons he dropped food and pipe and sprang to the edge of the gully where he had taken concealment. From the sounds he had expected that a troop of Krim riders would be passing, but he saw only a solitary rider trotting slowly by at some distance. At the sight his mustache twitched in a smile.

By old experience he knew the sight of a Krim shaman, or conjurer, and he grinned as he noted the hideous mask which garbed the man's features, the long cloak that floated over the tail of the horse, and the mass of miniature iron images of birds and beasts that cluttered up the magician's saddle and which had given forth the sounds he had heard.

Relieved of all apprehension, Khlit drew out a pistol and advanced from his place of concealment. Wrapped up in his own thoughts and lulled by the clatter of his accouterments, the shaman did not notice the Cossack's approach until they were nearly abreast, when Khlit spoke.

"Hey, swine of the devil's sty," he cried in fluent Tatar, for he had a lifelong knowledge of the speech, "stop your horse and share the meat of a Christian Cossack!"

The shaman cast a hasty glance around and decided that resistance was not to be attempted. Yet the appetite with which he shared Khlit's piece of meat was not great. Khlit, however, was in high good humor at the meeting and plied the other with meat, cakes, and tobacco.

"The men of the Krim steppe do not sleep in their huts," he observed craftily after a while. "They ride together in banks with weapons. What is in the mind of Mirai Khan?"

The shaman chewed his meat and his dark eyes scanned Khlit narrowly.

"There are wolves loose on the steppe with the coming of winter," he began. "And the word has gone forth from Mirai Khan, our leader, that they are to be hunted down lest too many of the sheep and oxen be taken. Perhaps you have heard the cry of the wolves—"

"I have heard the gathering cry of the packs, shaman," snarled Khlit. "But they have two legs, and swords instead of teeth. Tell no more lies, Flat-Face, or I will cut open your belly. I asked, what is the word that goes through the Krim land and brings the riders together with arms?"

"I will tell, noble chief," responded the conjurer hastily. "It is the truth, every word! This is the year of the ape, when it is written in the sacred books of our cult that there will be a battle. It is written in the books that they shall win victory in battle if Mirai Khan leads them, not otherwise."

Khlit mentally sifted the words of his companion and arrived at the conclusion that the Krim folk were actually getting ready for war, and that Mirai Khan, whose tricks he knew of former years, had secretly ordered the shamans to declare that he must lead them into battle. It needed no more to assure Khlit that the Krim horde was preparing to swoop down on the land of the Ukraine. Yet what was the delay? Why wait until winter? It seemed as if Mirai Khan was not yet ready to strike.

"And the Black Kallmarks," continued Khlit thoughtfully, watching the shaman, "are they likewise on the march? Is anything written in the books concerning them? Where are they to be found, son of a devil's dog?"

The shaman's face twitched involuntarily in surprise and his eyes narrowed. For a second too long he thought.

"Aye, noble Cossack," he whined at length. "The Black Kallmarks, who are the finest warriors in the world—except the Cossacks—are marching, and marching, and with them the Mongol Tatars, all under the leadership of the celestial Tal Taulai Khan. But it is a hunt. They are bound for Uskun Luk Tugra, the roof of the world, where the green fire burns by the frozen lake. It is the word of Tal Taulai Khan that they hunt."

"In winter?" Khlit scowled. "Their prince must love the chase to freeze his bones on the mountains. Have the Kallmarks ever come into the land of Mirai Khan?" The shaman's gaze shifted.

"Not for two men's lifetime," he responded. "Yet Tal Taulai

Khan has commanded a hunt. He wishes his men to become hardened, for he desires much a good fighter. Go you to the court of Tal Taulai Khan, noble sir? I will tell you how to find it."

"Aye," said Khlit shortly.

"Then ride into the rising sun for the space of a month. When you come to the wide Jaick River, turn south unto the mountain peaks, with snow and ice covering. One, the higher, is Uskun Luk Tugra. Pass between the two and in time you will hear of the approach of Tal Taulai Khan, who rides higher."

"Good!" Khlit rose and swaggered to his horse. "Tell Mirai Khan that you have spoken with Khlit, he called the Wolf, who rides past the land of the Krim Tatars to see the face of Tal Taulai Khan. He will remember me."

The Tatar spat in the direction of Khlit's back. As the Cossack rode away, the face of the shaman writhed into an evil smile.

Khlit, usually prompt to fathom the minds of his enemies, had passed over the words of the shaman lightly. He had overestimated the man's fear of him—a common trait of the Cossacks. He had perceived the man's reluctance to speak of Mirai Khan. Yet he had not noticed the other's readiness to speed him on to Tal Taulai Khan.

The shaman, on his part, viewed the departure of Khlit with the certainty that he would not return. All the Krim Tatars had heard of Khlit, the Cossack Wolf, and Mirai Khan counted the days until he could achieve the death of Khlit. And Mirai Khan, as the shaman knew, was at present in the camp of Tal Taulai Khan. For the first time in the knowledge of the shaman tribe, Krim Khan had ridden into the court of the Grand Khan. Hence, if Khlit reached his destination, and Mirai Khan was still alive, it meant the death of the Cossack. Which was what the shaman desired.

## IV

The rivers of the foothills of Uskun Luk Tugra were frozen, and the sun's rays did not serve to thaw the ice when brazen strokes on the copper basin outside the pavilion of Tal Taulai Khan summoned his host to the hunt that seemed without an end.

Kefar Choga himself, leader of the Kallmark army, stood by the copper basin, waiting with bowed head for the appearance of the Khan. Kefar Choga was a Mongol Tatar, with the broad olive face and black eyes of his breed. Beneath his fur cloak his legs bowed to the shape of a horse's barrel. His bronze helmet reflected the faint light of the winter sun.

Behind Kefar Choga stood the chieftains of the Kallmark army, leaders of tribes from the land of the Great Muga, the Kirghiz Steppe, Mongol Tatars. Wrapped in furs, fortified with heavy drinks of arrack and hasty mouthfuls of half-raw horse's flesh against the cold of the mountains, they waited the coming of the man they called Chief of Chiefs, Khan of the Kallmarks.

Near the group of chieftains were ranged the bonzes, priests who had journeyed to the Kallmark court from the kingdom of the Dalai Lama, their chests and arms naked in spite of the morning chill, and their furs white and gray. They poised their stout bodies in an attitude of reverence, not without an inward groan at the discomfort of their position.

In an outer ring thronged the mirzas and tribal leaders who had come to visit the path of the Khan, as custom demanded, and shared in the hunt. Policy as well as fealty dictated this course, for Tal Taulai Khan was inclined to lay waste the territory of any chieftain who neglected to visit him. With the visitors mingled the leaders of the hunt, Tatar horsemen, Usbec guides, caretakers of the royal packs of dogs.

At some distance from the pavilion, which was mounted on

wheels, full two hundred feet wide, and drawn by a hundred yoke of oxen, crowded the courtiers, Mongols and Chinese, loaded with accouterments, jars of refreshment and food should it please the Khan to halt before reaching the next camp, and silken cloths to lay under him if he descended from his horse. They were watchful of the hangings over the door of the pavilion, awaiting the appearance of Tal Taulai Khan.

A cry of welcome went up from the courtiers and visitors as the fur hanging was pushed aside and the figure of the Khan emerged.

For a moment Tal Taulai Khan stood facing the sun, as his pavilion was always placed to face the sun's rising place. The assemblage bowed salutation but the Khan glanced only toward his horse, waiting by the pavilion steps, Kefar Choga at the bridle.

Seizing the hammer from the attendant at the copper basin, Tal Taulai Khan struck an impatient summons that echoed the length of the great camp. Folding his arms over his wide chest, he watched the streams of riders that started from either side of the encampment up the valleys at the note of the gong. A steady stream of horsemen made its way to either flank, to take station perhaps ten miles away, forming the two horns of the human net that was to sweep the hills of game, closing in to a circle, so that Tal Taulai Khan could find and kill the cornered game.

This done, Tal Taulai Khan descended the steps and sprang on his horse with a lightness and agility surprising to one who did not know that the Khan spent the days of many months of the year in saddle, riding with his horde to war or hunt. Once he was seated, the chief's jeweled turban nodded affably to Kefar Choga, who bowed to the stirrup, remarking to himself that the Khan was in good humor this morning.

Drawing his scimitar from its sheath, Tal Taulai Khan noted with approval that it had been sharpened in the night by Kefar Choga, and, as further evidence of his satisfaction, ordered a beaker of arrack to be brought him, which he emptied with a single heave of his furred and silken shoulders.



"Horsemen from the hills," said he to Kefar Choga, "say that there are many of the horned sheep in the foothills of Uskun Luk Tugra, so there will be excellent sport today. To hunt mountain sheep with spear is better even than slaying a full-grown stag with a sword."

"That is true, O Chief of Chiefs," growled Kefar Choga, who had something on his mind. "But the sun must be higher before the beaters are at station on the flanks. Meanwhile, if it pleases you, there is one who would speak with you, the leader of the Krim Tatars, Mirai Mirza."

In the presence of the Grand Khan, all khans lost their title, being called mirzas. Kefar Choga was a man of few words. He had received a hundred good Arab horses with five camel loads of weapons from the hand of Mirai Khan to gain the ear of Tal Taulai at an opportune moment. This, however, he did not mention. The brow of the Kallmark chief darkened.

"Is this the hour, O Kefar Choga," he responded sulkily, "to think of mirzas or the welfare of tribes? Have the Krim Tatars ever given me aught but disrespect and raids? Mirai Khan was bold to come hither without fifty thousand horsemen. Are the beaters in place yet?"

Kefar Choga mentally vilified the ancestors and descendants of the Krim leader, and hastened to smooth over his mistake.

"In a short hour we can proceed, O Chief of Chiefs," he muttered, "for I have planned a great hunt for today, with a sweep of twenty miles." Tal Taulai grunted approval. "Yet already"—Kefar Choga cast about for some means to distract his leader—"already, at sunup our outposts have taken the first game of the day."

"How did that happen?" the Khan demanded. "What hunter took up his spear before I had ended my kill? Roast the soles of his feet over a fire and throw him to the jackals!"

Kefar Choga held up his hand.

"No spear was taken up, O Chief of Chiefs. This game wan-

dered into the outpost. It was neither stag nor mountain sheep. Never have I seen the like."

"A jaguar?" Tal Taulai showed immediate interest. "A marten?"

"Neither," Kefar Choga shook his head. "It was a horseman wearing sheepskin, with a fur hat. Never have I seen the like before. He speaks broken Tatar and says he has journeyed for three moons to come here."

"I will see him," said Tal Taulai with some disappointment. "It is well that the outlying chieftains come to the camp."

Kefar Choga waited for no more, but motioned to a group of his officers who were sitting their horses outside a pavilion nearby. The courtiers and chieftains fell back to allow the group to pass to the Khan, who eyed a tall figure in the midst of the Tatars.

Kefar Choga, Tal Taulai thought, had spoken truth. Never had he seen a man so tall who was swathed in furs, with mustaches the length of his belt and shoes that came to his knees, with blue eyes instead of black.

"What is your name, and tribe?" he demanded.

The newcomer looked inquiringly at Kefar Choga, who rendered the speech of the Khan into Western Tatar speech.

"My name," said the rider, "is Khlit, surnamed the Wolf. I am come from the Cossacks."

Tal Taulai considered this when it was repeated to him.

"Like a wolf you look, and show the manners of your breed," he meditated aloud. "Is he the leader of his tribe, come to render homage?"

To the Khan's surprise, the Cossack shook his head angrily and growled a response.

"He says," explained Kefar Choga without emotion, "that the Cossacks do not render homage to anyone. And he is not the leader. He has left them to seek fighting elsewhere. He has heard of the Kallmark Khan, and traveled far to see your face."

For an instant the Khan stared at Khlit curiously. He was not

accustomed to men who sat straight in the saddle when speaking to him and acknowledged no ruler. Then his gaze drifted to the mountains and the spreading lines of horsemen.

"If he is a fighter born, see that he is in the front of the first battle," he instructed Kefar Choga. "Meanwhile watch him, for I like not these strangers from the West. If the wolf shows his teeth, a spear in the back will make him meat for his brethren."

## V

No further notice was taken of Khlit until nightfall. The Cossack had taken a deer's quarter from the spoil of the hunt and was preparing to make himself a meal beside his horse when a figure pushed through the throng of Kallmarks around the fires, and Khlit recognized the leader of the army, Kefar Choga.

The Tatar touched him on the shoulder and motioned for him to follow his guidance. At a further word from Choga two of the men seized stakes from the fire and hastily constructed torches with which they accompanied them.

In spite of a long day's ride over the snow-carpeted mountains Kefar Choga appeared as tranquil as in the morning, although Khlit's bones—accustomed as he was to the saddle—ached from the toil.

Watchful and curious he followed the chief, noting that speculative glances were cast their way from the throngs around the multitude of fires that blazoned the valleys, as fireflies lighted the steppe of the Ukraine.

Kefar Choga spoke no word until they had passed beyond the camp proper and through the quarters of the outposts where regiments of horsemen nursed their arms beside their mounts or slept from weariness.

It was not until they came to the edge of a cliff that Kefar

Choga paused and motioned out into the night. They were standing at the brink of the cliff, but Khlit had concluded that it would not do to show any fear of his surroundings under any circumstances. He was fully aware that in the camp of Tal Taulai Khan the lives of men hung tenderly to their bodies, and a stranger who slept with his back exposed was gambling with perdition if he had anything of value on his person that might tempt the Kallmarks. Stepping to the edge of the cliff, Khlit shaded his eyes from the glare of the torches and looked out. A new moon cast a faint light over the valley below them, which Khlit recognized as one up which the horde of Kallmarks had passed that afternoon.

A curious moaning, snarling sound drifted up to him from the depression, and as he listened a chorus of howls welled up and died down. Hardened as he was to the sights and sounds of the mountains, Khlit drew in his breath sharply.

"Your brethren," growled Kefar Choga. "Look!"

His eyes being now accustomed to the semi-gloom, Khlit made out the bed of the valley, which stretched as far as he could see. Hundreds of carcasses of dead horses littered the snow and lay piled in the groups of firs, half-trodden into the ground by the passage of the multitude over them, victims of the cold and labor of the merciless hunt. But the horses were not alone. Dozens of dead Kallmarks spotted the valley, frozen or crippled during the ride and left by their comrades, who were hardened to such mishaps.

Again the wave of howls uprose on the wind and Khlit noted that the valley seemed alive with moving forms. He understood the meaning of the howls now. A multitude of wolves and jackals was following the Kallmark horde, too numerous to be counted. The valley swarmed with them, as if with vermin.

"It will not be long, Cossack," observed Kefar Choga pleasantly, "before you lie yonder."

Khlit swept a quick glance at the Tatar. Kefar Choga was

regarding him curiously, his narrow eyes gleaming in the torch-light.

"Be it long or soon," responded Khlit, "there will be many to keep me company. Aye, the wolves feast high when Khlit of the Curved Saber strikes his last enemy to the earth."

Kefar Choga grunted. His eyes did not move from the Cossack. Khlit thought to himself that something was upon the mind of the other, but he said nothing, preferring to let the Tatar speak.

"In the camp of Tal Taulai Khan, when the hunt is on, a man is slain more often than a bonze can count. The wolves know this, wherefore they follow."

Kefar Choga swept his hand toward the valley. Khlit took out his pipe and tobacco pouch, preparing to fill the one from the other. He did not lose sight of the Tatar. It was probable, he thought, that Tal Taulai Khan had expressed a wish that he be thrown to the jackals. Still, Kefar Choga seemed in no hurry to move.

"Harken, Khlit," said the Tatar leader, "know you a man who calls himself Mirai Mirza, chief of the Krim folk?"

"Aye," responded Khlit casually, "I know his face."

"He has no love for you. When you were brought before Tal Taulai Khan this morning I heard him say to another that it would not be long before you had a knife in your back."

Khlit paused in the act of lighting his pipe at one of the torches. "Mirai Khan is here?" he muttered. "In the camp of the Kallmarks?"

His face did not show how important he considered the news. That Mirai Khan would come without escort to the Kallmarks he had not anticipated, although he expected that the Krim leader would try eventually to unite his forces with those of the Grand Khan.

"He seeks an alliance," explained Kefar Choga. "Since he has promised your death it will not be long before you lie yonder. The thought came to me to tell you."



Khlit meditated. Kefar Choga was not one to waste his time in an act of kindness. Rather, he must anticipate something from his trip to the edge of the camp. If Mirai Khan had been long with the Kallmark horde, he would hardly have neglected to buy or barter the friendship of Tal Taulai's right-hand man. It was more than possible that Kefar Choga and Mirai Khan had an understanding.

If so, his situation was doubly precarious. Mirai Khan would like nothing better than to separate Khlit's head from his body. If the two were acting together, Kefar Choga's warning would only be accounted for on either of the grounds. Either he deemed Khlit as good as dead already, or he hoped to work on the fears of the Cossack.

Thus Khlit meditated, and a reply to Kefar Choga came into his mind.

"Say to Mirai Mirza that when he tires of waiting, Khlit's saber is ready to meet him."

Kefar Choga threw back his squat head and laughed harshly.

"To see the jackal fight the wolf—by the god Fo, they would be well matched!"

"Bring us face to face," continued Khlit calmly, "and you will see the wolf fight the jackal. It will be a good fight."

He threw out the remark as a gambler casts his dice. If Mirai Khan was actually planning to take his life—and there was no reason to doubt it—it would be better for Khlit to meet the Krim Tatar in personal combat. And Kefar Choga was a man who would be pleased to see the two slay each other. So much Khlit had read in his eyes, with the wisdom of years.

And at the same instant he understood the reason for their coming to the spot. And that Kefar Choga was indeed banded with Mirai Khan.

He had stepped forward to light his pipe at the torch held by one of the Kallmarks. Still, he watched Kefar Choga. For the first time he saw the Tatar's gaze fall from his, and go,

involuntarily, behind him. Just a little, the slit eyes narrowed, and the broad mouth opened. Khlit did not stop to think. He acted, with instinctive caution.

He stepped quickly, not backward, but toward Kefar Choga, past the direction of the Tatar's gaze.

As he did so, he heard a cough behind him, and the figure of Kefar Choga darkened. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the torch behind him whirl over the cliff. Turning, he saw the torchbearer stagger and throw up his arms. With a gasping cry the man's knees gave under him and he toppled forward over the cliff. Not so quickly, however, that Khlit did not see the tuft of an arrow sticking out between his shoulder blades.

Shading his eyes with his hand, his glance flitted over the camp, the groups around the fires and the shadows. Some were staring at him. But of the man who had aimed the arrow at him and sent the torchbearer to death by mistake there was no sign.

"It is useless to look," snarled Kefar Choga irritably. "The man who shot the arrow is gone. He was a servant of Mirai Mirza, and if he is wise he will not return to his master."

In his speech there was the anger of the man who has wasted his time vainly.

## VI

Many times as the Kallmark horde gained nearer to the slope of Uskun Luk Tugra—which they could now see rising before them, above its circling forests of fir—Khlit, surnamed the Wolf, tried to count on his fingers the thousands of warriors that formed the hunters of Tal Taulai Khan, and as many times gave up the task as hopeless.

There were more Kallmarks than he had seen in the Krim encampment, more than the trees in the woods of Muscovy, al-

most as many, he thought, as grains of salt in the sea that is made of white salt in the land of the Usbecs. All the Cossacks of the Siech army would equal no more than a third part of the Black Kallmarks who followed the road of Kefar Choga with their thousand ensigns.

Before he came to the Kallmark camp, Khlit had heard of the horde, but now he marveled at the human river of horsemen that flowed up the passes toward Uskun Luk Tugra.

Left to himself, Khlit found time to meditate. Since that first day Tal Taulai Khan had not noticed him, and Kefar Choga had said no word. Mirai Khan he saw at a distance, near the person of the Khan.

He himself was free to go where he chose in the camp, but he found that the outposts turned him back when he ventured near the limits of the army. At night fires were kept going to warm the guards, and no chance was offered to slip between them, owing to the snow, which outlined the figures of moving men.

The cold had taken a firmer grip on the hunters. Rivers that they bridged were coated with ice. Winds buffeted down from the mountain heights and searched under their fur tunics. Khlit was glad of his warm svitza, heavy boots, and sheepskin hat.

The court, Khlit among them, had taken refuge one night from the icy air in the pavilion of Tal Taulai Khan. The interior of the building was warmed by torches and fires in brazen kettles. On heaps of furs the chieftains sat on the floor drinking arrack and swallowing clouds of tobacco smoke from their long pipes.

On the side usually reserved for the women the bonzes sat, whispering among themselves, with an eye to Tal Taulai Khan, who was playing chess in the center of the pavilion with Kefar Choga. The bonzes were favored, as servants of the god Fo, but even favorites were not anxious to risk the cloud of displeasure which darkened the Khan's handsome face—displeasure at the poor success of the last few days' hunt.

Few stags and no horned sheep had been met with and Tal Taulai Khan had withdrawn that afternoon from the chase in

anger, leaving the slaughter of wild swine and deer to his attendants.

These things Khlit considered as his glance wandered from the Khan to Mirai, leader of the Krim folk, whose bald head glittered in the torchlight at Kefar Choga's elbow. Recently, thanks to the influence of Kefar Choga, the Krim leader had enjoyed more favor at the hands of the Grand Khan.

He knew the enmity of Mirai Khan against the Cossacks was such that he would risk much to lead an overpowering horde across the water of the Dnieper. Khlit drew his pipe from his mouth and watched closely, for the chess game had ended and Tal Taulai Khan sat back in his armchair, while Kefar Choga with a low bow acknowledged at once his own defeat, his sovereign's victory, and the celestial goodness of the Chief of Chiefs to engage in the mimic battle of chess with him.

"Great is your skill, O Chief of Chiefs," he said quickly, "beyond that of other mortals. Honored am I to help display your potency. Yet, if it please you, there is one who has more skill than I—"

Tal Taulai Khan drank of a bowl of mare's milk, which is headier than the strongest wine of Cyprus.

"Another?" he said indifferently. "Let him play—we will see if your words are truth."

Kefar Choga arose and stepped back. The eyes of the assembly searched for the new player, and rested on the bald head and scarred face of the Krim leader, who occupied the defeated general's seat.

To Khlit the mimic warfare of the chessboard with its jeweled effigies of warrior and castle was a sport for weak minds. Yet he studied the players with intent interest. Tal Taulai Khan, who towered upright in his chair in white furs and silks flaming with gems, held in his hand the war or peace of three nations. Mirai Khan, crouching over the board, swaddled in a gray cloak, was the spirit urging the Tatar hordes toward the Dnieper and Cossackdom.

Outcast from the Siech, Khlit felt a wave of homesickness for the islands in the Dnieper, the familiar kurens of his jovial comrades, and the sight of the wide steppe. Homesickness was strange to him, and he shook himself angrily. Yet, if he had reasoned the matter, he would have found that his old anger against hetman and Cossack had been replaced by the lifelong enmity for Tatar and Mirai Khan.

It did not escape him that at the end of the game, Mirai Khan did not immediately leave the board, but leaned forward to whisper something to the Kallmark chief. When Mirai Khan arose, the Tatar was stroking his mustache with the air of a man well content.

At risk of incurring notice and displeasure, Khlit arose from his seat in a corner of the pavilion and swaggered through the throng, pushing his way among the seated groups until he was beside a Kirghiz warrior who reclined, yawning and picking his teeth, a half-dozen paces from the chessboard. The Kirghiz chieftain looked up warily as Khlit squatted beside him, and scowled.

"Harken, Eagle of the Steppe," observed Khlit, using the favorite Kirghiz salutation, "did not Mirai Khan say to Tal Taulai that his skill was great beyond understanding?"

The reclining fighter closed one eye lazily, as if meditating whether to reply or no.

"Nay," he muttered, "Mirai Khan said that the hunt of Tal Taulai was not worthy—that it were better to seek honor beyond the Dnieper where murderous Cossacks were to be found—a tribe that attacks all peoples, as a mad dog bites all he meets—such were worthy the attention of Tatars and much spoil was to be got."

A glance convinced Khlit that the tribesman was too indifferent and too ignorant to make game of him.

"It is the truth," added the Kirghiz, to vindicate himself of all charge of politeness. "Cossacks are good only to be strung on a spear."

Khlit ignored the challenge.



"And what did Tal Taulai reply?" he asked in a low tone, for he had not heard.

"Nought," said the Kirghiz indifferently, seeing that his challenge was not to be taken up.

## VII

So drew near its end the great hunt of Tal Taulai Khan on the foothills of Uskun Luk Tugra, when the frozen rivers that came down from the mountains were red, and the annals of Abulghazi Bahadur Sultan told of a hundred camels' loads of human ears borne away from the spot where the hunt ended—the hunt that was to make memorable the year of the ape.

The sun warmed the snow on the slope of Uskun Luk Tugra and flickered on the doorway of Khlit's pavilion, when he awakened on the last day but one of the hunt and found four men with spears, under the leadership of a Kirghiz horseman, standing guard at the entrance.

This was in keeping with many changes Khlit had observed in the camp. The morning hunt did not start as usual. There was much bustle and talking among the Kallmarks. Much arrack and mare's milk was drunk. Upon inquiry Khlit learned that it was not permissible for him to leave the pavilion. Kefar Choga had said so.

When the sun was high Kefar Choga came and escorted Khlit to the entrance to Tal Taulai's pavilion. Groups of Kallmarks stared at him as he went by. Khlit realized that he was attracting more attention than usual.

He found the court of the Khan standing in the open air, Tal Taulai on horseback, attended by Mirai Khan. The Cossack's pulse quickened as he understood that he was to be taken before the Kallmark leader.

"Mirai Mirza says," he heard Choga mutter in his ear, "that

you have the cunning of a dozen serpents and the craft of a score of wolves, but I see it not. You have not slain a man, or taken spoil since coming to camp."

Khlit was silent, watchful of what went on, and especially of Tal Taulai Khan, who was stroking a falcon on his wrist.

The eyes of the chieftains sought out the Cossack and a silence fell upon them as he stood upright before the Khan. A change had taken place in his fortunes, although he was still armed and ostensibly unmolested, and Khlit, who knew the quickness of misfortune in the Kallmark camp, watched the Khan for a sign of what was coming. He did not like the new honor that had come to Mirai Khan. Tal Taulai lifted his gaze from the falcon and his dark eyes swept over Khlit caressingly.

"The Cossacks," he said softly, and Kefar Choga interpreted, "are a nation of beasts that form a plague spot on the edge of my kingdom. By the words of my good servant Mirai Khan, I have come to know of their iniquity. They must be punished. As a plague spot is burned from a man's body, they shall be scourged."

Khlit made no reply for a space. He had feared that the alliance between the two Khans might be completed. It was not to his liking to listen to insult to the Cossacks.

"Mirai Khan," he responded to Kefar Choga, "has told you twisted truth out of the evil heart. The Cossacks are a free people. Ask Mirai Khan how often the Tatar horde has entered the Ukraine. Ask him how many times he has made an ally of the Turk to harass Russia."

Khlit's boldness had little effect on the composure of Tal Taulai Khan, who was not wont to alter decisions once formed. After a short conference with Mirai Khan the Kallmark leader turned to Kefar Choga.

"How is a thief punished in your land, Cossack?" the leader of the army interpreted.

"By hanging," replied Khlit.

"And a deserter in war?"

"He is shot."

"And a drunkard in time of war?"

"By drowning."

"How is a murderer punished?"

"By burial alive."

Kefar Choga made Tal Taulai Khan acquainted with what Khlit had said.

"The Chief of Chiefs says," he explained, "out of the depths of his limitless wisdom, that no free people would endure such punishments, wherefore you have lied in saying the Cossacks were free. And he says that a tribe that dealt with each other so harshly would be merciless to others. Wherefore he holds that Mirai Mirza's words must be true—that the Cossacks are no less than a breed of murderers and ravaging dogs that must be exterminated."

Anger welled up in Khlit.

"Turks and Tatars," he shouted, "who have faced the Cossack army know that we are not dogs—yet there are few who have lived to tell of it. Tal Taulai Khan will come to grieve for the day he lifts his arm against the Cossacks if his horde is more numerous than the wolves on the plain."

Kefar Choga frowned.

"Already," he told Khlit, "costly presents of jewels from Peking, sapphires from Kabul, gold ornaments from Samarkand, with rare weapons from Damascus and countless silken cloths, are prepared in baskets for the Krim folk to be sent on ahead as an omen of alliance. Krim Tatar and Kallmark Tatar will turn their swords against the Cossacks."

Tal Taulai Khan was growing impatient of the audience with the captive Cossack.

"Ask him what punishment he deserves," he told Kefar Choga. "Whether to be hanged as a thief or buried alive as a murderer. Let him decide."

Khlit's heart was heavy. He saw no mercy in the eyes of the Tatar gathering. Rather, indifference. Yet Khlit had sent many men to death. He drew himself up and crossed his arms.

"Decide," growled the Kallmark general, "or I will speak for you."

Khlit shook his head angrily. Neither death was to his liking. He had his sword, and his arms were free. He could go to his death as a Cossack should, weapon in hand. He stepped forward and held up his hand.

"Say to Tal Taulai Khan," he responded, "that he can see with his own eyes the valor of a Cossack—greater than all else on earth. Say that Khlit, surnamed the Wolf by his enemies, will fight against the Kallmark horde. Say that Tal Taulai Khan can have sport at the hunt for following game that is not stag or tiger."

"How mean you?" questioned Choga.

"This. There can be a hunt tomorrow at the foot of Uskun Luk Tugra. It will begin here, with Kallmark cavalry far out to either side, and continue to the slope of the mountain. There it must end, for the way to the summit of the mountain is hidden. Tal Taulai Khan can see how a Cossack fights."

"Bah, dog!" Kefar Choga spat derisively. "Think you the Kallmark horde will hunt for one man?"

"You asked," retorted Khlit, "that I choose a manner of death, and I have chosen. Let me ride away from the camp toward the mountains, and the Kallmarks take up the chase."

"Nay, that would bring us, perchance, among the Krim ranks—" remonstrated Choga, when a motion from Tal Taulai cut him short.

"The Cossack has chosen," the Khan cried, "and it shall be so. It will be a great hunt. Better game is this than stags. We will chase the wolf. Guard him until then."

"That were not wise," broke in Kefar Choga angrily.

Tal Taulai scowled.

"Who mutters when the Khan of Khans orders?" he cried. "Kefar Choga! I have ordered. Keep the Cossack in the guarded pavilion where the gifts for the Krim chiefs are stored. See that he is well mounted and armed tomorrow. Let him not be harmed meanwhile. It will be a good chase."

## VIII

As a gambler handles his dice before making a final throw, Khlit, surnamed the Wolf, sat captive that night in the pavilion where the gifts of Tal Taulai Khan to the chieftains of the Krim folk were stored, and thought deeply.

Around him were stacked woven baskets of gems, silks, gold, and weapons. Costly rugs were heaped on the floor. Incense and curiously wrought Chinese vessels ranged around the wall, with sets of priceless armor, silver and gold inlaid, from Damascus and Milan. He could have taken up in his hand the ransom of a Polish voevod.

It was not the treasure, destined as a bond of friendship between Kallmark Tatar and Krim Tatar, that occupied the Cossack's mind. He could have placed a score of emeralds in his pocket from the nearest basket without being observed by the guards, yet it was out of the question to try to escape from the pavilion. Khlit was a marked man, having been sentenced to run before the Khan's hunt on the morrow.

Even if it had been possible to slip out of the pavilion, the Cossack could not have gone a dozen paces through the camp without being seen and overpowered. By his readiness of wit in the morning he had won himself a chance—a slender chance—for freedom and he was not minded to risk incurring the attention of the Khan again.

Khlit's thoughts were not engaged with his own welfare alone. The success of the Krim leader in leaguings with Tal Taulai Khan was like gall in the mouth to the Cossack whose feud with Mirai Khan dated back to the days when he had first won knighthood in the Siech. More than anything else, Khlit longed for the overthrow of the Krim leader; while Mirai Khan had lost



no opportunity to scheme for his death at the hands of the Kallmarks.

The dice of fate, Khlit meditated, were favoring the Tatar. Yet he was not ready to abide by the fall of the dice. It was Khlit's nature to fight while life was in him, and so it happened that he took up his pair of Turkish pistols from his belt. Tearing a strip of silk from a hanging, the Cossack began carelessly to clean his weapons, as if intent on preparing them for the morrow, when Tal Taulai Khan had decreed that he ride armed from the camp.

In doing so, he placed himself in full view of the Kirghiz captain of his guard, who loitered by the pavilion entrance. He did not look up as the warrior approached him.

There was silence while Khlit polished his weapons and the Kirghiz watched.

"Spawn of the devil," observed the Kirghiz presently, "those are too fine a brace of pistols to belong to an idolatrous Cossack. I will take them."

"Son of the son of swine," replied Khlit calmly, "the pistols are indeed choice. Yet will you not have them, for the word of Tal Taulai Khan was that I should be armed. Will the Grand Khan hear that one of his captains has despoiled the prisoner?"

The Kirghiz scowled and was silent. The displeasure of Tal Taulai Khan was not to be invoked lightly. This time it was Khlit who spoke.

"Nevertheless, nameless one, it is in my mind that I will sell the pistols, for I take only a saber tomorrow. And the price is cheap. Where is Kefar Choga?"

The Kirghiz muttered under his breath.

"One told me," he responded, "that Kefar Choga was at chess in the pavilion of the Krim mirza. I know not. What price do you ask for the pistols, Cossack?"

"This." Khlit held up one of the weapons and regarded its shining barrel, while the other's eyes gleamed. "Go quickly to

Kefar Choga and say that I would see him, for there is much I would tell him. What hour is the hunt to begin?"

"When the sun is highest. Tal Taulai would wait until the early cold is gone, and the presents are dispatched to the Krim tribes who wait nearby in the northern foothills of Uskun Luk Tugra."

"Then say to Kefar Choga I would see him before dawn. You say Mirai Khan is with him?"

"Why should I lie, dog?" demanded the Kirghiz impatiently. "I am wasting breath—give me the pistols."

Without waiting for permission, he caught up the weapons from Khlit and stuck them in his belt. Retracing his steps to the door, he crouched and lit a pipe over the embers of the watchmen's fires. For a long hour he did not move, to show his contempt for the prisoner's request.

On his part Khlit did not make the mistake of again addressing the man, but watched until the Kirghiz rose, yawned heavily, and sauntered forth. Then the Cossack pulled at his mustache and counted the men remaining in the pavilion. There were eight.

Drawing out the curved blade which had won the title of Khlit of the Curved Saber, he set it across his knees and sharpened the edge with a small piece of sandstone which he carried in his pocket for that purpose. Outside the pavilion he heard the brazen basin at the door of Tal Taulai Khan mark the passage of the hours. He calculated that it was midway between midnight and the first streak of dawn.

Through the entrance of the structure he could see the moonlight on the fir-clad slope of Uskun Luk Tugra, on the summit of which, reached by a hidden way, was the frozen lake and the ever burning fire of green. It was cold in the pavilion, but Khlit made no move to join the others by the fire.

He did not stir as steps echoed outside. Several of the arrack-dulled Tatars scrambled to their feet as the hangings were pulled back and three figures entered.

Khlit, with a quick upward glance, recognized the stocky,

helmeted form of Kefar Choga, and the cloaked figure of Mirai Khan. He had guessed truly that Mirai Khan would come to the treasure pavilion, curious to hear what he wished to say to the Kallmark. Not in vain had Khlit dealt with the Krim leader for many years.

Scheming and distrustful of others, Mirai Khan had viewed with suspicion the request of the Cossack. He himself had bribed Kefar Choga at heavy cost. It was not impossible that Khlit might do the same.

Khlit made no movement to rise. He continued to stroke the edge of his saber while the Tatars gained his side and stood looking down at him. By the flicker of the torchlight the Cossack could see that Kefar Choga was swaying slightly on his bowlegs, as a stunted pine rocks in the wind, from the effects of arrack. Mirai Khan, however, showed no ill results.

The Kirghiz chieftain, seeing that nothing of interest was occurring, withdrew to the fire. Kefar Choga and Mirai Khan waited. Still Khlit did not speak.

"The dawn is near the top of Uskun Luk Tugra," observed Mirai Khan, gloating, "when these costly gifts shall be sent in baskets to my people a few miles to the east, you shall be brought to ground at the hand of the first hunter who overtakes you. Is your blood cold, Cossack, or do you tremble with fear at the sight of Tatars?"

"Speak!" growled Kefar Choga, aiming an unsteady kick at Khlit's ribs. The Cossack grunted, but took no further notice of the insult.

"The army of the Siech," continued Mirai Khan viciously, "will tremble when they hear that the hordes of Tal Taulai Khan and the Krim folk are rolling down the mountains toward them. It is a good hunt that begins tomorrow."

Khlit sought the Khan's glance with his own.

"Nay," he said, "the hunt ends tomorrow, when the gifts of Tal Taulai Khan reach the Krim chieftains."

"That is a lie, Cossack dog," muttered Kefar Choga, "for you will be chased to Uskun Luk Tugra as a mad jackal is hunted by the pack. Aye, it will give us a taste of what is to come."

"Of Cossack blood," amended Mirai Khan mockingly.

"The Tatar horde is restless," went on Kefar Choga, "for the hunt is barren and it is written in the books that there will be a big battle in the year of the ape, which draws toward its close. Speak, Cossack, will there be a good chase tomorrow or will you drop from fright at the first sight of pursuers? Ha! What say you?"

"It will be a good chase."

"My tribes to the north in the mountain passes will watch," grinned Mirai Khan, thrusting his bald head closer to Khlit, "and perchance you will wander into their midst and be slain by a Krim blade."

"I will go to the northern passes," assented Khlit, nodding gravely, his eyes on the Krim Tatar, "but no Krim blade will be honored with blood of Khlit, surnamed the Wolf. Many Krim hands have fallen lifeless that lifted against me, Mirai Khan. Know you not the past, when your horsemen died at my hand? Remember the battles of the Dnieper! Remember the ride of Khlit through your camp on the steppe!"

"Bah," said Kefar Choga, as Mirai Khan meditated evilly, "a swine marked for slaughter will squeal. The Cossack is doomed."

"Tomorrow," muttered Khlit, "the hunt will end."

"It is not written so," objected Kefar Choga.

"The shamans say," broke in Khlit, "that only under the leadership of Mirai Khan may Krim Tatars achieve victory."

Something like a grunt of surprise echoed from Mirai Khan. At the same instant Khlit, without stirring from his crouching position, flung the curved saber up with both hands.

It was well for Mirai Khan that he was watchful and suspicious. Otherwise he would have died quickly. For he stood close to Khlit, and so rapid was the upward sweep of the saber in the

Cossack's arms that the blade clipped a strip of skin from the Tatar's bald forehead, even as he sprang back.

So it happened that Kefar Choga, excellent warrior as he was, had not time to dash the stupor from his eyes and draw his blade, when two crouching figures glided about the pavilion, and two curved sabers made unceasing play of light before his astonished gaze.

Not less skillful than Khlit with the sword was Mirai Khan. Warding the Cossack's thrusts and feeling warily for foothold as he retreated, Mirai Khan clung to his life desperately. Wrapping his cloak over his left arm, he made shift to use the latter as a shield.

Kefar Choga and his Tatars gathered near the combatants, yet so swift was the movement of the men and so varied the play of sword that none were willing to try to lay hand on Khlit.

Pressing the surprise of his attack with all the strength of his great height and reach, the Cossack allowed his enemy no moment of breathing space. His plan called for quick action, and though he had missed the first blow, Khlit saw that he had won an advantage.

The glancing blow on the Tatar's forehead had broken the skin, wherefore was Mirai Khan forced to shake the drops of blood from his eyes. Fearing to be blind by the flow of blood, he cursed savagely and made to come to grips with the Cossack. Khlit was careful to keep him at arm's length, and to turn quickly, as he struck, against a blow from behind. The Kallmarks, however, were still numbed with arrack and the surprise of the captive's assault.

All the anger of a score of years surged up in Khlit as he felt the blade of his enemy against his own. So far the dice of fate had been good to him, and he had been able to single out the Krim Tatar for attack. Khlit was not the man to let slip an advantage once gained. He watched the eye of Mirai Khan narrowly, pressing him backward around the enclosure.



As for Kefar Choga, twin feelings perplexed him. Ordinarily he would be willing to let one kill the other without troubling himself to feel concerned over the issue. Yet Tal Taulai Khan had planned an alliance with the tribes of Mirai Khan, and while the death of the latter might not interest the Grand Khan more than the slaying of a horse, there was the chance that he might be displeased over the miscarriage of his plans.

Balancing the possible disapproval of his sovereign against the probable injury to himself should he try to interfere, Kefar Choga was unable to come to a conclusion. Dire was the anger of the Kallmark leader if aroused.

The Kirghiz warrior squatted on some carpets out of reach of the fighting men and smiled. If Khlit were killed, he could sleep in comfort, not being obliged to keep watch. If Mirai Khan died, Khlit might then be slain immediately, and still he could sleep. But in a moment the smile faded in a look of interest.

The end of the duel had come as quickly as the beginning. Khlit had been waiting for the moment when the blood from his forehead might confuse Mirai Khan's aim. As he watched he saw the Tatar throw his left hand to his head in an effort to free himself of the menace.

Panting from the violence of the attack, Khlit had nevertheless kept much strength in reserve, and as the other's left arm went up the Cossack brought his saber down in a feint at Mirai Khan's skull.

It was the oldest trick in the art of the sword, and in a wariest moment the Tatar might have smiled at it. Confused by the blood, he flung up his own blade, parried at Khlit's and grunted with terror as he met empty air.

Whirling his saber down, Khlit slashed savagely at the other's side. Under the cloak of Mirai Khan the blade passed, and Kefar Choga shrugged his shoulders as he strove to escape from under Khlit. Writhing back, the blade of the Cossack fell full upon the neck of Mirai Khan, and the latter's head dropped, held to the

body only by the flesh muscles of one side of his neck. The curved sword of his enemy had nearly severed head from shoulders.

Kefar Choga watched while the legs of Mirai Khan drew up slowly and were still. Khlit stepped back, panting, and eyed them.

"It is written in the law of the Cossack," said Kefar Choga softly to his men, "that a murderer shall be buried alive, yet will we deal generously with this man and slay him on the scene of his crime."

The Kirghiz chieftain drew a long knife and stepped toward Khlit while a half-dozen swords flashed in the torchlight. Still farther Khlit drew back and held up his hand. He sheathed his saber in its scabbard.

"The word of Tal Taulai Khan!" he cried. "No man may take sword or spear against the game marked for the chase of the Grand Khan. Did he not say so this morning in the council? Who is the man to go against the word of the Chief of Chiefs?"

The Tatars halted and sought each other with questioning glances.

"Tal Taulai Khan himself has said," went on Khlit calmly, although his breath came deeply, "that none shall harm me until the hunt, and that weapons shall be given me. Who shall say otherwise?" He swept the circle of Tatars with his eyes. "There was a feud between Mirai Khan and the Wolf," he went on, "and Mirai Khan had an arrow shot at my back. Kefar Choga himself saw. Wherefore is Mirai Khan dead. The feud is settled. Why not?"

With a last look at his enemies, Khlit turned his back. Taking up the sword of Mirai Khan, he stooped and with a quick stroke freed the head from the body of the Tatar. Placing the head beside him, he sat down.

Kefar Choga murmured under his breath, for the back of Khlit was turned toward them.

## IX

And so came near the end of the great hunt of Tal Taulai Khan in the year of the ape, as written in the annals of Abulghazi Bahadur Sultan. Also is the tale of the last day and night, when the moon was full on the green fire that burned on Uskun Luk Tugra, written in the books of the bonzes who carried the news to the Dalai Lama in the mountains of Tibet.

The annals of Abulghazi Bahadur Sultan tell how fifty yoke of oxen carried baskets of gifts from the Kallmark Khan to the Krim chieftains at dawn of the last day of the hunt.

And now none spoke to Tal Taulai Khan until noon, for there was a frown on the face of the Khan, and Mirai Khan had been slain in the night, and no man was willing to lose his life in telling the news.

Never had hunt begun with such preparations. Khlit, from his pavilion, where he sat alone under guard by the headless body of Mirai Khan, had watched the departure of the gifts that were to ally Tatar with Tatar and overwhelm the Siech. He heard the beat of horses' hoofs as riders rode out to stations to the north and south ready for the beginning of the chase.

When the beat of hoofs had ceased, Khlit knew that the horde of Tal Taulai Khan stretched for a score of miles in a crescent. He had polished the blade of his saber, wiping away all traces of blood, and the Tatar guards heard strange sounds in the pavilion, for Khlit was endeavoring to sing to himself.

He sang in a harsh guttural the annals of the Ukraine that have no end, and the Kirghiz chieftain cursed, for no sleep would come to him. When his song was ended, Khlit had crossed himself devoutly, first removing his hat, and sheathed his saber against the summons to mount.

And the Tatars who thronged about the pavilion as Tal Taulai

Khan struck the summons to the chase on the copper basin saw a strange sight. A choice Arab horse had been picked for Khlit by Kefar Choga himself.

"When you are loosed," snarled the Tatar as he motioned for Khlit to come from the pavilion, "I shall not be far behind. We have a score to settle, you and I, by the name of the great god Fo!"

"Even so," answered Khlit, and the Tatars murmured in surprise.

For they had seen the captive that was to be hunted to death leap from the steps of the pavilion to the back of his mount, and, lashing the horse's flanks with his Cossack whip, ride like a frightened bird through the camp. On the back of his horse Khlit stood upright, his cloak flying behind him, and his saber whirling around his head. He rode so, and when he was lost to view around the first group of fir trees, sank to his saddle and settled into a long stride toward the slope of Uskun Luk Tugra.

As he went, Khlit surveyed his surroundings critically. Much of the lay of the land he had learned from the Tatars in camp. The slope of Uskun Luk Tugra, fir-clad and rising to forbidding cliffs, began some half-dozen miles in front of him. Up this he could not go unless he knew one of the concealed pathways that were the secret of the Tatar shamans who thus guarded the green fire that burned at night.

On each side of him were the snow-coated hillocks, rock-strewn, with scattered groves of stunted firs that served to conceal him temporarily from his pursuers. To the north these hillocks stretched into the mountain passes where escape was not possible. To the south was a waste of snow and rock ravines that promised no thoroughfare.

Khlit wasted no time in hesitating as to his course. At the first opening in the firs he turned north.

He was passing now between silent ranks of evergreens, twisting and dodging in and out to avoid thickets, but keeping his

course by the sun, which was high overhead. A glance showed him that he was leaving a clear trail in the snow.

Somewhere behind him he knew that Kefar Choga and Tal Taulai Khan, fired with the lust of the hunt, were upon his tracks, with their packs of dogs and horsemen. On each side of him the riders from the wings were closing in.

Khlit did not hurry. He steadied his horse to a rapid gallop, feeling with approval the pliable muscles of his mount's chest and forelegs. The horse was fresh and needed little urging. When he came to a thicket, Khlit halted and drew out pipe and tobacco. As he struck spark to tinder he listened. The horse pricked up his ears. Some distance behind, Khlit heard the faint shouts of men. Although there was no sound of the dogs, he knew that they were on the trail, under the eye of Tal Taulai Khan himself.

Urging his mount forward, Khlit resumed his flight to the north. The Cossack was not given to overmuch thought, yet he pondered the lot of Mirai Khan. Yesterday the dice of fate had fallen as the Krim leader wished. Today Mirai Khan was a name on the tongues of men. The old feud was settled. How was he, Khlit, to fare? Were the two enemies to fall together at the last of the Grand Khan's hunt? Was Khlit decreed by the dice of fate to return to the Dnieper and to tell how the hunt had ended?

Of one thing Khlit was aware. Greater things would come to pass that day than were in the mind of Kefar Choga, or of the consummate chess player, Tal Taulai Khan. Greater even than written in the books of bonzes. Of that he was certain.

Khlit had told Mirai Khan that he would turn his horse's head to the Krim tribes to the north. As he had promised, he did, hasting on at a pace that kept him just within earshot of the pursuing horsemen.

But now a change had come over Khlit. A little while ago he had been looking back over his shoulder as he rode. Now he watched the way ahead, scanning each clump of brush as he approached and eying tracks in the snow which became more frequent.



That he must be nearing the Krim encampment, he knew, yet there was no sound, nor could he see horsemen in his occasional glimpses up ravines ahead. He selected high ground and rode cautiously.

## X

The sun was well past its highest point and the shadows of the firs were lying prostrate across his path when Khlit came face to face with the first of the Krim folk.

Galloping into a clearing in the firs, he drew his horse sharply back.

The clearing was filled with moving forms of men. Khlit recognized the small figures and round helmets of the Krim cavalry. Each horseman was fully armed with bow at his saddle's side and quiver at his back. The leaders drew rein and stared at Khlit, who raised his hand to attract attention.

"Listen, men of the steppe," he said quickly.

The remaining horsemen came to a halt, at the summons of Khlit's raised hand. Their keen ears were strained into the distance. Khlit saw several whisper together. At the same instant he caught the sound of the pursuit, louder than before, and the crashing of many horsemen in the brush.

"Hey, men of the steppe," he cried, "do you hear the hunt of Tal Taulai Khan approaching? The Kallmark horde is not on the chase!"

At a signal from one of their number the Tatars divided, passing to each side into the bush. Khlit waited quietly, hand near his sword, but none came near him. With a breath of relief he spurred on his horse, choosing the thickest cover and bending low in the saddle.

His quick eye did not miss the change in the woods.

Cleared spaces showed him vistas of moving horsemen. Thickets

revealed Tatar helmets standing stationary. The snow underground was thickly trampled. Khlit must be nearing the Tatar camp, yet he saw no signs of tents or cattle herds.

Farther into the ranks of the Krim folk he trotted, his skill sufficing to keep him from running into the moving groups. Isolated Tatars galloped full upon him, stared, and passed on at sight of his drawn sword. Once he caught the sound of horns blaring in the hills above him.

He heard a shot echo behind him. Then another, followed by a crackle of shots that seemed to roll up the hills and back into the valleys. Khlit stopped his horse in a grove and listened. The woods behind him were stirring with sound. Shots continued, and he caught the frightened neigh of a horse. Trumpets sounded from several quarters. Truly the hunt of Tal Taulai Khan, he considered, was growing.

Making fast the reins of his horse to a tree trunk, Khlit clambered from its back to the branches of the fir. Grunting with distaste, for climbing trees was not to his liking, he gained a height where he could look out over his surroundings.

He had a full view of the hunt of Tal Taulai Khan. Swarming over the wooded ridges in his rear, distinct against the snow, he saw myriads of horsemen, interspersed with packs of dogs. Every clearing was black with men moving up into the hills. The hunt was drawing its net about him. Yet Khlit was not alone in the net.

Moving down from the hills, in the valleys he could make out swarms of brown-cloaked riders, mounted on small steppe ponies. These were the Krim Tatars, moving from their encampment. Restlessly they pushed ahead, frequently stopping to consult together or to rally to the colored ensigns which led the warriors of each tribe. Were the Krim Tatars riding to a chase? Had they decided to come down to meet the Kallmark Tatars? Were they uneasy for Mirai Khan, their leader of a score of years? Khlit tugged at his mustache and watched them narrowly.

As he watched he heard the crackle of shots growing like the snapping of fire, and a dull shouting arose. The dice of fate,

thought Khlit, were thrown upon the board and he must abide by the issue.

"If Mirai Khan leads the Krim Tatars into battle," he quoted to himself, "there will be victory."

But Mirai Khan was dead. The one man who knew the hearts of both Kallmark Tatar and Krim Tatar, who had tried to bring together these nations long hostile, was not living.

As he watched Khlit learned the meaning of the shots that grew into a long roll. Across one of the clearings he saw a regiment of Kallmarks gallop. Uneasily the riders moved about, a few horsemen darting out to left and right as if to learn what was going on nearby. Then Khlit saw a strange thing. The leading riders sank from their horses to the ground, writhed, and lay still. Those following went forward a few paces, their ranks thinning.

Distant as he was, Khlit could make out a flight of arrows that swept from the woods into the Kallmark ranks. Other bands of brown-cloaked and helmeted Tatars that were not Kallmarks emerged from the wood and drew in around the remaining riders. Swords flickered in the sun's rays.

And then more Kallmarks swarmed into the clearing. The riders now were so mingled that there was no telling Kallmark from Krim. Yet always, they fell to the snow, singly and in groups.

He had seen what he wanted.

"It will be a good hunt," he said softly, climbing upon his horse, for above the shouts and confusion he caught the sound of horsemen approaching him.

## XI

Glancing back, Khlit saw several figures come into view a quarter mile behind him. He made out the squat, menacing form of Kefar Choga, wearing the cloak embroidered with his rank,

and the tall Kirghiz chieftain. They rode behind a pack of dogs. By chance or keen scent the pack had followed him through the maze of firs.

Khlit bent low to avoid a possible pistol shot and urged his horse to full pace. Kefar Choga did likewise, accompanied by the Kirghiz. Khlit's mount had had a brief rest, but the other two appeared as fresh. Looking back a second time, the Cossack saw that the distance had neither grown nor diminished. He remembered Kefar Choga's promise to find him out in the hunt, and he knew that the Kallmark was not one to be lightly shaken off.

Khlit regretted that he had disposed of his pistols to the Kirghiz as he heard the crack of a shot behind him and saw the snow fly up a short distance ahead.

Turning aside, he swept through a thicket down into a ravine, dodged among some boulders, and came out on the level again to find that Kefar Choga had won a hundred paces nearer. Waving his hand at the Kallmark, he urged his horse up a rise, listening for the crack of a pistol.

The tired beast stumbled and floundered its way to the summit. Although the two pursuers should have been near them, instead he heard a sound that made him turn in his saddle.

Kefar Choga had pulled his mount to a sudden halt. The Kirghiz drew up beside him. The pack of dogs scattered to every quarter. In Khlit's ear echoed the shrill battle cry of the Krim Tatars.

A troop of the Krim warriors whom he had not seen on his flank had circled around the Kallmark horsemen. One of them pointed to Kefar Choga's cloak with an exclamation. As a pack of wolves dart in on a stag at bay the horsemen swerved and rode at the two.

The Kirghiz coolly discharged his other pistol without effect. Khlit saw one Krim rider and then another go down before Kefar Choga's weapon. Then the horsemen crowded into a circle. The flashing swords were sheathed, and Khlit knew that the last of his pursuers was out of the way.

Wisely deciding not to attract the attention of the Krim cavalry to himself, he trotted on and found that he was making his way into the encampment of the Krim Tatars. Gray tents stood on every quarter. Embers of fires blackened the snow. Empty wagons were ranged at intervals. In the camp Khlit saw no man stirring.

Looking about him curiously, he had almost gained the farther side of the camp, on the point nearest the Uskun Luk Tugra, which loomed overhead, when he saw a movement in one of the tents.

Guiding his horse thither, Khlit noted that outside were piled heaps of baskets that appeared familiar. Costly rugs were torn into shreds on the snow. Gold vessels had been trampled underfoot. The baskets themselves had been emptied and cast aside. Khlit pondered as he eyed the remnants of Tal Taulai Khan's gifts to the Krim Tatars.

Recalling the movement in the tent, he swept the tent pole to the ground with his saber. The cloth covering writhed as it lay prostrate.

"Unnamed one," growled Khlit, "come, or be spitted to the ground."

The movement under the tent hastened and presently a dismal-looking figure stood upright. A red cloak was tangled in the man's leg and the front of his undergarment bulged, while from it hung an emerald necklace, with a sapphire cross.

"Hey, shaman," greeted Khlit, remembering his acquaintance of the steppe, "are you a vulture that you prey upon the gifts of a khan? Disgorge the jewels, toad, and come here!"

The shaman obeyed, his face quivering with fright.

"It is the day of fate," he whimpered, "it is the doom of the Krim folk. The Black Kallmarks are marching upon us. Their lines draw in like a net. They are traitors and idolatrous—foresworn! Before today we had awaited them as friends."

"Where is Mirai Khan, who leads the Krim Tatars to victory?" mocked Khlit.

"Aie!" the shaman wailed, stuffing a costly necklace unnoticed



by Khlit into his sleeve, "Mirai Khan is dead, his head severed from his body. It is the beginning of doom for the Krim nation. None shall survive the net of the Black Kallmarks, who are more numerous than the sands of the salt sea—"

He broke off to cower as the din of combat swept up to the two. Khlit's nostrils expanded as with pleasure. He hearkened to the cries and shots that echoed from every quarter of the hills.

"It is not my doom, devil take it," he cried. "Come shaman, show the way to the summit of Uskun Luk Tugra, the roof of the world, for our tribe knows it well. The doom of this day is great for the Kallmark hunters who have found other game than they sought, yet it is written that you and I, the wolf and the serpent, shall pass through."

Wherefore it happened that Khlit rode silently behind the moaning form of the conjurer up concealed paths in Uskun Luk Tugra, past waterfalls that moistened his horse's feet, and between chasms that glowed on their summits with green fire until he came out on the snow of the summit and stood amazed at the flat field of shimmering glow that seemed to be the fires of a thousand devils, soft, as deep as an emerald's glow.

"By my faith," he swore, "is this the court of the devil? No land was ever so flat, and fires burn red, not green."

He shuddered, while the shaman edged close to his horse for warmth, for the cold on the roof of the world was great.

"Nay, noble Cossack," he whined, "the flat is but a frozen lake, and the fire is not flame but light. See"—he caught up a bit of rotten wood—"it is harmless. We call it phosphorus and it lies on the dead trees that were killed when the lake gripped their roots."

The shaman laid his flaming hand on the mane of the horse, which did not stir.

"It is well," said Khlit. "Come."

And the journey of the two continued along the lake, lit by the green fire, until they could see down into the valleys where the two hordes had been.

Many fires were there, and over all the dim light of the moon.

The outer wings of Tal Taulai Khan's host were engaged with the remnants of the Krim army. Khlit watched for so long that the shaman became faint with the cold.

Fires that had spread in the groves of firs lighted the landscape, and showed where horsemen moved in countless ranks over the farther hills. Khlit had eyes only for sight of this, but the shaman, who had suffered much, shuddered when he saw that the battle-field abandoned by the horsemen was black with moving objects. No sound came up to them, but he recognized the wolves that followed in the track of Tal Taulai's horde, covering the scene of the battle, like vermin upon a wound.

So Khlit saw the end of the hunt of Tal Taulai Khan.

For those who care to know more of the matter there are the annals of Abulghazi Bahadur Sultan, wherein is found an account of how the horde of Tal Taulai Khan turned back from the hunt after the great battle of two days and one night in which the tribe of Mirai Khan was annihilated.

It was thus that the prophecy written concerning the year of the ape was fulfilled, although it was the Krim Tatars and not the Cossacks that fought the Grand Khan. In the annals of Abulghazi Bahadur Sultan it is explained that the battle began when the host of the Black Kallmarks advanced unawares against the Krim tribe. Yet the cause of the battle, as written in the annals, was otherwise.

It was due to the gifts of Tal Taulai Khan to the Krim chieftains. For out of the first basket from the Grand Khan opened by the Krim men rolled the head of Mirai Khan, leader of the Krim horde. Yet it is written in the annals that Tal Taulai Khan afterward took an oath upon an image of a god that neither he nor his men had placed the head of Mirai Khan in the baskets that were sent as gifts, not otherwise.

## The White Khan

*Swift as a falcon is the White Khan to protect his people; keen is his eye of an eagle; his pride in his warriors is the pride of a strong war horse; his craft in battle is the craft of an aged wolf.*

*The White Khan's victories are countless as the sands of the Great Desert; his enemies slain are as the drops of water in the river Kerulen. What is the power of the White Khan?*

*It is the sword of a warrior!*

Chagan, the strong man, bearer of the two-handed sword, lifted the wine cup high. He bowed once to the south, once to the north, once each to the west and east, pouring as he did so a little wine from the cup. As he bowed to the north, in greeting to the dead, the assembled khans roared out a prayer and dashed their wine beakers against their bearded mouths.

The sun filtered through lofty pines upon the wedding assemblage. Here was Hotai Khan, the host, leader of the Ordus, and Togachar, khan of the Kalkas, with leaders of the Chakars and Kallmarks, the Hoshot, Torgot, and Tchoros of the Jun-gar. In the pine wood beside the river Kerulen the khans were assembled after a battle in the seventeenth century.

For a day they kept high the revelry, always wearing their swords, for quarrels were frequent, and the temper of the Tatar

khans was savage. The wedding was that of Berang, son of the white-haired Hotai Khan, and Kerula the Tatar girl, who had been brought to the country of the Jun-gar by a stranger. Hotai Khan had asked for the marriage, for it was his wish to ally himself with the stranger who had come with Kerula and who had brought victory to the standard of the Tatar lords in their last battle with the Chinese.

Hotai Khan, a straight-backed veteran of a hundred battles, blind in one eye, rose from his bench and stepped to the side of Chagan, his sword-bearer. From the breast of his coat he drew forth a parchment inscribed with the written names of Kerula and Berang, and with pictures to represent them. This parchment he held high for all to see.

Then, stooping over a torch that Chagan grasped in a mighty hand, Hotai Khan touched the edge of the parchment to the fire. The blaze caught it and in a moment the written names of the two young people had disappeared in smoke. Thus, they were married. Chagan lifted his stout voice in a shout of approval, and the lords of the Jun-gar echoed the shout.

Grim men they were, with scarred faces and broad shoulders. They lounged carelessly over the massive tables, quaffing heartily at their favorite drink, mare's milk. It was a wintry day and a cold wind searched the pines, but the Tatars, warmly clad in jackets of sable furs, long undervests of silk, and heavy boots fashioned like horses' hoofs, ignored it. The glances of the khans strayed to Hotai Khan, to Berang and his slim bride, and to the stranger. More often than not, as they looked at the stranger, they scowled.

Khlit, the wanderer called the Wolf, famous for his curved sword, heeded not these scowls. He had exchanged his Cossack svitza for a fur jacket and tunic of the Tatars, but he still wore his round sheepskin hat. His curved sword hung at his belt, with a pair of Turkish pistols. This sword bore in engraved writing the testimony of his rank. Khlit, outcast from the Cossack camps, was one of the few living descendants of Genghis Khan. He had the blood of Kaidu, the Tatar hero, in his veins.

And for this reason his presence made the khans uneasy. Khlit, the newcomer, outranked them in blood. Moreover, he had aided them in their last battle when they defeated and slew Hang-Hi the Chinese general. Yet he was not a Tatar. He was alone, having reached them without any follower other than the girl Kerula. Who was this wanderer? How were they to receive him in their ranks?

Hotai Khan had not taken his seat after burning the marriage script of his son and Kerula. His glance strayed along the rows of brown faces, and he raised his hand in greeting, carrying it next to his mouth.

"Lords of the Jun-gar," his deep voice rang out, "my son is married to the girl of Khlit. Hence he is now a brother, an anda. Honored am I that one of the blood of Kaidu is my anda. The smoke of my household will ascend for long, because of this. Let the nacars sound, to announce my new brother-in-arms!"

Chagan had been waiting for this, and the sword-bearer motioned to followers of Hotai Khan who were assembled with trumpets. A loud blast of the shrill instrument echoed through the pine grove. At the tables around that of the khans, warriors put down their glasses in surprise. The nacars were seldom sounded, save to herald a charge or to announce a council.

The khans consulted each other with glances. They were jealous by nature, and twofold so regarding Khlit. Each was jealous of his rights among the others, and each resented newcomers. In silence they waited for Hotai Khan to continue.

"The honor is great," pursued the old Khan bluffly, "for Khlit is a worthy warrior. You do not know how he came here. I have heard the tale from the girl Kerula. He left his won land to seek fighting. He joined the followers of Tal Taulai Khan, who is now dead, without disclosing his rank as descendant of Kaidu. After a mighty battle he went into Persia where he led the Kallmark Tatar horde against an idolatrous fortress."

Some Kallmark chieftains murmured confirmation of this. They had heard of Khlit's entry into Persia. But the others kept silence.



"My anda is a true man among warriors," went on Hotai Khan, "for he alone was khan to us and led us in battle against Hang-Hi, whom he defeated bloodily. Not for a generation have the nobles of Tatar seen the Chinese in fight. Is not this proof that Khlit's Tatar blood has led him here, to his brothers? Is he not worthy of high rank among us?"

The murmur that went up at this changed to a growl. Hotai Khan searched the faces of his comrades and found sullen anger written there. He had hoped to have Khlit acknowledged as his brother—a rank that might lead to the post of Kha Khan, White Khan, which could only be held by one of the blood of Genghis, now empty for two generations among the Jun-gar.

Hotai Khan was old in years and his wisdom foresaw that if the khans were to keep from further defeats at the hands of the Chinese, they must have a leader.

Khlit was entitled by blood to be this leader. So Hotai Khan reasoned, in his wisdom.

Sullen glances were turned toward Khlit, who had not known beforehand of the purpose of Hotai Khan. All attention was centered on Khlit, the warrior known as the Wolf.

"What rank will the Tatar lords give to the descendant of Kaidu?" asked Hotai Khan. "It must be a high rank, by token of the warrant written on his sword."

Still the khans did not speak. Hotai Khan flushed in anger, and would have spoken, but a short, powerful warrior in tarnished Persian mail rose from his seat and folded his arms.

"You did not say, Hotai Khan," he growled, "when you bade us drink at the wedding, that it would be a kurultai council. Your words are cunning as the tongue of a wounded fox. We did not come to listen to them. We came to drink with Berang and wish him many sons."

Several of the khans nodded their black heads in agreement. One or two put on their pointed helmets, which they had removed when they sat down at the banquet.

"Do your thoughts ever wander further than wine, Togachar?"

said Hotai Khan promptly. "They say you were born with a sack of mare's milk, but you drank it all when she was not looking. Harken, before another moon or two is ended the khans will be going back to their own districts. Is it not well, while the kurultai is assembled, to give rank to one who has nobler blood than we?"

Togachar sat down, disgruntled; but a lean man in leather armor rose, and the eyes of the gathering were turned on him. He lifted his hand in greeting and smiled sardonically at Hotai Khan. This was Chepé Buga, leader of the Chakars.

"Are we, Hotai Khan," he began clearly, "like a woman bereft of her husband, or a herd without a master? Are the Jun-gar like a flock of sheep without a herder? Nay, we are lords of our riders and of the Tatar steppe. We would like to be in friendship and agreement with Khlit, the lord who is called Wolf. Let him be your anda. Is not brotherhood with the oldest of the khans a fitting rank for a stranger?"

The gray-haired warrior bowed his head at the shout of approval that rose at these words. He knew the obstinate independence of the Tatar hordes, and how they would be fighting among themselves before a year was up. Only united by a common purpose could they hope to hold ground against the oncoming hosts of China. He saw the hoped-for chance to bring them together slipping away.

"Khlit is welcome to half my belongings and to half my men," he retorted proudly. "For he is my anda and we have exchanged girdles. Yet this is but a poor honor for the warrior who carried the banner of Genghis Khan in our van."

"Where is the standard, Hotai Khan?" queried Chepé Buga, twisting his dark mustache. "Khlit admits that he has put it back where it should be, in the tomb of the mighty Kha Khan. Truly our White Khans, the rulers of the long white mountains of Tatar, have been heroes. Shall we make a stranger such a hero? Nay, we know him not."

The assembly shouted approval at these words, which satisfied their jealousy of power and their hostility to the newcomer. "How

can we make this man a White Khan?" said one angrily. "He is not even a Tatar."

"The standard of Genghis Khan won the victory for us over Hang-Hi," echoed another drunkenly. "Behold how the Khan of Khans watches over his children. This man who has come among us had not a horse to his name. He has not been proved yet."

A clamor of agreement greeted this. As is the way with crowds, the chiefs vied with each other in objections, and even insults to the Cossack. True, they did not know that Hotai Khan alone had been responsible for the proposal to give Khlit rank among them.

Khlit gave no sign that he understood what had passed, although his knowledge of the Tatar tongue was good. Catching the eye of Hotai Khan, he made a quick gesture of acknowledgment. He pointed the fingers of his right hand toward his knee. The handle of his sword he laid on his knee. He bowed his head. This was the Tatar rendering of thanks.

Hotai Khan saw the sword, the blade that had been Kaidu's, and his sharp old face twisted in anger at his failure. Chepé Buga, still laughing at his jest, had lifted his beaker for a general toast when for a second time the nacars sounded.

This could not be a summons to the kurultai. Chepé Buga's hand went to his sword. At the same instant a roll of drums answered the nacars. As one man the assembled Tatars were on their feet. From infancy they had known well the sound of Chinese drums.

## II

Confusion reigned for another moment in the ranks of the Tatar revelers. With the exception of the khans, every warrior ran to his horse and mounted. Bows and spears flashed out. The horsemen formed into ranks through the pine grove. Squadrons

dashed out into the open toward the sound of the drums, which came nearer along the riverbank.

Then Chagan trotted up to the table. The sword-bearer of Hotai Khan was replacing his mighty two-handed blade in its scabbard, and a grin spread across his tanned face, scarred by a sword cut that had sliced away part of one cheek.

"It is a messenger, master," he bellowed; "he rides hither clad like the Prince of Shankiang, with a handful of followers. You can hang me by the thumbs if it is not a Chinese eunuch!"

A shout of laughter greeted this sally. Chagan wheeled his horse away through the grove. Presently, as the drums approached, the men at the table could hear the stentorian voice of the sword-bearer clearing a passage through the ranks of the horsemen who had crowded to see the new arrival.

A lane was cleared leading to the table. The khans behind a tall, stout man wearing a Ming hat, clad in red silks and nankeen and black satin boots. His horse was caparisoned with green embroidered silks from which jade pendants hung. A dozen mailed riders armed with lances followed him.

The Chinaman caught sight of the gathering around the table. He dismounted with some difficulty and advanced to the khans with a bow. Hotai Khan and his comrades made no response, staring at him curiously. The eunuch's brow glistened with sweat, although the day was chill, and his hands trembled.

He drew a roll of soft paper, wrapped in silk, from his pocket, and motioned to his followers. Two of them beat the kettledrums they carried on their horses. Whereupon their leader unwrapped the silk from the paper and held it in front of him reverently.

"Greetings and eternal good health to the Mongol khans," he said in good Tatar, "and felicitations from the World-Honored One, the Son of Heaven and the Star of Good Hope."

Khilit wondered as he saw the emissary turn respectfully and bow nine times toward the south. He noticed that the eunuch's hand shook so that the paper trembled like a leaf.

"Speak," growled Togachar impatiently, "or Chagan will cut your feet from under you, offspring of a dog!"

The trembling of the paper continued, but the voice of the emissary was even as he answered.

"Thrice honor and prosperity to the Mongol khans, neighbors and subjects of the Emperor Wan Li—"

A roar of anger greeted this, silenced by Hotai Khan.

"Who have been so imprudent as to take up arms against an army of the Son of Heaven, and slay one of the generals, Hang-Hi. It is written that with the slayer of his kin a man may not live under the same sky. Such is the wisdom of our ancestors. The general Hang-Hi was a cousin of the Divine Person, and his death will be fully avenged. The great general of the Imperial Court, Li Jusong, has been called from Korea and has taken a vow of vengeance. Evil will follow this act of the Mongol khans—"

"The evil will begin upon your fat, divine person," muttered Chepé Buga aloud, and the eunuch shuddered.

"As a beginning of the vengeance," he pursued, "Li Jusong, who marches to destroy the khans, seconded by the Dragon Emperor, and by the Lilies of the Court, decrees that the strange warrior who carried the Mongol standard in the battle which caused the death of Hang-Hi shall be given up. Failing this, the men of the Lily of the Court society will see to it that he is brought alive to the Emperor Wan Li. This is the imperial mandate to the Mongol khans. Wan Li, Son of Heaven, thus ends his message to his subjects."

The eunuch closed the roll of paper. He faced the assembly calmly, although his fat cheeks were quivering. A brief silence followed. Several of the Tatars glanced at Khlit irresolutely. Jealousy showed in their eyes. Chepé Buga, however, stepped to the emissary and snatched the paper, which he flung on the ground, spitting on it.

"Are we subjects, scion of the devil's worst brood?" he roared. "We will show your imperial master what we think of him."



Chagan! See that nails are brought and driven into the ears of this fat beast."

The grinning sword-bearer hastened away on his mission. Hotai Khan stepped forward, but Togachar restrained him.

"What is your name, old woman?" the latter flung at the terrified eunuch.

"Cho Kien."

"Cho Kien," laughed Chepé Buga, "after such a message do you expect to be pampered like a palace jade? Surely, you do not fear to join the Son of Heaven in the sky—by way of Hades. Hurry hither the nails. We will have good sport."

Before Chagan could make his appearance, another stepped between Chepé Buga and the emissary. Khlit faced Chepé Buga and Hotai Khan. But he spoke to the other Tatars as well.

"Harken, noble lords," he said in Tatar, "I have a boon to ask. Has not this man come with a message that concerns me? I am the man he seeks. Then let me answer him. And talk no more of nails. My answer must be taken to the emperor himself."

Some of the riders murmured disapproval at being robbed of their sport. But the khans and Cho Kien waited in silence. The slant eyes of the eunuch fastened on Khlit and he drew a long breath of relief. He had not expected mercy from the khans, knowing the message he was bringing them.

"Cho Kien," said Khlit slowly, and the Tatars hung on his words, "your life will be spared, to take this word to the man who is your master. Forget it not. The man you seek is Khlit, called the Wolf by his enemies—such that still live. He did not slay Hang-Hi, who committed suicide after his defeat. If your master wants vengeance on Khlit, tell him to come for it. He will not find me in the ranks of the Tatar khans but elsewhere. That is my message."

Hotai Khan stepped forward and laid his hand on Khlit's arm.

"Nay," he said anxiously, "you will be among us, lord. Are you not my anda? Am I not sworn to protect you with my sword and my blood? The arm of the Dragon Emperor is long, through

his spies whose societies are found in all Tatar and the world. Half my men are yours to command. The Khantai Khan mountains and the river Kerulen will guard us. Berang has left me. My home will be empty without you."

Khlit made again the gesture of thanks and this time his hand lingered on his sword.

"Hotai Khan," he said, "your words are those of a brother. But I have no place among the ranks of the khans. Do you think I did not hear what was said at the council? I shall be alone when the men of the Dragon Emperor come to see me."

"Nay, lord," spoke up Chépé Buga hastily, "do not leave us. Our swords will carve the carcasses of those who come after you."

With a grim smile Khlit shook his gray head.

"I ask it not, noble lord. My enemies have been many, but my sword has served me well—"

"The men of the Dragon Emperor have other weapons than swords," objected Hotai Khan. "If your death is decreed your sword will do little for you, outside our protection."

"It is the sword of Kaidu, the hero, Hotai Khan. When have the White Khans asked protection of men? I am of their blood. Cho Kien, you have heard what we have said. Tell it to your master. Now, go!"

Hastily the eunuch seized the chance to escape. He mounted with more eagerness than skill, and shouted to his followers. The mailed riders wheeled their horses behind him and broke into a gallop once they were clear of the Tatar ranks. Followed by the gibes of the Tatars they disappeared in the direction of the river.

### III

No sentries watched at the edge of Hotai Khan's camp that night. There was shouting and drinking in the tents, following the marriage of Berang. But sentries were unknown in Tatar

camp. The descendants of Genghis Khan held their enemies in scorn, and they never kept watch for a possible foe, proud of their strength.

Snow had begun to fall with darkness, and sifted in under the branches of the pine trees. The ground was already carpeted white, and the tents were cloaked with it. Through the snow, past the lighted tents and flaming torches, Khlit guided his horse.

The Cossack walked his horse until the last of the tents were left behind, and then he shook the flakes from his shoulders and broke into a trot. His shoulders were not as square as they had once been. His head bowed more than formerly. His thoughts were not cheering companions.

Once before he had ridden thus from the camp of the Cossacks, never to return. A second time he had left the yurta of the Kallmark Tatars, driven by the same impulse to wander. It may have been that it was the call of his ancestor's blood that had drawn him to the Tatar steppe. He had fought his way to the camp of the Jun-gar, who were his kin, and among them he had thought to find companions for the last days of his life.

For Khlit was no longer young. His arm, tireless in battle until now, was failing him, and more than ever he found himself depending on craft to aid him against his foes. The curved sword had not been drawn from its sheath for many months. Khlit's pride, which had separated him from comrades of the Cossack camp, would not let him dwell amid the jealousies of the Jun-gar khans. He set out again as he had done in the past, to match his wits against a foe. But this time he knew that his strength was not equal to his former efforts. And the wanderer realized that this enemy was greater than those of former years. The Dragon Emperor was not easily to be cheated of a victim.

Khlit pulled his saddlebags, containing food and powder, tighter. He had put on a long fur coat, but the cold pierced through it. His horse turned its head and neighed, edging to one side as if to turn back to the camp. Khlit jerked it forward in silence.

The next instant he was erect in the saddle and alert. The snow of the rough road made things visible some distance in advance. He made out the figure of a rider standing motionless a few paces ahead.

It was not a sentry, for none was posted. Also, it was no one who had taken the trail ahead of him, for the rider waited, his horse drawn up across the road. The man, whoever he was, could not have heard Khlit coming over the soft snow.

Khlit did not halt. He loosened his saber in its scabbard, and bent forward watchfully. The figure had not stirred, yet he felt that the man was observing him closely. His horse trotted forward, sniffing at the newcomer. They were within a few feet of each other when Khlit saw the arm's sudden movement, and the flash of a sword over the rider's head.

His own blade was out instantly and he urged his mount ahead suddenly by a pressure of the knees. He saw the other horse start back in alarm and the sword of the rider whirl over him. Parrying the heavy stroke of the other, Khlit threw the full weight of himself and his mount against the man, and felt the rider fall as his horse stumbled to its knees. The man sprang clear cleverly and confronted Khlit on foot.

The Cossack had wheeled his horse with uplifted blade for a second stroke when he was startled by a hearty laugh in the darkness. The man was standing before him, but with lowered weapon. Khlit halted distrustfully. As he did so a deep voice hailed him.

"Aye, it is true. It was well done, Khlit, lord, and I am content. By the mane of my grandfather's sire, I was nearly a dead man. But put up the curved sword. I have had a good taste of it. Save it for others."

A sudden suspicion struck Khlit.

"What name do you bear, O striker in the dark?" he asked grimly.

"They call me Chagan," the voice growled, "and I was sword-bearer to the Ordu Khan until tonight. I saw you leaving the

camp, and followed. Knowing the way, I easily got ahead of you. I had a mind to test the curved sword of Kaidu and I find it well to my liking."

With that Chagan swung his heavy bulk skillfully into his saddle, and came close to Khlit.

"Lord," he said slowly, "think not I meant evil. This great sword of mine has split men to the wishbone, but it was not laid heavily against you. I watched in the battle, and saw you bearing the standard of the White Khan, Genghis. I care not for talk of rank. I have seen what I have seen."

"What said you, Chagan?" said Khlit. "I go alone, and there is peril ahead. My arm is not as strong as it was, to swing the curved sword. Get you back to the yurta where there is good wine."

"Aye," laughed the sword-bearer, "I had a skinful of it. If there is danger so much the better. But where you go, I go. Did I not see the standard of Genghis Khan in your hand? My eyes do not lie."

"It is like a dog to bay without sense," he growled. "And a dog tries to make game of what it lacks sense to understand. I am going into the country of the Dragon. Get back to your kennel, dog!"

He urged his horse past the huge sword-bearer and galloped on down the trail. Before he had gone a hundred paces Chagan was beside him. Khlit lengthened the stride of his horse, but Chagan had chosen his mount with care and kept pace.

"You have named me well, lord," he growled. "I am a dog. And when was a dog sent home when a hunt was on?"

"Turn back, Chagan, one without wits, or Hotai Khan will be without sword-bearer."

Chagan reined his steed behind Khlit, for the trail had narrowed.

"Hotai Khan is without one now," he made answer with a chuckle. "Nay, I know the paths around here, to the Dragon



standard in your hands. Is not the battle thickest where the standard flies? I scent a battle in the wind."

Khlit made no answer. Putting his horse to its best pace he succeeded in distancing Chagan to some degree. He turned aside into a grove of pines when he guessed that dawn was not far off. Dismounting and tethering his horse, he took a skin from his saddle and hung it to keep the driving snow off him as he spread his coat on the ground to sleep.

The sun was high and the snow had ceased falling when he wakened. He crawled from his robe and stood up. Then he saw that another skin had been stretched over his own. Beside his horse another was tied. At his feet he saw a bulky form on the ground. It was nearly covered with a white drift. Khlit recognized the scarred face that turned up to him. The man had slept outside the shelter in the night. And it was Chagan, the sword-bearer.

#### IV

Khlit lost no time in putting a considerable distance between himself and the Tatar camp. He did not want to be followed, and he was grateful for the snow that had covered his tracks. He pressed ahead quickly, in a southeasterly direction that he knew would take him across the limits of Tatar and the plains that extended to the river Liao.

Chagan was not to be left behind, and Khlit was forced to reconcile himself to the company of the sword-bearer. The latter proved himself valuable in many ways. He led Khlit to a ford over the Kerulen. This river, he told the Cossack, formed the barrier that had been the scene of many battles between the retreating khans and the hosts of the Dragon Emperor.

As the two left the scattered yurtas of Tatars behind and came in sight of mud villages along the streams, Chagan conducted Khlit

around the main caravan paths and the villages so that they were not observed.

Chagan made no comment on the course Khlit directed him to take. Apparently the sword-bearer was well content to follow where his master led. Only once did he ask a question.

"Lord," he said one morning when the two were beginning their trot over the snow plains, "you have called me one without wit. Truly that is the case, for what need have I for wit when I follow you? Yet I would know one thing. What part of the empire is our destination? Are we going beyond the Wall?"

"Nay, I think not," responded Khlit. "Some travelers told us that the army of Li Jusong had passed the Wall and was riding northwest. If a fox wishes to hide from the hounds, is not the best hiding place the house of the master of the hounds? For the hounds go afield from the house. I am going to the army of Li Jusong. They will not know me for a Tatar."

"Aye, that's very well," grumbled Chagan, who did not seem overpleased with this. "But these hounds of ours have a keen nose for game. They are hard to throw off the scent. The Lilies of the Court that the fat fool Cho Kien mentioned are a society pledged to exterminate Tatars in China. They have sacked many cities outside the Wall. Aye, they are a poisonous sort of lilies, with their magicians that spy out the future. There will be many of the society in the ranks of Li Jusong, for he marches against Tatory."

Khlit glanced shrewdly at his companion. Chagan was not the man to be held back from fear. Yet it was plain that he liked the Lilies of the Court but little.

"Where can we meet the army of Li Jusong, Chagan?" he asked.

The sword-bearer scowled in thought and pointed ahead of them.

"Four days' fast riding from here is the city of Shankiang," he ventured, "a border city. It lies in the course of Li Jusong, and at the rate we are traveling we may reach it a little before he does.

Shankiang is not a city of China, for it borders the upper Liao, where the people are Holangs, merchants and traders for the most part and unwarlike. They are neither Tatars nor Chinese. There you can see your fill of the men of Han and the silk devils of the Dragon Throne."

On learning that Khlit would go to Shankiang, Chagan had a further suggestion to make. Khlit, he pointed out, had a full growth of hair on his head and in his mixed costume might pass for an ordinary traveler. Once in Shankiang, he said, they could stable their horses and Tatar trappings and go about on foot where they would attract less attention. But he, Chagan, would need a more complete disguise.

Their swords they must keep. So Chagan proposed that he purchase the clothes of a wrestler on the way to the city. His head was already shaven on the front of his skull, and if he shaved it entirely, it would be in the fashion of a wrestler. The two-handed sword would then be in keeping with his costume, for the stout wrestlers carried such weapons as a mark of their craft.

To this Khlit agreed. He knew that it would cost Chagan misgivings to shave his treasured hind lock of hair. But the sword-bearer's great size would bear out his character of a wrestler. Whatever danger Khlit ran from Chagan's presence would be balanced by the information the other could give him concerning the Chinese. All that would be necessary was for Chagan to keep silence in public where his tongue might betray him. Khlit, in speaking, used the tongue he had learned in Samarkand.

It was a favorite trick of the old Cossack to hide among the hunters when he was hunted. The army of Li Jusong would be made up of a hundred different clans, including warriors from Nankao to Holong, and in the myriad of fighters he might well be safe. In reasoning thus, Khlit had lost none of his cunning. He had, however, not reckoned upon two things. One was the prophecy of Li Chan Ko, magician of Li Jusong; the other was the Lilies of the Court.

Thus it happened that when Khlit rode with his companion into sight of the walled city of Shankiang he had the appearance of a traveler who was accompanied by a wrestler as henchman. Chagan's bulk was swathed in a padded quilt, bound around with silk sashes painted to represent his prowess; his Tatar boots were discarded for cotton wrappings, and a fur cap displaced his pointed helmet. The scar that ran down his cheek bore out his character, and his long hair had been shaved off.

The rough trails and caravan paths over the plains had changed to a broad road occupied by merchants' equipages, by wandering beggars, and by peasants carrying fish and grain to the city. On either side of the road the wind bells of tiled pagodas sounded cheerily; occasional stone pillars fashioned to charm away devils lined the way. Passing camels brushed past the horses of Khlit and Chagan.

The road joined the river Liao near the walls, and Khlit saw a multitude of junks drawn up along the banks. When evening fell and they were about to enter the gates, he saw the merchants and beggars with them point to the river and touch their foreheads in reverence.

Looking out he saw a large junk drifting down the current. It bore a multitude of colored lanterns, and banners floated from the mast and prow. The men on the junks along the banks raised a shrill chant as the vessel passed them. Khlit turned inquiringly to Chagan.

"They say," whispered the latter contemptuously, "that the junk is sent out with lanterns to light the wandering ghosts of the dead. May the evil spirits rip my hide, but they had best waited until Li Jusong had gone. There will be more dead, then. Aye, the ghosts will be plentiful."

So Chagan said, not knowing the prophecy of Li Chan Ko, magician of Li Jusong. But when he entered the towered gate of Shankiang, he touched Khlit's shoulder and pointed out over the river. In the distance the sun was setting. It was a dull, angry red in color. And between them and the sun drifted the lighted lanterns of the junk on its silent course down the river.

## V

*The Courts of Purgatory are filled not only from the City of Old Age. The Rakchas are gleeful when they hear the sound of trumpets summoning men into battle on earth.*

*For on the terrace of night the sleepers will throng. Surely, they are sleeping, since they went to their graves as beds.*

*The Kang Mu Chronicles.*

The first thing that Chagan did on arriving in Shankiang was to find stables for the horses of the travelers, and quarters for themselves in the merchants' section of the town nearby. He bargained for a room over a candlemaker's shop where a window opened upon one of the main streets of the city. Another aperture in the rear gave access to a walled-in garden where the candlemaker, Wen Shu by name, tended a miniature garden in his leisure hours.

Never, save in Samarkand, had Khlit been in a city of the size of Shankiang. Unlike Tatar cities, the wall was the sole defense of the place—a wall of stone some forty feet in height, surmounted by occasional towers and pierced by four gates. Within the wall was a solid mass of wooden buildings, humming like a hive with its populace.

While he waited for the coming of Li Jusong, Khlit wandered through the streets of Shankiang, visiting the teeming waterfront, and the booths of the journeying scholars who wrote letters and books for their clients, by the walled temples of the monks. At a shop set up outside their quarters he bought a set of ivory chessmen from a vendor, saying to Chagan that it was well to have a trade when Li Jusong's men should question them. To this Chagan heartily agreed.

The giant sword-bearer seemed not in the best of humor. He



spent long hours at the waterfront during the days of waiting, and returned with the news that Li Jusong had been seen approaching the river Liao. Also, he said, junks were hurrying to the city from the upper stretches of the river. That was foolish, Chagan declared, in the face of a coming army which was not allied to the Holangs.

Khlit watched Chagan closely, and he could have sworn the man had more on his mind than he was willing to tell. More than once the sword-bearer broke off what he was saying, to stare at his weapon in silence.

"Li Jusong should be here within three days," Khlit observed to him one morning as they left their quarters.

"Aye," said Chagan, "is not that what you are waiting for?"

The strange speech stuck in Khlit's mind. A curtained sedan was carried past them, and Khlit caught a glimpse of a yellow face peering out from the curtains. He noticed what appeared to be a badge of office on the hat of the man in the sedan. Chagan, however, plucked at his arm, and hurried him away into the crowd.

"That was one of the Lily of the Court officials," he whispered excitedly. "There are too many in the city, master, to please me. We may yet be strung up on the bone-crackers of their torture chambers, you and I!"

"Dog of the devil, Chagan," growled Khlit, "I knew not you could be so easily frightened!"

"I—frightened?" Chagan stared his amazement. "Nay, but this place reeks of evildoing. I am sick for the plains and a horse."

That evening, when the lanterns were hung outside the doors, Chagan came hurrying into the walled garden where Khlit was sitting nursing his sword.

"The beggars in the market place who have come from outside say that Li Chan Ko, the magician of Li Jusong, has told a prophecy about Shankiang. They say the mandarins of the city are debating shutting the gates on Li Jusong, for the men of Han bear them no good will."

The next day the city was rife with talk and the crowds thronged the streets. Khlit could not understand what was said, but he realized that the people were agitated. Bodies of infantry ill disciplined and worse armed were hurrying back and forth. The junks completely blocked the river.

The prospect of the city shutting its gates to the coming army had not occurred to Khlit. He was not aware of feuds between the men of Han and Wang under the Dragon Emperor and the outlying districts. He made his way to the southern gate in time to see an imposing cavalcade of mandarins and priests trot forth and the doors swing to behind them.

"They are emissaries going to Li Jusong," Chagan explained after the sword-bearer had questioned a bystander, a small, bright-eyed archer clad in complete mail with an ax slung at his belt.

The latter swung around at Chagan's words and stared at the two curiously.

"Ho there, those are foreign words," he chuckled, closing one eye, "but fear not, my tongue does not wag by itself. Here, it pays to say little. One dog barks at nothing and the rest bark at him."

"What man are you, archer?" questioned Khlit, for the other spoke a Tatar dialect that he understood.

"Nobody's man, uncle, but his who pays the most. I am a wanderer of Manchu blood, at present in the employ of the mandarins of this cursed city. Men call me Arslan; I am captain of a ten of archers on the walls. Likewise, a lusty singer. Harken—harken."

Arslan lifted a melodious voice:

"An arbor of flowers,  
And a kettle of wine.  
Alas! in the bowers  
No companion is mine.

"Then the moon sheds her rays  
On my goblet and me,  
And my shadow betrays  
We're a party of three.

"Though the moon cannot swallow  
Her share of the grog  
And my shadow must follow  
Whenever I jog.

"See the moon—how she glances  
Response to my song.  
See my shadow—it dances  
So lightly along.

"While sober I feel  
You are both my good friends.  
When drunken I reel—  
Our boon fellowship ends."

"By the looks of things," muttered Chagan, "your arrows will be flying before long and by the same token a Lily-handled dagger will stick from your shoulder blades."

"Not mine," laughed Arslan. "For I am stationed on the Tower of the Five Falcons, which is loftiest of all on the walls. Harken, wrestler—you bear a goodly sword. If there is fighting, come to the Tower of the Five Falcons. Then you will see some pretty bow-and-arrow work!"

"Aye, we may come to toss your carcass over the walls, cousin Arslan," growled Chagan.

But the archer turned away with a laugh. They heard him humming to himself as he disappeared in the crowd.

When they returned to the shop, Wen Shu had left his work and was laying a sacrifice of food and drink before his ancestral tablet in the sanctuary of the garden. More troops moved through the streets that night, and the gates were kept shut.

By the following night the embassy had not returned. Rumors

were rife that the mandarins had been held as hostages and that Li Jusong had ordered the gates to be opened, and all soldiers to be disarmed. The cavalry of the Chinese general were reported in the suburbs. Khlit and Chagan slept that night in their boots and with their swords under their hands.

## VI

At dawn, the Kang Mu relates, the gates of Shankiang were closed. Khlit was not able to return to the walls. When he tried to force through the crowds in the streets he was thrown back by armed bodies of horsemen. Shots were heard, and a wail went up from the women of Shankiang. Chagan and Khlit had agreed that in case the town resisted they would take to their horses, and await the arrival of Li Jusong. It might be possible to mingle with the ranks of the Chinese if they entered the place. But neither he nor Chagan was prepared for what followed.

They were unable to reach the stable and had drawn to one side of the street under an archway. The crowd surged back on them as a mounted man rode down the street. His armor was torn and he was without a weapon. Two footmen struggled to keep up with the rider by clinging to his stirrups. They also were without arms, although their badges showed them to be retainers of the mandarins. They were heading for the river.

After the rider had passed the people began to run into the houses. Merchants with their families in sedan chairs, accompanied by servants, thronged down the alleys that led to their junks. The wailing of women rose higher. From time to time bursts of musket shots sounded from the south. A bareheaded bonze with streaming garments came panting by them. When Chagan caught the latter's long sleeve to detain him, the priest tore himself loose and ran on with half his coat left in the Tatar's hand.

The street was nearly deserted by now and Khlit motioned Chagan to resume their course to the stable. Like the Tatar, he felt the need of a horse between his legs, for he was not used to fighting on foot. They had not gone a dozen paces, however, when a group of horsemen came galloping toward them. They barely had time to jump aside into a doorway before the riders swept past like a torrent, several gorgeously robed mandarins in their midst.

"They go like men who want to save their skins," growled Chagan. "Ha!"

He pointed after the horsemen. In the center of the alley a short distance away lay a quivering heap of silk. The bonze had not been quick to jump aside.

New crowds hurrying down to the junks barred the way to the stable and the two were forced to turn back to the candlemaker's shop. They found Wen Shu with his wife and daughter in their best robes sitting quietly in the closed shop. With a hurried question, Chagan left the candlemaker and followed Khlit to their room.

"To eat," said Khlit calmly, suiting the action to the word. "The walls of the town are strong. Li Jusong will have a hard time breaking in."

Chagan shook his head moodily at this, but, observing that Khlit was making away with the best portions of the rice and fish, he fell to eating with the Cossack. That done, Chagan stretched full length on the floor and was soon asleep. Khlit watched by the window.

It was impossible now to leave the city by the walls. And Khlit was loath to join the mad rush for the junks. He waited for darkness, when it might be possible to venture abroad and learn more of what was happening. The sound of musketry presently ceased. The pandemonium in the street was quieter. Khlit heard the beat of horses' hoofs.

Looking out, he saw a troop of riders in blue coats with banners trotting down the street in good order, four abreast. The



sight reassured him somewhat, and he shook Chagan into wakefulness.

"These are better warriors than the others we have seen," he observed to the Tatar. "Aye, your eye is keen, master," chuckled Chagan; "those are some of Li Jusong's Leo Tung men."

He disappeared down the stairs leading to the shop, returning after a moment. Stretching his giant arms wide, he gave a huge yawn and shook himself like a dog.

"It was a good sleep," he growled. "Come, Khlit, lord, we had best be stirring or we will be smoked out like dead fish. Wen Shu says that the city has fallen. Some of the infantry held the southern gate for a while, but the followers of the Lily treacherously opened the eastern gate to Li Jusong's cavalry. It will be an evil night for Shankiang and you and I will have work for our swords."

Khlit buckled his belt tighter and filled his pipe with tobacco. When the pipe was lighted to his satisfaction he turned to Chagan.

"What kind of men are these, Chagan?" he said, sweeping his arm in the direction of the city. "The walls could have kept Li Jusong out for a year—"

"In Tatary, yes, master. But in China there is always a traitor and a back door. Also a dagger in the kidneys of a true fighter. Come, I will show you proof of what has happened."

Khlit followed Chagan down to the shop, where the Tatar paused, pointing grimly to where Wen Shu sat cross-legged on the floor, bowing back and forth in grief. All the candles and lanterns of the shop had been lighted. Incense burned at the ancestral shrine. Flowers were arranged in the vases.

Clearly outlined in the many-colored glow, Khlit saw the figures of the wife and daughter of Wen Shu. Dressed in their dainty garments, the two women hung from a rafter over the head of the candlemaker. Silken cords were around their white throats, and fastened to the rafter.

"He will wait there until a Han sword severs his neck also," explained Chagan. "These people allow themselves to be slain

like sheep once a city is taken. Still, Wen Shu has the satisfaction of seeing his women dead before the warriors of Li Jusong get here. I know, for I have carved up many like him."

With that Chagan led the way into the street and Khlit followed silently. Evening was falling, but the sky was lighted by the glow of numerous fires. The smell of smoke was in the air. Khlit led Chagan into another street on the way to the stable. Here bodies were lying.

Chagan took no notice of them, but Khlit stooped at the first one and, drawing his curved sword, dipped it into the pool of blood beside the body, which was that of a child. The Tatar, seeing this, did likewise, with a grin.

"Better to be thought wolves than sheep, Chagan," said Khlit grimly.

The prospect of danger had brought a light to his eyes and a flush to his lean cheeks. With bared swords the two passed on, keeping close together, in the direction of their horses. As they went they saw new evidence of the coming of Li Jusong.

By a many-storied pagoda which was blazing to its summit they saw a heap of bodies. The unfortunates who had taken refuge in the temple had been forced by the flames to come out, only to meet the swords of the Han warriors. So much Khlit read in the sight of the bodies, for he was old in the ways of warfare. He had stooped over the forms, when one of them, a slender girl, struggled upright and faced him.

The child was wild-eyed with fright, and her trembling hands gripped her throat. She stared blindly at Khlit, plainly expecting his sword to descend on her. Chagan took her by the shoulder and pulled her to her feet with rough good nature.

"Get you into that alley, dollface," he bellowed, pointing to a dark opening at one side of the burning building, "or Li Jusong's butchers will sharpen their blades—ha! Watch, Khlit, lord!"

A group of pikemen had run into the open space from another street and approached them. Chagan gave the girl a hasty shove, as if to cast her down among the bodies again. But in-

stead of obeying him she pulled the form of a small boy to his feet beside her. The infant seemed to be wounded, for he was dripping blood. Holding the boy close to her, the girl remained motionless.

The pikemen had come up to them, and one of them questioned Chagan roughly. The sword-bearer made no reply, not understanding what the other said. Before Khlit realized what had happened one of the pikemen had thrust his weapon into the girl's side. She sank to her knees with a low moan.

The boy gave a cry of anguish and clutched the hand of the soldier. With a laugh the pikeman wrenched his spear loose from the girl and wiped it clean on the boy's garments. His half-dozen companions closed threateningly around Khlit and Chagan.

At the same instant Khlit's curved sword flashed up. It whirled swiftly against the throat of the pikeman. The soldier dropped beside the girl, his head hanging from his shoulders by a strip of flesh.

The spears of the others were lifted at Khlit, who had slashed the face of a second man with the same stroke that slew the murderer of the girl. He sprang back, only to see three of the menacing pikes knocked to the ground by a stroke of Chagan's huge sword, with its foot-wide blade. He warded off the stroke of the fourth man, drawing a pistol at the same time.

Khlit discharged his pistol at the waist of the man who had struck at him, and turned to Chagan. His sword was lifted for a second stroke, but he stayed his hand. Chagan's blade, falling again, had dashed two of the men to earth with split heads. The survivor had dropped his pike and taken to his heels. He did not go far, however.

With an oath Chagan caught up one of the pikes at his feet. Dropping his heavy sword for an instant, he poised the spear and hurled it after the fugitive with all the strength of his long arm. The weapon caught the man in the small of the back and he dropped to his knees.

"The hunting has begun, Chagan," cried Khlit, "but other dogs are coming. Follow me!"

With a backward glance at groups of Chinese who were running toward them from each end of the street Khlit turned and dived into the alley that Chagan had pointed out to the girl. The sword-bearer pounded at his heels.

## VII

The alley was shut off from the light from the burning pagoda, but the sky was bright with the general conflagration of the city. Khlit saw that he was running down a passage between large buildings. He caught sight of an opening at his right and turned aside. Two dim objects about the height of a man confronted him. These he recognized as the stone drums of the city, now deserted.

He had been that way before, and with a flash of memory he swerved into a gateway that led him to a flight of steps. Up these he climbed, with the watchful Tatar at his heels. The steps led to a jade and stone gateway of the central Buddhist temple.

A cry from below told him that the pursuers had caught sight of them from the street. Chagan gave a curse, but Khlit drew him silently into the temple. It was deserted. The long hall that led to the giant bronze figure of Buddha was empty of worshipers. There was no place of concealment in the hall and Khlit, perforce, ran on to the figure of the cross-legged god.

At the very feet of the image stretched a white form. One of the priests had been slain in his sanctuary, for a red line blurred the white of the robe from throat to waist. Khlit wasted no time, but sought along the wall for the doors he knew must be there, opening into the priests' apartments. A silken curtain covered the wall, but when Chagan thrust at it with his sword, it yielded

and they pushed under it, finding themselves in an ebony and lacquer chamber, lighted by red lanterns.

A white robe flitted away down a passage that led from the priests' chamber and Khlit sprang after it, panting with the effort he was making. The fleeing priest, who must have imagined that death stalked him, led them down the passage and through a narrow door out onto a terrace on the farther side of the building.

The wretched man had flung himself imploringly on the ground before them. Khlit stepped over his prostrate form, and Chagan followed him, bestowing a hearty kick on the priest as he did so. They were now in a cherry garden belonging to the temple. A few minutes more and they had reached the edge of the garden, unseen by their pursuers, who had stopped to slay the priest.

A stone wall confronted them, but this problem Chagan easily solved. Sheathing his sword, the Tatar swung himself up to the summit of the wall. Reaching down a powerful hand, he drew Khlit beside him. They dropped to the farther side and walked down the alley in which they found themselves.

It opened out into a wide square filled with moving bands of soldiers. Khlit realized that hesitation would mean disaster for them. Motioning to Chagan to follow, he stepped out among the Chinese. The latter, seeing their crimson swords, took no further notice of them. When they had put a safe distance between them and the temple garden, Khlit halted, leaning on his sword to recover breath.

He saw that they stood in a square one side of which was bordered by the city wall. The scene was outlined by flames behind them, and Khlit made out a tower opposite, rising against the wall and above it to a considerable height.

The Chinese around them were discharging arrows at the summit of the tower. Others were crowding around the door, which was already nearly blocked with dead. On the summit of the tower were several defenders who were replying to the arrows of the besiegers. Khlit could see the helmets of the men on the tower



appear at the edge of the rampart to let fly an arrow and then draw back. They had already taken heavy toll of the attackers.

Chagan, who had been scanning the tower closely, pointed up at it.

"The Tower of the Five Falcons, master," he whispered. "I see the archer, Arslan, up there. His men shoot like devils. We had best go elsewhere or our friend Arslan will settle his score with me with one of his shafts."

The streets leading from the square were nearly deserted by the Holangs, and the two were able to avoid wandering bands of Li Jusong's men. Khlit traced his way back to the merchants' quarter, and eventually they came to the stable where their horses had been left. The beasts were gone.

Chagan flung himself down on a heap of straw with an oath and Khlit seated himself beside the sword-bearer. Drawing bread and meat from a wallet at his belt, the Cossack began to eat calmly, sharing his food with Chagan. Khlit was too old a warrior to be disturbed by the slaughter that was going on around them throughout the city of Shankiang.

"We will wait here until daylight," he told Chagan. "Tomorrow we may find a place in the ranks of Li Jusong."

Chagan paused in the act of swallowing a mouthful of meat and stared at his companion curiously. He started to speak, then thought better of it. But for the remainder of the night, which was hideous with the sound of slaying and pillage, he kept silence. More than once Khlit found the giant looking at him moodily.

When the sun was well up the two went out of the stable. Stopping only to take a long drink at the well in the yard, they returned to the streets of the stricken city. Quiet prevailed. Nothing was to be seen save the bodies that filled the gutters and the doorways of houses. Smoke rose densely from several quarters of the town.

The quiet did not deceive Khlit. He had no need to ask Chagan to know that the sack of Shankiang was not ended; that it had only begun.

## VIII

On turning into one of the main streets, lined with shopkeepers' painted signs, Khlit and Chagan came face to face with a procession of Holang prisoners. They were marching in single file, escorted by a party of Han men, and were tied together by a long rope.

"Like a string of pearls," Chagan said.

The party was led by an officer of great height and imposing appearance. This man halted the procession as Khlit and Chagan came abreast him, and scanned them closely. Chagan returned his gaze with an impudent stare. Khlit essayed a word of greeting in the Uigur tongue to which the officer did not reply.

"What is your name and business, graybeard?" the Chinese asked finally. "You wear strange clothes."

"A traveling chess player, sir," responded Khlit quickly, "with my servant. Can you direct us to Li Jusong?"

"The general of the Son of Heaven is out inspecting the streets, Uigur," answered the officer. "He would welcome you if you are truly a chess player, for the game is his distinguished delight. Your servant is big of bone. I am weary of killing these swine. We will have some sport. Len Shi!"

He struck his fan sharply against his leg, and a giant Chinaman made his appearance from among the troops with a low bow. The officer spoke to him sharply and gave a command to his men. Two of them went into a shop and returned with a chair in which he seated himself. Two others brought a square silk of the width of five paces which they spread in the street. The prisoners watched apathetically. "Your man is a wrestler," said the officer to Khlit. "Len Shi is also a wrestler, a rascal of strength and skill. We will see which is the better man."

When Khlit interpreted this to Chagan, who did not under-

stand the Uigur tongue, the Tatar cast a calculating glance at Len Shi. Big as Chagan was, the Chinaman was broader at the shoulders and heavier by fifty pounds. When Len Shi had doffed his quilted coat and undertunic, two massive arms showed, topped by a bull neck.

Chagan followed the example of his adversary promptly. He seemed no whit afraid, although he wore a scowl.

"I know not this wrestling sport," he whispered to Khlit as he stripped off his shirt. "But there is no man in China who can overmatch me at handgrips. Let this fat bullock look to his back, for I will break it for him."

Khlit watched his comrade with a troubled glance. Chagan was as powerful a man as he had ever seen, but Len Shi was weightier and moved with assurance, like one who had no doubt of his skill. Strong as the Tatar was, he might be no match for the Chinaman at the latter's game.

The Cossack took the two-handed sword from Chagan, allowing no one else to touch it, in spite of the fact that two of the soldiers offered readily to do so. The rest crowded around the silk square, talking eagerly with Len Shi, who made no response, but stared at Chagan, hands on his knees and slant eyes narrowed.

Khlit watched the two men as they faced each other on the silk, and glanced at the bland countenance of the officer. The latter showed no sign of interest in the bout, but Khlit felt that he had arranged it with a purpose.

The next instant the two wrestlers had locked arms and were swaying over the square. Len Shi's great face turned mottled with the effort he was making, and he roared with anger. Chagan made no sound, foiling the attempts of his adversary to trip him to the ground, where Len Shi's greater weight would tell.

The soldiers crowded close to the two men, whose hot breaths rose in vapor through the cold air. The officer stroked his *an* gently. Apparently he was not interested in the wrestlers, but Khlit saw that he watched them keenly. Len Shi had shifted his

first hold to one more to his satisfaction, about the waist of Chagan, who had locked the other's head in his mighty arms.

Len Shi, however, was a master of his craft. Twisting his head free from Chagan's grip, he swung the Tatar free of the ground. Following up his advantage, he put forth his strength and tossed Chagan clear of the silk. The Tatar fell heavily on his back. A shout went up from the soldiers.

Chagan, however, was on his feet in an instant, snarling with rage. He sprang at Len Shi, only to be caught by the waist in the same grip that had thrown him off his feet before. Chagan, however, was not one to be tricked twice in the same manner.

As before, Len Shi swung the sword-bearer from his feet as if he had been a child. Khlit wondered at the smooth skill of the wrestler who could handle Chagan in this manner. Blood was running from the latter's mouth, for the fall had been a heavy one. Len Shi's wide chest was panting from his efforts and he was shouting shrilly in triumph.

Khlit saw Len Shi turn with the quickness of a cat and catch Chagan on his back. The Tatar was now athwart his opponent's broad shoulders, behind his neck in a horizontal position, with Len Shi's arms grasping his legs on one side and his neck on the other.

"See," said the officer to Khlit, "your man is like a trussed sheep. He is bleeding already, and he is helpless. Len Shi will presently cast him down and fall upon him. I have seen a dozen men crippled in this fashion. Len Shi is a master wrestler."

In truth, Chagan's arms were fumbling about Len Shi's bull-like head in seeming helplessness. Slowly the Chinaman began to turn with his burden as if to gain momentum for the effort that would hurl Chagan to the earth. The Tatar, however, was watching every move of his adversary.

With a shout Len Shi whirled. His arm about Chagan's legs shifted to the latter's neck with lightning quickness. His muscles bulged as he strained for the throw. At the same instant Khlit saw Chagan fling both arms under Len Shi's chin. As the latter

flung the Tatar from him, Chagan's powerful arms twisted Len Shi's chin to one side.

Chagan flew through the air, wrenched loose from his hold. Len Shi had thrown his foe. But Chagan had caught Len Shi's head, so that his full weight had jerked upon the Chinaman's spine. Len Shi's neck was broken.

"A clever trick, Uigur," the officer smiled blandly. "Len Shi has wrestled his last bout. But it was a Tatar trick. I suspected you and your follower. It will not be long before Len Shi is avenged."

The officer called sharply to his men, who were staring in wonder at the lifeless form of their comrade. Khlit had not been unprepared for such a move. He cast a quick glance around. They were in the middle of the street. The prisoners with the guard filled the street at one end. From the other side a group of horsemen were advancing. Escape by either end was cut off.

The doors of nearby buildings stood open, after the pillage of the night before. It might have been possible for Khlit to have gained one of the doorways while the soldiers were advancing on him. But Chagan was still on his knees, bleeding and dizzy from his fall and ignorant of the discovery of the officer. Khlit would not leave him.

Stepping to the side of the Tatar, he pulled him roughly to his feet and thrust the great sword into his hand.

"Stand, Chagan," he cried, "we are attacked!"

The Tatar grasped his weapon in both sinewy hands. But he was reeling from fatigue and dizziness. Khlit placed his back to Chagan and waited the onset of the Chinese with drawn sword. A grim smile twisted his white mustache. Truly, the odds were heavy. Twoscore against an old man and a tired warrior. Chagan, too, was naked of all protection, having doffed his quilted coat to wrestle. They had been cleverly tricked by the Chinese officer.

Khlit was facing the foot soldiers, who were advancing from the prisoners. Chagan was facing the horsemen, who had pulled up barely in time to keep from running them down. He saw



that the men in front of him spread out to surround Chagan and himself. This done, they waited.

Khlit gripped his sword impatiently. He would have preferred a quick onset to this. Then he caught sight of the Chinese officer and caught his breath in surprise. The man was down on his knees in the street, with his head bowed nearly to the earth.

Khlit cast a quick glance over his shoulder. Directly in front of Chagan was a horseman. His mount was caparisoned in silk with jade pendants. He wore a shining robe on which a dragon was embroidered. No armor was visible and his only weapon was a small sword with a jeweled hilt. The man was of lean build with a hawklike face, nearly as dark as his black eyes.

Behind him a score of mailed lancers were drawn up, with a banner at their head. The banner bore a dragon. The man's hand was lifted as if to arrest the foot soldiers who were around Khlit. As Khlit watched him he spoke quickly to the officer who was on his knees. Khlit could not understand what they said, but presently the rider turned to him.

"So we have a chess player who is a Tatar here," he said in a smooth voice. "I did not know the Tatars played the favorite game of the Dragon Emperor. A rare jewel I have found. Too precious to be thrown to these dogs of mine. Will you sheathe your sword and come with Li Jusong, general of Wan Li, of the Dragon Throne?"

## IX

Khlit looked long into Li Jusong's impassive countenance. He was face to face at last with the famous general who had led victorious armies against the men of Japan and the Manchus in Korea. He pondered the latter's words. Khlit knew nothing of chess-play. He had taken the role as a safeguard in case he was

questioned. What Li Jusong's purpose might be in sparing him he did not know.

It might be only a respite, but a respite was better than speedy death at the lances of the mailed riders. Khlit could see no course but to yield. He put little trust in the word of Li Jusong, but he preferred the society of the latter to the comrades of the dead Len Shi.

"Believe him not," whispered Chagan, "he has the tongue of a poisonous snake. Keep your sword, master. You and I will take many souls with us to the courts of Hades, as good Tatars should."

Khlit shook his head. He could see no good in resisting.

"Have I your word," he asked Li Jusong, "that I and my companion may keep our swords? And that we will be spared?"

"Aye, stranger," smiled Li Jusong, "so long as you are a chess player."

In spite of Chagan's protest, Khlit sheathed his weapon. The Tatar scowled blackly at this. Khlit wondered as he saw the man lift his great sword and bring it down across his knee with all the strength of his arms. Chagan's two-handed sword snapped in twain and the giant cast the pieces from him.

"No other shall have this," he growled. "Lord, you have done ill."

Li Jusong regarded the sword-bearer curiously as Chagan stood beside Khlit with folded arms. His glance strayed to the curved sword of the Cossack and he frowned as if in an effort of memory. He motioned to two of his men to dismount.

"Ride with me," he directed Khlit briefly, "you and your man."

With that Li Jusong spurred forward his horse. The kneeling officer barely had time to spring to one side. The other riders closed in about them. They went onward through the blood-stained streets of Shankiang.

Chagan kept close to Khlit's side. Only once did he speak.

"You have done ill, lord," he repeated surlily.

Khlit made no response and the two said no further word.

Even when Li Jusong left them at the gate of the governor's palace, which he had taken for his own quarters, and the horse-men led them to apartments in the rear where they sat down to a sumptuous meal plundered from the palace larder, Chagan did not rouse from his reverie.

The soldiers left them here, with guards. Khlit sought out a bench and stretched full length upon it, for he was weary. In a moment he was asleep. Chagan, however, had not followed his example. The Tatar paced back and forth through the chamber, eying Khlit and the guards. His scarred face was black with anger.

## X

*In spite of tempest or drought or evil demons, the word of a wise man will come true.*

*Chinese Proverb.*

That night was the eighth night of the second moon, according to the chronicle of the Kang Mu, and Li Jusong had put to the sword many thousands of the populace of Shankiang. For two nights and a day his men had sacked the city. Thus, says the Kang Mu, the words of Li Chan Ko, the magician from the Imperial Throne, came to pass.

That night Khlit learned of the strange prophecy of Li Chan Ko. He had slept for several hours when his guards wakened him, and took him with Chagan to the presence of Li Jusong.

The general of Wan Li had spent the early part of the night in drinking with his followers in the courtroom of the palace, an ornamented chamber, lacquered and tapestried, which had been spared pillage. Li Jusong was a man who trusted no one save Li Chan Ko, whom he held in great esteem. Consequently the two were alone with a few attendants when Khlit and Chagan

were led to the long table where they sat. Four candles on the table lighted the room.

Li Jusong looked up at their entrance. His hard face was flushed from drinking and his black eyes seemed sunk in his head. He motioned Khlit to a seat on the other side of the table and scanned him covertly.

"The dogs and vultures are feasting high tonight in Shankiang, Tatar," he murmured, "for the city has felt the weight of the Dragon's claw. Like candles in the wind, the lives of its people are going out. Truly, it is as blind Li Chan Ko, in his wisdom, has said. Before we left the Great Wall he had foretold the destruction of the city. Harken, Tatar, and hear the words of wisdom."

The general turned to Li Chan Ko, a shriveled man in a scholar's dress, who wore the insignia of high caste. Khlit waited silently for what was to come.

"Li Chan Ko will repeat his prophecy," explained Li Jusong, sipping his wine, "and I will translate his golden phrases into your language."

The blind sage lifted his eyes and murmured. Khlit noted that the guards who stood beside Chagan bowed their heads as if at the words of a priest.

"This is the prophecy, O Tatar," resumed Li Jusong. "All unworthy, I shall try to repeat it for you—"

"The wind whistles through the long night, where ghosts of the unburied dead wander in the gloom. The fading moon twinkles on the fallen snow. The fosses of the walls are frozen with blood, and the beards of the dead are stiff with ice. Each arrow is sped; every bowstring broken, and the strength of the war horse is gone. Thus is the city of Shankiang on the coming of the Dragon Host."

"These words, Tatar," explained Li Jusong, "were written on the mind of the magician Li Chan Ko during sleep. Great is the wisdom of the magician!"

He emptied his wine cup and stared at Khlit from reddened

eyes. The scholar sat with folded hands, paying no heed to what went on. Khlit, from the corner of his eye, observed that two spearmen were close behind him. Plainly, Li Jusong remembered that Khlit still had his sword. The general clapped his hands and called to one of the attendants. The man disappeared and presently returned with an ivory chessboard inlaid with gold, which he set on the table between Khlit and Li Jusong.

"Now we will have a game, Tatar, you and I," smiled the Chinese. "It is a pretty set of chessmen, this, for it belonged to the governor himself before my men tied a silk bracelet around his neck and he sped to join his worthy ancestors."

Khlit did not look at the board. He had no knowledge of the game. He was watching Li Jusong. Was the man serious, or was he playing with his captives?

"Come, Tatar," said Li Jusong, "this is the pastime of kings. And here is wine. Drink, for wine is justly named the sweeper-away-of-care. Come, you are no common Tatar. I knew as much when I saw your sword drawn today."

Chagan gave a growl at this, but the general heeded him not. His glance challenged Khlit over the wine cup, as the Cossack drank deeply. A smile played over his thin lips. Khlit set down his cup and motioned for more. The act gave him a chance to think. Li Jusong was playing with him. It was a game of wits, and Khlit had played at such many times. He smiled in answer to Li Jusong and drank again.

"You have good eyes, Li Jusong," he growled. "But this game of ivory puppets is not to my liking. It is a devil's pastime."

"Nevertheless," responded the general softly, "few can play it. Are you one of the few? I seem to doubt it. A wolf does not sport with toys."

Khlit looked up quickly. The other's face was expressionless, but the black eyes gleamed. It must have been chance that led Li Jusong to mention a wolf, the name that men applied to Khlit.

"You have called it the sport of kings, Li Jusong," he said



slowly. "Yet kings play with greater stakes. Such as lives, and armies—"

"True!" The Chinese laughed quickly. "I am in a mood to humor you tonight, Tatar. We will play another game, with higher stakes. I knew that you were not a common man. That was why I spared you today."

With a sudden move he swept the chessmen from the board. The ivory images rolled scattering about the floor.

"That is how I scatter my enemies," he smiled, "wherever I meet them."

He called to his attendants. One of the men left the room, and in a moment a door opened and several men came into the chamber, bowing before Li Jusong.

One or two were soldiers of rank but the others wore the robes of ceremony that stamped them as courtiers. The leader of the party halted close to the table with another bow. Something in the man's broad yellow face stirred Khlit's memory. He heard an exclamation from Chagan. The man was Cho Kien, the eunuch who had come to the Tatar khans as envoy.

"I see you know our visitor already," observed Li Jusong. "Cho Kien is high in favor at the Dragon Throne. He once bore you a message which was not delivered in full, owing to the presence of your undesirable companions. Cho Kien with his comrades of the Lily returned to Shankiang, following my instructions, and he recognized you while he was passing through the streets in a sedan."

Khlit recalled the meeting between himself and Chagan and the official of the Lily in a curtained vehicle. He made no reply, waiting for what was to come.

"Cho Kien, who was kind enough to open one of the gates to my cavalry," went on Li Jusong, "told me of your presence in the city, and I issued orders that you were to be spared and brought to me. For it was the wish of the Dragon Emperor, who is lofty as the clouds of heaven, that the message be delivered to you."

## XI

Cho Kien stepped forward at a sign from the general.

"It is written," he said in his high voice, "to kill not the ox that tills your garden. The World-Honored One, in his graciousness, has received knowledge of Khlit, the strange warrior who defeated Hang-Hi. Nevertheless, not he but the Tatar khans are the enemies of the Dragon Throne. Khlit, who bears the name of the Wolf, is not a Tatar by birth. He is a wanderer of great skill in warfare, from a distant country. His curved sword is a charm that brings victory to the side on which he fights."

The eunuch paused to glance keenly at Khlit. The latter was not surprised at this information, for it had been revealed to the councilors of Hang-Hi, some of whom must have escaped the massacre that followed the defeat of his army.

"The part of my message which was written on the paper I bore, and which was for the ear of Khlit alone, is this," pursued Cho Kien. "The paper was taken from me by one of the khans, but I remember its wording. The Gracious Emperor, Wan Li, convinced that only magic of high quality could have defeated so brave a man as Hang-Hi, has been pleased, on the advice of his wise men, to offer pardon to the warrior Khlit if he will use his magical power on the side of Wan Li against the rebel khans."

Li Jusong cast a shrewd glance at Khlit.

"It is the wish of Wan Li, whom may long life and honor bless, that you be given a high command under me and hereditary rank. You are not born a Tatar. The cause of the khans is lost. The sun of Wan Li rises bright over all China." He paused to empty his cup. "You will do well to accept the offer that will give you life."

"And what if I refuse?" asked Khlit slowly.

"Then to my sorrow I shall be forced to have you beaten to

death as a traitor with split bamboos in seven days, when the sack of Shankiang is ended. It would be brainless to choose death. I have seen the writing on your sword which signifies high descent. You have seen the power of the Dragon. The khans expect me to attack them at the Kerulen. But I shall wait here until they quarrel among themselves and the horde disbands. Spies have told me that the khans are on ill terms with each other."

Cho Kien nodded confirmation to this. Khlit stared at the scattered chessmen on the floor in silence. Li Jusong was a shrewd general. He had discovered the weak point of the Jun-gar Horde. United, the warlike khans might offer stern resistance. Separately, they could be cut down. Khlit was a wanderer, who had fought with many armies. He was not a Tatar, although of Tatar blood. Allied with Li Jusong he might win high favor from the Dragon.

He filled his cup and drank deep. Li Jusong took this as a good omen and did likewise, bidding Cho Kien and the men of the Lily be seated.

"These are the men, O Khlit," he smiled, "who are sworn to carry fire and sword into Tatary. If you refuse our offer they will see that you die slowly. Think well!"

At this the aged scholar, Li Chan Ko, leaned forward and placed under Li Jusong's eyes a paper on which he had been tracing characters with a brush.

"The blind man of wisdom has a word for you," said the general, holding a candlestick over the paper, for the light was dim. "He reminds you of the words of the Dragon Emperor to the khans, the saying—'With the slayer of his kin a man may not live under the same sky.'"

Khlit wondered as he watched the bland face of the blind man what the latter had meant by the sentence. Later he was to know more of the wisdom of Li Chan Ko. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Chagan standing by the door with drooping head. The sword-bearer had heard what had passed. Khlit remembered that the latter had chosen to die rather than to trust Li Jusong.

He had only to say a word of agreement and he would be safe.

Chagan doubtless would be slain with dispatch, and there would be no Tatar witness to his decision. The khans had refused Khlit his rightful rank among them. Jealous and intolerant of each other, they seemed bound to fall before Li Jusong's sword.

With Li Jusong he would hold a high rank. Weary of wandering alone, Khlit would have honor and a place of command. If he chose, he might not need to face the Tatars—might go into another part of China.

As he meditated his glance fell on his sword. The curved sword that had been his companion through life bore the inscription of Kaidu, the White Khan. The blood of the White Khans ran in Khlit's veins. Moreover, he had fought with the khans of the Kerulen—had shared their bread and wine. They had followed him in battle.

"Li Jusong," he said slowly, "tell me this thing. Is the man who betrays another to be trusted?"

"Nay, but you will betray no one. The khans have given you no place with them."

"Then," Khlit responded, "how is he to be trusted who asks one man to betray another?"

The old scholar, Li Chan Ko, turned his blind eyes to Khlit. He smiled approvingly, as if he had understood. Cho Kien spoke, his voice heavy with distrust.

"Your answer—what is it to be?"

Khlit stood up. The others did likewise, save Li Chan Ko. The dim light from the four candles showed Chagan's burning glance fixed on him from among the guards at the door. Khlit pointed to him.

"I would speak with the Tatar first," he said firmly.

Li Jusong and Cho Kien glanced at each other briefly. The former nodded.

"Bring the Tatar to the table," he called to the guards. "He will be safer here."

The guards escorted Chagan forward, leaving the door vacant.

The two behind Khlit stepped to his side watchfully. The men of the Lily muttered, and drew closer.

Chagan's questioning glance was on Khlit as the latter stepped close to his side.

"I give Chagan a farewell word," said Khlit briefly.

For a long moment he leaned close to the sword-bearer's ear and whispered. The latter's sullen eyes opened wide in astonishment. Cho Kien motioned to the guards impatiently, but Khlit stepped back to the table, resting both hands on it. He smiled grimly.

"This is my answer, Li Jusong," he said slowly. His hands tightened on the table. "Aye, my blood is noble—it is that of the White Khans. I keep faith with my blood—thus!"

A heave of his lean arms, and the table crashed over on its side. The candles fell with the flagon of wine and the goblets. The spilled wine extinguished the candles. A shout went up from the Chinese. The chamber was in darkness.

"The door, Chagan!" Khlit's voice rang out.

He heard the sword-bearer's answering shout, and the crash of bodies on the floor. A heavy weight descended on his head, and he sank forward over the table. A haze fell upon his mind.

## XII

When consciousness returned to Khlit he found himself chained to a pillar by the arms in a lacquered chamber. Beside him were white-robed bodies of dead Buddhist priests. He was in the room in the rear of the temple through which he had passed before.

Daylight showed Khlit the interior of the chamber. Narrow windows high in the wall at his back let in the light. The walls were of black ebony and teakwood. The single door was also of teakwood, and very strong.



The place seemed to have been a council room for the monks of the temple. It was littered with discarded robes, books, and chairs. The cold was piercing, but it served to lessen the stench of the bodies. And for seven days Khlit endured the cold and hunger of the place, for Cho Kien, who tended him, gave him only rice and water.

Khlit knew that the massacre was still going on in the streets of Shankiang, for at intervals shots and cries reached his ears. Footsteps passed in the adjoining corridors, but no one entered the chamber. Only Cho Kien came, to mock him.

The eunuch told him nothing of the fate of Chagan. He forced captive priests in white robes to minister to Khlit, at the point of the sword. Even if the sword-bearer had escaped from the palace there was little chance of winning free from the walled city where the swords of Li Jusong were reaping a deadly harvest. For a week the sound of slaying continued.

Khlit's situation gave him small food for hope. His arms long since had become numb from the cold and the ropes. He could sleep only at intervals, sitting against the pillar. His sword had disappeared from his belt, but he saw it strapped to Cho Kien.

The first night had convinced him that there was no loosening his bonds. And Cho Kien's vigilance prevented his speaking to the priests, even if they could have understood him. There was nothing to do but struggle to keep his blood stirring under the grip of the cold, and ward off with his boots the rats that came to gnaw the dead bodies.

The Cossack had long ceased to count the days. He was weak from hardships and lack of food. He had spoken no word for a week. His eyes were sunken in his head and his chest burned with fever. The rats had nearly finished the meat from the bodies in the corner and were becoming bolder in their attacks on him. Especially when he slept did they torment him.

Khlit's memory suffered from the week of imprisonment. Two things, however, were clear in his mind. He longed to regain

possession of his curved sword. And he desired to slay Cho Kien, who openly rejoiced in his ownership of the valuable weapon.

It did not occur to Khlit to beg for mercy of his captor or to alter his decision concerning the missive of Wan Li. The Cossack had never asked mercy of men, and his pride was invincible.

It was late on the seventh night—he had seen the glimmer of a pale moon on the floor at his feet—when Khlit came face to face with Li Chan Ko, the magician. That night he beheld something of the strange power of the man whose wisdom was feared by Li Jusong and by Wan Li, the Dragon Emperor.

So quietly had Li Chan Ko come into the chamber that Khlit was not aware of him until the blind man moved into the square of moonlight that lay beneath one of the windows. The teak door had not opened, and Khlit knew that Cho Kien had the only key to it, yet he saw the yellow robe of the scholar advancing toward him.

Khlit shook his head savagely, for he thought the fever was tricking him. He saw that Li Chan Ko's eyes were closed and that he moved slowly, leaning on his staff. The wizened face of the old man was calm. He had come from the corner where the dead men lay, but when he came abreast of Khlit he paused. Li Chan Ko turned directly to him and Khlit shuddered as he saw the eyes of the blind man open, as if seeking him.

"Once," said Li Chan Ko, "I heard you answer a question, strange warrior whom men call Khlit. It was wisely answered as if the spirit of Confucius himself had told you what to say. A noble mind is the highest form of virtue. Little do we take with us into the world of things that are not, yet a noble spirit is with us in our last hour."

The words of the scholar, in Tatar, were soft and he spoke as if he saw Khlit. A shudder went through the Cossack.

"The city of Shankiang is an evil place," went on the magician, "and those who do not know say that hobgoblins and ill-omened foxes infest the citadel. Li Jusong is one of these, for he slew fifty thousand in the houses that my prophecy might be fulfilled.

Yet in my dream of stricken Shankiang I saw snow over the streets and there has been no snow. The prophecy is not yet fulfilled."

Khlit spoke in a voice harsh from suffering. "Li Chan Ko," he asked, "how did you come here?"

"I came," said the blind man, "because I dreamed last night that the Rakchas took the soul of a man in this room, and that he ascended on the dragon. I heard them say that you were kept here, and that Cho Kien would come tonight to beat you with a bamboo cudgel until your body was broken. I would help you if I could."

"Then loosen my bonds," whispered Khlit eagerly, "and put a sword in my hand."

Li Chan Ko shook his head with a slow smile.

"What is to be, will be," he responded, "and who am I to interfere with the workings of heaven? Nay, I came through a corridor that leads to the closet behind the bodies of the dead men. Cho Kien had told me of the place, which he learned from his slaves, the priests of the temple. Cho Kien has profaned the temple with murder, which is ill."

Khlit mastered his disappointment with an effort.

"Was Chagan, my follower, slain?" he inquired, for the blind man seemed to have heard all that took place.

"Nay, I think not," Li Chan Ko shook his head slowly. "That night your man broke through his guards and escaped. I think he must have left the city, for Li Jusong said that Chagan had been seen in the Tower of the Five Falcons with the archer who still holds the tower."

Khlit pondered this. Chagan had escaped, without knowing what had happened to his master. The Tatar might have made every effort to find him; but how was he to do so? Probably he had concluded that Khlit was already dead. If what Li Chan Ko said was true, his life was to be taken that night. Cho Kien was prepared to end his imprisonment.

"Will you give me a sword?" he said. "Or break against the

pillar the blade of the curved sword the eunuch wears? Better that than to be sullied by the hands of Cho Kien."

Again the blind man shook his head gently.

"I am not a meddler with fate. What I have foretold will come to pass. I have not strength to break the sword or to take it from Cho Kien. Harken, here is Cho Kien, with his men, at the door."

The blind man turned his head as if listening to sounds which Khlit could not hear. For the second time the Cossack shuddered. Li Chan Ko seemed to him to be one of the Rakchas themselves—evil spirits of purgatory. When he looked up again, the magician had drawn back against the wall. He was nearly concealed now by the shadows.

Khlit heard the familiar sound of the door grating on its hinges. He caught a glimpse of several spearmen who bore torches outside the door. Cho Kien with one priest advanced into the room, and closed the heavy door upon his attendants. In his hand the eunuch held a steel-tipped flail of bamboo.

The priest carried a torch.

### XIII

Old Li Chan Ko had drawn farther from the pillar and Cho Kien did not see him as he stepped in front of Khlit, his narrow eyes gleaming, the curved sword at his fat middle. The priest stood near, watching them. The man's face stirred Khlit's memory.

"Li Jusong has said," Cho Kien whispered, "that your death must come this night. His men are weary of slaying, and I have come with the flail, to carry out the command of my master, Wan Li. Soon you will no longer kick away the rats."

"I saved your life at the Tatar camp, Cho Kien," said Khlit grimly, "and you have this in payment for me. If you were a true man you would free me and give me my sword. I am weak and

you would risk little. Should a man of noble blood be beaten to death like a servant?"

"Nay," grinned the eunuch, "I have heard tales of that sword of yours. I shall wear it, for it bears the inscription of a Tatar hero."

At Cho Kien's command the priest stepped nearer with the torch. The Cossack eyed his sword longingly. Truly, Chagan had been wise when he said it was better to face the Chinese weapons than trust to their good faith.

"Are you going to leave me tied to the pillar?" he said. "Aye, the devil has planted fear in your heart, Cho Kien. Before your birth you were a woman, and when you are born again, it will be as a jackal."

The eunuch snarled angrily, the whites of his eyes showing. He laid aside his long robe and stepped close to Khlit, who laughed in his face.

"Dog," mocked the Cossack, "one without honor! Aye, the name of dog is too good for you, for a dog is faithful—"

"To his master," cried the eunuch shrilly. "It is the word of Wan Li, monarch of the earth and dispenser of life and death that I am obeying. You shall die more slowly for those words. The torch will burn the soles of your feet until you bellow like a dying ox!"

"The torture will not make me cry, jackal. But to die at the hand of such as you—I would that I had let the Tatars drive home the nails into your ears. Then they would be less apt for spying."

Cho Kien held the flail before Khlit.

"Your head shall be sent to the Tatar camp, Khlit," he cried. "With a tale of how you whimpered under the lash and begged Cho Kien to let you live as a slave. I searched for you long, Tatar Wolf, in the city after I saw you in the crowd. I learned that you had been seen at the house of Wen Shu, the candle-maker, and I went thither. You had gone, so I exacted penalty on the family of the candlemaker."



"Nay, Cho Kien, they were dead."

The eunuch laughed shrilly.

"We tore their jewels from their clothes and cut down the bodies of the women, for Wen Shu had fled. Then we threw them into the street, to be food for dogs, and offal under horses' feet!"

Khlit heard a sound behind Cho Kien, and thought that Li Chan Ko had spoken. The magician, however, was silent in the shadows. The eunuch turned to the priest with a snarl and took the torch, which he waved in front of the Cossack's face. The priest stepped nearer as if to see what was to happen.

As he did so Khlit had a good glimpse of the man's face. In spite of the shaven head and the white robe, he knew that he had seen the man. The latter was breathing heavily as if from excitement. He stretched out his hand toward Cho Kien.

Khlit closed his eyes for an instant as the torch singed his face. As he opened them he caught the gleam of steel. He saw the priest withdraw the sword from the scabbard at Cho Kien's side. He read burning hatred in the man's convulsed face.

Then the blade swung aloft and descended upon the eunuch's neck.

The evil eyes of Cho Kien opened wide with pain. He wavered on his feet for an instant. Then the torch dropped to the floor. With a shudder Cho Kien sank to his knees. The priest hacked and stabbed at his frame as if possessed of a demon. Then Khlit remembered where he had seen the man before. It was Wen Shu, in the dress of a Buddhist monk.

There had been no sound save the fall of the torch, and the guards had not been alarmed. Khlit's heart gave a bound as he saw the dead Cho Kien. He whispered to Wen Shu to free him. He raised his voice, but the candlemaker was standing over the slain eunuch, with eyes for nothing but the blood which spotted Cho Kien's elegant dress. It had been an evil moment when Cho Kien had boasted of his visit to the shop of Wen Shu.

Then the form of Li Chan Ko made its appearance beside Wen Shu. The candlemaker started back in alarm as he saw the

blind man. He made no move to attack the other, however. All his rage had been spent on the eunuch.

"Where is Cho Kien?" asked the magician of Khlit.

"Dead," said Khlit grimly. "Your dream has come true, Li Chan Ko."

The blind man closed his eyes as if in thought. Then he stretched out his hand toward Khlit. He spoke softly to Wen Shu, and the latter unbound the Cossack's arms.

"One man is dead," said Li Chan Ko to Khlit, "and you need not remain, now that the prophecy is fulfilled. Lead me out by the closet door."

Khlit groaned with the effort of moving his arms. With the assistance of Wen Shu, he buckled his belt around his waist, and replaced the sword in its sheath. The candlemaker, who was now trembling with fear of what he had done, took up the torch and by its light Khlit was able to lead Li Chan Ko to the narrow door through which the magician had come. As he passed from the gloomy chamber he heard the scurrying of many tiny feet over the floor. The rats were hurrying toward the body of Cho Kien.

#### XIV

*The wind is swift, but swifter is a Tatar horse. A fool will ask thee why, but the wise man knows that it is because a Tatar wears no spurs. His horse is one with himself.*

*The Kang Mu.*

Arslan the archer nodded with sleep. He was weary with watching on the summit of the Tower of the Five Falcons. Since the last of his comrades had been slain by musket shots from the wall below, Arslan had had little sleep. He lay prone on the battlements of the tower, where he could make out in the

moonlight sentries moving back and forth on the wall below him, out of reach of his arrows.

The Tower of the Five Falcons was the highest in the city of Shankiang. It topped the city wall against which it was built by some thirty feet. It had been designed as a watchtower, and was a scant dozen feet in width, with a narrow door opening on the ground, and slits for windows on each of its five stories.

Had the tower been built against the wall Arslan might have escaped before this by a rope made from the coats of his dead comrades. But the distance of five times a man's height separated wall and tower and the Manchu archer had chosen to remain in his stronghold rather than run the gantlet of the watchers who were posted around, waiting for starvation to bring him forth.

Arslan nodded with sleep. But even as he heard a sound below him he wakened and fitted arrow to bowstring. He had sent many Chinese speeding to their ancestors and his enemies had prudently left him unmolested for the past week, but Arslan was wary and vigilant. Moreover, although the other defenders of the tower were dead, a half-dozen helmets showed around the battlements of the summit. At intervals these helmets and spearpoints which were a target for arrows of the besiegers changed their positions.

The moon was bright overhead, and Arslan yawned, stroking his black mustache. All at once he sat up alertly. He had heard footsteps in the square underneath, and a shout. In an instant he was peering over the side, with raised bow. He saw a figure run from the shadows of the buildings into the clear space under the tower. The figure approached the door of the tower, climbing over the dead men, and Arslan wondered. For it was a single, tall man, sword in hand, who did not look like a Chinese. As it reached the door the figure called up to him.

"A Tatar comes to the tower, Arslan," it growled. "Let me in, for I am followed."

Suspicious of treachery, Arslan scanned the newcomer, arrow

poised. Truly, the man looked like a Tatar. And Arslan saw arrows flicker out of the shadows, to rattle against the stones of the tower.

"What is your name, Tatar?" he cried.

"Khlit, the chess player, of the southern gate. Do you remember Chagan, the wrestler—"

Arslan cast down his bow.

"Aye, Tatar," he called cheerily, "Chagan was a true man. He said he would live to fling my carcass over the wall. Instead of that he flung over his own. Climb in the door. It is blocked by stinking bodies and a heap of masonry, but there is an opening at the top that leads in, over the pile—"

Khlit dived within the door as a new volley of arrows sought him out. Arslan discharged a shaft or two at the shadows and a cry told him that he had aimed well.

The arrows ceased. Presently he heard the sound of steps on the stone stairs that led to the summit, and a shadow emerged that became the figure of the tall Cossack.

"Bend that tall head of yours, uncle," grunted Arslan, "or it will be a rare target for the sly cutthroats yonder. Welcome to the Tower of the Five Falcons. Did I not say it was proof against the host of Li Jusong! Chagan was here a few days ago, but he said you were kept in the gilt bird cage of Li Jusong's palace."

Khlit dropped to the stone flags, breathing heavily, and moving his cramped arms painfully. He caught sight of the dozen silent watchers of the tower and pointed to them inquiringly. Arslan chuckled under his mustache.

"My good warriors, uncle," he whispered, "Such warriors have never been seen before. Their flesh is the coats of my dead comrades; their bones are spears. Arrows harm them not—and give me more shafts for my bow. Although I collect plenty from the quivers of the dogs lying at the door. And they ask not for food—although I saw to it before I took command of the tower that it was well stocked with wine and dried meat. Ho! I am glad to have a comrade. It had been ill watching alone."

Khlit scanned the archer keenly. Arslan's eyes were haggard. His helmet was dented by a crossbow bolt, the leather gauntlet on the left arm was stained with blood. But his hardy spirit shone in his black eyes. Khlit's heart leaped at being with a comrade again and out in the clear air, after the fetid room of the temple. A swallow of wine, drunk from Arslan's helmet, and a mouthful of meat sent the blood stirring in his veins again.

"They will be after you presently, uncle," grinned Arslan, eying the shadows. "Li Jusong will hear of your arrival at the tower, and will whip his dogs to the attack. My warriors will not aid us much, I fear. Aye, it will be warm work. Chagan told me that Cho Kien was sharpening his knife for you."

Khlit drew his curved sword and ran his thumb along its edge lovingly.

"Cho Kien is food for the rats," he said grimly. "How did you meet with Chagan?" Arslan peered over the rampart cautiously. A musket shot greeted his appearance.

"Ho! The dogs are giving tongue," he cried; "soon they will run in for the kill. Why, Chagan came to me as you did, but without his great sword. He was eager to be over the walls, and so like a fool he leaped to the wall from the tower. It was a desperate chance. The night was dark and the sentries saw him not. He had my twisted rope around his middle. One end of it I held here while he lowered himself down on the outside of the wall. But my rope parted and he fell.

"I think his leg was broken, for he limped as he rose after his fall. No one but an iron brute such as he could have done it. He must have got free the next morning. Many horses were loose on the plain and he may have caught one."

The archer gave a warning hiss and caught Khlit by the shoulder.

"The dogs are astir, uncle," he whispered. "Go you and stand at the top of the stone heap inside the door. If any of the vermin escape my shafts, shave their skulls for them with that long sword of yours."



Khlit hastened down the narrow stairs to the lower story, where he took up his stand on the summit of the pile of stones that Arslan and his comrades had torn from the floors above to form a rampart behind the door.

He saw at a glance the strength of the place, which had enabled a few men to stand off the attacks of many. The door was scarce a yard in width, and the stones formed a barrier inside to the height of a tall man. The entrance was choked with bodies, and barely wide enough to permit two men to come in at a time.

He placed himself where he could see through the door. A thin stream of moonlight came in, but the top of the stone heap where he stood was in darkness. Khlit was weary, but the prospect of battle refreshed him. He sat down calmly, lighting his pipe, and waited. A sound from the top of the tower caught his ear.

It was the soft note of a lute. A second later he heard Arslan's voice lifted in song.

"Where the Fox athwart is lying,  
And the moonbeams hang,  
They hunt—the pack is dying—  
These men of Wang."

He heard arrows strike against the stone of the tower, but the song did not falter.

"A sound of music lulls them,  
To the Serpent's fang.  
Alas! The sweet lute gulls them—  
My men of Wang."

The next moment footsteps pattered across the square in front of the tower. Khlit heard a cry of pain, and a heavy fall. He sprang to his feet and peered down at the entrance. He saw a man fall bodily into it, and lie writhing, an arrow sticking from his shoulders. A hand appeared and jerked the body aside.

Khlit saw a Chinese warrior clamber through the door and start up the heap of stones. The man held a pike before him, and peered anxiously ahead of him. He did not see Khlit, who stepped to one side softly, avoiding the pike.

The next instant the man fell prone. A stroke of the curved sword had severed his head cleanly from his body. Khlit caught the pike as it was sliding down the stones. With it he pushed the body back into the door. A second man appeared, climbing over the body of the first.

Khlit shortened the pike and waited until the man was up to him. A quick thrust and the second warrior followed the first. He heard Arslan's voice above the clamor outside.

"To my chant they sing the chorus,  
And woe they sang.  
They fall in their blood before us—  
Dead men of Wang!"

Two of the attackers essayed the entrance together, crowding each other and helpless in the dark. Khlit's spear felled one of the two, and the other crawled back hastily. The door was now choked with bodies. No further effort was made to clear it.

For some time there were shouts outside and on the wall beside the tower. Khlit waited with ears strained. The shouts died away and he could hear men running from the tower. Silence followed, broken by Arslan's shout of triumph.

"Ho, there, uncle of the curved sword! Come to the tower. The hunt has ended for tonight."

## XV

Khlit found Arslan filling his helmet at the wine cask on the roof of the tower. The Manchu was spitting blood from a cut

through his cheek where an arrow had glanced, but he grinned as he saw the Cossack. He pointed to where dawn was showing in the east. A cold wind whipped across the tower, and a few snowflakes fell between them.

"A warm skirmish, and a cold dawn, uncle," said the Manchu, wiping his mouth after the wine, and offering his helmet to Khlit. "How liked you my song? I play my lute day and night for these dogs of ours—and to keep awake. It brings me a rare harvest of arrows. Would that Chagan was here to see that skirmish. He was a rare drinker of wine. The cask is near empty."

Khlit seated himself and wrapped his coat close about him. The snowflakes were the beginning of a storm which presently began to whiten the tower. There was little satisfaction in Khlit's heart. A second attack on the tower with ladders might prove successful. Two men could not hold it long against odds. And there was no escape. He could not hope to leap thirty feet to the wall as Chagan had done, even if there had been a second rope.

"Where went Chagan?" he asked shortly.

"To his people, no doubt," responded Arslan indifferently, sitting close to Khlit and wrapping himself in his fur cloak. "We can rest for a while, uncle. The men of Wang may leave us in peace now, for the troops are drunk with pillage. You and I are too small game for them to bother about. Aye, the Tatar was in a hurry to carry some message he bore. His mission here was ended."

"How was that?" growled Khlit. "Speak, minstrel without wits!"

"Nay," objected Arslan, "my song was witty indeed. Why was his mission ended? Well, it is a long tale in the telling. Chagan was sent after you by the Tatar khans when they found you were leaving the camp. It seems they trusted you not."

Khlit looked up impatiently, and something in his eye made Arslan hasten on, more seriously.

"I meant no offense, comrade. Chagan told me the tale, and it is not in the brute to lie. It seems that a certain fat eunuch, Cho Kien, upon whom may the rats hold high festival, came to

the khans with a missive from Wan Li, demanding your person. So much he read. The rest the khans read for themselves, for Cho Kien left the script behind him in his haste to get away with a whole skin.

"Wan Li offered you a post in his army, and high honor. When you left secretly, refusing aid and escort from the khans, some were suspicious. So Chagan was sent to accompany you and leave you not on penalty of having his hide ripped."

Khlit made no reply. He recalled the first meeting with the sword-bearer and how he had thought it strange that the man had left Hotai Khan, his master. So the jealousy of the khans had followed him into China.

"If you yielded to Li Jusong," went on Arslan, "and took the place that was offered you, Chagan was to slay you and stick your head on a spear in front of your tent. If you did not bargain with the Chinese, and remained true to the Tatars, who seemed to think you one of them in blood—although you look not like a Tatar to me—Chagan was to serve you faithfully and bring the news to the khans. I know not why they take such an interest in you."

Khlit smiled grimly as he thought of the kurultai in the forest. Truly, the khans had debated much about him. Chagan had not told Arslan of Khlit's rank, or of the curved sword of Kaidu.

"Was that all the tale?" he asked.

"That was all—save that Chagan said the khans had assembled this side of the Kerulen to watch the movements of Li Jusong. They have all of their power there, with additional parties of Tungusi and Manchus—my comrades. Would I were at the Kerulen camp, four days' march from here, and not on top of this cursed tower. You have the bearing and speech of one accustomed to command, uncle. What is your name and people?"

"I am Khlit of the Cossacks."

"A Cossack? I have not heard of that horde. Chagan must have lied when he said you were a Tatar. At all events, you fight well, and that is enough."

Khlit, who had been pondering, turned to Arslan moodily.

"Think you the khans will march east?" he asked.

"Nay," Arslan growled sleepily, "how do I know? They will quarrel among themselves, more like, and waste their power in feuds. Such is their way. When they have a leader as they had at Altai Haiten, they are invincible—"

"Li Jusong is a shrewd general," debated Khlit. "He will not move from Shankiang to attack the khans, for he knows that they will quarrel."

Khlit's head dropped on his chest. He was well content to have the khans know from Chagan of the reply he had made to Li Jusong. Since they had sent a man to watch him, it was well that they should know he had been faithful to them—to the blood of his ancestor. He recalled Chagan's misgivings when he had come to Shankiang with grim amusement. Truly, the sword-bearer had had some grounds for his suspicion.

A movement on the part of Arslan caused Khlit to turn suddenly. The archer was wide awake now, and in his face was a look of wonder. His hand was stretched out toward Khlit's sword, fingers touching the hilt. Instinctively the Cossack struck down the archer's hand. Arslan drew back, but there was no anger in his face.

"Pardon," he said, "I did not mean ill. The sun is up—and I saw the hilt of your sword for the first time. It is like the sword of the White Khans. Does it—is it yours? Was it your father's?"

He remained sunk in musing, but Arslan arose presently. Removing his cloak, the Manchu laid it over Khlit, propping it against the stone rampart so as to keep the snow from him. When Khlit looked up at this, Arslan bent down on one knee.

"You need sleep, master, for you are weary. I will watch." He looked up anxiously. "If my tongue has given offense, slay me. I spoke in folly, not knowing who you were."

So Arslan took up his watch on the Tower of the Five Falcons. And presently, through the falling snow he saw the figure of a mounted man opposite the walls. The rider was some distance



away, only partly visible in the storm. Other horsemen appeared beside him.

Arslan knew that parties of Li Jusong's men were scattered over the outlying districts in pillage. But these were different. He could see their pointed helmets and lances behind their backs. As he watched they wheeled their horses and vanished.

## XVI

Khlit slept soundly. Worn out from his week in the temple he lay quiet while the snow piled up on the tower. Little by little, however, he began to be aware of an increasing clamor under him. His dreams were disturbed by the sound of horses galloping, and trumpets. He stirred and sat up, pushing aside the fur cloak that Arslan had stretched over him.

By the position of the sun he saw that he had slept away half the day. The snow had ceased and the plain around Shankiang with the roads and outlying houses visible from the top of the tower were carpeted with white. Khlit groaned as he set up, for his body ached from cold. He saw Arslan sitting near him, stringing his bow and sorting out his arrows. The archer was humming to himself.

"The swords will be a-shining  
And bowstrings twang,  
Where the banners are entwining  
These men of Wang."

Khlit sprang to his feet and looked down at the walls of Shankiang. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes with an oath. Surely a change had taken place in the city. Across the square under the tower squadrons of horse were galloping in haste. An uproar resounded in the streets. Chinese infantry were running

up the stone steps leading to the summit of the walls and taking their stations along the battlements.

"What is this?" growled Khlit. "Why did you not waken me?"

"Sleep was best, lord," responded the Manchu, "for soon we shall need all our wits. Aye, the Dragon is rousing itself from its drunken sleep of the past week. Look!"

He pointed to the northern gate, which was visible at some distance from the tower. A horde of horsemen were rushing through the doors, a motley crowd of soldiers, along the road where Khlit and Chagan had come to the city. As Khlit watched, he saw the massive gates close, shutting out the fugitives. A wail arose from the horsemen barred from the city.

What did this mean? The city was alarmed, and the Chinese were assembling on the walls. They had closed the gates hastily, shutting out some of their own men. Khlit cast a keen glance over the streets. He saw that confusion reigned.

"The sentinels were dozing.

To arms they sprang!

The toils are fast enclosing

Our men of Wang!"

Thus Arslan chanted. As he did so he pointed out over the plains. Khlit drew in his breath sharply. In the distance a dark mass was moving toward Shankiang. Spears glinted in the sun. Along the highroad a second mass was advancing at rapid pace. By the bank of a river a third body was moving. Over a hill to the west still another dark line was flooding down the slope toward the walls. Banners were to be seen in the midst of the oncoming hordes, which were composed of horsemen. Even at the distance he recognized the banners.

"The khans have left the Kerulen," he said to Arslan. "They must have met and defeated the detachments of Li Jusong which were out in the country."

"Aye," responded the archer with a chuckle, "now we will see,

you and I, lord, the Dragon penned in its lair. The hunters are the hunted. Either a miracle has come to pass, or the khans have learned how Li Jusong's men were scattered in pillage and have come to strike before the Dragon can prepare to defend the city."

## XVII

Old in the ways of the battle, Khlit noted the events that took place within the walls with a critical eye. During the next few hours he saw every detail of the tableau that was spread before him. And he wondered at what he saw.

The Chinese had been taken by surprise. Plainly the Tatars had succeeded, as was their custom, in cutting off the outlying troops before warning could reach the city. The mounted columns of the khans had not paused in their advance, and Li Jusong had barely had time to close the gates of Shankiang and order his men to the walls. The snowstorm had formed a screen for the movements of the khans during the last few hours. And the Chinese forces were disorganized by the sack of Shankiang.

So much Khlit reasoned to himself. He saw, however, that the walls of the city were high, and that cannon were ranged at intervals between the towers. The defenders were hurrying to the ramparts and crowding around the cannon. The uproar was incessant.

"It will take weeks for cannon to breach these walls," he shouted to Arslan above the confusion. "And there are no traitors in the city to open a gate, as when Li Jusong besieged the place."

Arslan paused in sorting his arrows long enough to stare curiously at Khlit.

"Have you ever seen your khans storm a city, lord? Nay, I think not. They have little use for cannon. From the time of Genghis

Khan they have attacked a walled city in one way and one way only. Soon you will see how it is done. The Chinese know the manner of it. See—they are squealing about the cannon like a herd of cattle.”

Khlit leaned on the battlement of the tower and surveyed the Tatar forces which had advanced within easy gunshot of the walls. The foremost columns had paused to wait for the others to reach their line. The troops were mainly horsemen, with bowmen and others clinging to their stirrups.

The column directly opposite the Tower of the Five Falcons was headed by the banner of the Chakars. That advancing by the highway bore the Kallmark standard. Khlit thought that the horsemen by the river carried the Hoshot banner, of Chepé Buga, the lean veteran of a hundred battles. There were other banners which he could not make out, but which were familiar to Arslan.

“Look!” cried the archer. “There is the Tungusi standard—from the mountains of the north. Aye, and there is the banner of my brother Manchu archers, from the highlands of Manchuria. Now there will be rare arrow work. Li Jusong will be begging a happy omen from Li Chan Ko, his magician, for here is all the Tatar power.”

Khlit made no response. He was spellbound by the sight before him. The Tatar host was greater than the army he had seen at the Kerulen. Each column must have contained twenty thousand warriors. There were five columns. The strength of Li Jusong, Khlit had heard, consisted of two hundred thousand men. But a good portion of these had been slain in the sack of the city. More had been caught beyond the walls. He saw the crowd of men outside the gate clamoring for admittance. In the face of the Tatar host the Chinese dared not open the gate to their comrades.

What had brought the Tatars to Shankiang? How had they buried the quarrels of the khans? Who was leading them to the attack?

Khlit felt his heart swell with pride. The hosts in front of him

were of his blood. They were the finest warriors of Asia or Europe. They were the men whose standard he had carried at Altai Haiten. He longed to be in their ranks, with a horse under him.

A blast of trumpets interrupted his thoughts. He heard a shout arise from the Chinese on the walls. At the same instant, at the sound of the nacars the Tatar array started into movement. Every column was in motion toward the walls. The reports of cannon sounded from the city. But the pieces were ill aimed and little harm was done.

"Now you will see how the khans storm a city, uncle," roared Arslan, in a fever of excitement.

The ranks of horsemen were moving faster now, to the sound of the nacars. A roar went up from thousands of throats. Over the entire plain in front of Shankiang the Tatar army spread, from the river to the hills on the west. Like a torrent they rushed toward the walls.

Khilit watched them with troubled eye. He had never seen such a thing as this. An army of cavalry was storming the high walls of a city, without cannon, without engines of siege, or preparation of any kind.

## XVIII

The attack on Shankiang, says the Chinese history the Kang Mu, lasted for five hours, from noon to the setting of the sun. And for five hours there was no pause in the fury of the assault, or the slaughter on both sides.

Khilit, watching keenly, saw the first rank of horsemen gain the space below the walls, where the cannon of the defenders could not reach them. Then he saw that each of the leading horsemen bore a long ladder. No sooner had they reached the walls than a thousand ladders were raised, from the ground or



from the backs of horses which were trained to remain still while this was done. Up these ladders swarmed the footmen who had been clinging to the stirrups of the riders.

Other ranks joined them and as fast as ladders were cast down others were raised. The sound of the nacars continued without ceasing, accompanied by the roar of the Tatar hordes, who struggled to gain a place under the walls. The archers and musketmen dropped back a short interval and covered the summit of the walls with a shower of arrows and bullets. The Manchu bowmen were skillful and their shafts exacted a heavy toll among the Chinese, who returned their fire desperately, striking down numbers of the attackers.

The unfortunate Chinese who had been caught without the gates were cut down to a man. Their bodies, with those of dead Tatars, were flung under the walls to form a rampart for the ladders. Not for a minute did the Tatars, utterly brave and reckless of loss, cease their efforts. As the piles of bodies grew, added to by slain horses, groups of ladders were raised at a time, fastened together by ropes, and these were not cast down.

Tatar swordsmen swarming up them grappled with the Chinese on the walls. At places Khlit saw the pointed helmets of the Tatars spread over the summit of the walls. At such times bodies of Chinese held in reserve hurried up the steps to the walls and engaged the besiegers. After stubborn fighting the walls would be cleared, only to be assaulted again by fresh men of the khans.

Although the attacking horsemen fought recklessly, Khlit noted that they carried on the assault in perfect order, and that the men followed their leaders with blind obedience. The Chinese, on the other hand, although well armed and skillful fighters, gave way at times to panic and rapidly lost all semblance of order.

Arslan, who had been plying his bow unsparingly at the Chinese on the wall under him, who had no opportunity to de-

fend themselves against him, gave a shout and pointed to the wall on the west.

"Ho, uncle!" he cried, "we gain the wall yonder. A strip of it is bare of the Chinese dogs!"

Khlit saw that what the archer said was true. The Tatars had cleared a space of defenders and were fighting savagely to force the Chinese farther along the walls. Other ladders disgorged helmeted swordsmen to swell their ranks. A party of Chinese under a man in the uniform of a high officer were raking the Tatars with musket fire from nearby housetops. A cannon on one of the towers cut swathes in their ranks, but still the swordsmen swarmed to the assault.

"Those are the Ordus of Hotai Khan, Arslan," he cried in response, "but yonder are the men of Chepé Buga. There is where the Dragon will be struck.

"Hide of the devil!" swore Arslan in glee. "May the demons of purgatory devour me, but the Tatars are swimming the river." Li Jusong had placed his men in junks there, but the speed of the Tatar attack had not given them time to tie the boats together. The horsemen were climbing from their mounts and swarming over the banks of the river. Some, in scows, had boarded the junks and turned the cannon of the vessels against the other junks.

Chepé Buga, crafty in battle, had struck the city in its weakest place—the river. Already his men had demoralized the crews of the junks and gained the bank. Khlit saw horsemen rushing through the streets of Shankiang toward the river quarter, led by Chinese mandarins.

Directly under the Tower of the Five Falcons a regiment of cavalry was crossing the square, led by Li Jusong himself. They galloped in good order with lances in their hands.

Khlit saw the general of Wan Li sitting quietly on his horse, watching the cavalry pass. At his side among his followers was the blind Li Chan Ko, his face tranquil amid the uproar.

## XIX

Arslan pointed at the cavalry. "Leo Tung men, and good soldiers all," he muttered. "Li Jusong has saved them to strike at any who entered the walls. Ho! What is that?"

From the western wall a loud cry echoed which ran from tower to tower. Arslan listened attentively, and turned to Khlit, a grim light in his eye.

"The western gate is forced, lord," he said. "The Tatar horsemen are in the streets. Soon they will be at the rear of Li Jusong's men. Look!"

Li Jusong had forced his horse into the ranks of horsemen, motioning them back from their course. Even the general, however, could not check the regiments of cavalry in full gallop. Some hundreds halted. Those who had passed continued on their way toward the river. The news that the western gate had fallen spread panic among the defenders of the wall under the Tower of the Five Falcons.

The Chinese turned and fled down the steps to the streets. A torrent of Tatars poured after them. A swift glance showed Khlit that where the Ordus had been fighting the cannon was silenced and the musketeers had vanished from the housetops. Chepé Buga's men still swarmed against the riverbank.

Li Jusong with his handful of cavalry turned back to the menaced western quarter. But few of the infantry followed them. The streets leading to the south, on which side the Tatars had not attacked, were filled with a panic-stricken throng of Chinese. A wail went up that drowned the clamor of the nacars.

The sun was touching the horizon on the east. The dark mass of Tatar horsemen that had been outside the walls was flooding into the doomed city by the northern and the western gates. The cannon on the walls were silent. In the streets of the city a hideous tumult arose.

Khlit caught sight of a score of horsemen galloping recklessly back through the square under the tower. It was Li Jusong, returning with what was left of his men. The general halted at sight of the oncoming Tatars and wheeled his horse into a street leading to the south. His followers formed around him, trampling down the fugitives on foot. Like a hurricane they swept through the street and vanished.

Arslan unstrung his bow. Khlit nodded understandingly.

"The city has fallen," he said, absently. His gaze was fixed on one face among the corpses in the snow, and the dead horses. The first gleam of moonlight had shown him this face—Li Chan Ko's. The magician's prophecy had come to pass.

## XX

It was after the sun had set, and the pale moonlight had flooded the snow-covered streets of Shankiang, lighting the dark stains that spread over the snow, when a group of riders with torches arrived before the entrance to the Tower of the Five Falcons. The tall form of Chepé Buga and a younger man led the horsemen, who halted before the entrance. The khan of the Hoshots was bleeding from a sword cut over the forehead, and Berang, the younger man, bore a broken spear as his only weapon. Behind the two followed Chagan, his face drawn with pain from his broken leg. The two gazed curiously at the ring of stiff bodies that lay around the door of the tower. It was here, they had learned from Chagan, that Khlit had been seen during the assault.

Chepé Buga started and wiped the blood from his eyes as he saw a tall figure emerge from the narrow door, pushing aside the bodies that checked it. Another followed, but it was Khlit who drew the eyes of the Tatars. He stood with folded arms before the tower. Chepé Buga and Berang dismounted from their horses.

"Lord," said Chepé Buga, and there was respect in his deep

voice, "we heard that you had lived through the battle and were in this tower. We came, as soon as we could leave our men, to seek you."

"Aye," said Khlit.

"Hotai Khan, eldest of the lords of Tatar, was slain on the wall," continued Chepé Buga, "and Togachar died in the city. Many faces will be missing from the kurultai of the khans to-night. Lord, will you come to take your rightful place in the kurultai? The khans are waiting."

Khlit's glance searched the face of Chepé Buga.

"Have I a place," he asked slowly, "among the khans?"

"Nay," the voice of the Tatar rang out proudly, "not among the khans. When Chagan brought the message you whispered to him in the hall of Li Jusong, that the Chinese forces were scattered and disorganized by pillage; and that Shankiang might be taken by surprise, there were some in the kurultai by the Kerulen who doubted. But when Chagan told of your answer to the offer of Cho Kien, we knew that you spoke in wisdom, and in loyalty to the khans. Nay, your rank is Kha Khan, White Khan of the Jun-gar."

"Your message, lord," added Berang, "brought us victory. Without your wisdom we are a flock without a shepherd. Glad were we when we saw you on the tower, for we knew then that you had not been slain."

Quickly Berang raised his right hand, and carried it to his spear. Chepé Buga did likewise. A shout went up from the horsemen, in which Arslan joined. Khlit was silent, but his heart was big within him. Khlit, the wanderer, the man called the Wolf, had found honor and a home.

Arslan, the archer, lifted his voice in song.

"They sing no more the chorus

That once they sang.

They are—see their ghosts before us—

Dead men of Wang."



## The Winged Rider

*Whoever draws a sword and sheathes it without having used it will taste shame; whoever lets a blade rust in the scabbard will know death. Nay, let thy weapon be bright and clean as thine honor, but use it not until there is need.*

*Proverb of the Afghans.*

Upon a day early in the seventeenth century three Cossacks trotted south on the snow road that ran beside the river. They were in no haste because they had far to go and this portion of the steppe was unknown to them.

In the vast plain that stretched from the forests of the north to the deserts of Central Asia they might have pressed on for a month without coming upon any landmark in the white sea of snow under the gray clouds.

The inhabitants of the steppe, men and beasts, were in winter quarters; the herds of half-wild cattle and horses that grazed in the rich grass during the brief summer were penned up; the fields of corn and wheat that gave sustenance to the isolated villages were invisible; the wagon-tents of roving Tatars had gone elsewhere; even the river Volga was icebound—no merchant barks appeared within its reaches and the songs of the boatmen were no longer heard.

It was a time of hunger, when the starving preyed on the full-fed, and the wolf packs ran lean.

The three Cossacks who followed the narrow trail had a sufficiency of food in their saddlebags, and they were not the sort of men to lose their way. Only, hereabouts, they must turn to the right and leave the river. They were on a broad bend of the Volga and some twenty miles to the west the river Don made a similar bend toward them. At this point merchants bound for the Black Sea landed their goods and carried them over to the Don. And pirates, tired of one river, would work their skiffs overland to the other. All that day the three warriors had been looking for traces of the portage.

When they found it they meant to make camp, reaching the frozen Don the next day, and striking due west until they gained the shelter of the Siech—the war encampment of the Zaporogian Cossacks, their destination. Moreover, on the portage they expected to find the hut of an Armenian trader, or a wayside tavern that would give them some protection against the storm that all three knew to be coming down the Volga at their heels.

The youngest warrior, a remarkably fine-looking man, rode in advance, watching the ominous wrack of clouds that hid the sun, studying the surface of the snow on his right, picking out the tracks of a wandering wolf. The wolf had been following the slot of an antelope without much hope because he had turned aside to try for a hare—vainly. So much the young Cossack read in a flurry of marks in the snow.

He was Kirdy, called the White Falcon by his comrades; and now he was white indeed, for his slender shoulders were wrapped in a svitka of splendid ermine, gift of the great Muscovite Czar whom he had well served. But his face was brown and merry, and he rode as a nomad rides, crouching in short stirrups.

The heaviest of the Cossacks, Ayub, the Oak—a man six feet and a half in height, armed with a gigantic broadsword that he carried slung to his shoulders—glanced at the youngster admiringly.

"Eh, how is that?" he cried. "You say Kirdy is not in every way a warrior. Then something is biting you, because as —— lives he is a regular bogatyr—a hero."

Khlit, surnamed the Wolf, a gaunt figure in gray sheepskins, did not look up or answer.

"He's your grandson, you old dog!" resumed Ayub earnestly. "He's a master hand with the saber, by ——! Once he clipped my mustache for me, and I've never taken grass in my teeth for any other dog-brother. That's the truth."

Khlit nodded gravely and Ayub glanced at the aged Cossack suspiciously.

"Umpff!" he grunted. "And here's something else. Kirdy can lead men. Because he's not afraid of a vampire or the archfiend himself, men will follow him anywhere. Isn't that the truth?"

"*Ay-a tak*," assented Khlit. "Aye so."

"Then why is he not a warrior in all things?"

Ayub, usually careless and good-natured, was puzzled and a little angry. At first with tolerance, then with joy, he had watched Kirdy. On the road, in the press of battle, and at the Muscovite court, he had seen this youth, who had emerged from the depths of Central Asia, bear himself bravely and modestly. He knew that Khlit's grandson was wiser than other boys. And he looked forward to the moment when Kirdy would be brought before the atamans of the Cossacks of the Siech. This moment, Khlit had said, was not at hand because the young warrior was lacking in one way.

"Kirdy," Khlit made answer, "is blind."

Ayub stared and then scratched his ear.

"Blind? Only look at him. If he is blind, my mother was a sow."

"His eyes have not been opened."

"*Ekh-ma!* It may be that he has few hairs in his mustache, and that he's drunk more milk than corn brandy. He blushes when he looks at a fair maiden. But he can search out an ambush like an old Zaporogian."

Again Khlit nodded seriously.

"An ambush but not a soul."

"How, a soul?"

Gloved hands clasped on his saddle horn, the old leader ruminated. Ayub, his kounak—comrade—was a warrior of few ideas. Since Khlit had said that Kirdy was lacking in one way, Ayub would decide that the young warrior was a coward or a weakling or a fool. And Kirdy most certainly was none of that. So Ayub must be made to understand what was in Khlit's mind.

"It is true," he growled, "that the suckling pig yonder is a swordsman." Although Kirdy had been honored by the Don Cossacks, it was not for Khlit, his grandfather, to praise him to another Cossack. "Yet what sword stroke can parry treachery? *Hai*, the boy is still blind in this way: He has not learned to see what lies in another man's soul—treachery or good faith."

"Well, that's easily seen," argued Ayub the Zaporogian. "When a man draws steel on you he is a foe, right enough; if he spreads his legs under the same table and drinks from the same keg he is a comrade."

"Not always."

This ability in Khlit to read men's hearts to scent danger and to strike before he was overcome had kept life in the old Cossack's scarred body in a place where most men died swiftly and violently almost before they had sons of their own. He wanted to live until he could bring Kirdy to his old companions of the Zaporogian Siech, who were the chosen warriors of the Cossacks. That the youth was a redoubtable warrior and would soon be a leader of the Cossacks, he knew—provided he could give to Kirdy this last bit of wisdom, the fruit of his long years of strife.

"This young dog," he explained, "was weaned in the tents of the Mongol khans beyond the roof of the world. There, in a man's yurt, a wanderer is safe from treachery. If friendship is pledged, friendship is kept. Aye so. Even among the Afghans

a foe rides boldly, his weapon drawn in his hand. Only here"—with the stem of his short clay pipe he pointed at the dark mists that ran around the edge of the horizon at their backs—"in the cities where Christian men gather together will a man hold out his hand to you and stab you, to take your horse."

"Aye, or your wallet, if it clinks of silver," assented the big Zaporogian reminiscently. "Only in the camps of the *bratzi Kasaki*, of the brother Cossacks, is your back safe from the knife or your purse from a thief's fingers."

"We are not there yet. Kirdy, the young son of a jackal, cannot see treachery. Yet in the yurtas of Christendom he will meet treachery. Only one thing is more to be guarded against than the faithlessness of the men of Frankistan."\*

"What is that?"

Ayub's mind ran on vampires, and fiends that, in the likeness of men, climbed up behind a rider and sucked the blood from his neck. The big warrior feared spirits heartily.

"Women." Smoldering fires of memory quickened the gray eyes under shaggy brows.

Ayub stroked down his mustaches to hide a grin. A woman—so long as she be not a witch—he did not fear at all. Yet he stood in awe of Khlit, who had emerged from the unknown world that lay to the east of the Volga. Behind the silence of the wanderer and his grandson lay tales of mighty battles, of the courts of strange kings, and the arts of the magicians of Cathay.

"*Ekh-ma*," he muttered. "And how will you teach him to read souls?"

But Khlit, having made Ayub understand what was in his mind, was well content to hold his peace.

"Brothers," Kirdy's clear voice hailed them, "here is the trail."

The trail was no more than a track left by a single horse, winding up over hillocks, bare except for a fringe of sedge tips and scrub oak. The track, plowing through a foot of snow,

\* Frankistan—land of the Franks, Europe.



had been made by a small pony, heavily laden, whose rider did not trouble himself to dismount and break the crust for the horse. So much the Cossacks saw at a glance.

They would have doubted that this was the portage leading to the Don, but for a building ahead of them—a dot of black in the gray sea that stretched away under the darkening mantle of clouds.

And the track of the pony led past this habitation—neither blockhouse nor tavern. It was a tiny wooden tower with thatched roof, large enough to shelter only one man. And a human being did emerge from it—a serf in greasy sheepskins and leg wrappings who held out an open pouch to them.

Ayub had reached into his wallet for a silver coin when the occupant of the tower croaked at him: "Toll, wanderer—toll for three. Aye, three silver rubles it will be."

This he repeated in a kind of hoarse singsong and the Zaporogian, who had taken him to be a beggar, withdrew his hand from the wallet empty.

"*Hai*, animal—what was that?"

"Three silver rubles it will be."

"May the foul fiend take you and your three rubles! Here is no bridge or gate, and you talk of toll to Cossacks on the steppe."

The keeper of the tiny tower merely held out the sack, pointing his finger at them in turn, his lips moving as he counted three. Through his long, tangled hair his small eyes peered at them fiercely.

"Now by the emperor of ——— and his dam!" cried Ayub, who was growing angry. "If you had ten men to back you with halberds you'd not smell a Cossack kopek. We'd toll you with sword edges!"

Rising in the stirrups, he looked around for any sign of another dwelling or a trace of smoke against the leaden sky. The steppe appeared deserted except for the shaggy man of the tower—and

this tower was too small to admit the giant Zaporogian. It was in fact, very much like the sentry boxes he had seen at Moscow.

"Well, brothers," he growled, "it is clear that this fellow is mad. And it is a sin to draw weapon on a witless wight."

Khlit, who had been watching the keeper of the tower, reined forward and took the leather pouch from the serf, shaking out a single silver coin.

"*Hai*," he said, "the rider who passed before us has paid tribute. You of the tower, tell me what he was like, this rider."

The deep voice of the old ataman stirred the wells of speech in the keeper.

"*V zid*."

"A Jew!" Ayub chuckled. "No blood is to be seen on the snow and so this dog-face is liar as well as madman, because it is well known that a Jew will not part with silver without shedding tears of blood—"

"What master do you serve?" Khlit asked the serf.

"Erlik Khan."

The Cossacks exchanged glances. The name was not Muscovite; in fact, it had a Tatar ring and meant Lord of the Dead.

"And where is he?" asked Ayub, amused.

"Where else but in his hall of Tor?" The keeper of the tower, having retrieved his ruble, still held out the pouch expectantly.

"In Péristán—in fairyland mayhap," smiled Kirdy, breathing on chilled fingers.

"Nay, good sir," the serf made answer literally, "in the forest."

"What forest?" Khlit perceived that the stranger was capable of explaining only one fact at a time.

"Where else but to the north, uncle, an hour's ride."

Here indeed a dark line of timber stretched along the horizon, barely visible in the wan light.

"And do Jews pay tribute to Erlik Khan, who sits in this forest hall?" Ayub put in, to discover to what flights the mad brain of the toll man would wander.

"Nay, all men pay, who pass along the dorogou. Give three silver rubles and no harm will overtake ye, my lords."

There was something stolid and sensible in his insistence that made the big Zaporogian thoughtful.

"And if we do not pay?"

"Do ye not know? It will happen that ye will lose all things—gold, horses, weapons—when the riders of Erlik Khan overtake ye."

"Come!" said Khlit, gathering up reins.

The tower would not shelter all of them, not to mention the horses. So he pressed on at a trot over the trail broken by the Jew without further thought of toll or gatherer.

Close at his heels Ayub was muttering to himself.

"Aye, I mind the place now. Here between the rivers it was, in another age. A great duke built himself a hall as great, and filled it with men-at-arms. They had long swords, those pani—perhaps even as long as mine. That was before the name of the Lord Christ was known in this land—"

He paused to ransack his memory and stare again at the darkness in the north.

"Well, brothers, here's the tale. This duke, being a dour man, crucified a priest or stewed him in a caldron. I think the priest had built him a church near the hall. No matter—as soon as life left the priest and his lungs fell in, the hall of the pagan duke, with every soul in it, sank beneath the earth. And there it has been ever since. Only at times the bell that the priest put in his church tower is heard chiming, down there beneath. That's all true, brothers, because otherwise how could bells be heard in such a place as this?"

Reaching over his shoulder, he touched the cross on the pomel of his sword. Khlit listened with only half an ear, because Ayub was superstitious to the marrow of his big bones. Khlit cared neither one way nor the other—he had seen magicians, it is true, but they had died like human beings.

As for Kirdy, that youngster hailed from the desert where

ghils were known to take human form and slay unwary riders. He believed that the scions of Péristán were thick upon the earth but he feared them not a jot.

Rounding a rocky hillock, they came upon the Jew, a shivering figure bundled up in seemingly limitless wrappings, topped by an enormously long woolen cap. On the rump of his weary pony rested a heavy bundle that clattered when the horse stumbled.

"*Ai-ee*, most noble pani," cried he the instant he set eyes on them, "I have nothing upon me but some dirty garments—not a kopek, nor a single dinar. This horse was broken in the wind—not fit for such illustrious knights to trouble themselves about, I swear—"

"How are you called, Jew?" growled Khlit.

"Shmel is my name, brave Cossacks—Zaporogians, I swear by all that is holy! Surely in all the world such noble lords were never before seen! I thank the fortune that sends such splendid warriors and not brigands who would strip me like a peeled turnip. Not that I have aught of value—"

Even while he spoke he kept an arm upon the bundle, and his keen, dark eyes were mirrors of his fear.

"Shmel, do you know this trail? Is there a tavern near at hand?"

The Jew drew his shoulders up to his ears and shook his head so that the tip of his long cap danced about like a wayward imp. There was, he swore, not so much as a hut on the trail this side the river Don.

"Then whither do you draw your reins, jackal?"

Shmel burst into a torrent of self-pity. A storm was threatening—the noble lords must know that—and his pony had gone lame. He had intended to camp on the Don but now that was out of the question. It was cold—he did not know what he would do.

In fact, the bitter wind was whipping up tiny spirals of the fine

snow. Somewhere the sun had set, and the air was growing chill. The Cossacks availed themselves of the last of the gray twilight to make camp in the lee of the rocky eminence, gathering the dry tops of the bushes and the debris of a dead oak, clearing a space for a fire. They took off the saddles and the experienced ponies began to dig with their hoofs to get at the grass under the snow.

Khilit kindled flame and started a small fire over which Kirdy roasted a quarter of lamb while Ayub heated brandy in a small pot that he always carried. They had slept out a night's storm before this, and if a buran—a long blizzard—should catch them here they could always gain the shelter of the woods an hour's ride distant.

Torn between discomfort and fear of the Cossacks, Shmel lingered on the outskirts of the fire after tethering his horse, dining on some indistinguishable food that he drew out of a bag a fistful at a time covertly. When he saw them lie back on the saddle-cloths and light their pipes, he ventured to draw near and warm himself, his bundle in his arms.

This brought him again to the attention of Ayub, who had been discoursing on the village that had been buried under the earth.

"*Hai, zida!* How came you to part with a ruble to the mad beggar in the tower? Is he your brother?"

"Nay, noble lord, he is the toll gatherer. In summer there are many to take the toll—a whole regiment of armed men. That is when merchants pass over this road. Now that the Volga is frozen few come this way."

In the midst of a cavernous yawn the big Zaporogian grunted and terrified Shmel by frowning.

"You lie, you dog! If you do not tell the truth I will beat you. Who takes toll on the snow road?"

He had no intention of beating Shmel, but he knew the best way to get at what puzzled him.

"*Ekh panzirniky!*" The Jew glanced appealingly at Kirdy,



who seemed to be the mildest of the three. "No doubt you are mighty lords in the Siech or somewhere, but it is evident that you are strangers here. Do you not know that Erlik Khan is master of Tor? He sits in the castle back yonder in the forest and a hundred of the very finest warriors eat at his table from heavy silver plates. Aye, he has more slaves than I have ko—than a dog has fleas."

"In that case why are you shivering here in the steppe instead of toasting your toes in this castle—Tor?"

Shmel smiled at them all uneasily and took off his long hat, disclosing the black skullcap beneath.

"No one takes the road to Tor who is not a captive."

"Why not?"

"Because Erlik Khan is a koldun."

"A magician? ——— take you, Shmel. No magician was ever served by knights and slaves."

"*Ai-ee!* Erlik Khan is not as others. He is more to be feared even than a Zaporogian. By spells he draws warriors to him and once they have dwelt in Tor they have no desire to go elsewhere. May I burn if that is a lie. He has white eyes that can see at night. At his table a drink is served—a drink that renders his warriors braver than other men."

"Have you ever seen his castle?"

Again Shmel hunched his thin shoulders and smiled.

"Am I a litzar—a noble knight? Nay, I have seen his riders. Such horses were never known before—"

"Is Erlik Khan a Tatar?"

"No more than a Muscovite or Frank. Some say he is a Persian and can turn himself into the semblance of a beautiful woman—others hold he is a dwarf."

Ayub crossed himself and glanced at his companions—at Khlit who was dozing close to the fire and the boy who was polishing the bright, bluish blade of the curved sword, the gift of his grandsire. And then the hair stirred on his scalp, under the stout Cossack cap.

From near at hand came the sound of a bell—clearly chiming above the whisper of the wind and the snuffling of the horses. More and more loudly it tolled, until Ayub could have sworn that a church must be within musket shot of them.

Snow was falling, the first white flakes rushing out of the upper darkness into the circle of firelight. The voice of the wind became strident. Kirdy asked if they should not saddle up and seek the protection of the wood. But Ayub, seizing the pot of warm brandy and emptying the last of it down his throat, shook his head.

"Look here, kounaks. First a serf, a very animal, dares to out-face three warriors; then a Jew gives a silver coin without being compelled. And now a bell tolls, under the earth, as —— lives. Here be three miracles, and yonder wood is a *prokliatoo miesto*—an unhallowed spot."

"Nay, the wind is apt to twist sounds, making them seem far and then near," put in Kirdy.

"The serf," growled Khlit, "was not mad. He was sure that he would not be harmed. And the Jew was sure that he would be harmed if he did not pay."

"And the bell?" demanded the Zaporogian doubtfully.

Khlit mused for a moment.

"*Hai*, it must be in the tower."

"Oh! Noble lords!"

From his corner under the rocks Shmel sprang up in sudden consternation.

"Did you *refuse to pay toll*?" He read their faces at once and groaned, clutching at his long ear-locks that projected from under the skullcap. "What a pity. What a splendid ermine coat the young warrior wears! I would have given thirty shekels of full weight for it. And that belt, surely it must be six feet in length and would make two with a little cutting."

He was staring at Ayub's girdle, a matter of some pride to the Zaporogian, being gold-embroidered on damask and sewn with

pearls. He even looked at their boots, of red and green morocco, with high silver heels, shaking his head the while.

"What do you mean, Jew?"

"It is a pity that such noble garments should go to the men of Tor. Always when toll is not paid on this road, men are slain. That is the law of Erlik Khan. Put on your saddles, my lords, and ply your whips. Go—go at once. Already it is long time since the bell tolled."

Irresolutely Ayub rose, certain now that Shmel was speaking the truth and fearing greatly the invisible powers of Tor. But Khlit, who had been looking beyond the light of the fire, spoke up gruffly.

"The clouds are breaking and the wind is going down. Devil or brigand, we will not show him our backs."

Shmel, who was thinking of himself, wrung his hands, went off to hide his precious bundle, and ran back to argue with the old warrior.

"By all that is holy, the ataman is brave as a lion; yet in what way can he strive against a magician? The law of Erlik Khan has been broken. Always he leads forth his riders, because if he did not attend to it, the law would not be obeyed and he would not be wealthy as a baron from the toll money. *Ekh*, of what use are your weapons?"

"Enough!" Khlit stowed his short clay pipe carefully in his belt. "Enough of words. In this snow men cannot find us. If the people of Tor be spirits and not men, what would it avail us to mount and take the road again?"

This silenced Ayub, who went and squatted by the glowing embers that sizzled as the damp drift struck them.

Around the dying fire the three Cossacks clustered, turning up the high collars of their svitkas, setting their backs to the wind. Their dark faces, thoughtful and expectant, fascinated Shmel, who could not refrain from estimating the many yards of wool and fur in the Zaporogian's gigantic garments. Every now and then he shook his head, exclaiming: "A pity. Such a notable sword!"

He could not understand why the Cossacks had not paid toll to Erlik Khan; nor could the warriors comprehend why the Jew was shivering, although by his own account his skin was safe enough.

When, somewhere overhead, the sky lightened and wan moonlight struck through the falling snow, Khlit reached out with his foot and covered the last smoking embers. Kirdy lifted his head, turning it slowly from side to side; then he rose and glided away without a sound to where the ponies were pawing and crunching at the dead grass. Ayub reached over his shoulder and eased the five-foot broadsword from its sheath, to the annoyance of Shmel who perceived something vaguely alarming in the movements of the warriors. He noticed that the horses made no more noise.

"Shmel," whispered Ayub hoarsely, "if a sound comes out of your body you will no longer carry your pack—you will find yourself on the road to purgatory and you will be carrying your head."

Holding it in one hand, he swung the tip of the great sword under Shmel's chin, and the little merchant began to shiver more violently than ever. All his senses became acute, and his heart began to pound against the bottom of his throat. And he began to hear other things than the whistle of the wind.

Not far away a horse snorted, and a bit jangled. In another direction iron clanked dully; then a voice called out and another answered. The Cossacks, outlined in the silvery glow from the sky, peered from right to left without moving from where they squatted.

A horse stumbled and a curse rang out clearly; saddles creaked—beyond the white, transparent curtain of the snow shadowy objects moved.

A greater fear drove from the agitated mind of the Jew the memory of the sword blade hovering near his throat.

"Oh!" he screamed. "Noble riders of Erlik Khan, I have paid the piece of silver. I have—"

He yelled frantically and fell over backward as Ayub lashed

at him savagely. Then, although he was unharmed, he continued to groan, until out of the drifting curtain horsemen appeared.

They were powerful men on black horses, and they wore chain armor covered by leather cloaks. It seemed to Shmel that they filled the whole steppe. One of them laughed and spurred at Ayub, who rose to meet him, heaving up the broadsword. The rider half turned and struck down with a scimitar. Ayub stepped aside and the man's laugh ended in a gasp as his ribs were crushed in by the impact of the long blade that shattered his light shield and smashed the iron links of his armor.

"*Ai-eel*!" wailed Shmel.

Other horsemen pressed up, shouting, and he heard the clang of steel upon steel. Sparks sprang up from the huddle of shadows. Then two pistols bellowed together, a man cried out hoarsely, and when the dark smoke cleared away Shmel could no longer see the three Cossacks. Instead the riders plunged here and there in the drifts, thrusting up with their lances and shouting.

It became apparent to Shmel that the fight was by no means ended. He peered down, and then up, and saw Ayub's bulk on the summit of the ten-foot boulders that had given them shelter against the wind. They had abandoned their horses and taken to the ridge of rock, holding it against the onset of the horsemen.

Shmel was knocked hither and yon by the plunging ponies, and he breathed a prayer of relief when the clashing of weapons ceased and a clear high voice cried out in the drifting snow: "Yield, Kosaki—we have bows."

Instantly Kirdy responded from above.

"And we have swords. The Wolf does not yield—the White Falcon does not yield to any man."

A moment of silence and the voice proclaimed, vibrant with mirth: "What cares Erlik Khan for swords? Nay, are you truly the Cossack twain, Khlit and Kirdy?"

Shmel, protecting his eyes from the drift with his hand, peered



at the speaker and saw something that gave him no comfort—a rider no more than half the stature of the Cossacks, sitting on a huge white horse. A warrior, apparently no larger than a child, wearing a silver helmet and bearing upon his back a pair of eagle's wings, which closed and opened when the rider moved.

"*Sokol moi ridný*" mocked the voice. "Falcon, my dear, by what token are you Kirdy?"

"Count your empty saddles and ask again," responded that youngster grimly.

Other horsemen reined up to the winged rider and Shmel heard their low whispers urging that a rush be made upon the three wanderers. But the leader shook off the whisperers impatiently and urged the white horse closer to the rocks, until its steaming breath beat against the neck of Shmel, who dared not move. No slightest attention was paid him.

Leaning upon his broadsword, Ayub was clearly to be seen, but the winged rider stared at Kirdy, standing a little apart in his white ermine *svitka*, the curved sword in his hand.

"Cossacks," cried the chieftain of the horsemen, "you have spoiled three of my warriors. I shall take you with me to Tor in their stead."

"Are you he called Erlik Khan?" Khlit's deep voice questioned.

"Aye, so."

Shmel groaned and mustered courage to look over his shoulder. The long cloak hid the figure of the chieftain, as the nasal piece, and bars running down from the light silver basinet, hid his features. But in the face of the master of Tor there was a pallor and a strangeness that surprised Shmel. The rider's eyes were closed.

"Yield yourselves," he said softly, "to me, for I am a koldun and not a man."

"Nay," said Khlit and Kirdy together.

Again the winged chieftain laughed.

"Who shall say to me nay? I have need of you, Cossacks, and

because of that need I will spare you. Yield not—keep your weapons. Ride with me to Tor.”

In the silence of the three warriors there was no hint of consent. And the master of Tor seemed to understand their thoughts.

“Here is no treachery, my falcons. Erlik Khan pledges you safety of life and limb, and freedom to go hence again, if you will. If not, I will waste no more souls upon your weapons but will drive off your horses—even this nag of the Jew’s—and then you may face the storm on foot. *Ohai*, upon the next day or the next I will ride again forth to look at your bodies, stiff and dark.”

So proclaimed Erlik Khan, looking at the silent Kirdy. But it was Khlit who stepped forward to peer at the winged rider.

“Draw back then, Erlik Khan,” he growled, “until we are in the saddle. We will sheathe our weapons. Look to yours.”

Only Shmel heard the amused laugh of the winged rider, as the white horse wheeled away through the veil of snow and the others followed. He was not surprised, then, that the Cossacks should leap down and fling their saddles on the ponies that had remained as they had been trained to do where they had been grazing. He knew that such warriors dreaded nothing so much as to be left afoot. And if the storm developed into a blizzard they were indeed lost, dismounted in the steppe.

At once the riders from Tor closed in again, their swords sheathed, their bows in the cases. A word of command was spoken and the Cossacks trotted off with them, leaving Shmel staring at three bodies already whitening under the falling flakes.

He ran to the fire and found it beyond repair. The moon was no longer visible.

The wind was eating into his very bones, and he was torn by a threefold fear—dread of the dead men, of the cold, and of the warriors. With numbed fingers, he roped his bundle to his saddle and set out, in a kind of dogged desperation, on the broad track left by the riders of Tor.

## II

*Strength bends a crossbow with ease; but only Wisdom knows the moment to release the trigger.*

*Maxims of Sun Tsu.*

A great fire roared upon the hearth of Erlik Khan. Candles gleamed on the pine tables of the long, low hall. And serfs hurried hither and yon bearing platters of wild boar flesh, ducks, and sturgeon, to feed the warriors who crowded the benches and laughed at sight of steaming food and fragrant wine.

Although the tables were bare wood, the dishes were silver and of massive weight; the goblets and pitchers of the wine service were gold, and the wines themselves—gorilka, brandy, white spirits, spiced red vintages from the south. The log walls, cemented with mud and clay, were concealed by draperies of Chinese silk.

On one side of the fireplace was a stand of falcons—small peregrine falcons resting on rings, and the great brown *bouragut* or golden eagles used for deer and wolves. On the other side, brightly lighted, stood a raised space filled with a teak table and Venetian chairs of ebony inlaid with ivory. This was the *krasnoi miesto*, the honored guests' place, and here at ease sat the three Cossacks and the two captains of Erlik Khan.

Save for these five no one in the hall wore any weapon, except the girdle knife they used to cut meat. Such was the law of Erlik Khan.

Swords, pistols, and battle bludgeons had been left in the quarters of the warriors on either side the hall. So too they had stripped themselves of steel shirts and breastplates. The serfs of course carried no arms.

Ayub had noticed this at once, and had seen that only one

door beside the chimney opened upon the guest dais. Weapon in hand, the three Cossacks could have inflicted bitter harm on the men of Tor if attacked. He placed himself so that he could watch the narrow door at his side, and loosed the broadsword, laying it against the table within reach—convinced that, for the moment at least, no treachery was intended.

Moreover, the officers of the khan filled him with curiosity rather than misgivings. One, a tall man, his sallow face clean-shaven, would drink no wine. His garments were—to Ayub's thinking—outlandish, being black velvet, with white lace at the collar and cuffs.

"I am called," said the tall captain, "Giovanni, at your service, my lords. I am of Genoa."

His eyes, amber-colored, dwelt on Ayub reflectively as he leaned forward to breathe deeply of the pungent incense.

"Genoa?" Ayub frowned. "Where on the Volga is that?"

The tall captain did not smile. Having appraised the big Zaporogian, he glanced at Khlit.

"It is a city in Frankistan where—no matter, my lords. Permit me of your courtesy—which of you is leader?"

When Ayub would have answered that Khlit, a koshevoi ataman of the Cossacks, was assuredly their leader, the old warrior forestalled him.

"The White Falcon is our hetman. We twain are no more than wanderers, journeying in his company."

Ayub gaped and would have denied this, if Khlit had not touched his knee under the table. Messer Giovanni seemed to be in two minds about this, but he bowed and waved a slender hand toward his companion.

"Call him Jean, messers. He also is a wanderer, from France."

Jean the Frenchman lifted his goblet to the three with a smile. A short man, too stout perhaps—as one who has fared well after long starvation—his red cheeks, carefully trimmed beard, and moist dark eyes all bespoke good humor.

*"A vous, messieurs!"*

"Pan Giovanni," said Kirdy, "surely you have rank, and more of a name?"

The Genoese glanced at the door and shrugged.

"Here, I am Giovanni, no more. For the rest, it is better to forget. You, messer, from this night will be known as the White Falcon."

He spoke in the clear, precise voice of one who knows his own mind and is accustomed to addressing inferiors. His words were softened by a careless courtesy, as if he were communing with himself, yet aware that others heard him.

"From this night?" Kirdy's dark brows drew together. "Nay, we shall not hang our saddles for long in the stables of Tor."

"Ah. I fear me the storm will close the road for more than one night."

"And then?"

"Then, my White Falcon, you are quite free to mount and go—if you will."

When Ayub would have spoken out bluntly, Kirdy silenced him again with a touch. "And you, my lord," the youth asked quietly, "are you captive to Erlik Khan? Is the road open to you, or closed?"

And again Giovanni leaned forward to breathe deep of the fumes from the incense jar.

"I am free," he answered indifferently. "While the devils of frost hold the steppe, it is comfortable enough here. When the steppe is green again, I may go."

The behavior of the two captains from Frankistan puzzled the young Cossack, because they seemed eager and at the same time drowsy. The man called Jean was drinking heavily without livening up. His boots were wet, and Kirdy thought that he had been out on the night expedition, while his comrade had not left the shelter of the manor house, the ousadba of Erlik Khan.

"Look," exclaimed Ayub in what passed for a whisper with the giant, "at the horde."

Kirdy looked and became thoughtful. The men lining the tables



of the great hall might have been gathered from the corners of the earth. Broad-faced, clear-eyed Tatars sat beside slender Circassians from the southern mountains; red-cheeked, bearded Muscovites thumped on the pine boards for mead to refill their glasses and were cursed by thin, pallid Poles who were casting dice—and an unmistakable Turk snarled at a Greek who sprawled too near him. The place reeked of sweat-soaked sheepskins, of musk and oil and damp leather—silk-clad shoulders rubbed against rags, and the babble of voices in twenty languages drowned the rattle of goblets. Here were cropped ears and slit noses, and here too were manly heads scarred by battle strokes. Erlik Khan had acted wisely in forbidding weapons within the hall.

But, though he rose and searched the shadows with keen eyes, he saw no one who at all resembled the winged chieftain.

Then the door upon the dais opened and the man called Jean sprang to his feet, with a low bow. Kirdy's hand dropped to the hilt of his sword, but shifted at once to his hip and he bowed in Cossack fashion, to the girdle, to hide the rush of blood that darkened his face. A young girl had entered bearing a tray upon which, in goblets of Venetian glass, wine sparkled.

Although her head came no higher than Kirdy's shoulder she appeared tall in her long sarafan of white silk bordered with dark sable—in the shining head cover of silk embroidered with silver and emeralds, with two strings of glowing pearls reaching to her slender waist.

Unlike the Muscovite women, this girl bore no paint upon her cheeks. Nor did she need kohl to darken eyelids and brows that were blacker than the sable. The brilliance of her soft eyes and hair, the grave dignity of her bearing stirred the heart of the young Cossack, who could appreciate both beauty and pride. At sight of him, her eyes half closed and she paused as though held back by an invisible hand. Ignoring Ayub and Khlit, she presented

her tray to Kirdy with a low-voiced welcome—"Volni Kosáki dom moi, vash dom. Noble Cossacks, my house is your house."

In turn the five men took a goblet and bowed again, tossing off the wine. Jean's moist eyes sparkled with admiration, and Giovanni roused from his reverie. Ayub, speechless, held his breath and put down the fragile glass as if afraid it would break in his massive fingers.

In the lower hall the tumult dwindled to silence and men rose from their seats, shouting—"Boyaríshna—the lady!"

She inclined her head and turned her back on the revelers to look again at Kirdy.

"Honored guest, a chamber has been prepared for the three heroes. Command Ibrahim, chief of the slaves, in all things. And," she added, almost in a whisper, "may no harm come to you under this roof."

"May harm never come near you, my lady!" Kirdy smiled, white teeth flashing under his dark, drooping mustache.

The firelight gleaming on his open, brown countenance showed an instant boyish delight in the beauty of the woman who had tendered him the greetings of the mansion.

When Jean would have detained her with blundering words, she slipped past the Frenchman and Kirdy was at the door, bowing as she passed. He had a fleeting glimpse of soft lights and veiled women slaves, and the door was drawn shut. He heard an iron bar drop into place.

"Gentlemen," remarked Giovanni, "you have seen Ivga, the bride of Erlik Khan."

"Messieurs," cried Jean, "*la belle Ivga*—a diamond under the hoof of a wild boar. Come, let us drink again."

When they were seated, and Ibrahim—a Muhammadan kayia, in a black robe bearing the wand of his office—had brought them fresh wine, Giovanni picked up an empty goblet, watching the play of the flames in the colored glass.

"True—a diamond never loses its brilliance. Did you mark, messers, that the boyaríshna touches neither skin nor hair with

color. She does not need to. I have been at Tor four years, and Ibrahim twice that time. Yet she was here before him. Do you think the koldun can preserve by his arts the beauty of this girl unmarred by time?"

"Aye, so," cried Ayub. "*He* did a harder thing than that when *he* found us in the storm, and brought this wildcat, Kirdy, to heel."

Giovanni shook his head.

"A mighty man with his hands was Skal. His favorite weapon an iron mace studded with massive steel points; the pirate boasted that he was invincible in single combat and few knights denied that his boast was true.

"While Erlik Khan lurked in his forest, secure in his own peculiar powers, Skal sailed the river with his burlaki, pillaging the ships of merchants, selling his captives as slaves to the Moslems, slaying as a panther strikes. Around him gathered the outlaw of the frontier, men who had been hunted out of hope. And they were many.

"The Volga was his, between the Kama and the portage, and the rivermen had joined his bands; on the boats that came out of Asia he levied toll as Erlik Khan did on the trail between the rivers. One day Skal swore in a drunken humor that he would pass over the portage without paying silver to Tor, and in due course he came striding along the trail, a mob at his heels, roaring the song of the Volga burlaki.

"Fate ordained that on that particular day Ivga the wife of Erlik Khan should be hunting a stag, and that Skal should meet her face to face on the trail. There were Tatars with her, who could use their bows, and she was in the saddle of a swift-footed pony. So she escaped the hands of Skal and the Volga men, but the pirate had looked into her eyes and vowed that when winter came he would seek out the lair of Erlik Khan and burn his *ousadba* and carry off his wife Ivga."

So said Giovanni, in his dry, precise voice.

"And, messers, it is true that the brigand of the Volga has kept

his word. He comes, Skal and his mob, from the Kama through the forest. While the storm holds the steppe he must lie in camp. Then, in four days—perhaps three—he will be at Tor with the burlaki, rivermen. Erlik Khan will not give up the boyarishna. We will see whether the arts of the Khan will overthrow the power of Skal.”

Kirdy nodded. In the world of the steppe, far from any Christian court, men must take service with such chieftains or lose lives and goods. For a thousand miles the Cossacks had seen no walled town; the authority of the Muscovite Czar was here no more than a shadow, the Church a memory. The soil of Tor was still Asia.

“Skal,” murmured Giovanni, “has performed the devil’s mass. He fears neither man nor magician. Satan, it seems, looks after his own.”

Again Kirdy nodded. He had heard tales of Skal’s power, though the Volga pirates had not molested the Cossacks.

“Erlik Khan,” went on the Genoese, “seeks the aid of your swords in the battle. He knows well that the White Falcon is worth fifty men-at-arms. No constraint is put upon you, sir knight, to serve him. You are free to draw your reins from Tor when you will; but it is my hope that you will draw your sword on behalf of the lady Ivga. Give me an answer on the morrow. Permit that I summon Ibrahim and wish you, nobles all, a good night.”

Stretched luxuriously on the tiger skin of his pallet, Ayub surveyed the unwonted comforts of the guest chamber of Tor with an indulgent eye, and pulled the taboret bearing a goblet of spiced wine nearer to his hand. He admired the soft carpets of Bokhara and the damask hangings that covered the whitewashed walls, and the collection of yataghans and oriental daggers about the fireplace. After waiting upon them courteously, Ibrahim the kayia had withdrawn and Khlit had dropped the solid bar into place upon the door. The narrow, high windows of stained glass

shivered under the buffets of the rising wind, and the heavy fumes of incense swirled about Ayub's eyes in bewildering fashion.

"*Ekh*, brothers," he muttered, "I have slept within the walls of Bagchei Serai, and in the Kreyml itself, but this place is as fine as any. The wine goes to the head at once, there's gold and silver and slaves enough for a palace, and nothing's grudged. Only one thing is lacking—no holy pictures anywhere, not even an ikon in the guest room."

Kirdy glanced up in his quiet way. It was true. The walls, save for the weapons and hangings, were bare. He had not seen a priest in the throng in the hall.

"As for the wine," said Khlit suddenly, in Tatar, "I have tasted its like before now in the hills of Mazanderan. It is tainted with *bhang*."

"And in the braziers," added Kirdy, sniffing, "hemp is burning."

A delicious drowsiness was enveloping the big Zaporogian; he pulled off his boots and contemplated them with pleasure, thinking that they had never looked so bright and red before.

"Well, brothers," rumbled Ayub, wrapping the tiger's paws about his big body, "what are we to do? We are in a wizard's ousadba, no help for that. I'd rather go against Skal than Erlik Khan. That's the truth. We'll have hard work with the pirates, but there are worse things than that—" He yawned heavily and fell asleep almost with the last word.

Khlit stared at the fire in silence for a long time. Then he sighed, shook himself, and placed his boots under his head for a pillow. His eyes closed as if in spite of his will.

"Kirdy," he said, "little bogatyr, my eyes are old—they cannot see in the night. There is darkness here and our way is not clear. Ayub has a stout hand but a weak wit. You must choose the road we will take, and answer the people of Tor."

Turning on his side, he coughed and went to sleep. Left to his own devices, the young warrior picked up the incense stand



and tossed it into the fire. At the court of the Moghul of Ind he had seen the effects of burning hemp.

Listening to the heavy breathing of the older men, he paced up and down the guest chamber. To be penned within solid walls always made him restless, and this north wind was howling around the corners like a fiend—

At one of the walls he stopped, his ear pressed against the damask. Above the roar of the storm and the crackling of the flames, he heard a girl's voice clear as the chime of the bell over the frozen steppe—

It was Ivga, singing to a balalaika:

*"Ai-a—gallop away  
From the earth, to the threshold of day!  
Away! Turn again,  
O my warrior, from the earth and its men."*

Kirdy was afoot early the next morning, before sunrise. The sky had cleared and the old moon was a gray wisp in the west; the breath of the forest was bitter cold and snow had drifted waist-high. He reflected that they would have fared badly in the open steppe that night, and he wondered how Shmel had managed to weather the storm, until he came face to face with the Jew at the stockade gate.

"The forehead—the forehead to you, noble lord. See, here are fine flints and bullet molds—belt buckles and powder flasks of the newest fashion. I have all things a noble knight can desire for an expedition. Or does your honor wish ribbons to adorn a pretty girl's shoulder? You will not buy them cheaper anywhere. And it's a fact that I have a certain powder, got from a wise woman on the Kama, that, when mixed with the wine a maiden drinks, will inspire her with everlasting love for the noble lord—"

"What price do you set on your own hide, Shmel? If Erlik Khan find you, unbidden, within his gate—" Kirdy smiled a little

at the thought of the merchant selling love potions in the mansion of a magician.

The Jew had arranged a rude stall out of the wrappings of his bundle and a plank or two and was setting out an array of goods.

"Isn't it true that the warriors of Tor are setting out on an expedition, your magnificence? At such times they must need flints and powder."

"You have long ears—beware lest Erlik Khan crop them!"

Shmel wriggled and ran around the stall to grasp the Cossack's long coat.

"Harken, young lord! Is it not true that Erlik Khan has shown you honor? Take me under your protection, O most illustrious of chieftains, and I will repay you well. Before God, I know that which will open your eyes. Last night on the steppe I saw—"

But Kirdy, impatient of such talk, moved away toward the gate. He could not understand the merchant, who had no thought for his own honor, yet would risk torture for the sake of selling his trinkets at many times the price he had paid for them.

As for Shmel, he lifted his hands in amazement at the man who would not stop to listen to a message that might mean life or death to him. He watched the warrior stride through the snow to the gate, where the Tatar guards bent the forehead to him respectfully. Kirdy said nothing to them but surveyed the defenses of Tor with a critical eye.

The ousadba was strong—the outer palisade, twelve feet in height, of heavy fir logs sunk upright in the ground, surrounded even the low thatched stables and serfs' quarters. The upper ends of the logs were sharpened to a long point and a narrow platform on the inner side permitted the defenders to stand and shoot down over the top. At the corners towers projected beyond the line of the palisade. These had narrow loopholes through which the defenders could shoot down assailants who ran to the foot of the stockade. And for an arrow's flight outside, the fringe of the forest had been cleared away.

The enclosure was more than a castle—it was a dominion

within walls. A granary and meat house occupied the side across from the stables and cattle sheds; behind the manor house a windmill creaked irresolutely, and the ousadba itself, built of squared logs chinked with clay, could have stood a siege.

Covered ways led from it to the outbuildings, so that the serfs could come and go, no matter how deep the snow lay in the enclosure, and a square tower with a roofed-in summit rose out of the mass of the structure, like the head of a serpent, raised to strike from its coils.

Since the ousadba stood on the crest of a long slope, the tower must overlook the countryside. Probably in the first place it had been one of the strongholds built by the Tatars of Tamerlane, generations ago. Was Erlik Khan a Tatar?

Thoughtfully, Kirdy made his way to the stables, rubbed down and watered the three shaggy ponies of the Cossacks, and gave them their oats. One had lost its leather shoe on the off forefoot and this pony Kirdy led to the shed where he had seen thick oxhides and tools. Taking off his svitka, he set to work cutting a strip that was almost as hard as iron, shaping it to the horse's hoof, talking to the beast under his breath as he worked, taking no heed of the damage done his clothing.

While he was pounding in the nails a shadow darkened the shed and he glanced over his shoulder. Ivga, wrapped in a marten skin khalat, stood watching him, Ibrahim beside her.

"O honored guest," she said quickly, "the stable knaves will attend to your horse. Giovanni awaits you at breakfast."

Kirdy, his mouth full of nails, shook his head. The Cossacks were accustomed to look to saddle girths and hoofs themselves—a loose girth or snow balling in a pony's hoof and hardening to ice might mean a fall or a lame mount at a critical moment.

Turning to Ibrahim, the mistress of Tor ordered him to explain to the captain Giovanni that Kirdy would join the others presently. The kayia hesitated, then took himself off.

"Erlik Khan has made a prophecy!" Ivga cried softly. "Last night he talked with the vourdalaks of the storm. He said to

me, "The three warriors will abide at Tor; yet the hour of their going will be terrible. Then the wolves will come out of the forest and the vultures will darken the sky.'"

Kirdy drove a last nail and released the pony, which trotted off to its stall.

"Eh, boyarishna," he said, "what do you say?"

"I?" That the Cossack should spare her a thought seemed to astonish the girl.

Her eyes brightened and the color flooded her cheeks.

"I would have you—stay."

"Surely, my lady, Erlik Khan can beat off the Volga men."

"He fears Skal. He seeks the aid of your swords."

His eyes on hers, the young hero mused.

"And yet the prophecy of the koldun foretells evil out of our visit."

"Evil?" Her lips trembled. "Nay, Tor itself is evil. In all the manor you will not find the cross of God. Nay, they will not give me one little image to wear over my heart."

Hands clasped upon her throat, her dark eyes grief-stricken, she stirred the spirit of the young Cossack to its depths.

"Eh, boyarishna, how is that to be endured? Is Erlik Khan truly a magician with powers more than human?"

She nodded mutely.

"It is easier to enter the gate of Tor than to leave. But the face of Erlik Khan you will not see, unless—" She caught her breath as if beholding something unexpected and welcome. "Nay, he does not like to be seen because he is no more than half a man. He is no larger than a child."

Kirdy thought of the winged rider; if Erlik Khan were in truth small in body, he had the clear voice and quick wit of a leader of men.

"Yet he commands his warriors when they are mounted for war."

"Aye, in his cloak and armor he will do so, because in the saddle—"

"He bears himself well."

"And in the ousadba he keeps to his own chambers, which are in the vyzga, the tower. My room is next to his and at all hours he comes to me with orders or questions, or summons Ibrahim, who bears his wishes to the captains of the men-at-arms."

"And you are his wife?" asked the blunt Kirdy.

"Aye, so. Ten years ago when I was a child I was taken captive on the road between the rivers. My father, who was on his way from Moscow to Astrakhan, was slain by the robbers. Because I was fair they let me live among the women and in time Erlik Khan made me his wife."

"*Ekh*," Kirdy mused aloud, "I would like well to see this magician."

She looked at him, wide-eyed.

"You do not fear him?"

"Not in his hall nor on the steppe."

"And you would see his face?"

"Aye."

She bent her head in thought, her hands still clasped against the white throat that nestled in the furs.

"Tonight, late, when the hall is quiet, come into the passage by the guest room. At the far end I will be, and if Erlik Khan is sleeping you may see his face."

Kirdy smiled, bending closer to catch her whispered words. "Why should he sleep? Let him await me in the vyzga with candles."

"That he would never do. Is it the tower at night you fear?"

The young Cossack shook his head impatiently, and then added swiftly, "Then it is agreed."

At the door of the ousadba he left her and was hastening to the hall when a growling voice arrested him in his stride. Turning aside into the guest room, he found Khlit holding Ayub down upon the pallet by his shoulders. The big Zaporogian was curs-



ing and reaching vainly for his sword, the veins knotted on his forehead, his eyes staring.

"You dog-brother," he roared at Kirdy, "where were you at sunup? It is not your fault I am here, and not paring the devil's hoofs. Brothers, let us to saddle! Wolves may fare well in this place but the souls will go out of men. Khlit, you old chakali, let me gird on my sword."

Evidently he was still the worse for wine, and frightened, which was unusual.

"He's been dreaming of Satan," muttered Khlit, thrusting his knee down on the Zaporogian's throat.

"*Ugh-a!* Out of the way! If I was dreaming then you are a bathhouse tender. As God lives, I had wakened—my eyes were open and I was looking at the door because it was swinging slowly. Then in the dark passage I saw it, the vourdalak, the vampire. It was no bigger than a child, though its head was the size of mine. *Ugh*—take your fist out of my hair. By the good Saint Nicholas, its skin was white and shining and its eyes glowed like fire. It was a hungry vampire, and I said to myself, 'It has carried off Kirdy and now comes looking for me!' As soon as I touched the cross on the hilt of my sword it vanished."

"Did you see this?" Kirdy asked Khlit.

The old warrior shook his head.

"I heard Ayub howl, and the fiend may have entered him, because now he is out of hand."

"Give him wine."

A pitcher of the spiced vintage tossed down his throat calmed the giant and Khlit allowed him to take his broadsword in his fist. He sighed and drew on his boots hastily. Although still confused in his wits, he was by no means drunk, and he announced his intention of getting to horse and quitting Tor at once.

"Brothers," he said, "I will go against Skal and the Volga men, but I will not linger where vampires come in at daybreak."

"And you?" Khlit asked his grandson.

"I have decided, ataman. Cossack honor does not permit that

we ride from Tor the day before it is besieged. I will draw my sword for the boyaríshna."

Ayub groaned and clutched his head.

"And I will not stay. Ivga is fair as a lily, and I would like to cross swords with the Volga chieftain—"

"So you will, Ayub," Kirdy assured him. "One night and no more we will abide at Tor."

"How—"

"Giovanni awaits me. I must not keep him."

Khlit looked after the young warrior anxiously. There were questions he would have liked to ask, and he would have warned the White Falcon not to put himself under the orders of a captain of Tor; but Kirdy, he saw, had decided what to do and Khlit had no love of advice, given or offered.

"I did not dream, old Wolf," Ayub muttered. "It is the truth that the vourdalak turned his eyes on me and looked right through me."

"Enough!" said Khlit curtly.

Yet in his thoughts he compared the dwarf that Ayub had seen in the first light of that day with the rider who wore wings and called himself Erlik Khan. It was quite possible that the Khan had looked into their room after Kirdy had left it. If they were to stay and aid the people of Tor, sooner or later they must speak with the master of the house. And there was Ivga. Khlit suspected that if the mistress of Tor had not been beautiful Kirdy would not have decided to stay. And this troubled him.

At the table by the fireplace Kirdy found Giovanni alone, and the Genoese raised his brows at sight of the young Cossack.

"I had looked for your comrades, my lord."

"And they," Kirdy smiled, "have looked too long on the cup. I am here in their stead."

Giovanni had heard something of the uproar made by the Zaporogian, and he nodded without comment. Jean the Frenchman, too, was the worse for wine, and many others. But Kirdy's eyes were clear, and his step assured.

"Your decision, my Cossack?"

"We will go against Skal, on one condition."

"And that?"

"We shall have command of the men-at-arms for Tor."

A moment's silence while the Genoese struggled with surprise. "Odd's life! You to command in Tor! I dare not bear such tidings to Erlik Khan. Have you taken leave of your wits?"

"Nay, Pan Giovanni, by this token. The old Cossack is a koshevoi ataman—they two have led thousands into battle; they will aid you, but will not serve under a—koldun."

"Erlik Khan is no simpleton when it comes to an affray, as you should know well."

Kirdy bowed his head, but answered with pride.

"If the magician is able to deal with Skal, let him do so. If he seeks our aid—"

"He asks it."

"Then we cannot serve under a koldun."

A flush darkened the Italian's forehead, and his fingers twitched toward the rapier hilt at his side. "Sant' Maria! Such words are to be answered with steel. I serve under Erlik Khan!"

"Answer as you will," responded Kirdy calmly, "but think of the boyarishna. We would keep her from the hands of Skal and his men. For Erlik Khan I care nought."

Giovanni's hand rose to the table irresolutely, and he smothered an oath.

"So soon? Jean is mad, by her beauty. He dreams of the lady Ivga and he is not the only one. They are all her slaves, the men of Tor."

"If they would guard her from Skal they must leave Tor and seek the Volga men in the forest."

This time Giovanni could smile.

"You Cossacks love horses overmuch. Leave Tor? Nay, it is clearly to be seen that you know little of warfare on the frontier, if you bid us leave the walls."

To this Kirdy made no response, busying himself with the meat and barley cakes put before him by the serfs.

"Eh, my Cossack knight, I have seen a battle or two in my time. The walls of the stockade cannot be pulled down, and Skal's horde will not be able to assault them in the teeth of our muskets and pikes. The Volga burlaki are best at hand-to-hand fighting—yet you advise going to meet them in the forest where even your horses will be of little use."

Kirdy nodded, plying his knife with relish.

"And why?" persisted Giovanni.

"Because Skal would not come against Tor unless he could deal with your walls. He can."

"Pray, how?"

"With cannon."

This gave the Genoese food for contemplation. He had thought that the transport of cannon during the winter was impossible.

"Nay," the Cossack assured him, "among his baggage sleds Skal has two that bear brass guns, covered with furs."

Messer Giovanni permitted himself a smile.

"Eh, are you too a wizard—that you can see twenty miles through the forest?"

"Three days ago, my lord, we passed Skal and his train, turning into the forest from the Volga trail. I saw the cannon then and counted four hundred warriors, well armed. It needs not a wizard to prophesy that he will surround you in Tor. Then the cannon will growl and your gates will go down before your men can fire a shot from their muskets; then the burlaki will cry 'Up, lads!' and will slash the lives out of you."

Messer Giovanni found no comfort in this. Biting his fingernails he stared at the table, with covert glances at the young warrior.

"Matia Bogun!" he whispered. "Four hundred! And cannon—the odds lie against us." Presently he roused, as if he saw his way clear. "Young sir, I deemed your years too few for such knowl-

edge of war. Permit me to inquire how you would move against Skal?"

Kirdy shook his head.

"The Wolf has said; an ataman must not disclose his plan to his men."

"Ah. Hannibal was not more discreet. At least, confirm me in this—you are confident of victory in the forest?"

"Nay, only if God sends victory will we overthrow the Volga men."

The swarthy face of the Genoese darkened and his fingers tapped rapidly on the table.

"—— poor jest—it likes me not. Messer Kirdy, there is about you a taint of the stables and cowsheds."

He filliped a scented handkerchief before his nostrils, staring openly at the garments of the young warrior, soiled in the morning's labor.

Now, Kirdy had spoken quite seriously. He had thought out a way to attack Skal in the forest. Knowing something of the fighting qualities of the Volga pirates, he was not sure of the issue. God gave victory and defeat, when men had done their utmost.

"Enough of words," he smiled. "We Cossacks do not scorn horses—or swords."

"Or women," Giovanni added lightly, and Kirdy felt anger flash upon him suddenly.

"Death to you!" he cried, his hot temper flaring.

The thin nostrils of the Genoese expanded and he had gripped at his sword hilt, when a dark figure stepped silently from the door beside them and bowed with folded arms.

"Effendim," said Ibrahim, soft-voiced, "Erlik Khan bids the falcon of the Cossacks command the men of Tor. He has heard your talk and he also bids the two lords of Frankistan keep their swords sheathed, according to his order."

During that day Kirdy did not open his lips again. Giovanni had postponed the sword duel until Kirdy should take his departure from the ousadba, and they waited for word from the



Tatar riders who were searching for the Volga men in the forest. But the young warrior did not bother his head about Skal as yet.

He was puzzled by the strange behavior of the people of Tor, the evil temper of Giovanni, the silence of Khlit, and the savage ill nature of Ayub, who was enjoying the aftermath of his drinking bout. Usually the Zaporogian was the best-natured of men. He thought more often of Ivga, pitying her plight and admiring her beauty. And above all things he wondered why in this manor house filled with costly objects, with furs and gold and all that men could desire, foreboding lay like a cloud upon the souls of its people.

When he watched the warriors in the hall he fancied that they moved about like men whose limbs were chained—as if their spirits were asleep. And this, he decided, must be some wizardry on the part of Erlik Khan.

He was glad that he would meet the Khan face to face that night.

### III

*When you go into battle—string your bows, temper your spear points, sharpen your swords, but pay no heed to the words of the soothsayers.*

*Proverb of Old Cathay.*

Never, to Kirdy's eyes, had the boyarishna appeared more lovely than that night when she awaited him at the end of the passage, a candle dimmed by a night shade in her hand. Her hair, dark as the mane of a black stallion, flooded her slender shoulders. It was pushed back from her smooth forehead and from it came a scent more elusive than dried rose leaves or the

dust of jasmine petals. Her lips, parted in a half-smile, gave him welcome in a voiceless whisper.

Kirdy, standing erect, his Cossack hat in his hand on one hip, his other hand on his sword hilt, bowed respectfully.

"Come," she breathed, her eyes seeking his.

She was indifferent to cold, heedless of the dark and the danger of that moment. To Kirdy she seemed as a divchína, a maiden without fear or evil thought—one who went, candle in hand, to pray in some dim and deserted chapel, and at that instant he could not think of anything more to be desired than the lady Ivga.

They passed through her sleeping chamber, her light feet tripping over the soft silk carpets and white bearskins soundlessly. And the room itself gleamed with white damask hangings, even the canopy of the carved cedar bed. A gray wolfhound, Ivga's pet, raised its head but did not growl at the young Cossack. Only in the chamber Kirdy did not see any ikon or prayer stand and he remembered what she had said, that such things were not allowed her.

A narrow door set in a heavy log wall admitted them to a bare compartment without windows or hearth, and Kirdy, who had an accurate sense of direction, thought that they were now within the base of the square tower. He looked around swiftly for other doors, but saw none—only rows of powder casks.

"The koldun," Ivga whispered, "lies asleep above us. If you find him terrible, make no sound. *You must not wake him.*"

She glanced up at him beseechingly, and Kirdy nodded understanding. Holding the candle close to her breast to shield it from the eddies of the outer wind that swept through cracks in the upper wall, Ivga ascended a narrow stair that ran around the walls and disappeared in the shadows far over her head, as a path clings to the side of a precipice.

The wind snatched at her light garments, causing the flame of the candle to sink to a pin point and then leap up madly.

Somewhere in the height above him timbers creaked, and he stopped instinctively.

Ivga laughed under her breath and passed through a small opening in the floor above, leaving him in near darkness. The wooden steps whined under his weight and he held his breath to listen—hearing nothing but the high whimper of the wind outside the *ousadba*. It needed courage to thrust his head through the aperture into the chamber of Erlik Khan, but Kirdy appeared beside Ivga so silently that she smiled approval and took his fingers in her warm hand.

Kirdy moved on his toes, so that his silver heels should not grate on the rough timbers. He was more than a little fearful for Ivga's sake—if the Khan should awake and see that she had brought an armed warrior to his side, there would indeed be terror and the boyarishna must suffer. But above all things Kirdy felt the need of seeing the face of the winged rider who had offered him terms on the steppe. Otherwise how could he take command with Erlik Khan at his stirrup, when all their lives must be put to hazard in the forest?

His first glance assured him that the room behind him was empty, except for bundles of valuable furs piled in the corners. There were chests ranged around the wall, and he half glimpsed a ladder that must lead to the tower summit.

As quietly as he could he followed Ivga to the far side, where a shelter of hides had been arranged roughly on stacked spears, Tatar fashion, to shield a cot from the blasts of the outer air. One side—the side toward them—was open, and, bending closer to the cot, Kirdy beheld a small figure curled up in a black bearskin.

The thing was no larger than a dwarf, and the head was shaggy as the bear's fell. The face that he saw in the flow from the shaded candle was colorless except for the veins in the heavy brow—a pallid, twisted face, without vitality.

It was, in truth, a dwarf. An old man, judging by the gray streaks in the coarse black hair, and the lines about the closed

eyes. Kirdy had seen such stunted beings at the court of kings and boyars—garbed in rags and oriental finery, jesters whose pranks and sharp words caused their masters to laugh.

“Come,” Ivga pressed close to his shoulder, her cheek brushing his mustache, to whisper almost inaudibly, “you have seen Erlik Khan, the koldun. He is restless, and if he should open his eyes—”

She tugged gently at his fingers. Erlik Khan, in fact, was moving uneasily under the bearskin. Then Ivga bent her head swiftly and blew out the candle, drawing Kirdy to one side.

The dwarf had sighed and lifted his head. A square embrasure by the ladder admitted moonlight into the tower, and by good fortune the silvery rays fell squarely upon the cot and the dwarf, so that Ivga and Kirdy stood in shadow.

As quickly as a snake coils when a step strikes the ground, the koldun turned, crouching, his short arms braced on the side of the pallet. He had seen or heard something that startled him. Powerless to prevent it, Kirdy noticed a thin wisp of smoke drift from the candle wick into the square of moonlight.

Kirdy's right hand gripped the ivory hilt of his sword suddenly. He could see the shaggy head of the dwarf distinctly and the eyes, now wide open. The pupils of the eyes shone in a peculiar fashion, and the Cossack, staring at them in fascination, knew that they were white.

His fingers closed around the cross on his sword hilt and his lips formed a prayer to the Father and Son. Erlik Khan did not quiver or shrink at this invocation, fearful to evil spirits. Instead, the translucent eyes roved around the chamber in a ghastly manner as if seeking in the shadows that which had aroused his anger.

“*Ai-a!*” the girl breathed. “Strike with your sword before—strike now.”

But Kirdy, intent on the dwarf, did not move.

“He sees us. Draw and strike while you have your strength.”

A moment passed, and Kirdy bent his head until his lips touched Ivga's hair. "Nay, he sees us not. He is blind."

The woman beside him trembled with eagerness that was like a fever.

"Blind—yet he has the power of sight within him. His anger is growing. See!"

The head of the dwarf was moving from side to side, even while his eyes swept aimlessly from the floor to the ceiling; it seemed as if he had heard their light whispers above the creaking of the tower. His long teeth were visible through the tangle of his beard, and he resembled so much an animal drawing up its sinews to spring that Kirdy slipped the curved saber halfway from the scabbard. Ivga watched him with silent eagerness.

Kirdy knew that he could step forward and slash open the skull of the man on the pallet before Erlik Khan could harm him—unless the dwarf were indeed a koldun with power to shatter the steel blade. But the Cossack had named the Father and Son and the dwarf did not even spit, as a koldun might be expected to do.

Surely the master of Tor deserved death, because he had slain innocent men without cause. And with Erlik Khan dead, would not Ivga be freed from her tormentor? Still, he could not step forward and strike. He wondered if Erlik Khan had, in truth, cast a spell upon him.

Abruptly, he slapped the sword back, and the dwarf started as if stung, peering at the darkness in which the woman and the Cossack stood. Kirdy had realized that this was not the winged rider. The dwarf had a beard that hung nearly to his hips. Unless Erlik Khan could change his shape, like a witch—Kirdy, heedless of Ivga's impatience, fell to wondering.

"Erlik Khan," he said quietly, "by Ibrahim you named me ataman of the men of Tor, so that I might lead them against Skal. From your lips I would hear that promise."

The face of the dwarf changed instantly; the snarling intent-



ness fell away, to be replaced by bewilderment. He squatted back in his lair, fingering his beard.

"Skal? Who is he? Nay, I am Erlik Khan. I speak with the vourdalaks of the storm—I ride the white horse of nights. What do you seek with me?"

Again came the woman's insistent whisper at his ear: "He can appear like this if he wills. He is afraid of you. Come, let us go while we may."

But the young Cossack shook his head impatiently.

"Nay, grandfather, you lie. You did not ride the white stallion last night, or wear the armor with wings. Your voice is not *his*."

"Good youth, what are these words? Where is the boyarishna? Who is near me?"

"The Cossack, the White Falcon. I have said that you lied."

Kirdy strode forward then and seated himself on the side of the pallet, pulling the dwarf forth from his lair of shadow by the beard. The old man was very uneasy and kept calling out for the boyarishna, who, however, maintained utter silence.

"*Ekh batyúshka*—eh, grandfather, it was you who looked in at the Cossack Ayub, and raised the hair on his head."

Scrabbling at his beard, the dwarf tried to get beyond reach of the young warrior's hand.

"*Ai-trzei!* Noble sir, I meant no harm. How could I, when God has darkened my eyes? I heard one of the noble lords breathing like a horse and I opened the door to listen."

"And you listened at the door of the *krasno miesto* this morning while I talked with the captain Giovanni."

The old man mumbled and wriggled, swearing that this was not so.

"The hall is not a fit place for such as I. When other men behold me they go away—such is my ugliness. Only the boyarishna is kind."

"Kind?"

"As a mother of saints. She has given me this bed and coverlet—"

A sudden movement on the part of Ivga made him lift his head and listen.

"That was like her step. Why do you not go away from me, cousin Cossack? Aye, Ivga brings me bread and at times a shank bone of mutton. When she rides from the tower she only locks the lower door."

"And Ibrahim?"

"*Ai-trzei!* He binds me and beats me sometimes because he is a Muhammadan."

"Are you, grandfather?"

The dwarf shook his head vaguely.

"Do not mock me, cousin Cossack. I think you have come from afar. I do not make the five prayers, and I eat unclean meats."

"Nay, you are Erlik Khan!"

The twisted face brightened and the dwarf started to his feet.

"Aye, Erlik Khan they have named me. I listen to the vourdalaks flying about the tower. When the storm spirits cry out like dead souls, I dance. *Hai*, Cossack!"

In clumsy cowhide boots the dwarf began to caper on the echoing planks, grinning like the fiends he had invoked. He flung his short arms about.

"There are many dead souls in Tor. I hear them wailing, below." And he began to sing in a hoarse high voice, while Kirdy watched, grave-eyed, his chin on his hand. He could see clearly now the white cataracts over the pupils of the old man's eyes, and the pallor that came from age and confinement.

"Enough!" he cried suddenly. "Back to your nest, little grandfather."

He felt a twinge of pity as the dwarf darted to the pallet and rolled up in the bearskin, like a dog that has been caught in some mischief and rushes to its corner to escape the wrath of its master. Then Kirdy went down the dark stair very quietly. He had seen Ivga slip away and he did not know what he might find below.

He had been born in the Gobi where the night has its tasks and struggles as well as the day, and he knew that he was alone in the lower chamber where the powder casks were stored. Soundlessly he moved to the door, and after listening a moment pushed it open.

The boyarishna was sitting on a cushioned bench, near the fire, one hand on the neck of the wolfhound, her eyes on the face of the young warrior. He went to the hearth and gazed about the room, the blood warming his cheeks as he realized that it was Ivga's sleeping chamber, and that he was standing in his boots on a small silk prayer rug of Bokhara.

"This night," he said, "I sought for speech with Erlik Khan, and now the moment has come."

From under lowered lids she studied the lean face of the warrior, the thin nostrils, the wide, firm lips, and the level brows, now darkened with anger. Kirdy was standing with his cap at his hip and his hand on his sword hilt as if facing an enemy.

And Ivga felt in her heart that she loved the Cossack, even while she told herself she hated him.

"Aye," she said, in her clear young voice, "they named you well, White Falcon. Truly you have the eyes of a falcon. I *did* ride the white stallion last night, and wear the cape and helmet—but how did you know?"

"Boyarishna, your voice is not like another's."

"Still, you were not sure until you talked with—the dwarf. Riding so, in the night, the men-at-arms knew me not. If they thought a woman led them, they would not obey."

"Not so—they worship you, my lady."

She looked up at him quickly.

"They may think so of Ivga, the captive-wife of Erlik Khan. But would they be loyal to Ivga, the rider of the white horse, the mistress of Tor?"

When Kirdy remained silent, she stared upon the fire musingly for a space and then tossed back the dark tangle of her hair as if casting off thongs that bound her.

"It's true, *bratik*—my brother. Your Cossacks would not follow a woman to battle. They think we are all witches."

A little smile touched her dark lips, though her eyes were somber.

"Harken, White Falcon—once I tricked you and lied to you. There is no Erlik Khan. In other years my father, journeying from Persia, was slain by a few bold robbers on this trail that leads from the Volga to the Don. All our servants except two were cut to pieces. I was brought to this ousadba, then a small hold. One of the two servants, Ibrahim, was able to put the white dust—*bhang*—into the flagon of wine the dog-souls, the robbers, were drinking from that night. Their senses were dulled and some of them Ibrahim slew with his knife. He freed me, and I put on the mail and small helmet that I found in the plunder gathered by the outlaws. Those who survived were savage men without wit, and they thought that the dwarf, Erlik, had got the better of them because he was a koldun, a wizard."

Kirdy nodded understanding. In appearance Erlik was awesome enough.

"Who was there to tell me what to do—I, a maiden untaught? Ibrahim would have gone back to the towns of Islam. But we were no more than three, with my father's goods and the gold and weapons the robbers had got together in Tor. In Muscovy I had no friends. So we strengthened Tor, and in time other outlaws took refuge here. Knights, passing along the road between the rivers, chose to stay and serve me and to them I said that the dwarf was truly a koldun and that I was his wife."

Her slender fingers caught in the shaggy coat of the wolfhound and she laughed, a chiming bell-note that caused the dog to lift its head to her knee.

"*Ai-a!* At times the knights fought among themselves on my account, and a few prayed me to flee with them into the steppe. Why should I? There is a legend related of this place that once a pagan duke lived here with all his court. So did I set up my kingdom, and even the Tatars came to abide at my house, for dread

of the koldun, Erlik Khan. I sent them here and there into the world, and they brought me tidings swiftly—so that men thought I had eyes and ears to perceive what came to pass in the steppe and the forest. Because I rode from the ousadba usually at night, they said that I could see in the dark, like a vampire.”

“The prophecy,” said Kirdy thoughtfully, “you related to me in the stable—whence did it come?”

Ivga shook her dark head.

“My lord Cossack, it was from the lips of Erlik, the dwarf. He has a whim of strange sayings. ‘When they ride forth from Tor,’ he proclaimed, ‘the wolves will come from the forest and the vultures from the sky.’”

“*Ekh-ma*, that may well be a true saying, if Skal comes against Tor. Tell me this, boyarishna: We have made a bargain, that I was to have command over your men. I will release you from the bargain, if that is your desire—”

“And why, Sir Cossack?”

“Because if I command at Tor, all things must be in my hands. The Volga men are not hedgehogs—we cannot play with them.”

Ivga smiled suddenly and clapped her hands. Before she could summon him again the outer door opened and Ibrahim appeared, very much surprised at beholding the young warrior in the room of his mistress.

“Tell me, O kayia, what word has been brought by our riders.”

Ibrahim made answer in Persian.

“*Ak Begum*—Flower Princess—the Tatars know that Skal is no more than two days’ march distant.”

Ivga dismissed the chief of the slaves as if well satisfied with what she heard.

“White Falcon, the Tatars also brought to me tales of your daring. When we met on the steppe, they pointed you out to me, and I thought that God had sent to me a sword to strike down the outlaw Skal. My thought is not otherwise now—I bid you take command of my men.”



"Has Giovanni told you that I will lead them into the forest?"

"A bold stroke. It likes me well."

"Then we mount before dawn, and I ask you to remain at Tor."

Ivga stretched out lithe arms to the fire and threw back her head, her eyes half closed.

"Nay, Sir Warrior—I will ride with you."

"It will not be a falcon hunt, this. When a hundred rush upon four hundred in the deep snow only God knows where the victory will lie, my lady. Abide at Tor and if we are beaten you may still escape alive."

"What is life?" Ivga rose and placed a hand upon his shoulder. "Who knows what lies at the end of the road? I will ride with you, my lord, and if we find death, then surely the tale of it will be on the lips of men and minstrels for the ages of ages."

Looking down into the beautiful eyes, sensing the impetuous spirit of the divchína, Kirdy felt the spell that had been laid upon the men of Tor, who loved Ivga.

"Eh, you are brave, my lady." Glancing at the stained glass of the window, he added, "Sleep now, if you can. It is near cock-crow."

Ivga laughed.

"On such a night, who could sleep?" And, when she had searched his face with a swift glance, "Send Ibrahim to me, if you will, with my sword and armor."

In the guest room of Tor, Khlit, the Wolf, had been sleeping soundly in spite of the clatter of cups and the hum of voices from the revelers in the hall, until a song in the high voice of the Frenchman, Jean, awakened him and he noticed Kirdy sitting on a bench by the candle that Ayub had lighted as a protection against further visits of the apparition with the white eyes. The young Cossack was gripping his head with both hands and groaning.

After watching him for a moment Khlit growled, "Have you been hunting devils?"

"Fire burns me, little grandfather! I have seen treachery and evil! Where now is Cossack honor? It is dark, the road."

Khlit did not go to sleep again. Aware by some sixth sense that the dawn was at hand, he yawned, scratched his head and felt for his boots. "She is a beautiful witch—devil take her," he said to himself. But to Kirdy he said nothing, only watched his grandson with troubled eyes.

## IV

*In open country, do not try to bar your enemy's way; on dangerous ground, press ahead quickly; on desperate ground—fight.*

*Maxims of Sun Tsu.*

Both Khlit and Ayub eyed Kirdy expectantly when he rode out in front of the Tor men, an hour later. Ivga's warriors had spent the night over the wine cup and many of them had heated their brains with bhang. They were loud-tongued and quarrelsome—a few singing, others savagely silent. Giovanni, morose at the selection of the young Cossack as leader, was not inclined to give Kirdy any help.

It was a wild and orderless array, each man armed to his own choice; but armed they were, and the veteran Cossacks saw that the horses were good ones.

"These sons of dogs will give a good account of themselves if cornered," Ayub remarked to Khlit, "but it remains to be seen what they will do in the open field!"

They quieted down the moment Ivga appeared on her white horse. Every man noticed that the supposed koldun did not wear the eagle's wings, and this was taken as a portent of something unusual. Ivga had worn the wings the better to disguise her figure and to increase the awe in which the men held the rider of the

white horse. Perhaps now she felt they would be in the way, or she discarded them on a whim.

In fact, everything that Ivga did sprang from a whim; for two years she had been absolute lord of slaves, captives, and men-at-arms, and she had become a little satiated with the taste of power, in ruling Tor. She longed for new fields, for greater homage. In the wilderness of the border, she saw herself a queen riding to conquest—with Kirdy at her side.

Until the White Falcon had come to Tor, the maiden Ivga had not known the meaning of love, and perhaps her heart went out to Kirdy because in no way would he submit to her. Until Skal and his horde moved against her, she had met no worthy rival.

Now, in the bleak hour before dawn, in the glow of spluttering torches, facing lines of armed men, Ivga was thoroughly happy.

Twenty warriors—and Kirdy selected those who carried arquebuses—were told off to garrison Tor under Ibrahim's orders, and then the Cossack rode down the ranks, searching every man for pistols, and giving all that he found to Ibrahim, taking no heed of the barbed oaths of the owners.

Then he kneeed his pony up to Ivga without taking off his kalpak.

"Boyarishna, there is yet time to gather your treasure on pack horses and escape to the Don country."

"Go, White Falcon mine—go, if you fear! You have my leave to fly!"

And a little laugh fluttered in her throat as she watched his face. He drew the rein against the pony's neck and turned away.

"*Shagom marsh!*" he called out in Muscovite speech. "Forward, slowly."

But when he passed the dark group of Tatar riders at the gate, his lips parted in explosive gutturals: "*Ahatou ashanga, yarou! Yaubou boumbi!*"

And the men of Tatary, the Tcheremisse and the Kitans, drew in their breath sibilantly, and every gnome-like head turned toward Kirdy expectantly. He had addressed them in their own

speech, in pure Mongol, which these inveterate wanderers had not heard for many winters. Their homeland was the Gobi and there Kirdy had been born and weaned. He spoke as a Mongol khan, with authority and understanding: "Brothers of the winged rider, take heed! Show the road without haste."

They closed around him and Ivga, astonished and silent, waiting patiently for daylight so that they could look more closely at Kirdy. Ivga's curiosity took fire at once.

"What did you say to them?"

"They are your best men." He did not answer her question. "It is well that you have thirty such and that you wore the eagle's wings formerly when you took to the saddle."

"And why, my Cossack?"

Among the Mongol tribes a chieftain wears an eagle's feather, white or black, and the term *ashanga*—winged rider—was an expression of highest praise. The matter-of-fact Tatars held Ivga in awe, the more so as she was quite fearless. Their eyes, keen to see in the darkness, had made out that she was a woman. Believing implicitly in magicians, they assured themselves that she was a *shaytán epereké*—a particularly potent forest goblin, appearing sometimes as an old man, sometimes as a young maiden. The *shaytán epereké* was known to spring up behind a rider and drive the horse over a precipice. All this Kirdy, whose thoughts were otherwise occupied, did not see fit to confide in Ivga.

In fact, he became utterly silent and would not reply to her questions, and the Tatars, who missed nothing of all this, remarked that the White Falcon had no fear of the magician.

Two abreast, the horsemen filed into the trail behind the Tatars, Khlit and Ayub bringing up the rear. They had barely passed the gate when Khlit looked back. A pony was galloping after them, bearing a rider who wore no sword, carried no spear.

"It's the Jew," Khlit muttered and moved on again.

Shmel had no sooner drawn abreast of them than he began to wag his tongue, his head, and his legs all at once.

"Hi, noble lords, I will tend your horses; I have some fine

gorilka in my flask, and anything you tell me to do, I will obey faithfully. Only let me stay near your horses' tails and do not drive me away."

The Cossacks, who looked after their own mounts and did not drink on the road, paid no attention to him, until Ayub grunted: "It is a wonderful thing that you are not lying on your Jew's quilt at Tor, where there is gold and silver and a fire. Why do you take the snow road this night?"

"Because it is safer by the swords of such kingly warriors than in Tor."

"How, safer?"

"Because the boyarishna and her knights are less to be feared than the dwarf and that pagan with the dark face—Abraham, as they call him, blasphemously."

Ayub yawned, drew the collar of his svitka tighter, and regarded Shmel without favor.

"You have lapped up too much gorilka. The lady is sleeping at Tor and Erlik Khan rides at the head of the column."

"If the noble lord will forgive me, it is otherwise."

Bending down from his high saddle, the big Zaporogian stared into the thin face of the merchant until he could see the flickering and restless eyes.

"Do you desire to feed the kites, that you say a Cossack is drunk on the march?"

"As God lives, worthy colonel, I did not say that. I swear by all that's holy, yesterday morning I tried to warn the young ataman that the lady Ivga was the one who took you prisoner—"

"Death to you! We yielded to no one! The lady Ivga is a gentlewoman, though married to a dog-souled magician."

Seeing Ayub reach over his shoulder, toward the projecting hilt of the broadsword, Shmel groaned.

"Harken only one little moment, illustrious lord, and then do as you like with me. That night on the steppe when you dealt such a blow with the sword—I swear never was such a blow seen before—I was so near the winged rider that the horse snuffled on my



neck. My soul sat on my shoulders from fear but I looked around and through the bars of the helmet I saw that the eyes of the rider were dark. Close at hand I heard her voice—a woman's voice. The captain Giovanni knows this secret, though he keeps his own counsel—"

"The Jew speaks the truth," growled Khlit suddenly, because Shmel was raising his voice and the nearest men-at-arms were looking around.

Ayub stared at his friend and scratched his ear.

"What do you know of this, old wolf?"

"Last night Kirdy said he was going to speak with Erlik Khan, but at cockcrow his Cossack soul was troubled and he knew not what to do. A woman had talked to him."

Forgetting Shmel, Ayub pondered and presently gathered up his reins.

"Where are you going?" Khlit asked quickly.

"To warn Kirdy."

"Of what?"

"Of the rider on the white horse. If the dwarf is not a koldun, then she is a witch or vampire. If Kirdy's spirit is dark, I'll eat grass but she has laid a spell on him. He will not speak to us. At the first cliff she may jump up behind him and drive his horse over to death."

"She may do worse," muttered Khlit, who kept his hand on the Zaporogian's reins. "Nay, do not go. Are you his friend?"

"In all things."

"Then wait. He has taken the bit in his teeth; he has chosen the path he will follow."

Ayub considered this for a moment.

"*Ay-a tak*. It is in my mind, old wolf, that you are testing Kirdy."

"Nay," said Khlit grimly. "He is making a trial of himself."

"Well, brother, it is true that every warrior finds himself someday in the arms of a beautiful woman who would put a spell on

him. And it is also true that we have agreed to help the people of Tor. And yet—”

Tugging at the ends of his long mustache with both fists, he frowned heavily, glancing now and then at the impassive Khlit. Shmel, well satisfied to be ignored, followed out of reach but within earshot, venturing from time to time a remark that if the Cossack colonels took rich spoil from the Volga men they would find no one ready to give them half the value that he would give.

“Allah!” said the Zaporogian at length, half to himself, “the horses are snorting—that means either a vampire is near, or a good omen. The —— only knows which it is. But to send our falcon against Skal and his horde with only a hundred of such tavern sweepings! And with a beautiful witch whispering in his ear. May the dogs bite you, Khlit! It is all very well to make a test of a youngster, but a hare does not jump over a wolf to test its legs.”

And he reached up to make certain that his sword was loose in the scabbard.

Throughout the day Kirdy led them without a halt except to breathe the horses, and the Tatars twisted and turned so often that the men of Tor had no very good idea where they were when they dismounted at sunset in a mass of immense firs. They only knew that they had climbed from the scattered groves around the ousadba to a higher region where the forest was unbroken, and the tree trunks rose far above their spear tips before branches began to spread out into the network that made the forest bed a labyrinth of darkness. Here the snow was only a few inches deep, and they could make out a multitude of tracks left by men on horses and sleds. And here Kirdy dismounted, bidding the men eat what was in their saddlebags, and sending off the ponies in charge of five Tatars armed with bows. Only Ivga kept her white stallion, and this seemed natural enough to the men of

Tor, who had never seen Erlik Khan out of the saddle. They were too hungry to wonder much, and when they had finished eating Kirdy had disappeared in the darkness with his guides.

Their bellies filled, they began to gather in groups and speculate in a dozen languages as to what was going to happen. They could light no fire—Kirdy had forbidden that—and they began to be cold and to complain. They had neither brandy nor vodka nor any understanding of what was going on and their mood was like the maw of the forest. Then the moon rose somewhere and its rays filtering through the mesh of firs outlined patches of snow.

By its light Giovanni was able to search out Ayub and to ask a question.

"Where is your White Falcon? Why does he wait for moon-rise?"

"*Ekh*," said the Zaporogian, who was none too pleased at being dismounted, "he waits so your soul will have light to find its way out of the world after your body is cut open." And he added under his breath, "May it roost in purgatory!"

But Kirdy himself came striding through the patches of moonlight, his white *svitka* blending with the snow carpet, giving out orders as a wind-whipped torch looses sparks.

"Are your bowstrings dry in the pouches? The bows oiled? Good. String your bows—ye who have them—shift your quivers and form behind the captain Giovanni. Yonder."

It was no idle question he asked because the very trunks of the trees were damp and a wet bowstring is only a little more useful than wet powder. Surprised, the men who had bows obeyed. And before the others could grumble, Kirdy had them in charge of Jean the Frenchman. The Tatars he left with Khlit, who alone—excepting himself—could hold them in hand.

Standing in the center of the three groups, hand on hip, he was silent for a moment, paying no attention to the white stallion that paced out of the shadows and halted at his shoulder. But

the men-at-arms saw and crossed themselves or bowed as the mood struck them.

"O ye men of Tor!" Kirdy's words rang out with the hard echo of striking steel. "Ye are doomed men. Too often have you raided the trails. Your sword edges are dull from striking down cattle. You have lived like dogs. What honor have ye—what courage?"

Men held their breath, watching to see the rider of the white horse strike down the young Cossack. But something like a laugh came from between the bars of the helmet that hid Ivga's face.

"Hide of ——!" whispered Ayub hoarsely. "The fledgling is mad. They will claw him!"

A growl went up from the assembled warriors. Among them were bold spirits, enthralled by Ivga's beauty, and souls were not lacking that had once held honor dear. Then too, there was stealthy fumbling for throwing daggers and fitting of arrows to strings. The men of Tor were in no mood to suffer abuse.

"Is there any," pursued Kirdy without moving, "who fears not to draw steel when he is named a dog?"

"I—horns and hoofs of Satan, I—I will."

Three tall men stepped out from the groups, sword in hand. Giovanni, gnawing thin lips, was not among them—he was staring at the rider of the white horse.

Kirdy's laugh was short and savage. "Good! Ye are the three I shall take. Ayub, you too, stand with these."

Surprised at being singled out in this fashion, the three warriors waited to hear what more the Cossack would say, and the giant Zaporogian joined them.

"We five," said Kirdy, smiling, "will strike for the tent of Skal. We will bring him to earth early in the fight. For an hour I watched his camp, and his tent is in the center of the fires. He is as tall as Ayub, here, with yellow boots—a bearskin on his shoulders."

They listened now attentively, and he laughed at the two groups behind the captains. Jean the Frenchman had stepped for-

ward with the three boldest spirits, but Kirdy had waved him back, saying that his work was elsewhere.

"Ye are doomed," he cried, "and lost indeed if you do not overthrow the Volga men. Their camp is between you and Tor. In the day we circled it, and now you must fight your way back or wander without food in the forest. The horses have been driven back along our trail and the horse-herders have orders to greet with arrows any who run after them."

A hoarse roar of anger went up at this—even Ayub grumbling aloud that his horse should have been taken from him without his knowledge. Only the three that had been chosen out of the ninety-five kept silence, knowing from their own experience that Kirdy had more to say.

"Skal's kibitka lies half a league from here," went on the White Falcon calmly, "and many of his horde are awake around the fires. He has stationed sentries in pairs in eight spots a bowshot from the fires. Our Tatars can deal with them, with the lassos. Giovanni's detachment will go to the right, to a knoll where the underbrush is thick, and will shoot from their bows when the first blow is struck."

He glanced at the Genoese, who nodded understanding. Greatly as Giovanni disliked Kirdy, the hazard was too instant to think of his own quarrel.

"The captain Jean will work toward the left, and rush in on the side when the first arrows fly."

"And you, Cossack?" The rider of the white horse spoke, low-voiced.

"Skal sleeps. His men obey him like slaves; without him, half their strength is lost. With these four, I will be the first to enter his camp lines, and one of us must bring him down. Then, not knowing our numbers, the Volga men will yield. But as long as Skal remains on his feet it will go hard with us."

He turned impatiently to the listening throng. "The moon will set in three hours. Will ye go forward to fight or run off to die like jackals?"



"Monsieur," observed the captain Jean, "such words are not to be endured. If both of us come out of this, it must be that we measure swords."

"Well said," laughed the White Falcon.

The men-at-arms growled assent, and Ivga answered for them. "Lead on, my Cossack, to Skal or the ——."

Hidden in the shadows with his Tatars, Khlit looked around for Shmel, chuckling. He was beholding the fruit of the years when he had fostered Kirdy. He alone had read what was in the young warrior's mind. The firearms had been left behind so that no premature alarm should be given. The men of Tor had been led around behind the Volga band so that they must fight if they hoped to behold Tor again. The horses had been sent away to prevent any from attempting to flee if the fight went against them at first. Without their being aware of his plan Kirdy had deliberately cornered his followers, and such men fought best if they were desperate.

Only—Khlit knew that Kirdy should have kept five horses for himself and those who were to try to pick the Volga chieftain from the midst of the pirates. Kirdy had not done so because it must inevitably have aroused suspicion among the men left on foot.

"Shmel," he growled, when he had found the Jew. "Once you cackled when the Tor riders were seeking us out in the steppe, and gave us away. This time you will not be with us. Go—nay, back along the trail. Sol!"

He caught the trader as if to thrust him in the right direction, and whispered swiftly in his ear. Shmel departed, his thin legs and his cap flying as if, Ayub observed, his soul had come out of his wallet and sat on his shoulders again.

V

*If they are desperate, men will fight to win or die; at such a time they will not draw back or flee—officers and warriors will be in accord and all orders will be obeyed.*

*Maxims of Sun Tsu.*

Skal did not sleep for long. He crawled out of his felt tent and came to squat by the largest of the fires—his heavy shoulders drooping, his long arms crossed on his bare knees.

He had the broad, stooped head of a Kalmuk, and black eyes that shifted constantly, from the embers at his toes, to one of his lieutenants who was cleaning a pistol in the clear moonlight, to a dark body that lay stretched out in the form of a cross in the snow. This was a woodsman, one of the serfs of Tor, whom Skal had captured that day and had staked out on the ground, to torture until he wrung from the serf's lips certain things he desired to know about Tor.

His long, greasy hair lay heavy on the bear's hide that covered gigantic shoulders. He listened idly to the rattle of dice on a wagon board, to an angry mutter of quarreling men, and the movements of the oxen penned behind the sledges.

Skal had chosen his camp shrewdly, in a clearing hidden from sight by surrounding ridges, where fuel could be gathered without felling any of the tall firs that screened him. The sledges—the largest of them bearing two brass ship's cannon—and the oxen protected the two sides of the camp toward Tor, and he knew that his outposts were alert. Skal had a way of enforcing obedience among the escaped serfs, the deserters, and the gallows birds that had rallied to him on the Volga.

From the dead woodsman he had learned how few were the men-at-arms of Erlik Khan, and he did not look to be attacked.

Although his keen senses sampled the sounds and smells of the night, he was thinking of the face and slender body of Ivga, and of his purpose to take her for himself.

"*Ekh-ma-a*, father," grunted the man who was charging a pistol. "Such a moon—like a sun, it is."

Skal lifted his dark face toward the sky, and his lip twisted away from his teeth.

"Yonder the kites rise up. They have sighted this." And he spat on the body beside him, but his restless eyes took account of the crows circling over the pines.

The lieutenant—he had a thin red beard and a skin so pitted with small-pox it resembled carved wood—glanced sidewise at his leader without raising his eyes. It was not good, to his thinking, to look upon the full moon.

"Aye, Skal, there will be vultures and wolves aplenty at Tor, come another night."

The shaggy giant was wholly intent on the forest wall beneath the wheeling crows.

"*Sloo-ou—chay-y!*"

Beyond the wagons the sentinels raised their routine cry, but their mates on the other side did not echo it. Skal gripped hard upon the kisten in his fists—the long iron mace ending in a knobbed boss, which was heavier than a broadsword. A clumsy weapon in ordinary hands, but in Skal's grasp a thing more dangerous than any sword because he could wield it as lightly as a wooden cudgel.

"*Mátka Bozka schotzé driasnúlo!* Mother of ———, what was that noise?"

The man with the red beard raised his head but heard nothing except the rattling of the oxen's chains and the sougning wind above him.

Without a sound Skal sprang to his feet as a wolf stirs up, alert, with blazing eyes. He strode from the fire, away from the wagons, and stopped as suddenly as if he had scented danger under his

nose. Throwing back his great head, he laughed deep in his throat and roared, "Up lads—weapons in hand!"

From the nearby edge of shadow he had seen five men walking toward the camp, and still no cry from his sentinels. He saw in a glance that the foremost wore a pure white svitka and Cossack kalpak, and the second was as large in stature as Skal himself.

Kicking at the nearest of the sleepers, Skal started toward the intruders; the dicers left their board, drawing their short, straight swords, and everywhere the Volga men began to roll out of their skeeppskins.

The Cossack leader whipped out his saber and howled like a wolf. Instantly arrows flicked from the overhanging ridge and several of the pirates stumbled to their knees. The red lieutenant leveled his freshly charged pistol, and shot down one of the five, who were now running within spear cast of the Volga chief.

"Up!" roared Skal. "Close up, dogs! Steel to them."

His left hand jerked a small ax from his belt—a weapon that he could throw, splitting open the head of a foeman at ten paces. But a knot of his men gathered in front of him, and others, running up, formed a thin line on either hand. Of these the speeding arrows of the hidden bowmen took heavy toll.

The man nearest Skal groaned and stepped back, a shaft embedded under his heart. The Volga chieftain dropped his ax long enough to rip the arrow from the dying pirate and stare at its smoking point.

"Tatars and Cossack thieves!" he roared. "Drive them back to their holes."

This loosed Ayub's tongue.

"You lie, dog-face!" he cried. "Here are Zaporogian swords that have made Satan glad before now."

At his cry the Volga men hung back, but, urged by Skal and seeing no more than the four in front of them, five warriors ran at Kirdy. He sprang forward to meet them, caught one blade under the edge of his saber and passed the point through the man's throat. Stepping quickly to one side, he parried another's

slash and, laughing, smote the pirate in the forehead with his hilt. Stunned, the man was cut down by one of Ivga's champions.

Meanwhile Ayub had run forward, cutting savagely to left and right with his two-handed sword, so that only one of the five burlaki remained afoot. He was engaged by the other swordsman, while Ayub and Kirdy pressed forward, their shoulders touching, to reach Skal.

They had failed in the attempt to surprise the shrewd chieftain and both of them knew that if they could not slay Skal quickly they would be surrounded and borne down by numbers. Giovanni was slow in advancing to aid them.

But on their left Jean the Frenchman was running into the camp followed by his three dozen, and the Volga men on this side were facing about to form against the newcomers, whose number in that uncertain light was unknowable. So that, for a moment, only a few men stood around Skal.

The Cossacks drove in. Kirdy found himself opposed by the lieutenant, who hurled his empty pistol and crouched as Kirdy cut at his head. The heavy saber of the Volga man parried the first cut, and, stepping forward, he locked blades. Instantly his left arm flung out and he gripped Kirdy's weapon in his hand, drawing his own blade free with a shout of triumph.

Before he could bring down his saber the Cossack had caught and held his right wrist. At the same time Kirdy twisted his blade, pulling it back sharply, and the red-beard screamed when his fingers came off under the razor edge of the curved sword. Kirdy thrust him through, pushed him aside, and ran on.

Skal had gone back into the center of his camp to rally his followers. On either side men were fighting in groups or singly. The clatter of steel grew louder, the mutter of voices swelled to a roar.

*"Ou-ha-a!"*

Kirdy heard Ayub's shout and saw the big Zaporogian running



after Skal, accompanied only by one of the Tor men. Behind him Khlit's Tatars were coming forward, plying their bows.

But the young Cossack saw that on all sides the attack had been checked. Men were falling to the bloodstained snow. The armored knights of Tor were pressing in savagely, but the greater number of the wild burlaki was beginning to tell. All this he noticed as he sped after Ayub.

Skal turned, at the glowing embers of the large fire, and, while his men ran toward him, hurled his ax. It struck fair the forehead of the remaining warrior beside Ayub and split his skull, so that he dropped where he was hit and lay motionless.

"Satan looks after his own!" laughed Ayub. "Greet him well, ye!"

Before Kirdy could reach him, the broadsword and kisten had clashed, bright sparks shooting forth into the haze of moonlight.

"Death to you!" howled Skal.

For a moment it seemed as if the long iron kisten would shiver the broad blade of the Cossack. Once the knobbed end of the mace swept off his kalpak, drawing blood from his shaven brow.

"Back, brother," Kirdy pleaded, "or he will beat you down."

The heavy kisten, swung with all the strength of the Volga chieftain, seemed on the point of smashing in Ayub's skull like a melon. At such close quarters, the big Zaporogian had neither time nor room to swing his broadsword; all he could do was to parry the stunning blows of the mace.

"I'll give ground to no man," he panted, and suddenly dropped his sword. The Volga men, seeing this combat of the two giants, hung back expectantly, and Skal, beholding Ayub defenseless before him, shouted aloud and swung the kisten high.

As he did so Ayub hit out unexpectedly with his right fist and toppled the chieftain back. Before Skal could regain his footing and strike, Ayub had seized him around the ribs.

Skal beat at the Cossack's head, then gripped Ayub's throat in both hands, letting fall the kisten. They swayed and trampled back and forth, their heads growing darker with congested blood.

Ayub had locked his chin on his foeman's shoulder, and for a space the chieftain could not crush in his neck muscles.

Both men were gasping, their sinews cracking. They swerved into the fire and out again, their blackened boots smoking in the snow. Then Skal grunted. One of his ribs had broken. Ayub, grimly silent, tightened the grip of his steel-like arms.

Skal's twisted face grew black and he screamed suddenly, choking as the breath was driven from his lungs. His arms went limp and he lay in Ayub's grasp, his ribs cracked, his back broken.

The burlaki stared, not believing that Skal could be dead. But Tatar arrows smote them and those who had watched the fight turned to flee, crying that they were dealing not with men but with demons. Others joined them in seeking the safety of the forest. Kirdy, standing vigilant beside the wearied Ayub, saw that half the Volga men had abandoned the camp.

"*Umpf*," the Zaporogian grunted, picking up his sword and leaning on it while he got his breath back. "It was said he held mass for Satan. That did him little good."

"Come," said Kirdy impatiently, and they plunged into the thick of the fighting, leaving, as they pressed on, a trail of the dead behind them. As flames soar up when fresh wood is cast on a fire, the struggle about the Cossacks grew more intense—no longer were the voices of men to be heard, only the clang of weapons, the splintering of wood, and the bellowing of the frightened oxen.

On the outskirts of the camp someone shouted; a horse neighed and presently men began to call out everywhere: "Quarter—throw down your blades!—Make an end—Erlik Khan gives quarter!"

First one, then a dozen of the Volga burlaki, seeing that the warriors of Tor grounded the points of their sabers, threw down their weapons. Then all stood disarmed, looking in stunned silence at the apparition that paced out of the forest wall into the moonlight.

Upon the white horse sat Ivga without her helmet. Her cape

was thrown back and her shining black hair flooded her slender shoulders; her eyes sparkled with delight. The very poise of her head showed the pride she felt in Kirdy when she reined toward him, and placed her hand on his shoulder. So tall was the young Cossack that she needed not to lean down to do this.

"My falcon, even in former ages there were no greater heroes! *Ai*—my enemies lie scattered under your sword. Now it remains for Ivga of Tor to pay her debt."

## VI

*"What is homage without loyalty, or profit without honor? No more than the husk without the seed!"*

*Kashmiri Proverb.*

The fear that shone from the stained faces of Ivga's men was no greater than the bewilderment of the Volga men when they beheld a young woman in command. They thought that the wizard, Erlik Khan, had chosen to appear in this semblance. All this amused Ivga, who issued orders to fetch in the pirates who had sought shelter in the forest, and to build up the fires.

"I will no longer wear the mask, Messer Giovanni," she assured the Genoese, who looked more sallow than ever when he saw her admiration for the Cossack. "Do you make known to these animals of mine why I hid behind the helmet of Erlik Khan."

"Men of Tor," responded the ready-witted captain, "the mistress is no magician. Erlik Khan is no more than a name, to put fear into our enemies. Those who first came to the ousadba beheld the dwarf, Erlik, and made up a tale that he was a koldun. The boyarishna could not lead you, in the raids, if you thought she was no more than a maiden, unskilled in war. So she clad herself as you see, and took the name of Erlik Khan—and you have seen that no foeman could stand against her. Even," he

added with a faint sneer, "these lordly and renowned Cossacks were taken—"

Ayub lifted his head angrily, but Ivga smiled at him, and flicked Giovanni with her whip.

"Enough, sir captain! And now harken, O ye rivermen. Your lives are spared—if ye serve me faithfully in all things, giving up the ships hidden in the reeds of the river."

The captives answered with an instant shout—"We will serve you, gracious lady!"

Without leaders of their own, awed by her beauty, those nearest Ivga fell on their knees and beat their foreheads against the snow.

"*Ohai*, my dogs!" she laughed. "The portage is ours; now we will frolic on the Volga. We will make the red cock crow in the walled villages, and drink the wines of Astrakhan. Did Skal show you good hunting? Now the frontier is yours and you will take what you will—red gold and fair women, and the altar pieces of the monks!"

She knew how to stir their blood. They raised up their hands and roared approval, while the men of Tor listened eagerly, understanding now why the lives of the burlaki had been spared. With Skal's men, the power of Tor was doubled. With cannon and ships they could levy tribute on the river. Outlaws all, they grinned and nudged one another, elated—not quite certain yet whether she were witch or human, but assured of the good fortune that followed her.

"We will kindle things up, Lady-Miss!" they proclaimed.

Again Ivga laughed, her hand on Kirdy's shoulder.

"We shall kindle a flame that will light the border. The Tatars of the far steppe will obey the White Falcon; their hordes will cross the river, to our aid. We shall sow terror. And why, men of Tor?"

They held their breath and crowded closer to hear the better, forgetful of wounds.

"Why?" echoed Jean, the Frenchman, his eyes on her face.

"*Boris Gudunov is dead!*"

Giovanni, his thin features sharp in the firelight, cried up at her.

"The Czar is dead?"

"Aye so—he who ruled Muscovy and the steppe with a hand of iron and bound you—and you—serfs to the soil." She pointed her whip at the outlaws. "Now the power of the Czar is no more than a shadow. Already his empire breaks up—the Kalmuk across the river rides against the Muscovites; the Poles are on the march. One town arms against another. The plundering has begun and we will take our share."

Only half understanding, the outlaws bellowed their glee. Plunder—they lived for nothing more than that.

But Ivga, utterly heedless of them, had bent her dark head to the silent Kirdy.

"My lord," she whispered exultantly, "such words serve to feed the rabble. Yet it is true, my falcon—all true. Once I lied to you, but now—"

The color deepened in his cheeks, and she brushed back the tangle of her hair.

"Now I yield Tor to you."

When he did not answer at once, she went on swiftly: "Out of the fragments of the border an empire can be built up. At such times of stress the masterless men flock to leaders. The Cossack Irmak made an empire with fewer men than these."

"Fewer, but they were Don Cossacks," said Kirdy reflectively.

"And cannot you lead Don Cossacks to Tor? It has been told me that Boris Gudunov sent five hundred of your comrades, you among them, to suffer in the deserts of Asia. Do you not live by the sword? Be master of Tor and the Khan of all the hordes will send envoys to you."

The pressure of her hand, the insistence of her splendid eyes stirred the blood of the warrior. The hint of coming war aroused him instantly.

"And I, Ivga"—the words barely reached his ear—"will serve you, my falcon, body and soul. Of all men, I love only you."



"You!" he cried, trying to understand. "You love—"

"The White Falcon." She bent still lower in the saddle and raised his hand, pressing it with sudden strength to her forehead. Of all those who stood around them, only Giovanni saw the act, and frowned.

"Nay, my falcon," she added merrily, "do not the very gods serve you? Your sword will never be drawn against your brother Cossacks, because the Zaporogians have lifted the standard of war. Their Siech, their mother, has declared itself free."

The beauty of the woman who had aroused his admiration, the savage appeal of her ambition, her very pride in him—all these faded from his thoughts. With an effort he drew his eyes from hers, and felt as if invisible chains had fallen away from him.

"The Siech's at war!" A voice within cried it out, and the words rose to his lips as he looked around eagerly for Khlit. "Little grandfather," he shouted, "there is war in the Cossack land. We must hasten to the Siech."

No longer was his spirit troubled; the path he meant to take was clear to his eyes; an eagerness to be in the saddle seized upon him.

"You would leave me?" Ivga's lips were still smiling, but her cheeks had turned colorless.

"The road awaits us."

"But—you would not leave me. Why? Among the Cossacks of the Siech who would know the White Falcon? Here you are master. Yonder you would curry your horse and ride guard at night, in the snow. Your captain would shout at you, and if there is a battle, you would charge like cattle, pressed in among a thousand of your kind. Why do you think of that?"

Kirdy smiled. Ivga had painted for him the very longing that was in his heart. To take his place among the Cossacks, and hear a sotnik swear at him in his own language; to be in the saddle, on the night round of the picket lines, singing to the restless horses—to charge with the thunder of a thousand hoofs in his ear!

"*Ekh*, I thank you for the word. You are brave, boyarishna,

and beautiful as the dawn on the southern steppe. Now Skal is dead and you have many swords to serve you. Nay—we must seek the horses, because the road is long to the Siech.”

The bewilderment and dismay had left her eyes and they had grown bleak. Ivga had smiled at men before now, and they had given their lives to her.

“I would have—slain Erlik, for your sake,” she whispered.

Kirdy’s lips tightened. Because Ivga had almost tricked him into dishonoring his sword by cutting down the dwarf, who was no longer useful to her, he had distrusted her after that hour. But he found no words to make this clear to her.

Nor could he make clear to her that he had no love for Tor and its brigands—a woman’s kingdom, luxurious as a court of Ind, but impalpable and brief as the morning mist. Khlit had said truly that the soul might be loosed from the body but a Cossack’s pride could not be driven from his soul.

He did not see the flush that darkened even her eyes, or hear the swift pounding of her heart. Ivga’s pride, in its own way, was no less than his.

“Choose!” she cried, struggling to breathe evenly. “The road, or my—service!”

Kirdy looked out beyond the fires. Over the serried line of the forest, the first dull streaks of the sun’s rising were showing in the sky. The moon had grown smaller, it seemed, and was like a round orange lantern hung near the horizon.

“Farewell, boyarishna—may God keep you.”

And in that moment Ivga had a feeling that it would be better to permit the three Cossacks to go, as she had pledged, unharmed from Tor. But anger, like a hot flash, leaped from her heart to her brain. She smiled strangely.

“I jested, my falcon. I see it is true that Cossacks are clowns without spirit who groom horses well. Giovanni!”

A glance at the thin, sardonic face of the Genoese captain decided her, and she spoke to him under her breath, turning her back on Kirdy.

With a half nod Giovanni passed around her horse, drawing off one of his gauntlets as he did so. Ignoring Khlit and Ayub, he bowed before Kirdy, the hand with the glove sweeping low.

"Ha, you are in haste, Messer Cossack. You would be off before I could remind you of your promise—a little matter of satisfaction that is due me."

Without giving Kirdy a chance to answer he stepped forward and made as if to flick the glove in his face. Kirdy's hand went to his sword hilt instantly and Giovanni appeared to ponder.

"Perhaps if I stir you up with the flat of the blade, you will stay to cross swords with me. Ah, so!"

Kirdy had started forward, his eyes blazing, until he was checked by Ayub's great arms.

"Will you fight with your own weapon?" Messer Giovanni asked with some curiosity. "Then choose the ground. As for seconds—"

"Enough!" cried Kirdy. "Begin!"

But the Genoese, who was no stranger to the dueling ground, wished to make the most of the Cossack's impatience. He would have challenged Kirdy on his own account; now, at the unexpected suggestion from Ivga that he do so, he experienced a keen satisfaction, knowing that the young warrior had aroused such anger in the mistress of Tor that his blood would certainly be shed.

Giovanni knew much of women. In Ivga's passion he foresaw favor for himself, and a step toward that for which he had planned patiently ever since, coming to Tor, he had been aware that Ivga was the winged rider. Leisurely, he removed his coat, and warmed his fingers at the fire, bidding the outlaws throw on more wood so that the light would be better.

Then he stamped on the surface of hard, trodden snow, to make certain of the footing, and took off his coat.

Jean the Frenchman approached Kirdy, who, his svitka flung aside carelessly, stood with his eyes fixed on the black form of Giovanni.

"*Par dieux*," exclaimed the captain, "you will not fight with that light saber?"

Impatiently, Kirdy nodded.

"But you cannot do that!" The Frenchman flung out his hands and his eyes widened. "Look! Giovanni uses the heavy campaign rapier—a straight blade. With the curved blade you cannot parry his thrust—for long. Perhaps you have never dealt with an Italian rapier before?"

"He has not," Ayub put in, and added anxiously to Kirdy, "Eh, brother, that black dog will outreach you—his blade will glide around your sablianka."

The French captain put his hand on his hip and bowed.

"Young sir, you are brave. I—Jean Etienne de Montleherey—was once accounted a *maître de l'escrime*. I have had bouts with Giovanni. Consider, he is fresh, you are wearied. Take then my blade, if you will. In its day, it served well a Christian king."

His blurred eyes gleamed and he straightened his shoulders with something of a swagger. Kirdy glanced at the plain rapier of the Frankish captain.

"Nay, sotnik, the curved blade fits a Cossack hand."

"As you will." Jean de Montleherey hesitated, and added under his breath, "Sir Cossack, in our duels the dagger may be used in the left hand. Giovanni wears a knife at his hip. Watch, then, his left hand."

He glanced at Giovanni, who had chosen his ground with his back to one of the fires and was bending the supple blade of the rapier in both hands. Kirdy, arms and throat bare, quivered with eagerness, the curved blade moving restlessly in his grasp.

"To one death, to the other life!" he cried.

The Frenchman glanced again at Giovanni, who nodded gravely.

"Begin, *messieurs*," he said, and turned to Ayub. "A pity, is it not? A splendid youth. Name of a name!"

Kirdy had sprung forward, slashing thrice at his foe's heart, so swiftly that the watchers stared. And, quietly, Giovanni parried the cuts. His right foot slid forward, his arm shot out and up,

and when Ayub could see Kirdy again, blood was dripping from the base of the young warrior's throat. The point of the long rapier had pierced beneath the skin.

Kirdy gave ground. Here was no sweeping onset, no crashing strokes of the saber. He could not leap in and out, as a Cossack fights. The gliding thrust of the rapier could not be foreseen.

Confident now that he had checked the first rush of the Cossack, the Genoese began to attack at once. He was utterly cool as he took matters into his own hands. A master of the sword, driven to flee as an outlaw by an unfortunate duel, he had no doubt of his ability to slay the young Cossack.

"May God and His holy angels watch over Kirdy-aga," groaned Ayub. "*Ekh*, he draws back again. The ——— in armor could not stand before him with a saber, but that long spit is always at his throttle."

Giovanni was feinting and thrusting without an instant's respite, the corded muscles standing out on his forearm. The two blades were ripples of flame as the firelight gleamed on the bright steel. And still Kirdy gave ground, perforce, before the menace of that dancing point.

Breathing heavily, the Volga men pressed against the shoulders of their captors, forgetting everything in their delight at the savage play of the swords. Ivga never took her eyes from Kirdy, except when she glanced once fleetingly at Khlit. The old ataman, quite undisturbed and feeling the bite of hunger, had drawn a barley cake from his wallet and was munching it steadily, his eyes hidden by shaggy brows watching the flashing weapons.

Kirdy had retreated until he felt one of the wagons behind him. Here he held his ground, crouching, his right arm shortened, only the wrist and elbow moving.

The grating of the blades never ceased, nor were they for an instant disengaged. Giovanni was feeling the saber, his rapier whirling in and out. Both men were breathing fast, and sweat ran from their heads. Steam rose around them in the bitter air.

Giovanni's knees were bent, his body swaying back and for-



ward. Now he smiled. He was growing tired, but Kirdy, weary when the fight began, was panting. Thrust followed thrust, always to be parried by the instinctive skill and the iron wrist of the Cossack. Once the rapier point passed through a fold of Kirdy's shirt at the side, and he cut at Giovanni's head.

But the Genoese slipped back a pace—and the blades had engaged again before the watchers were aware that the saber had struck, fruitlessly.

"Not then," gasped Giovanni, his smile fixed as if painted on a mask, "but presently—you will die."

He was growing flushed under the eyes, and anger surged through his veins. He had been confident of tiring the Cossack, and it was inconceivable to him that a saber could parry a rapier point for so long. The two men, nearly at the end of their strength, were gathering themselves together for the end.

And still the blades twisted and flashed without respite.

"He lives yet!" whispered Ayub hoarsely. "A golden candle to Saint Nicholas, and a new robe to the good Saint Andrew. May they—"

Suddenly he clutched his head, and Khlit drew in his breath sharply. For the last moment Giovanni had repeated the same glissading thrust—a light feint, a thrust to the other side, against the heart. Three times Kirdy had knocked the rapier point aside. Again Giovanni had fainted. But this time the rapier flashed up before Kirdy's eyes, and a knife gleamed in Giovanni's left hand as it drove for the Cossack's heart.

Kirdy's eyes, fastened on the livid face of the Genoese, had caught the sudden purpose and the flicker of the knife. His saber swept out and then up. The blade whistled as it cut down twice.

"Name of a name!" whispered the French captain.

Giovanni, slashed through the temples on each side, lay motionless in the snow. But his left hand, severed from the wrist by the first snap of the keen-edged blade, had fallen a dozen feet away, the dagger still gripped in its fingers.

For a moment no one moved and then Jean de Montleherey went to the Genoese and turned him over. He was dead—had died in all likelihood before he touched the earth.

Ivga, her lips bloodless, spurred her horse up to the two men and smiled at the French captain.

“Monsieur, you, too, have a word to say to this Cossack. Slay him!”

“I? It is true that I challenged him, and another day I will await him where he pleases.” He shrugged plump shoulders, as if explaining a simple matter to a child. “Name of a name, though, he has fought ten men this night and is cut up, I—Jean de Montleherey—could not cross swords with him.”

Ivga’s hand, which had been pressed against her throat, sought her side. Kirdy, leaning against the wagon, his eyes closed, did not see that she had drawn a dagger from her girdle.

“No!” The Frenchman caught her arm impulsively, and she screamed suddenly.

Wrenching free, she leaned down, and before the man could defend himself, drove the knife blade into his throat.

“A hundred gold pieces to the man who strikes down the Cossack!” she cried to her startled men-at-arms. “Bows—take bows!”

Some of the archers began to string their bows; others, lifting pike and sword, ran forward. They were checked in their onset by a loud whistle from Khlit. The old Cossack had leaped to the top of the line of wagons, and now he whistled again. The men of Tor heard the soft impact of hoofs on the beaten snow and turned to see what riders were approaching.

They beheld, instead of riders, a gray pony with an empty saddle, followed by two others. The horses shied at the fires but made toward Khlit, who leaped into the saddle of the gray. He wheeled away, leaning to the neck of the pony so that all the archers saw was a gaunt leg, the tail of a flapping svitka, and a polished boot hanging over the saddle.

Kirdy and Ayub had jumped for their mounts before any man thought to prevent them. Running beside the ponies, they gained

the saddle and raced beyond the firelight. A few arrows whistled over them without doing any harm.

At the edge of the forest Khlit had reined in, and they paused to look back at Ivga.

Motionless in the saddle, the boyarishna pressed her hands against her face. On the snow by the white horse lay the bodies of Skal and the two men who had sought her love. In the illusive glow of the firelight it seemed as if they were still trying to look upon her face with their sightless eyes.

Ayub crossed himself and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Eh, tell me brothers—she is beautiful, that's the truth. Is she a witch, or"—he pondered a moment—"a woman who wished to reign like a king?"

But Khlit and Kirdy heeded him not. They were looking intently at a figure moving toward them in the murk of the forest. It proved to be a mounted man, Shmel on his nag, shambling forward uneasily and yet hopefully.

"Noble colonels—and I swear you will be generals now that the illustrious Cossacks are at war—I obeyed in everything your order. I rode to the Tatar horse-herds, and as God lives, they came near ending my life with their arrows. When they heard the name of the ataman Khlit they bowed to the girdle and gave up the horses, pointing out the right ones to me. Then, believe me, I rode like mad to your nobility—"

"Give him gold," Khlit said to his companions.

The three Cossacks untied their wallets and tossed them to Shmel, who was struck dumb by this evidence of madness, and by the circumstance that the warriors had not even counted the gold and silver pieces in the heavy wallets.

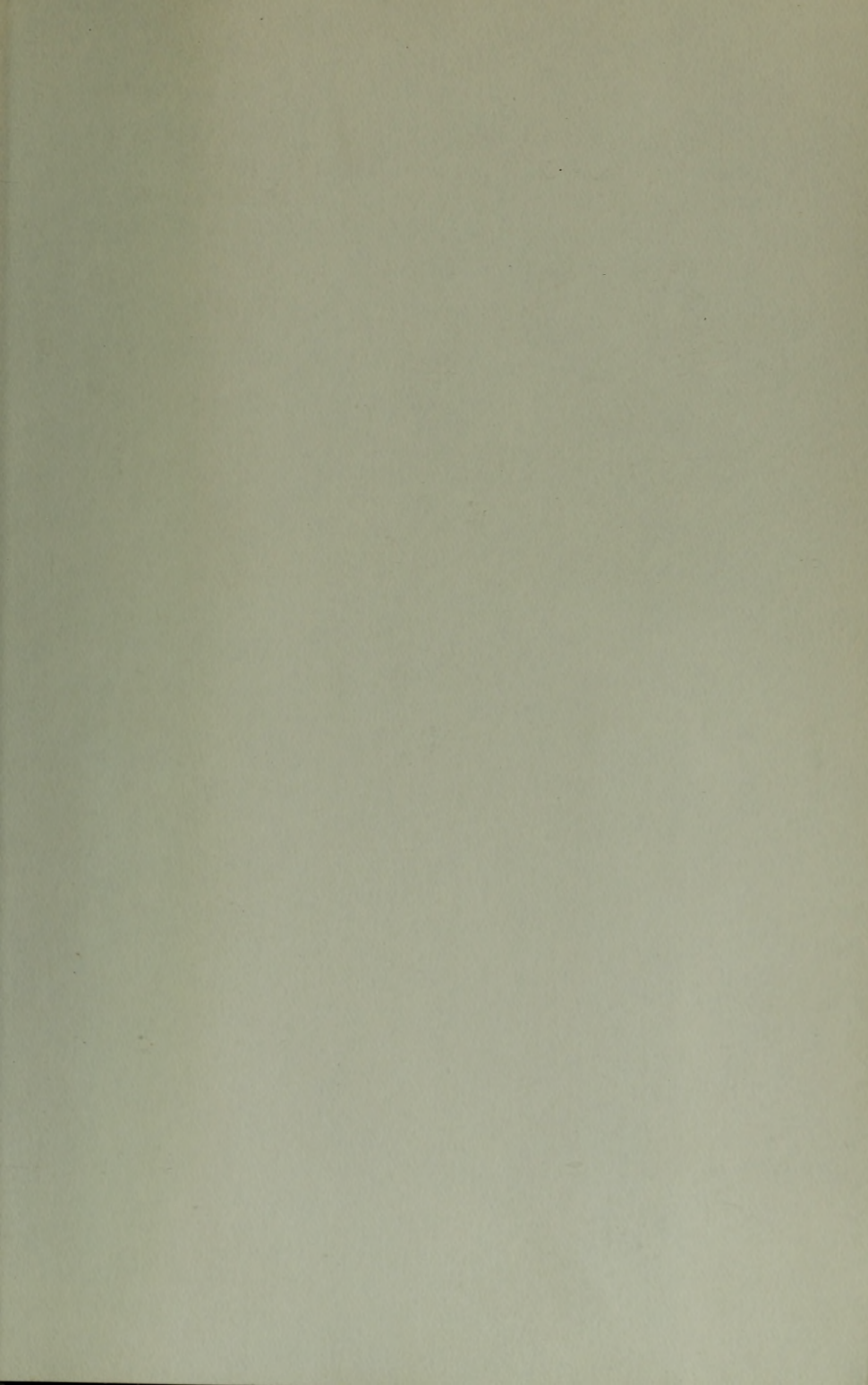
"*The Siech's at war, Jew!*" Khlit's beard bristled in a grin, as he tightened his reins and made off.

He was unusually happy. Not four days ago he had said to Ayub that Kirdy's eyes were not yet open. Until now the young warrior had not met with treachery; but at Tor he had dealt with the enemies who were hidden, and with the hatred of a proud

and ambitious woman. Kirdy was unharmed—a stab in the throat, but unharmed in his spirit and much the wiser.

So great was Khlit's satisfaction, he actually praised Kirdy.

"You did well enough, for a mewling cub. Only don't give up the horses again, you little dog's brother!"





Both men were gasping, their sinews cracking. They swerved into the fire and out again, their blackened boots smoking in the snow. Then Skal grunted. One of his ribs had broken. Ayub, grimly silent, tightened the grip of his steel-like arms.

Skal's twisted face grew black and he screamed suddenly, choking as the breath was driven from his lungs. His arms went limp and he lay in Ayub's grasp, his ribs cracked, his back broken.

# Harold Lamb

## The Mighty Manslayer