

THE SEA OF THE RAVENS



HAROLD LAMB
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THE SEA OF THE RAVENS

Harold Lamb

The Sea of the Ravens continues the exploits of *Durandal*, fabled sword of history and legend. This blade of destiny had found its way into Africa and finally into the Near-East, subsequent to the death of the warrior-hero Roland, knight of Charlemagne.

How the sword came into the hands of Sir Hugh of Taranto, whose band of 800 Crusaders is slain through treachery, is chronicled in the earlier book, *Durandal*. In *The Sea of the Ravens*, Sir Hugh joins forces with the great khan, Genghis, in a man-hunt for an emperor that is without parallel in human annals.

This is the second of three related volumes which first appeared in *Adventure* magazine more than fifty years ago. Each tale may be read independently, but all succeed in capturing a somber and moody flavor that was to prove an influence on Robert E. Howard. Here are a series of monumental battles, dark treachery and betrayals that led one winner of the prestigious "Howard" award to say about *Durandal*: "Brilliant! Simply brilliant! . . . It is the foundation of modern heroic fantasy."

The author of *The Sea of the Ravens* is Harold Lamb whose marvelous historical biographies of *Genghis Khan*, *Hannibal*, and *Tamerlane* have been best sellers for decades.

The Sea of the Ravens contains 8 full-color illustrations by Alicia Austin and George Barr.

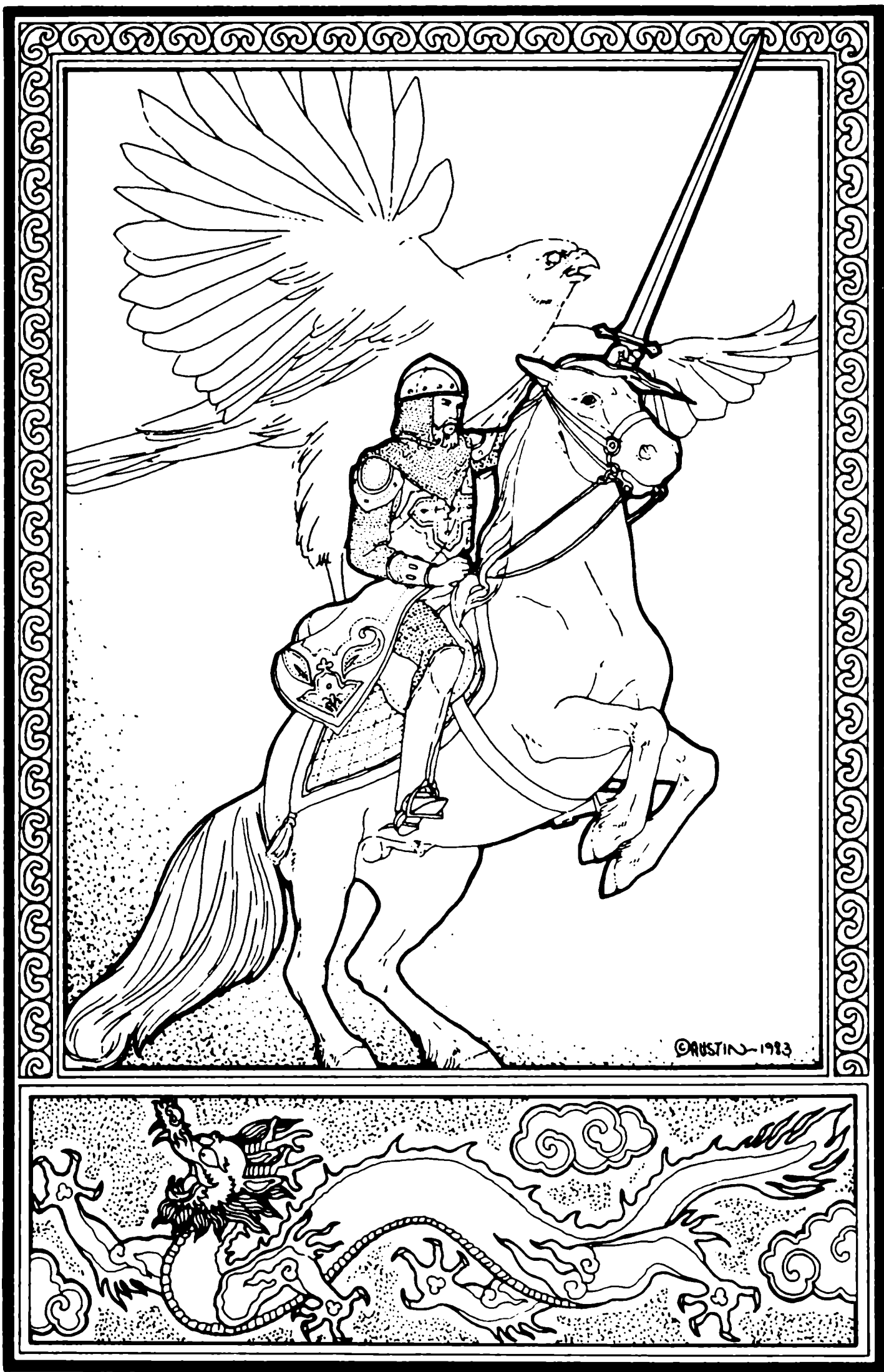
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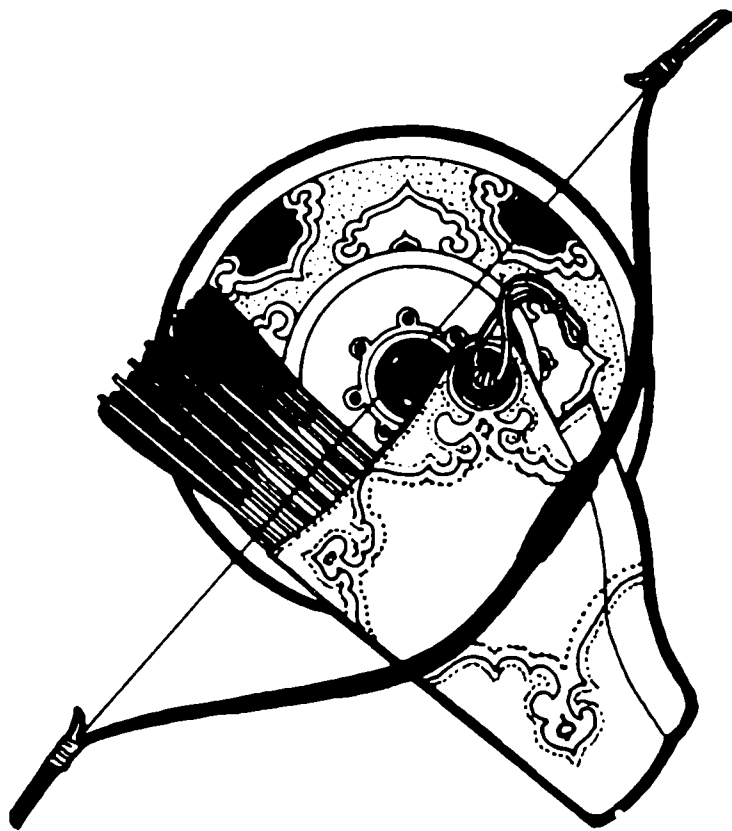
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by HAROLD LAMB

Illustrated by
Alicia Austin & George Barr



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by Harold Lamb

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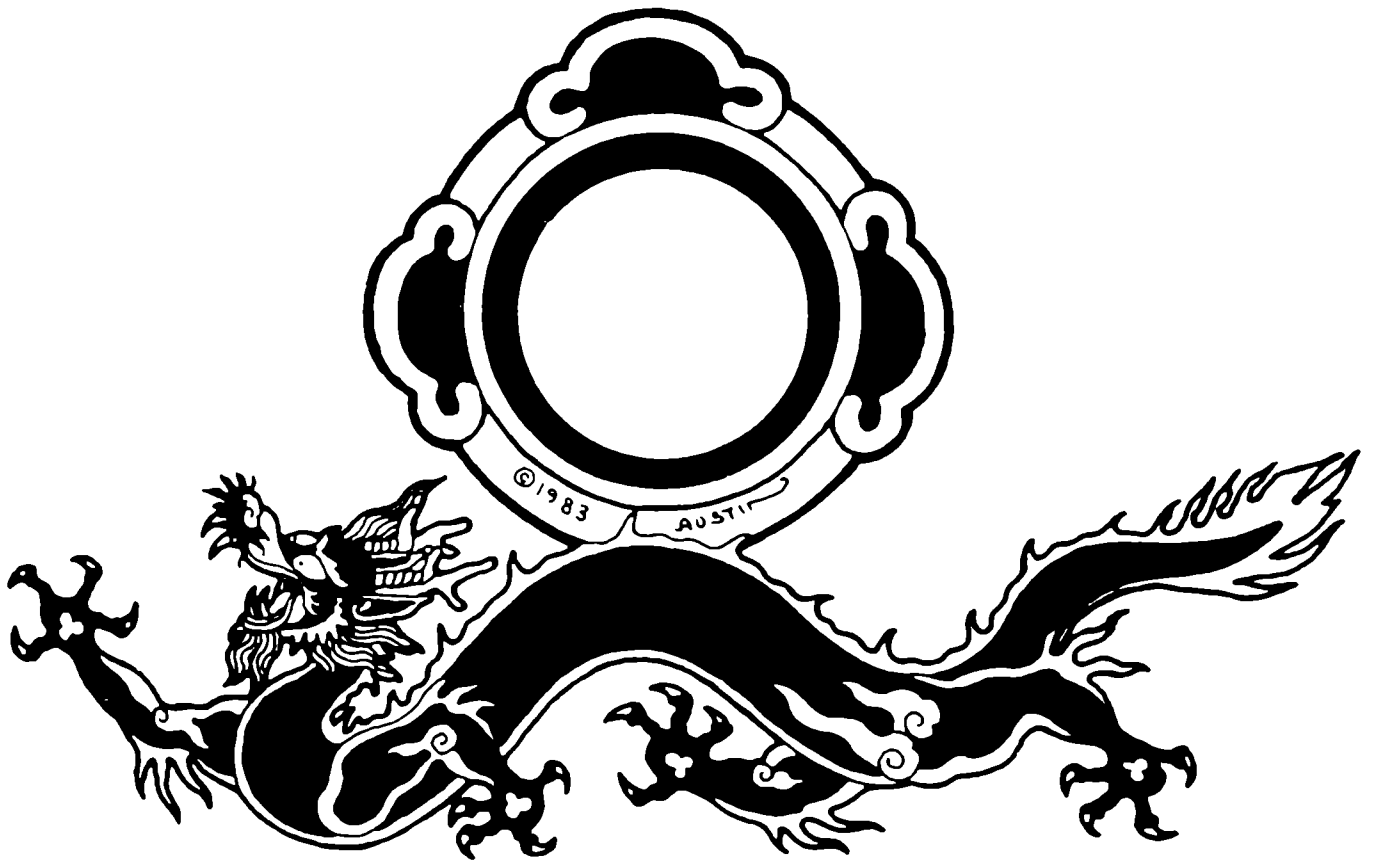
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THE SEA OF THE RAVENS is volume two in a series of three books that chronicle the exploits of Sir Hugh and the sword, *Durandal*.

I L L U S T R A T I O N S

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- “And yet two signs befriend thee. Look for the coming of the Archer and the Dragon — they will aid thee. (See page 35) 33
- Tightening the rein, he struck spurs into Khutb’s flanks and plunged through the Muhammadans. (See page 51) 48
- “By this token from the body of Mir Beg, I have seen thine enemies, the riders of Cathay.” (See page 90) 65
- “Cathayans!” cried Nureddin. “Already I have died. My heart is water and I must die again.” (See page 96) 80
- Khutb reared and a simitar flashing down from the other side wrenched into the loose mail of Hugh’s shoulder. (See page 128) 129
- They faced the mass of the Horde, but all fire had left them and from the other sides came steadily that storm of shafts. (See page 135) 144
- “Aside ye men of the Horde! Make way for the bearer of tidings from the great Khan Genghis.” (See page 172) 161
- “*Hai* — the hunt is at an end!” (See page 189) 176

The march of ninety degrees of longitude was made by the Mongol Horde of Genghis Khan early in the thirteenth century. It was the most remarkable feat performed by cavalry in all history.

The map shows the route followed, roughly. Starting from the northern Gobi, two hundred thousand horsemen crossed the ranges of Central Asia, passed over the Kizil Kum desert, took Samarkand and Bokhara, went through the Hindu Kush and looked in on Delhi, turned west over modern Afghanistan and northern Persia, including the great salt desert, continued on west into a corner of Armenia, turned north and passed through the Caucasus, entered the Russian steppes, swung down into the Crimea on the Black Sea, and into Europe as far as the Dnieper River, then returned to the Gobi through the heart of what is now the Russian empire — or is it a republic?

This trek of a wandering army is remarkable in itself. But every foot of the route lay through hostile country, and battles were the order of the day. Moreover, the march from Afghanistan westward was made by two of the Mongol eagles, or marshals — Subotai and Chepe Noyon — with two and a half *tumans*. A *tuman*, or cavalry

division, numbered ten thousand. So the two Eagles could not have had more than twenty-five thousand.

They were ordered by Genghis Khan to set out in pursuit of the Muhammadan emperor, to ride him down wherever he went in the world and not to come back until he was dead. They did it.

And this man-hunt of an emperor is without parallel in human annals. Muhammad, fleeing before the Mongols, had all the Moslem empires of the west for sanctuary — Kharesmia, Persia, Saracen and Seljucke, the Mameluks of Egypt. He could, and did, throw armies in the path of the pursuing Mongol divisions; he could pass through great cities that they must besiege or skirt. He disguised himself, slept at night in different tents.

He would start off on one road and divide his followers, turning off in a different direction himself. He had resources — the bulk of his treasure with him — and devoted men to serve him.

At Nisapur he organized a hunt on a large scale and stole away with a few warriors. But the hard-riding Mongols were never off the scent for long. They trailed him through half a dozen kingdoms, headed him off from Bagdad, and then from the refuge of the Caucasus.

The final scene, where the Mongols came up with the fleeing emperor on the Caspian shore is not a bit of the author's imagination. It is given, as in the story, by al-Nisavi, the chronicler.

*

*

*

And the main events of the story took place as related. Muhammad, Omar, Subotai and Ye Lui Kutsai are characters of history. It is not certain whether Kutsai accompanied Subotai. In reality, Muhammad died on his island instead of in the boat. The chronicler says of him "In spite of vast riches, the sultan was so poverty-ridden at his death that he was buried in a shirt of one of his followers for a shroud."

The Sea of the Ravens is the Caspian Sea. It was christened *Kouzgoun Denguiz* or Sea of the Crows by, I think, the Huns or Alans.

One thing calls for explanation. The story describes the Mongol Horde as it existed then. Most of us have been given the impression that the Mongols were a migratory people, vast multitudes moving over and conquering half the world. Also that the Mongols were Chinese.

They were no more Chinese than the Arabs are Turks. They conquered thirteenth century China, which is named Cathay in the story. The Horde was a disciplined body of cavalry that could go anywhere.

It was untiring. As for its rate of progress, Subotai once galloped with twenty thousand men two hundred and ninety kilometers in a little less than three days.

It was handled with all the genius of Genghis Khan and the veteran Eagles who had waged war for a generation in Cathay. The victories gained by the Mongols —

invariably, swiftly, and with terrible losses to the foes — seem incredible until we reflect that the armies of the middle ages were accustomed to fight in compact masses, either standing their ground or charging. The Mongols maneuvered in detached divisions, and their bows outranged anything opposed to them.

A Christian observer reports that the arrows of the Mongols were so devastating that they rarely had to use their side arms in a battle. The trick — and Subotai was a master of strategy — played on the Kharesmians was the same that annihilated the grand dukes of Russia and their host a year or so later.

There is so much bunk in history about Genghis Khan that we ought to know the truth. Demetrious Boulger is speaking:

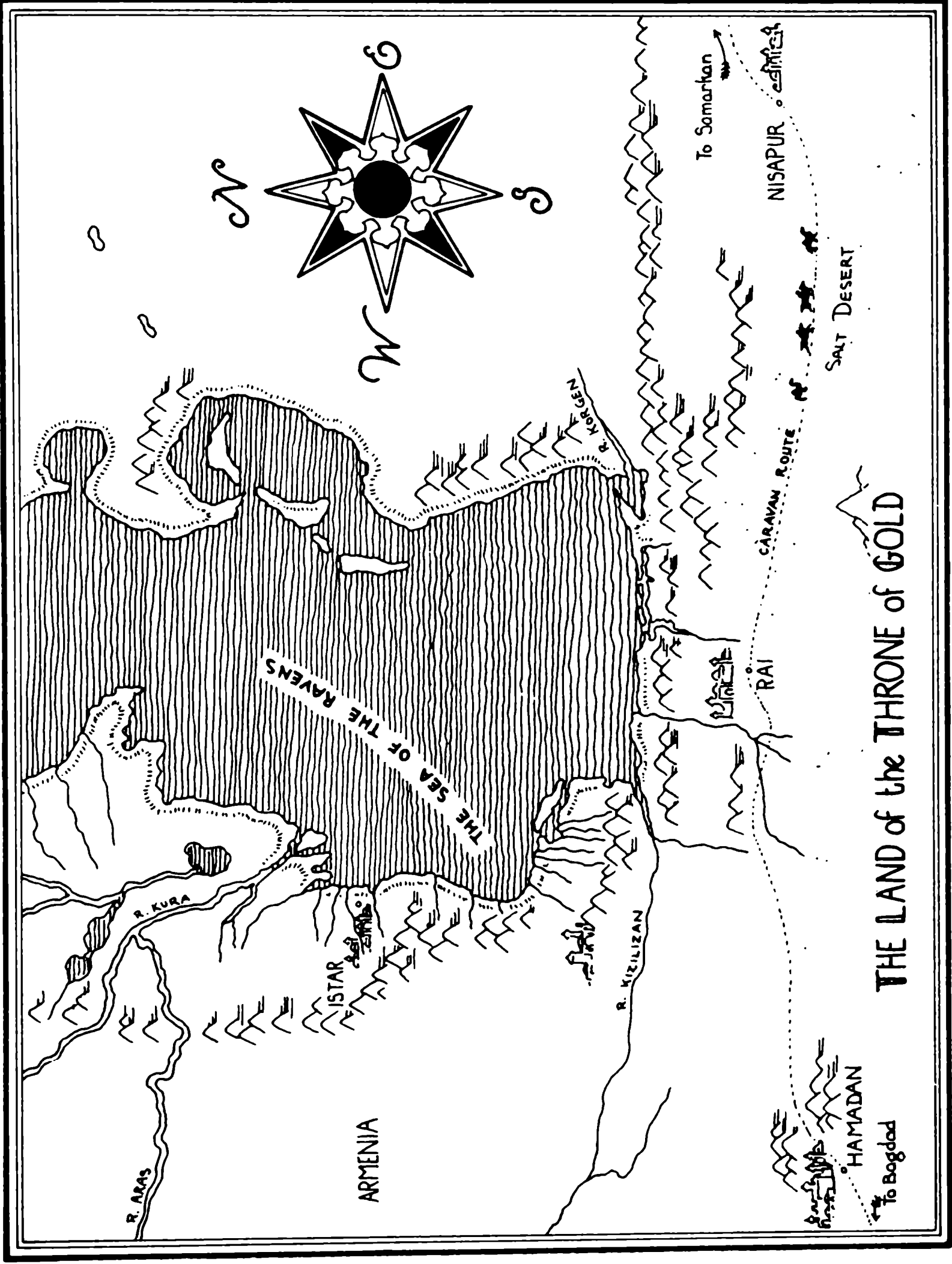
“The area of his conquests was more vast than was the case with any other conqueror. Not a country from the Black to the China Sea escaped the tramp of the Mongol horsemen. . . . Perhaps the most important result was the arrest of the Mohammadan career in Central Asia — and this is not as fully recognized as it should be.

“Genghis Khan was a military genius of the very first order, and it may be questioned whether either Caesar or Napoleon can, as commanders, be placed on a par with him. Even the Chinese said he led his armies like a god.

“The manner in which he moved large bodies of men over vast distances, his strategy in unknown regions,

always unhesitating, his brilliant victories — a succession of ‘suns of Austerlitz’ make up a picture of a career to which Europe can offer nothing that will surpass, if indeed she has anything to bear comparison with it.”

As to the Mongol pony express, it is described by Marco Polo and others, as in the story. Mark Paul says the express riders made ten days’ journey in a single day — probably a hundred and fifty to two hundred miles. In modern times, four Tatars riding day and night used to carry the express from Constantinople to Bagdad, about 1,100 miles in twenty days.



THE SEA OF THE RAVENS

CHAPTER I

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

Arab Proverb

Nureddin was hungry. He squatted beside his donkey and watched a copper bowl simmering in the fire. Only a handful of barley was in the bowl and, although Nureddin had spent the twilight hour gathering fuel, the scanty heap of dry dung and tamarisk twigs would not make the water boil.

The hour of the *namaz gar*, the evening prayer, had passed, and the sun had dipped out of sight behind the rampart of mountains, a changing radiance clinging to a single lofty snow summit. Now this peak was gray and there stole over the caravanserai in which Nureddin squatted the utter quiet of the desert plain.

The donkey munched twigs sleepily; the sick man who lay in a corner of the broken stone wall moaned at intervals. He was an old man, come from somewhere or other, and intent on reaching the thrice holy city of Meshed where he could die with the assurance that he

had become a *hadji*, a pilgrim with the pilgrimage performed. Nureddin had inspected the thin body of the old Persian and did not think he would reach Meshed.

They had arrived at the caravanserai at the same time, coming from opposite directions, Nureddin whacking the rump of his donkey, and the pilgrim moving very slowly, sitting down often to rest. Few men passed by this caravanserai that lay on the edge of the salt desert, below the foothills of the western mountains. Here there was a well, brackish water that tasted of sulphur. No grass grew about the well, not even a withered poplar. Tough, gray tamarisk clung to the stones of the wall, and that was all.

Above the fringe of brush two heads appeared, enormous in the dusk. After a look inside, the heads materialized into two Turkomans wearing clumsy *kalpaks* of black wool and mounted on miserable pones as shaggy as the *kalpaks*.

After inspecting the sick man the riders came and peered at Nureddin, who tried not to seem afraid of them.

“God be with ye!” he cried and received no answer.

One of the Turkomans, who wore two yataghans girdled high under his arms, dismounted and kicked Nureddin’s pack. It flapped open loosely, disgorging nothing of greater worth than a cloak with holes in it, a length of carpet, some scrolls of paper and a brass pen.

The tribesmen — who had wandered into the *serai* on the chance of finding odds and ends of plunder — scrutinized Nureddin's bald-faced donkey in disgust, sniffed at the copper bowl, spat into it and went off to the well.

Nureddin sighed thankfully. He was an astrologer and a man of peace; moreover, he had various bracelets worth more than a little under his sleeves, and a purse slung beneath his arm-pit.

Since no further attention was paid to him, he began to talk, and his tongue soon wagged freely. He called the Turkomans khans and *orluks* — eagles from the mountains.

“*Ai*, what a journey! How my bones ache. My liver has died in me. When the grass turned brown I started from the cities of the Land of the Throne of Gold. I crossed the salt desert, with companions, and,” he added hastily, “without money of any kind.”

The eagles from the mountains only snarled at him and went about their business of eating.

“By God's will,” went on the astrologer, “I did not perish from the breath of the poison wind. Many's the time I watched *ghils* dancing at my side. Sometimes they cried to me, sometimes they beckoned me.”

The *ghils* were spirits of waste places, arising where the bones of men lay unburied, and supposedly led travelers astray in the salt desert. It was well known that

dead men were often found, outstretched and fully clad, without sign of a wound upon them. And when such bodies were lifted, the arms came away from the trunk. Nay, the finger of the passer-by could be thrust into them as if the bodies were no more than dust.

True, some said that it was not the *ghils* but the breath of the *Simúm* wind, the poison wind that dried men up and left them lifeless. But when the heat had been greatest Nureddin had beheld quivering shapes in the air.

“What have I not seen?” He began to boast a little, because after all, he had crossed the salt desert. “Back there, under the rising sun is a war, and such a war!”

“By Allah,” grunted one of the Turkomans, “there is no war in Kharesmia.”*

Crunching away at his barley, the astrologer lifted his hand and shook his head.

“There is a war! I have seen. The roads are peopled with the flying, and wailing is heard in every village. Aye, the smoke of burning cities hides the sun.”

The Turkomans, looking like sitting vultures in the dusk, weighed his words. They were the scavengers

*The Land of the Throne of Gold, the greatest of the Muham-madan empires of the early thirteenth century, stretching from India to the Caspian Sea. Its ruling cities were Bokhara and Samarkand.

of the caravan route, hungry for plunder. But between them and the Land of the Throne of Gold there was the salt desert, and this they had no desire to cross.

“God is one,” muttered the taller of the Turkomans. “The war may come even to these mountains.”

He was thinking of the caravans of fugitives, but Nureddin who had seen what lifted his hair on his scalp was filled with a new dread. Verily, the slaying and the wailing, the clangor of kettle-drums and cymbals, the clash of steel blades might pursue him across the salt desert. The caravanserai and the hills were within the Kharesmian empire —

So thinking he lifted his eyes to the glowing vault of the sky and cried out suddenly, twisting his fingers in his scanty beard.

“*Ahai! Ahai!* Look! A portent is to be seen. There, above the ranges — God hath hung the banners of death.”

Even the pilgrim in the corner turned on an elbow to scan the sky, and all four were silent. The sunset had taken on an unusual hue, since a light cloud strata stretched from end to end of the horizon. It seemed as if cloud streamers, dyed ruddiest crimson, had been flung athwart the ranges.

“The sign,” went on Nureddin shrilly, “is a sure sign. It is the *maut ahmar*, the opening of the pathway to death.”

“But it lies in the west,” pointed out a Turkoman.

“That is not certain,” observed Nureddin, who was troubled by this very fact — he meant to journey to the tranquil towns in the hills where an astrologer of skill and some imagination might set his zodiac between his knees and gather silver in the market place. “The meaning of the sign is that someone who beholds it will be shrouded before the first dawn. And it may be we four are the only beholders.”

This did not please the tribesmen, who had their share of superstition, and they called him a dog of an Irani and a pack-saddle of an ass, a father of lies and a son of all dishonor.

“In Meshed is salvation,” whispered the old Persian, getting upon his knees to go through the motions of cleansing hands and feet and head before the hour of the *namaz gar* should be past.

“O fool,” cried Nureddin, who was bold enough where the sick man was concerned, and ached a little with hunger, besides, “in the hill towns of the west there is rest and ease.”

“I go my way,” responded the sick man mildly. He leaned heavily on his staff and managed to reach the well, where he filled a wooden bowl — no one thinking to offer him aid. Apparently he did not have any food. “Who knows what may have been written?” he added thoughtfully, pausing to fight for breath, and stifling a moan for fear of angering the Turkomans.

The afterglow still filled the sky, though the fire had left it. The cloud streamers were turning ash gray, but the ground still gave off heat. The volcanic ridges that hemmed in the caravanserai had changed from red and white to shapeless masses without color.

In this quiet of the gathering night, horses' hoofs were heard at a distance.

The horses were moving at a trot past the caravanserai and the Turkomans noticed that they halted abreast the opening through which the red glimmer of Nureddin's fire might be seen. Then they came on, smartly, toward the well.

Two riders entered the inclosure with a pair of pack horses following. The Turkomans, peering into the dusk, saw that the saddle mounts were splendid beasts — a gray *kohlani*, with long tail and mane, and a powerful bay stallion.

The newcomers glanced around and dismounted, with a click of steel. One — the tallest man Nureddin had ever seen — pulled the loads from the led horses and gathered brush for a fire while the other rubbed down the chargers, talking to them under his breath.

When the flame was kindled and caught in the tamarisk, Nureddin had a moment of surprise. The tall stranger wore no helmet; long yellow hair, cut evenly over his brow, fell to his shoulders and his beard was like red gold. Though his skin was burned many

shades darker than his hair, his eyes were a light gray.

Beyond doubt he was a warrior, because he was clad in chamois leather, stained and wrinkled by armor. Strapped to his broad belt was a five-foot sword and Nureddin did not fail to notice that empty sockets in the ball of the pommel might once have held jewels. When he moved about, the stranger lifted the sword in his hand, and the firelight gleamed on gold inlay within the hand-guard.

From chin to eye ran the line of an old scar, and Nureddin thought that this warrior could be singled out from a multitude. Evidently a Nazarene, although he did not bear himself like a captive. In other years the astrologer had seen the Nazarene crusaders in the seaport of Antioch.

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

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

“Peace to him who directs his steps aright!”

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

“And upon thee be the peace.”

“Saddle the horses and go at once from this place,” whispered Nureddin. “Go before moonrise and spare not the whip. Those Turkomans are vultures. They have seen your blooded steeds, your heavy packs and fine weapons. *Ai!* They have departed like rats in a field to find their brethren, and presently they will come back to slay and strip you.”

“Vultures feed only on the dead,” said the stranger. “They have seen our swords and they will not be back.”

Nureddin wagged his head ominously. He could not understand men who were not afraid of thieves. Enlightenment came to him when he looked more closely at the slender stranger — at the flowing garments of loose black wool, at the hood that almost hid the braids of hair upon the warrior’s forehead.

“*Ai-a*, thou art an Arab, my lord. Surely the chieftain of a tribe!”

“I am a wanderer.”

“Verily honor is mine, that I should sit at the fire of a son of Yaman. The honor would be greater if I knew thy name.”

“Khalil el Kadr.”

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

Nazarene crusader. Whither? They were without followers, and both were hundreds of leagues from their fellows. Why?

More than that, they were men of birth. The astrol-
oger could read much in the poise of a head and the in-
tonation of a voice accustomed to command and he
wondered why they were setting forth upon the salt
desert.

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

“Give the mountebank food,” laughed the tall cru-
sader, who understood Arabic.

Khalil el Kadr was silent. He guessed that the astrol-
oger was lying and was utterly unwilling to acknowledge
him as a guest at their fire. Khalil was a judge of men,
and he read in the tiny blinking eyes of Nureddin weak-
ness and treachery. Nevertheless, the pride of the Arab
would not allow him to refuse anything he had to give
when another asked for it — as Nureddin well knew.

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

“May God reward thee!” cried Nureddin, reaching
forth.

“It is written in the Book to be read,” responded
Khalil dryly, “that it is well to give to the aged and bet-
ter to give to the holy ones.”

“True,” assented Nureddin.

“And so do thou take this bowl to the *hadji*, and partake thyself of what he leaves.”

Disconcerted, Nureddin knew better than to refuse, and departed, his slippers flapping over the sand, his long sugar loaf hat bobbing on his head, like an indignant heron deprived of a fish.

Emerging from the darkness, Nureddin tried to look as if he had not made a full meal. The sick man had eaten little. But the good fare had put new courage into the astrologer, and his curiosity waxed mighty. For a while he watched the tall crusader who had drawn the long straight blade from its leather sheath and was polishing it carefully with a clean cloth, pausing to rub a little oil upon the inlay.

“Eh,” he addressed the warrior, “I am no mountebank — no charlatan who vows he can bring rain by piling stones in a certain way! I am Nureddin, the Mirror of Wisdom. None can predict as well as I the *sa’at* — which is, as your nobility comprehends, the hour of commencement of happenings.” He folded his short arms and his eyes glimmered under bushy brows. “I have foretold to kings the most auspicious hour for battle, to merchants the day of profit or loss, to beautiful women the hour of the coming of a lover, to ugly ones the advent of a husband. By the wisdom of the stars I have weighed all things. Aye, and this I have done be-

fore the courts of Cathay, Ind, Kharesmia, and Iran.”

“Of Cathay I have heard,” smiled the crusader. “It lies on the far side of the world; but what is Kharesmia?”

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

Nureddin sighed in remembrance.

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

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

“Verily, there is no court like the Throne of Gold. A thousand slaves could not carry the Shah’s treasure, for it has been gathered from the cities of the Two Rivers and Ind. The softest shining of matched pearls, the fiery rubies of Badakshan, lumps of clear turquoise, diamonds, blue and yellow! His sword-belt would ransom a king, and his turban crest would buy a kingdom. Moreover, in this year of the Serpent, the Shah has lifted the standard of war. It is easy to see that your Grandeur will find work for that sword in Kharesmia, at the court of the Shah, whither, beyond doubt, thou art riding.”

“We seek a road,” the yellow-haired Nazarene made response.



AND YET TWO SIGNS BEFRIEND THEE~
LOOK FOR THE COMING OF THE ARCHER AND
THE DRAGON~THEY WILL AID THEE.



“What road?”

“To the Sea of the Ravens.”

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

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

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

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

The crusader lifted his sword in one hand, although it weighed nearly as much as Nureddin, and thrust it into the leather sheath. Leaning back against one of the packs, he looked at the astrologer inquiringly.

“Verily, I would serve thee, my lord,” Nureddin chattered on. “Not since the day of Iskander* hath a man of thy race set eyes on the Sea of the Ravens. Here, in the caravan track, are merchants that pass to and fro, and few are found to question thee. But beyond this place the life of an infidel is forfeit.”

“Eh, where lies the road?”

“There be many — and there is none. Look!” He pointed up at the dark line of summits under the glitter

*Alexander the Great, who conquered most of Asia sixteen centuries before the crusades and whose name was still a thing to conjure with.

of the stars. "To the west and north are the hills. Beyond are the higher ranges, and the pastures of the Turkomans. They would cut the head from an unbeliever and set it over a tower gate."

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

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

Again the Nazarene nodded assent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thy birth, hour and day and year? The place?”

A smile touched the dark face of the crusader.

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

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

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

He shook his head, sunk in meditation that was not at all assumed. “It is not clear which road is best to follow. All are alike. And yet two signs befriend thee. Look for the coming of the Dragon and the Archer — they will aid thee.”

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

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

“We have heard,” grinned Khalil, who had no pa-

tience with Persian soothsayers, "the bleating of a goat. Begone!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had learned to wield a sword, a child playing with the Norman men-at-arms in the courtyard of his

father's hold in England. Mightier in body than his fellow lads and quick of eye and hand, he had been able to meet grown men on even terms.

That part of his life, twenty years ago, was a dim memory — the stables, the horses he had known, the hours spent with the falconers and the bowyers. Before he had risen to the dignity of an esquire-at-arms a priest had come through the countryside proclaiming a summons to the Holy Land.

The lad Hugh had taken the cross and given the pledge never to turn back until he reached Jerusalem.

And that oath he had kept. Twelve years he had warred against the Saracens. And of the comrades who had first assembled in the camps of France at the summons to arms — who were living?

Sickness had taken some on the long journey overland to Venice. They had fought the battles of the Pope, had stormed Constantinople to pay their debt to the Venetians for the ships that were to carry them onward to the shores of Palestine. The ships, continually promised as soon as the season permitted, were never forthcoming.

Instead there had been campaigns against the pagan Bulgars and the Slavs — why, Sir Hugh did not know. Himself, he had never seen the fief of Taranto which had been bestowed on him by Baldwin, Count of Flanders. And Baldwin had been thrown into a pit and slain by

the Bulgars. A few, most Italians and Swabians, had gone back to their homes. Eight hundred had crossed the Sea of Marmora to join the Greek emperor in an expedition against the Saracens. And of this eight hundred only Sir Hugh had survived.

Tricked and betrayed by Theodore Lascaris, the Greek emperor, the crusaders had been cut down by the Muhammadans while the host of the Greeks remained aloof, looking on.

Thanks to Khalil, whose band of Arabs had swooped down on the field to plunder, Sir Hugh and one other crusader had reached Jerusalem alive. Before the gates of the Sepulchre, Sir Hugh's comrade-in-arms had been slain by a servant of Theodore Lascaris. The long sword of the knight had cut down the murderer, but Sir Hugh knew well that he was being hunted by all the agents of the Greek emperor.

For Theodore Lascaris, knowing that he lived, sought to silence this one voice that might proclaim his treachery to the barons of Christendom. The emperor must make certain of the death of this survivor of the massacre. And the arm of Theodore Lascaris stretched far into Asia.

Sir Hugh had become a marked man with a price on his head that kept every Levantine and Genoese, every Armenian and Jewish merchant searching for him. He could not fare to the seaports, and the roads of the north all led to Constantinople.

An exile, he had gone into the barren lands behind Palestine with Khalil, taking refuge among Muhammadians from the enmity of a Christian.

With the Arabs, he had learned the swift and merciless warfare of the tribes. He had taken his part in raids and had mastered the language of the nomads. Khalil, admiring his strength and wondering a little at the silence and quietude of the crusader, had besought him to come to the land of the black tents, to take a girl to wife and abide with the clan until the end of his days.

“Many horses have been taken by thee, O my friend. Thou art as my right arm in all things. Consider that in the getting and the rearing of sons there is joy and pride, and solace in companions.”

But with Sir Hugh there went always eight hundred companions, unforgotten and always to be thought upon — who had died, tormented by thirst, torn by the arrows of the Turks, who had been sacrificed to the ambition of the Greek emperor. And Sir Hugh did not mean that they should be long unavenged.

With Khalil at his side, he searched for a way back to Christendom, penetrating deeper into the dry lands.

Sir Hugh roused from his reverie. No sound had disturbed him but the horses had stopped munching. The moon had come up over the plain and flooded the caravanserai and the sleeping men with white radiance. And the horses had lifted their heads.

The moon was still low on the horizon and the gray plain seemed full of illusion. Shadows came and vanished and presently the crusader made out groups of horsemen moving toward him out of the desert.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“*Allah kerim!*”

Drawing his simitar, he took his stand before the well, a lean, pockmarked warrior, his brocade cloak

thrown back from a hairy chest. Long-handled daggers filled the front of his girdle and his slant eyes were baneful as a hawk's.

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

"Whence are ye?" cried Khalil.

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

"Kum dan — from the sands."

Camels padded up, grunting, and knelt complainingly. Dust rose around the forms of the desert riders who soon filled the caravanserai and squatted on the ground outside. Someone kindled a horn lantern and hung it from a spear thrust into the ground.

Black slaves, glistening with sweat, staggered up bearing burdens and after them came a cavalcade of turbaned men in multicolored cloaks, their gaunt ponies decked out in fringed trappings. They were escorting, apparently, a white camel carrying a carpet shelter. Bells tinkled as the camel knelt, while the men of the cavalcade dismounted and clustered around it.

Standing aloof, Sir Hugh and Khalil saw the carpet shelter quiver and yield up a hooded figure that passed quickly into a silk pavilion, set up by the slaves. At once warriors with drawn swords took post at the pavilion entrance. The dust subsided as men formed into groups

and squatted down, while the horses were led outside.

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

CHAPTER II

THE GRAY HORSE

Nureddin had departed to ask questions and learn what gossip the new arrivals might have. He was certain that some woman of a chieftain's household or some very wealthy merchant was in the pavilion, because camels bearing light packs continued to come in from the trail, escorted by warriors, mounted and afoot.

And he returned full of news, to the sick man's corner whither Sir Hugh and Khalil had betaken themselves with their belongings and horses.

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

But the Arab had been watching events with attentive interest.

"The braying of an ass is unpleasant," he remarked grimly, "and so also are the words of an idle prophet."

The eyes of the astrologer were hidden under shaggy brows.

“Nay, I have seen black eunuchs and white slaves. Incense is burning in the pavilion.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So close did he thrust himself that the necklace on his matted chest was distinct in the moonlight, and the necklace was made of many things — of women's opal rings, ear pendants and anklets of jade. From it hung a human nose, small and wrinkled.

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

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

"And why?" smiled Khalil, drawing tight the girth. "The moon is high, and surely it is time to put foot in stirrup."

"Whither?"

"There be many roads. We go where we will."

"The horses are fresh — not lame?"

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

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

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

“What men are ye?” asked the Kharesmian lord.

“From Jerusalem, O *Khoudsarma*.”

“And he? Verily, he is an unbeliever, an accursed!”

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

“Aye, an unbeliever,” Khalil replied boldly. “A chieftain of Frankistan (Europe) who hath performed a pilgrimage to the shrine of his prophet. Now he seeks the road to his own land. There is a truce between his people and mine.”

“Not a stone falls save by the will of Allah.” The amir inclined his head as if meditating piously on the strange companionships brought about by fate. “Verily, the wolf runs with the jackal — the Arab with the Nazarene. Until now I had never set eyes on a Christian warrior. That is a heavy sword. I would like to take it in my hand.”

Sir Hugh would have spoken, but Khalil made answer swiftly.

“That is a sword without peer, a blade unmatched. It hath name and fame.”

Omar nodded courteously. A good weapon, a finely forged simitar that could be bent pliantly, would assuredly have a name, and would pass from father to son through generations — its history repeated as often as the pedigree of a famous horse.

“And yet,” he objected, “no blade is the peer of Zulzakar, the two-edged, the sower of destruction, the flaming simitar of the Prophet than whom there is no other.”

The words were a rebuke to Khalil who had praised the weapon of an unbeliever above others. And the listening Kharesmians murmured assent.

“O lord of the Throne of Gold,” retorted the Arab, “the merit of this sword is otherwise. He who fashioned it in by-gone days made it mighty in weight and potent in edge. And in the beginning it was the sword of the Frankish knight Roland, whose fame is known even to my people. And its name is Durandal.”

“A strange name.”

“In the hand of the palladin Roland it won battles for the Franks. When it was carried off by the Moors, no man was found who could swing it over his head, even with two hands. So it hung in the hall of the sultan, Kai-Kosru, until the coming of this knight who slew Kai-Kosru.”

Again the Kharesmians murmured, and Khalil's white teeth flashed in a smile, because nothing pleased him better than to tell of the deeds of Sir Hugh.

"None can wield the sword Durandal save this Nazarene — nor will he suffer another to take it in hand. With it, he held the gate of Antioch against five thousand Greeks, and they did not pass over him. *Ya hai*, then did the bright steel flash and blood hissed from the stricken!"

"And yet — " Omar fingered his red beard reflectively — "this warrior is an infidel from the tribe of the Cross. And thou art his brother."

"Aye, his *rafik*, his brother of the road! We have shared the salt."

"Ha! This, thy horse, pleases me. He is fine in the limb, and there is courage in his eye. Surely Allah hath made him swift of foot."

Khalil's jaw thrust out and his hand tightened on the bridle of the stallion. Omar was asking — after the manner of princes — that the gray horse Khutb be given him. To ask an Arab of birth to sell his saddle horse would have been an insult unforgivable. Khutb was Khalil's most prized possession — as much a part of him as his right arm.

"He is Khutb," Khalil said quietly. "Between sunup and sundown he could carry me to Rai."

The amir stepped forward to stroke the soft muzzle of the stallion and run his fingers through the long mane.



TIGHTENING THE REINS HE STRUCK
SPURS INTO KHUTB'S FLANKS AND
PLUNGED THROUGH THE MUHAMMADENS.

“My steed is foundered,” he said. “Give me thine, and thou shalt not go unrewarded.”

This was sheer arrogance, for no man would willingly give up his horse in the desert. And Khalil, his arm across the shoulder of the stallion, shook his head, smiling.

“May Allah forgive thee!” He responded.

Still fondling the charger’s mane, Omar lifted his hand. Sir Hugh heard breath indrawn, and saw the warrior of the necklace leap through the air. Steel flickered, and Khalil staggered back against Khutb, the blade of a long, curved *kindjhal* buried under his heart.

The Arab stretched to his full height and grasped at the hilt of his simitar. He drew the sword and lifted his arm, when his body swayed, and he cried out:

“Ho, brother — go, with Khutb! Take him!”

An arrow crashed against the mailed chest of the crusader. Men closed in on him, and swords grated from sheaths. Sir Hugh could not draw his long blade in time to meet the onset.

So sudden had been the attack, so wanton the knifing of Khalil that Sir Hugh acted by instinct — striking out with his mailed fist. He smashed two of the Kharesmians to the ground, and caught the blade of another in his mittened fingers, pulling the man to one side. Something thudded against his light steel helm and red flashes veiled his sight.

Bareheaded — for the blow of a mace had knocked off the basinet — he staggered back, Khutb reared and snorted beside him, and he turned swiftly, leaping into the saddle of the stallion.

This gained for him a moment of respite. Khutb, wise in battle, reared again, lashing out with his forefeet. Sir Hugh found the stirrups barely in time to keep his seat, and by then his sight had cleared enough for him to make out Khalil kneeling and watching.

Bringing down the horse, Sir Hugh quickly warded off a simitar blow with his arm, and reached down to pull the Arab to the saddle.

But Khalil, dying, a smile on his drawn lips, flung himself back under the weapons of his foes, out of the reach of his comrade's hand. In his fading consciousness one thing was clear — the charger could never carry the two of them to safety. And his own hour was at hand; for him, the end of the road —

Neighing, Khutb reared again, and the on-pressing Kharesmians gave back hastily. One of them thrust his simitar through Khalil's throat, shouting savagely. Upon this warrior Sir Hugh wheeled the frantic horse. Lashing hoofs struck the man down and he rolled over, voiceless, his forehead crushed in.

Sir Hugh had seen the death stroke given Khalil, and knew in that instant there was no mortal aid for his companion of the road.

Tightening the rein, he struck spurs into Khutb's flanks and plunged through the Muhammadans. Once clear of the corner, he turned sharply and galloped toward the entrance. Men stood in his path, but none ventured to seize the rein of the gray horse. Javelins whistled past him, but the moonlight was elusive and Khutb's swift turn disconcerting.

Passing the silk pavilion, a flicker of lights caught the eye of the crusader. The opening flap had been thrown back, and he beheld a shimmering carpet that stretched to a couch, and on the couch a man who had risen to his elbow to peer out.

A stout figure, at once powerful and indolent, a broad pale face with a heavy jowl and restless brown eyes, a turban of green silk, close wrapped and falling at the end over a massive chest, and in the turban a crest of precious stones that reflected the gleam of the pavilion lamps — all this Sir Hugh saw clearly, each detail distinct.

Wheeling Khutb suddenly, he came to a stop. His clenched right hand he lifted above his bare head.

“For Christ and the Sepulchre!”

The deep battle shout of the crusader rang out above the clamor of the Kharesmians. And the sight of Sir Hugh gave them pause, for he loomed above them in the moonlight that gleamed in his tawny hair.

Then he vanished through the caravanserai gate.

No one rode in pursuit because the horses of the Kharesmians were spent, and the Amir Omar claimed the big bay charger of the crusader for his own.

Sir Hugh did not go far. Behind a knoll screened with tamarisk brush he tethered Khutb and waited for the pursuit that did not come. Waited until the sun burst up, over the salt-streaked plain, and he could watch the Kharesmians.

They did not linger for the dawn prayer, but set out toward the hills. His eyes were keen, and he saw the white camel go forth attended by the same Muhammadan cavaliers — one of them riding his charger. Then the dust began to rise over the caravan and he could see only the men who swung out to the flank to keep clear of it.

The horses went forward slowly and it was a long time before the last of the followers had disappeared into the dust. No sooner had they gone than vultures dropped from the sky, and crows began to blacken the caravanserai wall.

Leading Khutb, the crusader went back to bury his comrade. At the wall he paused, hearing a gentle and resonant voice intoning:

“Ma tadri nafsun ma dha taksibu ghadan — ” The sick *hadji*, kneeling by Khalil's body, was repeating verses from the Koran. “No soul knoweth what the morrow shall have brought; neither knoweth any soul in what land it shall die. Verily, God alone knoweth all things.”

Painfully the *hadji* was winding around the body of the warrior a shroud that he had fashioned out of his

turban cloth. When he looked up and saw the crusader standing over him, he nodded as if he had expected Sir Hugh.

“Why art thou here?” asked the knight.

The *hadji* meditated.

“Eh, the road is long to Meshed, the holy city, and there was talk of war.”

“Did Nureddin the astrologer go with the caravan?”

“It may have happened.” The thin Muhammadan looked around uncertainly. “He is not here. It was a calamity that came upon thy friend.”

Sir Hugh did not answer. Khalil had been at his side for years; they had gone hungry together and had shared the torments of heat, the wild exhilaration of conflict. Khalil had left his tribe to try to discover a way for the crusader to join his people.

Silently the big man in armor dug a grave in the loose clay by the wall, while the pilgrim watched. To make the grave he was forced to use the blade of Durandal, lacking any other tool. When he had covered the Arab's body with earth, he rolled several massive stones from the wall to the grave to keep it from being dug up by wolves.

This done he bethought him of Khutb and led the horse to the well, and a moment later rejoined the *hadji*, his face serious.

“The water, O father, hath been fouled with dung and dirt.”

“It was the doing of the Kharesmians.”

“Why?”

The pilgrim shook his head vaguely. “My son, it is not clear to me. They came, and they slew and they spoiled the water. Then they went away.”

“With little rest.” Leaning on his sword, Sir Hugh thought for a while. “Tell me, O *hadji*, who was the chief of the caravan?”

“He of the white camel.”

“What name had he?”

“My son, it is not known to me. There was the Amir Omar, but he waited upon the prince who sat in the pavilion.” He pondered this for a while, while the crusader waited patiently. “And thou, O Nazarene, thou wert seeking a road. Whither?”

“My father, I have found a road. I shall follow the trail of this prince of the Land of the Throne of Gold, to make atonement for the slaying of my companion.”

Gently, the pilgrim shook his head, peering up at the erect form of the warrior. “That is a road of peril. They are going to Rai, which is the first city on the Bagdad way. They be many and thou, my son, art a Nazarene.”

“Come! There is a horse awaiting thee. Here no good water may be had, and thou lackest food.”

Again the *hadji* shook his head, his brown eyes introspective.

“It was the kismet of thy friend that he should be shrouded in this spot. Eh, so do the warriors pass from

the earth in the fullness of strength, bathed in their blood. With me it is otherwise. My strength is little. For a while I shall recite verses from the leaves of the Book unfolded. Then I go toward the Holy City."

Sir Hugh remembered the years he had spent in fighting his way to the walls of Jerusalem. This quiet man with the lined face was filled with the same purpose. He glanced a last time at Khalil's rock-covered grave and lifted his hand.

"Upon thee, my father, be the peace!"

Then he went to Khutb, felt of the saddle girth and lengthened the stirrups. Swinging into the high-peaked saddle, he reined out of the caravanserai, scattering the crows in raucous protest, and headed toward the hills in the west.

"On the day of judgment every woman that hath a burden shall cast her burden; and thou shalt see men drunken, yet they are not drunken; but it is the mighty chastisement of God."

So the *hadji* cried out, and his cry echoed in the ears of the crusader who had gone forth to seek atonement for the death of his friend.

CHAPTER III

MIR BEG

The trail of the caravan led into the foothills and began to dip into gullies. Around the crusader brittle, volcanic ledges arose, and the heat grew terrifying.

There was no enduring the weighty steel mail on his body, and he had rolled up hauberk and coif and mittens, binding them on the saddle. Out of the Arab's cotton saddle-cloth he had fashioned a hood that shielded his head from the sun's rays.

His helm, Khalil's sword, and even the weapons of the dead Kharesmians in the caravanserai had been carried off, and no scrap of food had been left behind.

The trail turned and ran under the face of a yellow cliff and dipped into the bed of a dry stream, strewn with worn sandstone and smooth rocks. Here Sir Hugh dismounted to ease Khutb, who was beginning to sweat in the neck and withers.

As he did so he had a glimpse of something moving

above him. It might have been the flutter of rags over some shrine, but there was no wind and apparently no shrine anywhere near. More likely the end of a cloak had been whipped out of sight. He listened, and was aware of a distant crackling of brush.

Going forward as if he had noticed nothing at all, he scanned the slopes of the gully. They were steep, sun-hardened clay with fringes of dead grass in cracks, too steep for the passage of horse or man, but not too high for an arrow's flight.

Sir Hugh strode on, glancing casually to right and left, ears alert. He heard no more movement above him. If the Kharesmians had left watchers at the gut of the riverbed, or if wandering Turkomans had sighted him, they would have dismounted and crept to cover with their bows.

Presently he saw what he was seeking. On the left appeared a cross gully, filled with spindly poplars, the bed of a smaller stream. And he noticed hoof marks in the soil under the trees. Entering the little ravine, he tethered Khutb where the horse could easily be seen from above.

Then he went on, until the poplars hid the blazing sky, and a nest of boulders, covered with thorn and creepers, was close at hand. Drawing the long sword from its sheath, he moved silently into the rocks, stooping and climbing until he lay prone in deep shadow between two granite blocks.

He could hear Khutb stamping restlessly a hundred feet away, but he could see nothing beyond the screen of the poplars and the overhang of the rock. Nor did he try to see down into the gully.

Not a leaf rustled, not a bird stirred in the gully. He sat up to relieve the pounding of blood in his ears, but the silence was unbroken. The temptation to rise and look at the horse was well-nigh overwhelming. And then Khutb whinnied.

The crusader took the hilt of the sword in both hands and placed his ear against the rock. Nearby there was a faint sound as of something sliding and slipping. And then a sibilant call:

“*Ohai, Gutchluk!*”

Sir Hugh did not hear the response, for the voice — and it seemed familiar in some way — went on:

“He has gone to seek water, or he sleeps. Take thou the horse.”

This time the listener caught the murmur of an answer below him.

“I will watch,” went on the first voice. “Come thou back and take shelter across the *nullah*.”

Two men, at least, were near him, and before long one would lead Khutb away, which was not the crusader’s intention. He rose to one knee, striving to make out his neighbors. The man below him, the one called Gutchluk, began to speak again, and the other snarled angrily:

“What if we did not see the dog of a Nazarene? He is

a fool to go and look for water in this place of *shaitan*. He was a fool to ride after us, and I shall carry his head to — ”breaking off, the invisible Muhammadan added surly — “Wait, and I will attend to the horse.”

The sliding began again, more distinctly, a few yards to one side. The creepers shook and cracked, and Sir Hugh stood up, climbing swiftly to the top of the boulder that had concealed him. Without pausing, he leaped down.

He had seen two men directly under him and his knees struck the one who held a bow, squarely between the shoulders. The impact of the giant Nazarene with the weight of the sword he gripped, snapped the Muhammadan’s spine and drove his body face down into the sand and stones. The crusader rolled over, springing to his feet with sword upraised.

The other man had turned with the flash of a simitar sliding from sheath. And as he turned he leaped, lips writhing and slant eyes gleaming. The steel blades clanged as the crusader parried the simitar’s stroke.

Then Sir Hugh laughed and stepped forward, striking once and twice, lightly as if in play. The sweep of the long blade forced the Muhammadan to retreat toward the rocks, until the Nazarene stopped and spoke to him.

“Thou art he who slew a nobler man. Tell me thy name.”

The pockmarked face of the Muhammadan sharp-

ened, and his slant eyes shifted from side to side. Suddenly he began to pant, the necklace of women's trinkets stirring on his dripping chest.

"I am Mir Beg," he growled, "the slayer, the sower of destruction."

It amazed him that the Nazarene should have come upon him out of the very air, and should address him in fluent Arabic. Amazement was edged by fear that made Mir Beg as dangerous as a trodden snake.

"Taste then," answered Sir Hugh, "the fruit of thy seed." And he lowered the point of his sword.

Mir Beg moved as a wolf leaps. He crouched and sprang to a boulder, waist-high. And then he whirled, his *khalat* flying out, his simitar upflung. Had the crusader run in, or had he raised his long sword, Mir Beg would have slain him. For the Kharesmian warrior made no attempt to climb the rocks. Instead he crouched and flung himself bodily at the crusader.

Without moving his feet, Sir Hugh lifted the point of his sword, gripping the hilt strongly and thrusting. The blade entered Mir Beg below the ribs, and his body slid down until the handguard checked it. Sir Hugh lowered him to the ground, freed the blade with a wrench, and wiped it clean carefully.

When life had passed out of Mir Beg, he took the necklace from the Kharesmian's throat and thrust it into his wallet. For a moment he pondered stripping the gar-

ments from the other warrior and putting them on. But he remembered the words of Nureddin — that no disguise could make him out a Muhammadan.

So he searched up the hillside until he found the horses of the Kharesmians, and in the saddle-bags a little cheese and barley. More precious than food was the small goatskin tied to a saddle-horn and half full of warm, sulphurish water.

When Khutb had had water enough to rinse out his teeth, the crusader drank and ate sparingly and slept during the hours of intolerable heat.

Then he stripped the saddle from the better of the two horses — which had doubtlessly belonged to Mir Beg — and led him by the rein when he rode back to the riverbed.

Until sunset they climbed steadily, following the broad trail of the caravan. And when the road crossed the summit of the pass, he turned in the saddle for a last look at the salt desert and the caravanserai where Khalil had been buried.

The shadow of the foothills extended far out upon the plain, hiding the site of the caravanserai. Sir Hugh looked long and steadily, shading his eyes from the glare of the sky.

Black dots were moving across the gray floor of the desert — dots that might be antelope or horsemen. After a while he did not think they were antelope, because they

advanced so steadily in groups, heading in upon the riverbed.

“Nay,” he thought with a smile, “Nureddin would say they were *ghils*, forsooth.”

It seemed to him they must be another caravan of Kharesmians riding, like the first, in haste, and if so he must look for foes behind as well as before him. But as he touched Khutb with the rein and started down the pass, he wondered why men should ride like that during the middle of the day and why Kharesmians should be coming in such numbers to these hills.

Twenty-four hours later Sir Hugh rode into sight of the city of Rai (modern Teheran).

He had not pressed on too rapidly because he did not wish to pass the caravan of the Amir Omar. Still it was clear to him that the caravan had made a forced march. Dying horses and sick camels lay by the trail; here and there stragglers toiled along on foot or sat by the wells, too weary to be curious when the Nazarene trotted by.

He had descended steadily from the first pass, and now the aspect of the country had changed. The white walls of villages gleamed on the hillsides, and buffaloes worked in the fields; along the trail came donkeys and women nearly buried under burdens, with a bearded and barelegged man stalking behind carrying nothing heav-

ier than a javelin and the inevitable simitar. These people stared silently at the crusader, at his gambeson of yellow leather, his bare arms and knees burned dark by the desert sun, at his head half hidden under its white hood and — covetously — at the splendid stallion he rode. No Christian warrior had ever set foot in this land so many leagues behind Jerusalem before this time. And the Muhammadans must have imagined him some giant from India or Cathay.

Others might have troubled to question him — horsemen who were descending from the villages and moving toward Rai in the late hours of dusk. These Sir Hugh avoided and on the last ridge before the city he halted to study his surroundings.

Rai lay like a crumb in the bottom of a wide and very shallow basin — a green basin, for here the desert ended and groves of willows and poplars bordered the road, and water glinted in the distance.

Beyond the broad oasis stretched the same line of purple mountains, a golden haze flooding the jagged summits and the ridges and towers that were like the battlements of a citadel rising from the bowels of the earth to the higher altitudes. Again Sir Hugh saw on his right the solitary snow peak, visible through a veil of clouds.

It was to cross these ranges that he had come up from the south with Khalil, and now he decided to ride into Rai. He needed food, and he meant to learn the name of the prince who had watched from the pavilion the mur-



BY THIS TOKEN FROM THE BODY OF
MIR BEG, I HAVE SEEN THINE ENEMIES,
THE RIDERS OF CATHAY.

der of Khalil. So he reined forward into the soft dusk, and the horses, snuffing the cool air of the valley, tossed their heads and trotted briskly.

Many others were on the trail that twilight. Stout little nobles appeared in intersecting paths, attended by warriors and slaves bearing torches — *mirs* and *begs*, in gleaming silk and tinted shagreen, their reins heavy with silver, their horses brave in tasseled headbands and caparisons of damask and cloth-of-gold. Beside the nobles on ponies rode sad-faced boys with jeweled simitars thrust through girdles — rode, too, heavily veiled women on camels and carts surrounded by black slaves with spears.

These were no fellow pilgrims of the road, but pleasure seekers, and the crusader thought that there must be a festival in Rai and Rai must be a rich city. He was hard put to keep out of the torch and lantern light, until an avenue of poplars loomed out of the night and he turned aside into the fields.

It was near to midnight and moonrise when he approached a gate of the city wall and touched Khutb on the neck. Men were loitering in the shadow under the tiled arch, and — though they did not seem to be guards — they had seen him. Better to go ahead swiftly than to hang back.

Under the white hood his eyes were alert, but the loungers did no more than glance enviously at Khutb. He turned blindly into the darkest alley and threaded

through piles of refuse and snarling dogs until the odor of bad butter and worse meat yielded to the smell of matting and wine and he bent in the saddle to escape the low awnings of a bazaar.

All Rai was awake and a whisper, late though the hour might be. As if in the depths of caverns, red lights glowed under rings of bearded faces, lanterns bobbed from stall to stall.

Overhead a drum muttered sonorously, and a voice took up its song. Somewhere on the roofs, another cried out thrice:

“Be of light heart, all ye who believe, for this is a night among nights.”

The crusader kept to the darkest alleys, feeling the mud walls of dwellings brush his shoulders, avoiding lights and cleared spaces. One lane led into another, turning and twisting and the smells multiplied and changed, until he sniffed musk and burning incense and found his way blocked by a fat man who blundered from wall to wall, his turban lopsided, his shawl girdle trailing.

“*Ei, ba'tyr,*” a lisping Persian voice proclaimed. “Eh, my warrior, it is time to sheath the sword and dismount from the saddle of discomfort.”

“Is there a festival?” Sir Hugh asked guardedly, suspecting correctly that the stout Muhammadan was drunk.

“Indeed and indeed, by command of the shadow of

God on earth, the *Shah-im-shah*, upon whose name be — ” he coughed and looked around uncertainly — “extermination.” Then he chuckled. “Consider, O my Arab, a pair of bees feed from the same flowers, yet one giveth forth honey, the other a sting; both deer eat the same grass, yet one giveth forth dung, the other musk. And now consider women, my friend, they subsist on the same goat’s milk and sugar paste, but one will embrace you and another scratch you. Man,” he added solemnly, “is a magic lantern with a light within. So saith that cup-shot prater, Omar. But I say a woman is a veil without any light at all!”

He gathered up his girdle and tried laboriously to wind it on again by turning around and around. This upset him and he sat down heavily against the wall while Sir Hugh moved past.

“Allah hath promised wine in Paradise,” he called after the crusader. “Then why is wine on earth a vice? Omar said that and I say it too. Both of us!”

His stentorian voice had attracted attention because a casement opened just above the hooded head of the rider. A soft voice greeted him:

“*Ai-a*, my lord, there is dust and weariness upon the road. Wilt have ease and refreshment?”

Then Sir Hugh was aware of other sounds in the alley, of anklets clashing faintly, a guitar’s distant note, a murmur of voices. Men did not go through this street

with lights and the dwellings were all discreetly screened, yet he thought the disciple of Omar had emerged from a gate not far away.

Overhead the glow of the moon shed light into the alley, and he could make out the woman who had spoken to him — who had, no doubt, listened to the talk of the drunkard. Her dark hair was odorous of musk, and her cheeks were sunken in too much upon the bones. Her eyes were shadows — she wore no veil — but her flesh was white, and her arms strong and supple.

“Is anyone in the house with thee?” he asked curtly, and she shook her head.

“Nay, my lord, there is none. I have raisins and curried rice, and a rare repast even for a man of note such as thou — ”

“The horses?”

“A spear’s length onward is the gate to the courtyard.” She glanced fleetingly at the splendid stallion. “Come, my lord.”

CHAPTER IV

THE NECKLACE

When he had fed and rubbed down the two horses, Sir Hugh sought and found a flimsy stair that led to a balcony above the yard. He was sure that no one had watched him go in — in that street curiosity was not a virtue. The fat man was snoring where he sat down, and the gate had a stout bar within.

Crossing the balcony, he entered a small room, the windows hung with red silk behind the lattice. A bronze lamp reflected its light from a painted ceiling, and a divan was nearly shrouded with soiled samite. Sir Hugh thought that if the light were brighter the room would have seemed more dirty.

“Allah bring thee joy!” The woman saluted him and offered to take the massive sword.

“Nay, let be!” He flung himself down on a bench from which he could watch the arched entrance to the inner passage, and ordered her to bring whatever she had of food.

While he satisfied his hunger she curled up on the divan and watched him, henna-stained fingers clasped under her chin.

“That is a strange sword.”

“Too heavy for thy hand.”

“Thou hast the speech of a Beduin and the bearing of — of a *mir*, a leader of men.”

Sir Hugh pushed away the tabouret and considered her, reading little in her face save that she had been more beautiful than now and might have been Armenian or Georgian by birth — perhaps a slave carried off in childhood who had become a creature of the Muhammadans.

“I will lodge here this night.”

She made a little gesture of acknowledgment, touching brow and lips and breast.

“The pleasure of my lord hath brought honor to his slave. Art thou a warrior of Ind? It is said in the bazaar that Muhammad Shah hath brought with him many such.”

“Nay, I am — ” the crusader’s eyes smiled — “from Palestine.”

“*Ai*, a weary way.” She slipped from the couch and stood behind him, running her fingers lightly through the mass of his yellow hair. “Will my lord the warrior have wine, unless — ”

“Wine I will have. Why — ” Sir Hugh thought of the philosophy of the stout reveler — “should the

prophet forbid it in this world, or the houris of Paradise? Thy name?"

Taking down a jar that hung by the window lattice, she filled a copper cup, drinking first to reassure her guest.

"I am Salma, the Georgian."

Her eyes, darkened with *kohl*, had taken measure of the wallet in his belt, and the measure was satisfactory. But hanging from the belt she noticed a length of necklace, of opals and ear pendants, and a withered human nose.

"And thy price for the lodging, O Salma?"

If this was a night of festival, he was safer in the Georgian's house than in any *khan* or *serai* where he would meet throngs of Kharesmians. And before going forth he had many things to find out.

But the woman stepped back, her hands against her breast. "Nay — my lord, I did not know. Surely the sower of destruction pays no price. I have heard — wert thou sent? Has an order been given?"

"Who would give an order, to me?" Sir Hugh had caught the new note of fear in her voice. "I came. Is not that enough?"

She seemed more intent on reading his face than in weighing his words, and some instinct reassured her, so that she smiled and settled back on the divan, curling her bare feet under her comfortably.

“I have heard thou art a man of strange moods. When the grandees of the Lion of Islam entered the *suk al maidan* before the sunset hour of prayer, I heard tell thou didst linger behind to watch the road.”

Sir Hugh laughed and this seemed to puzzle her.

“Perhaps thou hast heard my name, O daughter of Rai.”

“Nay, but thou art known in all Kharesmia from the sea to Ind.” She nodded at the long sword that stood against his chair. “Surely that is the blade of the sower of destruction, the dispenser of fate, the executioner of the Shah who takes life from those who have displeased him. And that is the necklace thou hast fashioned of women’s trinkets.”

Taking it from his belt, the crusader tossed it upon the tabouret, repressing a shiver of disgust. So Mir Beg had gained his trophy in this way. And the slave girl had taken him for Mir Beg. No harm for her to think that for a while. He had a use for the necklace.

Abruptly, he looked up and tried to speak casually.

“Is it true that the Lion of Islam, the exalted, the world-defying Shah of shahs, arrived in the city this day? With the Amir Omar?”

“Aye, my lord. I watched from the roof and saw his white camel and the emerald crest of his turban. Before now the Shah had not honored us with the presence. The *imams* and the nobles have made a feast for him.”

Then Sir Hugh knew why throngs had entered the

gates of Rai, and why the city was awake and rejoicing. The man he had seen in the pavilion at the caravanserai was the emperor of Kharesmia, who chose to travel, it seemed, nameless and in haste across the salt desert. In such haste that his minister, the Amir Omar, had slain Khalil and sought the crusader's life for the gain of four fresh horses.

This emperor, Muhammad Shah, had never visited Rai before. And yet he had journeyed hither in spite of thirst and privation, and the lives of men and beasts. Now there was a festival in Rai —

Sir Hugh pondered, weighing one thing against another, and wondering how much Salma could be trusted. Given gold, he thought, she would serve him for a while.

“Where is the court of the Shah?” he asked.

“Where, but in the *tarim*, beyond the markets? The *imams* and the nobles go thither to make the salaam of greeting, for his coming was not known to them, and they fear that blame will fall upon them. The Shah is not a man of mercy.”

“Nor am I.”

Salma shivered a little, because the eyes of her guest were bleak and gray as the steel of the sword that he kept ever near to his hand.

“Go to the court, O daughter of Rai, and carry a message. Say to no one that Mir Beg is in this street.” He opened his wallet and drew out two gold *dinars*. “This is

thy reward for silence. Find an astrologer named Nured-din who is in the following of the Shah — a mountebank with a curling beard. Say that one in thy house would speak with him.”

“I shall say ‘By command of Mir Beg’ and he will surely come.”

“Nay, thou wilt say, ‘By token of the Archer and the Dragon.’ ”

“The Archer and the Dragon,” she repeated, rising and picking up a veil, with a last glance at the gold pieces. “ ’Tis a strange token.”

Sir Hugh smiled, and the lines around his wide lips softened.

“No stranger than the nature of man, who will flee from the thing he fears and distrust the promise of reward, but is ever drawn by curiosity.”

When she had gone, he sat patiently, the long blade of Durandal across his knees, listening to the sounds of the street — a far-off voice crying the first hour of the morning and a chorus of revelers that mocked the watchman; the slip-slap of furtive feet stealing away, broken by the harsh oaths of a sudden quarrel.

He heard a woman in the next house laugh shrilly, until another screamed and there fell a silence, as if the ears of all the street were harkening. If it were known outside the room in which he sat that he was no follower of the Shah but a Nazarene, he would never leave the street alive.

Khalil would have relished the adventure — would

have given him wise counsel. The Arab had said often that it was better to go ahead than to hang back, better to go unseen and unlooked-for, and to strike swiftly.

And that was what Sir Hugh meant to do.

With hesitating step, Nureddin climbed the outer stair and, instead of entering the chamber, thrust his black sugar loaf hat and his shaggy head through the curtains. When he saw the crusader he blinked like an owl, his beard quivered and he slipped into the room, drawing the curtains behind him carefully. The woman slipped past him and caught up the gold pieces; then, as the crusader did not reprove her, she went and curled up on the divan.

“By the breath of Ali — by the ninety and nine holy names!” whispered the astrologer. “Why art thou here? If it were seen — if I were seen in this place, we would be given to the elephants. What is this Georgian? She will betray us — ”

“She will not speak the name of Mir Beg.” Sir Hugh nodded at the table. “She has seen the necklace, and the sword, and it is known to her that I am the Shah’s executioner.”

Nureddin bent over the jewels of Mir Beg, his fingers twitching in his beard. His plump lips opened and shut wordlessly. “Thou has slain — ” he muttered suddenly, and was silent. Then he sat down on his heels and meditated, visibly waxing curious.

“Why didst thou send for me?” he asked at length.

“To tell me why Khalil the Beduin was put to death.”

The astrologer spread out his hands, looked at Sir Hugh, and shook his head.

“*Ya aba shah al-khayr*,” he vouchsafed. “By command of my lord the emperor. He saw the two chargers in the caravanserai and gave an order that they should be taken.”

“But the Shah’s name was not spoken — Khalil knew it not.”

“And am I to know the thoughts of the Lion of Islam? He chose to hide his name, and it would not have mattered in any case. The Arab was a hot-headed fool — ” Nureddin glanced again at the crusader’s impassive eyes. “Yet a most generous chieftain, a brave man, though he took too little account of omens. There had been a sign in the sky that one should die that night. It would not have happened otherwise.”

He began to feel comfortable. After all, he did not think the Nazarene had any quarrel with him, and the warrior’s wallet held gold. Nureddin had been sent for and some of the gold would pass into his hand. Afterward, he could denounce the stranger and establish his own innocence and gain business on the strength of it all.

“Why did the Shah covet the horses?” asked Sir Hugh quietly. “He had a racing camel under him.”

“The camel was a little lame, and the Lord of lords desired to have fast horses ready to hand in case of need. He — he had departed from the cities on the far side of the salt desert to hunt antelope. Then he decided to visit Rai and the mountain kingdoms of his empire; but the heat in the barrens was beyond enduring, so he hastened to escape the *ghils* and the storms of that accursed place.”

“And did he conceal his name,” Sir Hugh put in, “to make greater haste? That was a lie. Should not Mir Beg, the sword-arm of the *Shah-im-shah*, know the reason of his coming and setting forth?”

Nureddin bethought him then of the listening woman and was troubled. He could read men’s eyes — because he was too clever to depend altogether upon the aspect of the stars in casting fortunes.

“What can I tell thee that is unknown to thee?”

“This: Muhammad Shah fled across the desert. He was in fear of pursuit, so he hid his name and hastened. He left men in the foothills to watch the trail. What did he fear?”

“The *ghils*, the spirits of the unburied dead, the riders of the barren lands!”

The whisper of the astrologer was heavy with dread, and for a moment the memory of the crusader went back to the multitude of horsemen he had seen far below him at sunset. Into his mind pressed old stories and age-old fears — werewolves that preyed upon men, and those

other foes, the legions of Anti-Christ that were penned up at the far end of the earth, the land of Gog and Magog whence they would issue forth at Satan's bidding.

Angrily, he cleared these fancies from a weary brain and struck his clenched fist on the flat of the sword.

"The truth!" he cried. "Enough of lies. I will have the truth from thee, or never another word wilt thou utter."

Nureddin shivered, crouching on the floor, clutching at beard and cheeks.

"Nay, my lord — nay, prince and commander of men, I will tell thee the tale, all of it. And yet if they who pursue the Shah be not *ghils* they are more than mortals.

"They are indeed spirits," the astrologer went on earnestly, "because the wind bears them hither and thither at night; they disappear and take shape at will. They ride horses that carry them at a gallop over the highest mountain passes.

"Verily until now they have been penned behind the mountains that we call the *Taghdumbash*, the Roof of the World. Your emperor Iskander made conquests of all the lands until he came to the eaves of the Roof of the World, and I have heard tell that the *Roumis* (Romans) once ruled all of the earth except the deserts beyond — " Nureddin stabbed with a thin forefinger toward the east — "beyond the mountains where the sun rises, the limbo of the earth, the place called Cathay."

Sir Hugh made a gesture of assent. Minstrels and

home-returning wanderers had chanted songs of Cathay, its magicians and its wild horsemen. In his childhood he had been told of the wonderful country of Prester John of Asia.

“Aforetime,” went on the astrologer, “Muhammad Shah was the greatest of earth’s rulers. As he waxed in power, it was his whim to slay and torture men. Some he did to death by the kneeling of elephants, some by casting from towers, some by poisons. Why not? He is the shield of Islam.

“And then misfortune came upon his head in this wise. Envoys had journeyed to him from an unknown chieftain, a nomad, a lord of desert land, and it seemed to the Shah that these envoys were spies. So he cut off the head of one, and the beards of the others, sending them back to Cathay whence they had come, to the chieftain who called himself Khan of Cathay, and who is called a Mongol by others.

“*Wallahi* — I am a man of peace! Of war and its waging I know nothing. At that time I was in Samarkand, the city of the Shah. They said then that the Khan of Cathay was moving out of his deserts to avenge the death of the envoy. Why should war happen for a little thing like that?

“The Shah also lifted the standard and mustered his host and I saw many multitudes of armed riders, of elephants with leather coats, and slaves. There was a battle under the Roof of the World and before long the Shah

returned hastily to Samarkand, giving out praise and robes of honor but hurrying south. His army was not with him.

“From Samarkand he carried his household — ” by this Nureddin meant his family and wives and slaves — “and his treasure of precious stones. The walls of Samarkand were mighty but the Shah went away very quickly and I joined his following because there was talk that the host of Cathay marched upon Samarkand. Many of the warriors said that desert horsemen could not storm a walled city — still, I did not linger, and this was well. Within two moons, when we were in the gardens of Khoresan, we heard that Samarkand had yielded to the hordes of Cathay.

“Then the Shah ceased to gather a new army and began to journey to the west, to Nisapur, on the caravan road. It was then the time of grape gathering, and some Turkomans who rode swift camels gave out a report that the Khan of the Cathayans — ”

He hesitated, looking uneasily about.

“The Khan hath sent forth chosen riders to hunt down the Shah.”

Sir Hugh had listened closely, and questioned this:

“To ride down an emperor in his own domain? That is idle talk. If so, an army must have been sent, and an army must stop to besiege cities and gather supplies.”

“As to that I know not. But this I know. Muhammad Shah made pretense of enjoying a hunt at Nisapur; se-



"CATHAYANS!" CRIED NUREDINN
"ALREADY I HAVE DIED. MY HEART IS
WATER AND I MUST DIE AGAIN."



cretly he set forth with his officers and treasure to cross the salt desert. That also was to come upon my head. It was time to leave the Shah — I rode ahead. By the Ka'aba, I have ridden a thousand leagues since the grass turned green. My bones have ached. But this is a rich city, and at peace."

"And here he will gather a new host," meditated the crusader aloud.

"Am I a man of weapons and blood, to say thus and so is the case? What happened to the warriors in Khar-smia beyond the desert? They were scattered like old leaves when the hot wind blows. They fed the kites." Nureddin stroked his plump thighs and shook his head.

"So the Cathayans are magicians?"

"The Cathayans are magicians. Yet few ride with this accursed host of Mongol warriors. But the wizards make their arrows fly vast distances, always striking the mark. They can see at night, and they listen to messages that the wind carries. It is good that they are on the other side of the salt desert."

Sir Hugh half smiled.

"This was not known in Rai until the coming of Muhammad Shah?"

"It is not known yet. The Shah hath summoned the *imams* to his *divan* (council).

"Come!"

The crusader stood up and emptied half the coins from his wallet upon the tabouret, saying to the Georgian

girl that this was for the feeding and care of the horses in case he did not return. To Nureddin, who was watching with jealous eyes, he added —

“We will go to this council of the Shah, thou and I.”

Nureddin's beard fairly curled and he choked when he tried to speak.

“To the council — among Turkoman chieftains and other devils. May Allah assuage thy madness!”

“Thy part is no more than to gain me entrance to the presence of this lord.” Sir Hugh knotted up his wallet and tossed it to the astrologer who caught it skillfully in spite of his agitation. “Thy pay. Come, time lacks and before this Shah and his minister I must proclaim them guilty of a foul wrong and an ill deed.”

“*Ai!*”

But a hand of steel closed upon the arm of the terrified savant, lifting him from the floor and propelling him into the outer darkness. There Sir Hugh paused to don mail hauberk and thigh pieces and to draw the steel mesh of the hood over his head. He had given away the last of his gold. His horse Khutb was fed and cared for; he himself would stand before Muhammad Shah, and from that presence there was no way of escape. Within the hour Sir Hugh thought that he would be beyond need of gold.

And a resonant tongue was heard in the street without:

“See! The dawn breaks and rends night’s canopy;
Arise, and drain a morning draught with me!
Away with gloom! full many a dawn will break
Looking for us, and we not here to see!”

The disciple of Omar, aroused by the stir in the courtyard, staggered to his feet, wound up his girdle, and went none too steadily about his business.

CHAPTER V

THE CHALLENGE

Nureddin had time to reflect as they walked through the almost deserted streets, and reflection brought comfort. Mad or not, the Nazarene meant to go alone into the presence of the Muhammadan lords, and that would be the end of him. And Nureddin could say that he had tricked the stranger and delivered him up to punishment.

No one stopped them, because Rai was beginning to fall asleep after its merrymaking. The great square before the mosque and the governor's house, in which Muhammad had quartered himself, was dark except for the dull glow of the low-hanging moon.

A watchman cried the third hour of the morning as they entered the garden of the *tarim*. Here and in the courtyard lay warriors of the Shah's following, in the utter sleep of weariness.

Persian spearmen, wearing plumed helmets and light, gilded scale armor, halted them in the hall. They

had seen Nureddin coming and going and when the astrologer explained that the tall warrior brought tidings to the Shah the spearmen suffered them to pass.

"The Shah does not sleep," Nureddin whispered. "He sits with the grandees and chieftains and officers on the roof."

But Nureddin's knees began to quiver as they climbed a marble stair and when two men with drawn swords appeared at the head of the stair, he hung back.

"These be Turkomans," he cried under his breath. "Dogs with long fangs. Let us go away!"

"Go, then," responded the crusader and mounted the last steps slowly, his sheathed sword in his left hand. Although his pulse raced and his teeth were set, he managed to seem quite at ease, and the guards waited for him to speak.

They were lean and alert, and their long simitars looked more than serviceable; but they wore baggy velvet breeches and loose embroidered tunics, and Sir Hugh did not think they had been with the caravan. They understood no Arabic, so he spoke the word that has one meaning in all Asia.

"Padishah!"

At this request to be admitted to the emperor, the sentries frowned; but the mien of the visitor was determined, his stride resolute, and they had never seen anyone quite like him before. Weapon in hand, they lifted the silk curtain in a sandalwood screen and ac-

accompanied Sir Hugh into the presence of the first lord of Islam.

Verily Muhammad sat with his officers and grantees, but the crusader, who had expected to find him deep in council, halted utterly surprised.

For a moment there was silence — except that a drum in the shadows muttered rhythmically and a flute piped softly.

Cross-legged on a carpet sat Muhammad, one hand extended toward an ivory box at his side. In the box was *hashish*, and the eyes of the Shah were moist and dulled. Against the parapet of the clay roof sat some scores of Muhammadans in their finest *khalats*, watching intently the motions of a dancing boy — a *batcha*, who, with rice-powdered cheeks and blackened brows, knelt before Muhammad, lithe bare arms twining and twisting over his head.

So wrapped up in the dance were the spectators — who patted their hands together gently in time to the jingling of a tambourine — that no one had eyes to spare for the unexpected visitor.

Some murmured their delight; others, sipping wine and *sumvar*, were trying to attract the attention of the singing girls who sat on the soles of their feet in a corner by the musicians, making great play with transparent veils in henna-stained fingers.

Omar the Amir was the first to perceive Sir Hugh. The moonlight was dim and the glow from the burning

incense beside the *batcha* created more shadow than light, but Omar had learned to look into shadows and now he dared interrupt the amusement of his master.

“By Allah, what is this?”

The boy ceased gesturing, the singing girls drew closer their veils, the musicians dropped their hands, and a hundred faces turned toward the hooded figure in chain mail.

Sir Hugh himself made answer, seizing the instant for speech —

“A Nazarene, a peer of Christendom, who bears a message to the emperor of Kharesmia.”

Muhammad’s sluggish memory stirred, and he recognized the solitary rider who had defied him in the caravanserai. He saw that the Turkoman guards had half-raised their weapons, and that his officers were thronging to their feet. He perceived no reason for alarm; but he was angry that his quiet had been disturbed; moreover — for *hashish* breeds indolence — he was drowsy.

“What is thy name?” he asked.

“Hugh, knight of Taranto, vassal of Baldwin, a king of Frankistan.”

“Thy message, dog of a Nazarene?” barked Omar, for unless the stranger were touched by Allah, only a matter of life itself would bring him before the Kharesmians.

Sir Hugh stepped back so that the two guards were

in front of him and felt with his free hand in his girdle.

“I have come, O *Padishah*, to accuse thee in the presence of thine officers of a foul and traitorous murder. By thy command was slain the Arab chieftain Khalil, who was guiltless of wrong or affront to thee.”

The listeners remained rigid in utter astonishment. Surely the Nazarene was mad!

“For that,” resumed the deep voice of the knight, “thou art emperor of a wide domain and may not take weapon in hand to justify thyself, I do challenge thee to name a champion. With him, on horse or afoot, with lance, sword or ax, I will do battle this night, and by slaying him will make manifest thy guilt to all men. For God defends a just quarrel.”

Those who understood the sonorous Arabic whispered to the others and there was a stir among the chieftains of the Shah, for the Kharesmians were a war-like people. But annoyance overspread Muhammad’s petulant face, and he made a sign to Omar.

Sir Hugh, seeing the Shah clearly in the glow of the incense bowl, spoke again swiftly:

“My lord, hold back thy men! If they come against me not one but many will fall this night. And if I fall, the tidings that I bring from the salt desert will never reach thee.”

The plump lips of Muhammad moved, and he stretched out his hand toward the jeweled simitar that lay across the arm of his sword-bearer.

“Allah hath touched thee for thy sins — dog of a Nazarene. What word hast thou?”

“By this token — ” Sir Hugh tossed the thing he held in his right hand upon the carpet at the Shah’s knees — “from the body of Mir Beg, I have seen thine enemies, the riders of Cathay.”

Omar stooped and picked up the necklace of Mir Beg, scrutinizing the women’s baubles and the withered nose.

“*Ma’ashallah!* Thou hast slain the sower of destruction. What hast thou seen?”

Sir Hugh’s right hand gripped the hilt of Durandal, and his left hand tore the sheath from the long bright blade.

“I saw thy pursuers, speeding hither from the salt plain. And at dusk, when I turned aside from the road into the fields, I saw the glint of spear tips against the dark forest line. Horsemen are stealing like wolves upon thy city.”

Shaken somewhat by the evidence of Mir Beg’s death and reluctant to have swords drawn in the presence of his master, Omar hesitated until reflection brought him reassurance.

“*Yah ahmak!* O madman, thy body shall be given to the dogs for burial — ”

But the Shah’s lips grew pallid, as his brain came out from the influence of the drug.

“Question him — torture him — find out the truth,” he whispered.

“O my Sultan, the Cathayans could not cross the desert so swiftly. The unbeliever hath heard the talk of thy caravaneers and, as for torturing him, I do not think we can take him alive. If it please thee to withdraw, we will send his soul to the court of Satan.”

It did not occur to them that Sir Hugh was not skilled at lying — that he had risked everything to defy them and settle the quarrel in his own way, the only way open to one who had taken the rigid vows of knighthood — that he had done only what he knew in his heart Khalil would have done for him had the Arab survived and he himself been slain.

Searching the faces turned toward him, the crusader beheld only cruelty and the lust to kill in the narrowed eyes, the thin, snarling lips, the fingers that caught at dagger hilt and sword girdle. And suddenly he leaped aside, into an angle of the parapet where none could come at him from behind.

Wavering between apprehension and eagerness to watch the downfall of the Nazarene, Muhammad decided that it would be amusing to have the mad stranger cut down in his presence.

“Slay!” he cried, and the throng moved in upon Sir Hugh.

“Are ye dogs to hunt in packs!” the crusader taunted

them. "Is there not one without fear — or is God to be judge between me and ye? Come, and taste of Durandal that hath laid low the heads of kings, and the knighthood of the Moors. Come — the sword of Roland is lifted again!"

Hard breathing, cautious of foot, they crept forward, simitars grating from scabbards.

And then rang out the voice of the watchman in the square below.

"Ho Moslems, arise and arm! Arise and arm!"

The shuffling of feet ceased, and men held their breath to listen. On the other side of the town brazen cymbals clashed and clanged.

Omar stepped to the parapet beyond Sir Hugh and searched the shadowy city with his eyes.

"A village burns yonder, to the east," he said.

A horse galloped past the *tarim*, and somewhere a murmur sprang into being. And then straining ears caught the distant clash of steel. The nobles who had taken their stand near the Shah turned to him expectantly. And Muhammad's arrogance and pride vanished as suddenly as tinder caught by flame.

"The Cathayans!"

Omar came to his side.

"My sultan, they can not be here. Some pillagers — "

But Muhammad Shah, the Lion of Islam, was in the grip of overmastering fear. Thrusting aside those who stood in his path he cried over his shoulder for his

amirs and guards to attend him. Then he departed down a stairway, and the disturbed Kharesmians hastened after him.

Only the Turkomans and some slaves remained confronting Sir Hugh, and these were not eager to close with the mailed figure that loomed by the parapet. One of them remembered the necklace and ran to snatch it up and the others retreated to the nearest stair where they could watch the Nazarene and look below at the same time.

Sir Hugh sat down on the parapet and listened. He did not venture to take his eyes from the Muhammadans. The distant murmur had resolved itself into shouting. Nearer at hand drums rolled suddenly, and were answered by other drums, and still others beyond the city. Sir Hugh had never heard that strident, carrying note before.

The streets behind him seemed to be alive with hurrying horses. He glanced at the Turkomans and looked quickly over his shoulder.

The moon was setting and there was a gray streak along the eastern skyline. In this half darkness before the dawn he beheld, sitting a motionless horse in the square by the governor's house, a solitary rider. Faintly gleamed upon the horseman's head a helmet and behind his shoulder a lance tip.

Sir Hugh turned back to the half score Muham-

madans who lurked upon the roof like uneasy jackals. He could not depart down one of the stairs while these worthies remained with their javelins and long knives — and it was useless to think of following the Shah for the present.

Again the strange drums barked, and again came the answer, nearer now. A sudden bustle arose in the courtyard beneath — hurrying feet, the sharp twang of bows and the outcry of stricken men.

The Turkomans and slaves had been peering down the main stair. Now they turned and fled after their master, silently.

Sir Hugh bent over the parapet, straining eyes and ears. The white bole of a minaret was visible in the murk and upon its balcony a light gleamed, rising and falling, as if signaling to the shadow-filled city. The sky grew lighter, but no muezzin cried out the sonorous call to prayer.

Invisible in the maw of the alleys, horses still galloped past the house, the *thud-thud* of hoofs growing louder and louder. The changed aspect of the city, the sounds of an invisible multitude — all this savored of magic.

“*Ai* — prince of swordsmen, mighty Nazarene! Aid, or I perish!”

Panting, his short legs flying over the roof tiles, Nureddin shot through the curtained entrance of the

screen and cast himself down by the crusader. Behind him two strange warriors appeared.

They were little taller than the astrologer. Clad in dark leather and wolf-skin cloaks and soft boots that made no sounds on the tiles, they darted like ferrets on their prey.

“Back!” cried Sir Hugh, lifting his sword.

Seeing him they separated and closed in from opposite sides without a word. One of them slashed at his arm with a short saber curved like a sickle and broad at the tip — half ax, half sword. The crusader parried, setting his feet, and lunged full at the other.

The long blade caught the man beneath the heart and passed through his body. Wrenching his sword clear, Sir Hugh stepped quickly to one side as the first foeman came at him. He took the stroke of the saber on the hand guard of Durandal, and stepped back.

“Yield thee!” he said again, but the warrior paid no heed though he must have understood voice and gesture. Crouching, he ran forward and the downstroke of the crusader’s blade caught him at the base of the neck, severing his head and right shoulder from his body.

“Allah give thee strength,” moaned Nureddin. “Look, here are others.”

Two warriors came through the curtain — a quick-striding man in breastplate and helmet with a long horse-hair plume, and an archer, broad of shoulder and bare

of head. The bowman plucked a two-foot shaft from the quiver at his hip and loosed it at the astrologer.

The bow was as thick as Sir Hugh's wrist, and the arms that drew it were massive with mighty sinew. Nur-eddin rolled over and the arrow passed only through his robe under the armpit, pinning him to the parapet. By the shock with which it met the sun-baked clay, the crusader knew that another shaft could penetrate his loose chain mail.

The archer, ten paces distant, fitted a fresh arrow to his bow, and glanced at Sir Hugh. Apparently the sight of the tall warrior surprised him, because he exchanged a low word with his companion who seemed to be an officer, and the man with the crested helmet called out sharply.

Immediately, the screen with its curtain was cast down. Sir Hugh was aware of figures ascending the stair and flooding the roof. Someone gave an order, and the taut muscles of the bowman's arm slackened.

"Cathayans!" cried Nureddin. "Already have I died. My heart is water and I must die again."

But the weary and tight-lipped crusader, facing a throng of strange foemen, was looking into the eyes of a man of his own height — a majestic figure robed in blue silk, his bare throat encircled by a chain of pure jade stones, his black nankeen cap surmounted by towering peacock plumes. A thin beard swept his broad chest, and his wide, full eyes were those of a sage and a dreamer.

“Where is the *padishah*?” the stranger asked, his deep voice pronouncing the Arabic syllables slowly.

To Nureddin it seemed quite natural that a wizard from Cathay should speak in tongues, and he hoped with all his heart that the Nazarene would propitiate the tall lord.

“I know not,” Sir Hugh made answer.

The bearded Cathayan swept the roof with an understanding glance.

“He was here.”

“Within the hour. He went with his followers.”

For a moment the Cathayan considered the crusader.

“Thy speech is not the speech of the other *Tu-kuie*. Thou art a barbarian from another land — to the west?”

His calmness brought inspiration to the despairing Nureddin.

“O exalted one — O lord of created things — this, my companion, is a foe of the emperor. Hither came he to give challenge to the Shah. And I am his friend, his brother. I am a traveler and a man of experience, and I will serve thee well and faithfully. We meant no harm to thy men, who rushed upon this warrior heedlessly. His sword hath a sigil writ upon it, and it deals death when it strikes.”

The bearded noble glanced at the bodies of the warriors and sighed; then he looked at Sir Hugh questioningly.

"I will not yield me to unnamed foes," said the crusader quietly. "Magician or no, I bid thee make an end."

"Aye," murmured the Cathayan, "thou art a barbarian, blunt and bold and foolish. The Eagle would wish to see thee, and thy weapon. Wipe and sheath it."

Sir Hugh made no move to do so, and the stranger seemed to read his thought.

"I am Ye Lui Kutsai," he said, "prince of Shantung, of the Golden Dynasty of Cathay."

"Leader of these men?"

Kutsai shook his head, and stretched out a wide-sleeved arm toward the red glow of the sunrise.

"Servant — as thou wilt be — of the great Khan, Genghis, who is master of Cathay, and of all the earth from here to there. Keep thy sword. What would it avail thee against us? Come to my *yamen* when I send for thee."

Sir Hugh's set face relaxed, and when one of the warriors brought him his leather scabbard, he sheathed the blade of Durandal. Then he bent down to free Nureddin from the arrow. But the astrologer was staring open mouthed beyond him.

"O Nazarene," he croaked, "it has happened, even as I foretold. Look, here are the signs that were to be revealed to thee! Thy fortune is assured — remember that I foretold it."

Puzzled by the earnestness of the little man, the crusader glanced behind him. The warrior who had handed him his scabbard — the same who had loosed

the arrow at Nureddin — was now slipping the string from his heavy bow of black wood and ivory.

“The Archer,” chattered Nureddin. “And on the robe of the magician — ”

The silk tunic of the Cathayan bore, embroidered in gold, the writhing semblance of a dragon.

CHAPTER VI

BEHIND THE HORDE

Sir Hugh was roused from deep sleep by a hard grip on his shoulder. The sun was nearly overhead, and the rug upon which he lay outstretched, in the spot where the Shah had rested, fairly simmered on the hot tiles. The officers of the horsehair crest, having wakened him, motioned for the crusader to descend the stair.

“Now is the *sa’at*, the hour of commencement of happenings,” observed Nureddin who had come to heel faithfully. “Will they torture us? *Ai*, it is not good to be in the hands of wizards!”

Sir Hugh noticed that the rent in the astrologer’s black robe had been neatly sewn up.

“Did the arrow wound thee, little man?”

At this Nureddin seemed confused.

“Nay, lord — it glanced from a — a purse that was slung beneath my shoulder.”

He inspected his robe carefully, glancing up timidly as a bird that sees a stranger approaching its nest.

“No more than a few worthless trinkets,” he added, although his companion only smiled.

They were escorted into the wide hall, where the bodies of the Persian spearmen lay thrust into a corner. Sir Hugh thought they had been slain with arrows and the shafts pulled out afterward. In the hall sat Kutsai behind a sandalwood table, his arms folded in his sleeves. At either end of the table two slender Cathayans wrote with tiny brushes upon rolls of rice paper.

Before the prince stood harrassed Muhammadans, acting as interpreters while captives were brought to the table and questioned. Sir Hugh inspected the warriors on guard at the door, with a soldier's eye for detail of bearing and equipment.

Stalwart men he thought, road weary — horsemen beyond doubt. All carried two bows in a wooden or leather case slung at one hip; their broad, curved scabbards hung between their shoulder blades on a strap passed around the neck and secured over the chest armor — boiled leather coated with lacquer.

Except for the leather drop, studded with iron rings, that protected the nape of the neck, they wore no armor on the back. Nor were they supplied with shields.

Light cavalry, the crusader thought, armed for offense rather than defense. A foison of spears — the mailed horsemen of Christiandom — would shatter such an array. But the broad, sun-browned faces, the muscular

throats and hands bespoke endurance and the bows were certainly heavy. He thought, too, that the warriors seemed to be of a different race than Kutsai's attendants.

"They are Mongols," Nureddin whispered an answer to his question. "Genghis Khan is the chief of the Mongols. He conquered Cathay, and these magicians are conquering all the other lands for him. Look, they make spells with birds and tablets of brass and writings. Aye, the Mongols came out of their desert, but now they have made themselves masters of Cathay and the twain are as one. The Horde is one — and greatly to be feared."

The birds were pigeons, dozens of them, penned in little bamboo cages. Kutsai gave an order and a servant took one of the pigeons from its cage, first reading carefully an inscription painted on the bamboo.

Swiftly the Cathayan prince took a tiny square of rice paper from a secretary, read it over and rolled it up, thrusting the scroll into a silver tube clamped to the bird's claw. Then he nodded to the servant, who went to the door and cast the pigeon up into the air, watching for a moment before returning to his duties.

"It flew east," Sir Hugh commented. "Aye, a messenger pigeon."

No witchcraft in that! But the circular brass sheet puzzled him. A Cathayan hovered over it, steel-tipped stylus in hand. At intervals he carried it to Kutsai who, after cross-questioning the most intelligent of his cap-

tives, the *imams* and *mullahs* of the city, pointed out a spot on the brass, and he of the stylus made a mark and inscription.

More than half the sheet, Sir Hugh noticed, was covered with these marks — wavering lines and squares that looked like houses and triangles that might be tents. Finally he understood.

Long ago, when he had struggled with his letters under the tuition of a priest, he had been shown a parchment bearing such lines. These were rivers, the squares were cities, the rows of triangles mountains and the brass sheet was a map — a map that grew under the Cathayan's direction.

“No magic this,” he said, “but the arts of priests and scribes.”

“Aye, but yonder are strange devices, I think, for judging the position of the stars.”

Nureddin nudged his companion and pointed to a small and highly polished bronze globe ruled off in parallel circles. Beside this was a jade slab with a silver arm pointing up from it at right angles. Before the arm a square inset of some size was filled with water. It was a simple quadrant, for figuring the sun's shadow, the water serving to keep the plane of its base level.

Sir Hugh, however, could not comprehend its use. Weapons and men who used them, and horses he could judge with an experienced eye. But these instruments were things undreamed of by the savants and astrologers

of Europe. Nureddin, on the other hand, drew comfort from them, perceiving that they were devices for measuring the changing of the seasons by the sun's shadow.

"These Cathayans," he whispered, "be astronomers, who calculate the position of the sun and moon. Knowing that, they measure off the hours and the size of the earth's surface — they keep a calendar. I can do more than that, I foretell events as thou hast — "

He broke off in confusion, perceiving that the Cathayan prince was listening. Kutsai spoke to a clerk, who bowed thrice and approached them, saying in broken Arabic that cooked food awaited them in the courtyard and it would be well to satisfy their hunger, as they would have to leave Rai at any moment.

"Whither?" Sir Hugh asked himself as they left the hall.

Scores of Mongol officers were seated around fires in the courtyard, fires tended by Muhammadan captives who boiled whole quarters of sheep in great copper pots. Nureddin, after watching the hungry warriors fearfully, approached a pot with Sir Hugh and cut himself off a generous portion of mutton with his dagger as the others did, saying nothing at all about religious scruples.

"Wine!" he whispered, nudging the crusader. "Allah send it be of Shiraz."

The captives were going about among the warriors filling lacquer bowls with a sizzling white liquid that they poured from goatskins held under their arms. Nureddin

held out his bowl eagerly, but his face changed as he sniffed at the bubbling fluid.

"Milk," he muttered and tasted it warily. "Pfaugh! Mare's milk — goat's — camel's!"

Sir Hugh found the milk fermented, strange to the palate but refreshing, and he emptied his bowl without complaint, making a hearty repast of the mutton. Barely had he finished when a horseman plunged into the courtyard, scattering the cooks, and leaped down from a sobbing and sweat-soaked pony.

The rider, stumbling on stiffened legs, ran into the hall, holding outstretched a long silver tablet. Instead of armor he wore bands of heavy buckram around chest and loins and forehead, and he was caked with dust and sand from his deerskin boots to his bloodshot eyes.

Another moment and Kutsai appeared in the door, drawing on a linen cloak. He spoke briefly with the Mongol officers, and nodded to Sir Hugh.

"An order has come from the Eagle," he said in his measured voice. "I ride to join him. And of thee I have need."

"Then I am captive — to this Eagle?"

The Cathayan considered, as a philosopher weighs an axiom.

"Is a stag within the hunting lines a captive? Thou art within the power of the great Khan, since this dawn. Only the dead are free of the Mongol yoke — the living must serve, each in his own way."

He swept his long arm around the courtyard.

“From one of the nobles of Rai I have learned thy history — though the *Tu-Kuie* believed thee mad. Thou art a Christian warrior from the *Ta tsin*, the western world. The seas and rivers and peoples toward the setting sun are known to thee, and I may have need of thy knowledge.”

“Whither goest thou?”

“Where the Shah rides we follow.”

Sir Hugh’s gray eyes lighted.

“It likes me well.”

Nureddin’s ears had been pricked to catch every syllable, and now the astrologer leaped up gleefully.

“We will not be slain. *Ai-a*, I am most useful — a hound upon a scent. I know all about the Shah, and can interpret omens.”

Gravely the Cathayan surveyed him.

“Jackals also play their part,” he said cryptically.

“O prince of Cathay,” said the crusader boldly, “in Rai I have a charger beyond others dear to me. By thy leave, I would seek him out.”

“A steed of good blood, fair to see?”

“Aye, a gray *kohlani* with unclipped tail and mane.”

“Then the Master of Herds will have found him. Come!”

Gathering up his cloak Kutsai strode into the public square where a high-wheeled cart awaited him — a light chariot to which four horses were hitched. Mongols were mounted on the outer horses of the span.

When the Cathayan stepped into the chariot, drums

rolled near at hand, and presently a patrol of lances trotted around a corner — its officer saluting the prince and dividing his ten men, half before the chariot, half behind.

Thus escorted, the three were whirled through the alleys of Rai, meeting at times other patrols, but never a Muhammadan. Courtyard gates were closed, and window lattices drawn. Sir Hugh, who expected to come upon pillaging and disorder, saw only deserted streets and empty gates when they passed through the wall of Rai on the far side.

It seemed to him that the Mongols could not be a great force — only the indolence and overconfidence of the Kharesmians had enabled the invaders to slip inside the gates. If the wall had been manned, the gates closed, the Muhammadans need not have yielded to these light-armed nomads who lacked siege engines of any kind. If Muhammad, he thought, had dared make a stand against them, matters would have turned out otherwise.

Outside the gate they came upon something grim and altogether unexpected. Almost covered by crows and flapping vultures and furtive, snarling jackals, the bodies of hundreds of Persian warriors lay in heaps throughout the orange groves and gardens.

“*Wallahi!*” Nureddin shivered and clutched the rail of the swift moving chariot.

“The guards,” Kutsai said to the crusader, “upon this

side of the city surrendered to us when it was known that Muhammad had fled. They were slain."

Sir Hugh frowned, restraining an angry word. But the Cathayan seemed to read his thoughts.

"It is well to think, and think again before blaming," he remarked. "I am not a Mongol, yet I understand their code. These Irani were warriors; because of fear they threw down their weapons. When fear had left them they would have fought against us again. It is the order of the Khan to put to death all weapon-men who surrender. When a foe is brave enough to stand against us, then quarter is offered him, because such men may be trusted."

"A strange order," quoth Sir Hugh.

"It save thee life." The Cathayan smiled. "As it did me, for I was faithful to the Golden Dynasty."

The crusader looked back at the white wall of Rai.

"The Persians lacked heart, it is true. Five hundred men-at-arms and archers could have held the city."

Kutsai's dark eyes were meditative.

"Once in Kambalu, in the imperial city of Cathay, five hundred thousand men-at-arms failed to hold a wall five times the strength of that yonder. I saw it for I was then an officer of Cathay."

"How could that be?"

"This astrologer would say 'twas done by magic. I say — otherwise. Look about thee and reflect."

They were passing at a gallop through an open stretch, thronged with Mongol patrols and Muhamma-

dan merchants. Wheat, rice and dried dates were being brought in carts and piled in great heaps, while bellowing herds of oxen and flocks of sheep were counted and driven off to the far end of the field.

“Nourishment,” said Kutsai briefly.

“There is gold in Rai,” spoke up Nureddin tentatively, “and many wealthy grandees — ”

“But no time to plunder.”

“Muhammad has escaped — gone far away. And his treasure was sent ahead upon fresh camels.”

The Cathayan looked twice at Nureddin.

“Aye, wisely he kept fast horses saddled behind his house. From the men of Rai I learned that he rode with a hundred nobles and followers through the north gate at the time we entered the *rigistan*. Our wings sighted him just about here, but his horses were fresh, ours jaded. He fled toward the mountains at first. Then, out of sight of pursuit, he turned west. Our advance riders picked up one of his stragglers.”

“He is safe.” Nureddin wagged his head shrewdly. “At the end of the western road lies Bagdad, with the armed host of the caliphs.”

“A long road.” Kutsai seemed to be weighing the little man’s words. “Have the stars foretold his arrival in Bagdad?”

But Nureddin, for once, held his tongue.

The chariot halted beside a stone wall that served

as a corral for a neighing and rearing mass of horse-flesh. Some Mongols in sheepskins and leather breeches came out of the dust to salute the prince and receive his orders. In a little while Sir Hugh shouted with exultation and held out his hand for Khutb's rein. The gray stallion, already saddled for the road, whinnied and thrust his soft muzzle against his master's throat.

"Well for thee," smiled Kutsai, "we came swiftly, for the horse had been groomed and fed for the next courier."

He himself mounted a powerful roan, and Nureddin was given a tough looking pony with a rolling eye. While their escort of some fifty archers was coming up, the herders handed them saddlebags. Sir Hugh untied the thong and inspected the contents of his with some curiosity. One bag held rice and grapes and sun-dried mutton, with a small jug of the mare's milk. The other, that served for a feed sack, held grain for the horse.

A smaller wallet was thrust into his belt, and this contained wax and flint and steel, with a needle and whetstone.

"Equipment," observed the Cathayan who had been watching him. "There is no knowing where we will halt or when."

When the escort had changed saddles to fresh mounts, Kutsai lifted his hand, the herders raised a shrill cry that might have been warning or well-wishing, and

the Mongols who took the lead trotted across the rice fields and leaped irrigation ditches until they came out on a broad clay road that ran between avenues of poplars toward the setting sun.

Then the horses were put to a gallop, the riders easing their weight in the stirrups and slinging their lances over their shoulders. Kutsai glanced over his right shoulder at the mountains they were leaving behind them.

"The order was to come to the Eagle," he said, "and *he* may be in Bagdad or beyond that snow peak before we reach him."

Nureddin, bouncing along uncomfortably in the dust at the rear, his long woolen shoe tips flapping in the wind, heard the words and muttered to himself as if he were cherishing a secret grievance known to no other soul.

Nureddin, relieved of the fear of death, was a different person from Nureddin about to die. He was jealous of Sir Hugh because the Cathayan prince kept the crusader at his side, deep in conversation when the pace would permit it. Although he had been given a rolled-up bed quilt, he complained of saddle sores, and of the dust and lack of wine to slake his parched throat.

For all that he kept his eyes about him, noticing the caravan of camels lightly laden that they passed in the first few hours, and listening until he was certain that

this was the first unit of the Mongol baggage train. From that — although a man of peace — he deduced correctly that they were drawing near the fighting forces. A second courier appeared on the Bagdad road, plying his whip and bending over his pony's neck when he beheld them.

Kutsai gave an order and the Mongols divided, drawing to the side of the road. One, on a restive horse, dismounted in the cleared space. The courier drawing nearer, held up a silver tablet — the Mongol on foot raised his hand, and the courier was in the warrior's saddle, gripping the reins in a sinewy hand. Flying past Kutsai he shouted a hoarse greeting.

"Ahatou — noyon!"

Again that night when they halted to cook supper and rest the horses where a stone bridge spanned a stream, and a clump of willows screened them, a dispatch rider came along and commandeered a mount. This time the Cathayan halted the man long enough to ask him a few questions, and though Nureddin wandered over to them he could make nothing at all of the answers.

"A message to the Khan," the Cathayan explained. "The post to Samarkand."

It seemed to Nureddin that the world was topsy-turvy. Instead of the usual straggle of fruit venders, pilgrims and nobles' cavalcade on the Bagdad road, they encountered only scattered patrols of the invaders, driving in cattle. Somehow the silence and the unceasing

activity that went on in the hours of darkness depressed the astrologer more than all the imagined terrors of actual war. He would have chosen rather to see bands of slaves driven along the road and any amount of bloodshed — not his own.

So he carried his troubles to the crusader who sat by the fire munching raisins. The Cathayan was sleeping soundly beyond earshot.

“Eh,” pronounced Nureddin, “we are brothers of misfortune.”

Sir Hugh continued to look into the fire.

“Why do we not see any believers, any Muslimin? Surely they are not all martyred!”

“More likely fled.”

“Then let us flee. I have thought of a way. These devils who carry messages all have a silver tablet with a falcon drawn on it. Let us go away secretly and lie hidden until one comes along. Then, when he dismounts to take thy horse, slay him with that long sword and keep his *talsmin*. The accursed Mongols honor it more than my people do the Shah’s ring.”

Sir Hugh smiled at the thought of Nureddin ambushing a dispatch rider. As for trying to escape, he had satisfied himself that they had pickets out and that the sentries did not sleep.

“What of the omens, O watcher of the stars?” he asked gravely. “We have found the Archer and the Dragon.”

Torn between professional pride and anxiety, Nureddin twisted the curls of his beard.

“True, and yet — and yet the omens may be of evil, not of good alone. I have been thinking.”

He watched Sir Hugh thrust some more brush on the embers and draw his saddle cloth over his knees to sleep.

“Listen,” he whispered. “I remember now. It was the moon before this, in the Shah’s camp. There was talk that I heard — a little. Certain amirs were sent ahead to Irak Adjem, to far Persia. Rokneddin rules there and he is the son of the Shah. He is fond of war.”

Sir Hugh was listening attentively now.

“The Shah never meant to stay at Rai. The caravan with his goods went on, somewhither. By the beard and breath of Ali, I swear that he planned to hurry to Rokneddin, who can muster twenty thousand swords if the caliphs move to his aid. And the caliphs will lift the standard of war against a foe of the true believers.”

He abandoned his beard to gesture earnestly.

“We galloped far today. Another two days will bring us to the river and the hills of Savah. That is within Rokneddin’s domain. These un-eyelashed Mongols have not enough men to stand before his swords. Anyway, they are cattle drivers and sheep stealers. They will flee like dead leaves before the *simúm* wind. But what will happen to us? It is time we took thought together, thou and I, and made a plan.”

A sinewy hand closed upon the astrologer’s thin knee, and gray eyes probed his face.

“Art certain of these tidings?”

“By the Ka’aba, by the holy bedsheet — ”

“Enough. Think ye Muhammad and his son will stand against this folk?”

“They will stand and there will be a battle!”

Sir Hugh lay back and rolled the saddle cloth tighter. “God send it be so! Then may I strike a blow against the Kharesmians. Now go and sleep, man of omens.”

And Nureddin crept back to his quilt, heartily cursing all men of weapons and the whole race of warriors, including crusaders of past ages and Christians still to be born.

CHAPTER VII

A TRAP IS SET

As a swimmer exults who has long seen the shore in front of him and who — with the last remnant of his strength — grasps a rock beneath the surface of the water and rests, Muhammad Shah, King of kings, rejoiced when he rode into a long valley at the head of a hundred road-weary nobles and slaves.

Far as the eye could reach, even to the rolling hills on either hand, stretched pavilions and tents. They shone under a mild autumn sun, crimson *tophs* and white awnings. In the center of the camp uprose the green banners of the caliphs, to right and left were visible the glittering gold and silver standards of Iran, and Muhammad drew a long breath of satisfaction when he knew that the mailed cavalry of far Persia had assembled to meet him.

There had been rain in the uplands and he rode forward through lush grass that wavered under a fitful wind. The salt barrens, the torture of sand and thirst were

behind him, and this was a smiling land — breeder of warriors and fine horses.

His eyes exulted savagely in the great camp, and in the throngs of turbaned men in long *khalats*. When Rokneddin came out of the tents with a cavalcade on rearing, caparisoned steeds, Muhammad greeted his son with pride.

Straightway he permitted himself to be escorted to the pavilion prepared for him, feeling a glow of inward satisfaction when Persian amirs pushed forward to hold the reins of his charger, and a robed chamberlain crouched on elbows and knees to receive his weight as he dismounted.

Cymbals clashed when he set foot to earth and bearded chieftains crowded to the edge of the carpet that had been rolled from the pavilion to his horse. They thrust out jeweled hilts of simitars to be touched as he passed.

“May thy shadow increase, Lord of Our Lives!”

“We are here at thy command, O Shield of the Faithful!”

Hurrying into the inner chamber where the great teak pole of the pavilion stood, the Shah dismissed all his courtiers until his slaves could bathe and shave him and robe him in fresh satin and cloth-of-gold. Then, commanding two simitars to be brought and placed in his crimson girdle, he sent for Omar the minister.

Omar came, surprised to find his master alone and

the chamber empty save for seven caskets of plain sandalwood and a bundle done up in cotton.

“What is the strength of the host of Rokneddin?” demanded Muhammad at once.

“My Sultan, I have passed through the camp. The caliphs, favored of Allah, have come to aid thee with six thousand horse and half as many spear and bowmen; thy son, exalted above others, awaits thee with four thousand swords of Iran, tempered and keen of edge; four thousand armored cavalry of the amirs — the heart of the host — are quartered around thee and upon the hills are Turkoman bands without number.”

“Ten thousand horse,” Muhammad’s eyes gleamed. “Seven regiments of foot, and as many tribesmen to hold the flanks.” It was more than enough for his purpose.

He stretched forth a plump hand, the fingers stiff with many rings, to the minister who had served him faithfully since he had been a child, slave-born, and who had guided him through massacre and battle to the highest dignity of a Muslim prince, the Throne of Gold.

“Well hast thou served me, O foster brother — and now I have a task for thee alone.”

Omar, gaunt and anxious, knelt before the Shah and touched his master’s hand to his forehead — unquestioning, though the minister was of the finest lineage of ancient Iran, and the monarch indolent and unlettered.

“What is in these chests?” demanded Muhammad suddenly, a shadow of suspicion flitting across his broad face.

“My Sultan, I do not know.”

Satisfied, the Shah took a small key from his girdle and unlocked the steel-bound lid. Summoning Omar to his side, he opened it half way. Under his hand gleamed softly strings of pearls and lumps of blue turquoise, flaming emeralds, and yellow diamonds that seemed even in the dull light of the pavilion to be incarnate with hidden fire.

“Rubies of Badakshan, unflawed,” Muhammad commented, “and the diamonds that were the ransom of the rajahs of Ind. The other coffer is not less in worth. They hold the greater part of the treasure of the Throne.”

“But the pack animals — thy burden bearers still stand with their loads.”

“Aye, and my slaves toss silver to the common warriors.”

“They say in the camp that thy treasure is in those packs.”

“*Inshallah!* Here is the wealth of Kharesmia. Do thou take a dozen followers, load these chests upon camels and bear them elsewhere. Be thou guardian of the treasure!”

Omar’s lined face was thoughtful.

“And yet, O my Sultan, we have fled hither with no more than a hundred weary men. The caliphs looked for thee to come with greater power. Thy son has armed

his followers at some expense. It were wiser to make gifts of some of these precious stones — to reward those who are to serve thee.”

“If I throw meat to dogs, they will howl for more.” Muhammad closed and locked the chest. “Nay, I have a whip that will rouse them. Go thou to the strongest hold upon this border!”

“To Istar? The rock of Istar?” Omar hesitated. “Verily it lieth far to the north, in the higher ranges; behind it is the sea itself.”

“And so is Istar made safe by Allah. Keep thou the chests and await — ” he was silent a moment — “what is written.” Then, fingering the splendid hilts of the simitars, “Art assured that the mad Nazarene is dead?”

“As I have said. A slave hidden on the roof that was honored by thee beheld him lying lifeless on the carpet. Indeed, O my king, have the Mongols ever spared an armed man?”

“It may have been an omen.”

Muhammad was as superstitious as most ignorant men of his time, and the apparition of the armed crusader, emerging from the fantasy induced by *hashish*, had startled him to the core. The Shah now wished that the Nazarene had been slain while he watched.

He waited until Omar’s attendants had carried out the chests, and the amir made his farewell.

“Upon thee be the Prophet’s peace!”

“Within the mountains, behind the rock of Istar,”

spoke Muhammad, "thou wilt find ease and solace — "

When Omar had gone he clapped his hands and a powerful Nubian entered, armed with a long tulwar — a negro whose tongue had been cut out in childhood, who knew no law save the will of the Shah. To him Muhammad entrusted the cotton bundle, forbidding him to leave the inner chamber of the pavilion. Not until then did the lord of Kharesmia summon his retinue and go forth to meet his nobles in *divan*.

And then indeed did Muhammad show the fire that had elevated him among the peoples of Islam.

At the council he scanned the rows of attentive faces — some bewildered and doubtful by reason of his small following and the rumors of defeats — and caught their interest with his first words —

"I have come to you, among all others, to lead ye to victory over the unbelievers!"

He called on them by name, remembering their deeds, and praising them greatly, naming them servants of Allah, sowers of destruction, shields of the faithful. Some there were who had fought in Palestine against the crusaders; other had driven the weakened soldiery of the Greek empire out of Asia Minor.

He likened them to the companions of the Prophet, thundering out a tribute —

"There dies no lord of ye a quiet death in his bed, and never is blood of ye poured out without vengeance; verily I say your blood streams forth from the edge of the whetted swords!"

The well-known words of the Koran stirred the embers of fanaticism, and Muhammad fed the embers with fresh fuel until they rocked on their heels and ground their teeth.

He drew both his swords, and, holding the hilts in one hand, cast away the gold inlaid scabbards, crying that he would not put down the blades until the invaders had been driven from the land. At this, one chieftain after another sprang up, and simitars flashed over jeweled turban crests.

“Lead us!” they shouted. “O chosen of Allah!”

“Nay,” he cried response, “I am no more than a servant of the All-Wise, who hath opened to us the way of victory. The Khan of the barbarians is beyond the desert; their horses are weary, and their strength is divided in little bands. At dawn we will lift the standard of conquest and advance along the valley, penning the infidels between the hills and the river. Go now, and make ready thy men.”

That night the fires were kept alight, and few slept; the roar of voices, the clatter of steel, the stamping of restless chargers did not cease until cymbals clanged the summons to saddle. But throughout the night the Shah sat attended only by the black mute, his bundle ready to his hand and in his sunken eyes the uneasy fever of *hashish*.

Sir Hugh, trotting through the mists that morning, had his first sight of the Horde.

Coming abreast a ravine they were halted by mounted sentries and the crusader beheld some two thousand warriors encamped between the rock walls of the gorge. They wore chain mail and black helmets that, with the wide leather drop, almost hid their faces; the horses, too, were black.

“The Kerait clan of the *orda*, (horde — in the beginning it meant the village, but it came to mean the center of the clan) Kutsai told him. “But the Eagle is not with them. He has gone up the valley with the archers.”

Here, unexpectedly, Nureddin announced that he would not go on. He complained of illness and saddle sores, and said if the Cathayan would make his peace with the black horsemen, he would wait until they came back.

“He sniffs a battle,” Kutsai smiled as they galloped on, “and is wiser than we.”

“Two nights ago,” replied the crusader, “he told me that the Kharesmians have mustered a host beyond here, and they await the coming of Muhammad — a host of twenty thousand swords.”

The Cathayan glanced into the thinning mist.

“It seemed to me the astrologer knew more than he would say. If there is a battle, we will need to look for the *Orluk*, the Eagle, in the center of the clans.”

“How many men has he?”

Kutsai thought for a moment.

“Thou has seen the *orda* — the armored cavalry. The Eagle would have three *tumans* of bowmen with him —

three thousand. And the clan of the khan of Almalyk is across the river."

"Then will thy leader withdraw upon Rai, where he might make a stand against such numbers?"

"We may not. The code of the Khan saith otherwise, and even his own son did not withdraw when Muhammad took him by surprise. Nor is the Eagle like to fly away from a foe."

Sir Hugh was cheered by this, and he urged forward the gray stallion so that the Cathayans big roan was laboring to keep up. The mists cleared and they found themselves entering a grassy valley, a league in width, with wooded hills on one hand, the gleam of a river between willow groves on the other. And presently they made out what seemed to be a horse herd in the center of the valley.

As they drew nearer Sir Hugh saw that it was made up of bands of Mongol archers, each man having a spare horse on his bridle. He noticed that the detachments were a hundred strong and that a warrior with a red horsehair crest to his helmet seemed to be the captain of each company — also, strangely enough, the archers had chosen to mount the inferior of the two horses in every case. In the years of life among the Arabs, Sir Hugh had learned to judge the small and fleet beasts of Asia.

As they passed, the officers saluted Kutsai, who turned toward the group surrounding the standard — a long pole bearing buffalo horns and a bar from which

nine yak tails hung. Mounting the ridge on which the standard had been placed, Sir Hugh reined in with an exclamation.

Not two hundred paces beyond the ridge the Kharesmian army was drawn up in battle array.

His eyes glowed as he scanned the brilliant line of warriors extending from the distant hills to the woods by the river. After years of wandering he saw again the green banners that he had faced in Palestine, heard the shrill clamor of *nakars*, the taunting shouts of individual horsemen who curveted in the open before the first rank.

In that single glance, Sir Hugh judged the strength of the Muhammadan array — the splendid horses of the Persian warriors whose silvered mail gleamed like fire; the clouds of sheepskin-clad Turkomans.

The shaggy ponies of the Mongols beside him were cropping the rich grass eagerly, one foot out-thrust. No trace of a formation was visible; the warriors, leaning on their saddle horns, were gazing attentively at the Muhammadans. Even the bows were in the sheaths. Kutsai had left his side.

Again the *nakars* sounded behind the Kharesmians, and the green standards dipped, moved forward. Sir Hugh knew that it was impossible for these bands of nomads to stand against the charge of those mailed ranks.

And he was in no mood to run from the Muhammadans. If this was to be the end of the road he would not shun it. Slipping the steel hood over his head, he drew

taut the lacings at his throat. Drawing the sword Durandal, he gathered up the reins of the gray stallion and spurred down the ridge toward the oncoming Kharezmians.

It was unlooked-for — past belief. Every head in the first rank of the Muhammadans turned toward the solitary rider who advanced without shield or lance on the swift moving stallion that every warrior coveted at once.

They had never seen — except for the few Seljuks — a warrior of Frankistan, or a sword like the long blade in his hand. No one followed him.

Then he reined in and cried at them in sonorous Arabic:

“Yah shatyr, yah rahb! O ye who slay, where is the champion of your king?”

One of those in advance, a dark-skinned Seljuk, swooped forward as a swallow skims the earth.

“Dog of a Nazarene! Thy death shall delight the eyes of my sultan.”

In his right arm the warrior gripped a long lance, his left clutched a round shield against his shoulder. Only his blazing eyes peered over the shield's rim from either side the steel nasal.

Sir Hugh reined in, erect in the saddle, and swerved Khutb to his right hand as the Seljuk came at him. The lance, on the far side of the horse's neck, shot past without touching him, and the knight, twisting in the saddle, lashed down at his foe's shield.

The heavy blade hit through wood and leather and crushed in the man's chest, flinging him back over the horse's rump. A shout of anger greeted the downfall of the Seljuk, and a second rider galloped at Sir Hugh — a powerful Kharesmian in silvered mail.

He had seen the Christian's sword slash through his companion's shield and he maneuvered his nimble-footed charger warily until he saw a chance to dash in from the left. He raised a short battle ax as he closed with the knight.

Sir Hugh gripped the man's upflung right arm between shoulder and elbow and held it so. Snarling, the Muhammadan struggled to free himself, and then — no novice at close fighting — slipped his shield to grasp one of the daggers in his girdle.

Before he could strike, Sir Hugh raised his sword and brought down the massive pommel on the Kharesmian's forehead. His skull shattered, the man slumped over his saddle horn. The frightened horse plunged on.

There was barely time for the solitary Nazarene to parry the stroke of a third foe. Khutb reared, and a simitar flashing down from the other side wrenched into the loose mail of his shoulder.

"Ha!" Sir Hugh struck right and left with all his strength. A man leaned toward him, teeth agleam, eyes glaring. He thrust savagely with the point — saw the man's eyes redden — felt another horse plunge into the



KHUTB REARED AND A SCIMITAR FLASHING
DOWN FROM THE OTHER SIDE WRENCHED
INTO THE LOOSE MAIL OF HUGH'S SHOULDER.



gray stallion, who shifted his footing shrewdly to meet the impact, and knew that he was surrounded.

He heard a curious hissing in the air, followed by a series of crashes, as if axes were splintering shields. A warrior who had thrust a shield into his eyes swerved and fell from the saddle with an arrow through his beard. Sir Hugh saw other empty saddles.

Then hoofs thudded behind him. A wave of dark ponies enveloped Khutb. Strong hands gripped his sword arm, and the reins were snatched from his other hand.

Khutb was jerked around, and when Sir Hugh was able to look about him he saw that he was being hurried up the ridge in the center of a group of Mongols. Other bowmen were plying their shafts at the Kharesmians.

When he galloped over the ridge the Mongols turned and darted off in headlong flight after their standard which was already in retreat.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PAVILION OF THE SHAH

There was no slightest doubt that the Mongols were fleeing. Only the rearmost companies attempted to use their bows. And behind them rose the high-pitched ululation of triumph.

“Allah, il’lahi!”

Sir Hugh sheathed his sword with a grimace. His left shoulder was bleeding and he thought that at least one bone in it was broken. He was grateful for Khutb’s even pace and wondered how the Mongols managed to handle his reins with their own and keep the extra mounts galloping beside them.

It was natural enough that they should retreat, he reasoned. A glance over his shoulder showed that the Kharesmian cavalry was in full pursuit. The foot soldiers had been left behind.

For a while he was occupied with his wound and the saddle which had become slippery from blood. Then he was aware that the Mongols were scattering, the de-

tachments spreading out over the valley. Better to have kept together, he thought, for they could not pass the river and would only be hunted down in the hills.

The gallop slowed to a trot, none too soon for the sweat-soaked Khutb, and Sir Hugh noticed something unusual in the flight of the Mongols. The detachments, each with its officer, had kept intact. They were moving outward in a kind of fan-shaped formation, so that the wings lagged behind the center.

Again he looked back. The more sluggish Muhammadan cavalry had fallen behind a mile or so, and the clouds of Turkomans and well-mounted Seljuks were in full cry on the heels of the Mongols.

“St. Giles!” Sir Hugh began to wonder.

From somewhere came the now familiar roll of kettle-drums, and at this signal the warriors around him jumped down and checked the horses. Swiftly they changed saddles from the jaded mounts to the faster horses that they had kept at the bridle. Then, springing into the saddle again, they whipped out and strung their bows, fitting arrows to string.

In that moment of quiet, Sir Hugh had a clear view of the valley — the Mongol detachments in the form of a half-circle, from the hills to the river bank — charging headlong into this half-circle the masses of triumphant tribesmen on sweating, foaming horses. The nearest Turkomans were barely a hundred paces distant from him, yelling like fiends incarnate.

And then the Mongols began to send their arrows into the tribesmen. They rose in their stirrups, broad shoulders tensing, pulling the feathered tips of the arrows to the ear.

“St. Giles of the Bow!” breathed the crusader, wiping the sweat from his eyes.

The arrows made a gigantic *whirring* in the air, as if in all the valley birds were rising from the ground. Empty saddles appeared among the leading Turkomans. Riders and horses rolled into the tall grass and the screaming of wounded men and beasts broke through the war cries.

The tribesmen wavered, some pressing forward, others reining in. They flung up their light shields, but the heavy shafts tore through wood and leather, emptying more saddles until the Turkomans, who had expected to harry a beaten foe, swerved and galloped back more quickly than they had come.

At once the officer of each Mongol detachment darted forward. The warriors followed. And, in the center of the valley, the standard was lifted again.

Instinctively, lacking discipline and any leader, the Turkomans had drawn closer together and the Mongol wings herded them up the valley as sheep are driven by dogs that race far out to the sides. From left and right and rear the arrows sped into the mass of men and beasts, until the Turkomans fled blindly, slinging their shields over their backs and lashing their horses.

“They will break the array of the heavy cavalry,” Sir Hugh thought, “if they turn not aside.”

The main body of Persian horse was coming up at a trot — some four thousand warriors in mail, who had kept their formation. Planning, evidently, to cut the Mongols off from the hills, they had tended to that side of the valley and toward them the harassed tribesmen raced, only to be greeted by a line of lowered lances. Experienced in battle, the Persians did not intend to let the fugitives crash into their array.

Howling, the Turkomans, still dropping under the long flight of the arrows, changed course again and lashed their horses toward the woods on the right where a wide gorge yawned.

Sir Hugh had seen that gorge before. He forgot the ache of his wound when he heard the shrill *harr-rhum!* of the kettle-drums that seemed to be accompanying the Mongol standard.

At once the Horde emerged from the mouth of the ravine. A hundred riders trotted out in the first line, their horses covered with sheets of heavy leather, long lances upraised over their helmets.

There were five ranks of lances, then an interval, and five ranks of swordsmen. The first *tuman*, as soon as it was clear of the brush and loose boulders, quickened its pace to a gallop. The second *tuman*, following it, did likewise.

Sir Hugh, moving toward the battle as swiftly as he could urge the tiring stallion, beheld it from afar as if so many miniature warriors were maneuvering on a vast green chessboard. Some of the Turkomans escaped through the narrowing gap between the Persian wing and the onrushing Horde. But remnants of the tribesmen, driven like spume before an advancing wave, fled into the ranks of Persians who, at that moment, were wheeling to face the charge of the *tumans*.

Gallant fighters and good horsemen, the Persians were at sore disadvantage. At full gallop, the powerful chargers of the Horde, rushing shoulder to shoulder, came down the slope on their flank.

Drawing nearer, Sir Hugh could see clearly the overwhelming of the desperate Persians. The plumed helmets sank under the black tide of the Horde. Muhammadan horsemen were accustomed to charging in open order, fighting individual duels. They faced the mass of the Horde, but all fire had left them and from the other sides came steadily that storm of shafts, tearing through light mail, dropping the horses under them.

Into this mass of struggling men the crusader plunged, hewing a path through the crowded Muhammadans with his long sword, guiding Khutb by his knees alone. It seemed only a moment that he heard the splintering of wood, the clash of steel and the panting of frenzied warriors.

Then the ground in front of him cleared. The Persians were fleeing before the Horde, leaving half their number dead.

The sky was a mass of dark clouds, moving before a rising wind. The air had grown cold.

Sir Hugh sat on the rocky crest of a knoll, the mail coif thrown back from his head. His shoulder, stiffening, had begun to throb, and his sword arm was bruised and quivering. Like Khutb, who stood at the base of the knoll with heaving flanks, the crusader, after hours of fighting, had been forced to rest.

A half mile or so up the valley the pride of Islam — the unconquered warriors of the caliphs — stood at bay against the onset of the Mongol bowmen.

The surviving Persians had retreated to the shelter of the green banners, and Sir Hugh had seen the Mongols alter their tactics again. The Horde had divided into companies, slipping the lances over their shoulders, sheathing their sabers. Drawing their bows, they had shot into the close-drawn ranks of Muhammadan horse and foot, circling beyond the effective range of the smaller bows used by the caliph's warriors.

"The flight was a trick," Sir Hugh meditated aloud. "They led the Muhammadans on until the steeds of the pursuers grew weary. Then they turned and smote each band, driving it back upon the others."

Drawing nearer the knoll a grotesque black figure

ran from body to body, stripping gold and silver from girdle and turban. Sir Hugh recognized Nureddin's sugar loaf hat and curling beard.

"Eh," cried the astrologer when he came up to Khutb, "thou hast seen! It is the magic of Cathay that scatters armed hosts like dried grass."

"No magic," responded the crusader sternly, "but skill with the bow and obedience to the command of a wise leader."

Nureddin had the grace to be ashamed of his plundering, and tried to conceal a bulging sack under his robe.

"A day of calamity," he mourned. "The swordsmen of the Prophet went to their graves as to beds. *Ai-a!*"

His little eyes shone with the lust of unlimited gain — for the Mongol detachments in the rear would touch no plunder. They were driving captured horses into herds, tying swords and shields to the saddles, and moving up the valley after the fighting forces.

Harr-rrum — arr-rrum!

Again the kettle-drums beat the summons to onset and Sir Hugh climbed stiffly into a bloodstained saddle. The Muhammadans, after trying vainly to close with the circling Mongols, had lost heart in the face of the storm of arrows and were retreating, the green banners moving up the valley under a lowering sky.

And the mailed *tumans*, closing into the ten-rank formation, were preparing to charge.

Sir Hugh did not join the fighting again that day. Though he pressed Khutb, he could not come up with the standard. Riderless horses galloped around him and the valley bed was covered with dying Kharesmians and those trying to make their way to the hills. Darkness hid the slaughter, and rain fell heavily.

“Woe! Woe to the faithful!” A voice wailed near at hand.

“Fly!” Someone cried, unseen. “The Shah hath forsaken us, and the wrath of God is visited upon us.”

A flurry of hoofs in the wet grass, the whistle of a saber and a moan indicated that a passing Mongol had struck down the wailer. Sir Hugh kept his sword in hand, because in the darkness he might easily be mistaken for one of Muhammad’s followers, and he could not answer a challenge. To fly! He smiled wryly. Where was he to find a road that led back to Europe, and how pass through the strongholds of the Muhammadans?

He drew some comfort from the thought that the Kharesmian emperor might be wandering like himself in the storm.

After a while he heard at one side a curious clanking and swishing and grunting. It grew louder and seemed to keep abreast him. *Clink-clonk*. Those were surely bells, but what bells would be passing over a battlefield at night?

He smelled camels, and when lightning flickered, saw through the driving rain a line of ungainly beasts

roped together. Beside the caravan rode Mongol guards, sheepskins over their shoulders.

Sir Hugh remembered that he had seen that caravan not long ago — the first of the Mongol baggage train, pushing forward to join the Horde. From time to time the guards shouted response to a harsh challenge, and the crusader edged in closer to the camels, understanding that they must be bound for the main camp, wherever it might be.

Before long a lantern bobbed into sight ahead of him, and a patrol of lancers trotted out of the darkness. One of them lifted the lantern to look at him and there was a murmur of guttural voices.

“*Ahatou!*” The leader of the patrol sheathed his sword and lifted his right hand, and Sir Hugh remembered that in this fashion the Cathayan prince had been saluted.

The Mongols indicated by signs that he must come with them, and as they seemed friendly, he accompanied them without question. Presently they passed a line of sentries and entered the lighted tents of a camp.

“Muhammad,” said Kutsai thoughtfully, “has vanished. In the battle he was with the green banners of the caliphs but he fled alone. And alone he came to this *yamen*. Look!”

Sitting upon a brocade couch, the tall Cathayan pointed at some objects on the carpet that covered this

inner chamber of the great *toph* that had been prepared for the Shah by his people. Near the teak pole of the pavilion lay a satin tunic and a fine *khalat* of cloth-of-gold, wet and splashed with mud. Thrown down haphazard were silk trousers and pearl-sewn slippers, and the unmistakable green turban with the emerald crest.

“These simitars were his,” went on the Cathayan philosopher, brushing his long fingers through the tip of his beard. “Slaves say that the Shah dismounted and ran into this chamber where a black man stood guard. Master and man left by another opening. What is the meaning of this?”

Sir Hugh, working off his mail with the help of a Mongol warrior, shook his head. Kutsai dipped an exploring finger into an ivory jar and sniffed the brown powder dubiously.

“This stuff breeds dreams. Muhammad may have sought forgetfulness, and that means he was afraid. He would be, I think. Here he changed his garments in haste and separated from his men. Perhaps he has made himself a pilgrim, or even an astrologer.”

Sir Hugh looked down in surprise, but the wide brown eyes of the prince were thoughtful.

“It comes to me now — Muhammad dreaded defeat, and made ready this way of escape. He covered his flight with the bodies of ten thousand of his followers.”

“If he abandoned his men to save his life, God will judge his sin.”

Kutsai inclined his head.

“The power of *T'ien*, of Heaven is illimitable, but upon the earth the Khan is master of all men. Alas, that I, a former servant of the Golden Dynasty, should say this — the princes of Cathay were unworthy and *he* cast them down. And Prester John of Asia in like manner. The Muhammadans cry that Heaven's wrath is visited upon them. Can this be so? Perhaps there are times when earth's rulers grow false and weak, and at such times a barbarian is sent with a sword out of the desert — ”

Arms folded in his sleeves, the Cathayan meditated. “Since my youth I have been the councilor of Genghis Khan, and he is no more than a barbarian chieftain wiser than other rulers in the art of war. He is like tempered steel, unswerving and unbreakable. Those who serve him he spares not and yet upon those who are faithful in all things he bestows power vaster than that of your Caesars.”

That day Sir Hugh had seen the downfall of the caliphs, who had withstood the hosts of crusaders for generations, and he asked a blunt question —

“Wherein lies the power of this Khan?”

Kutsai smiled and answered promptly.

“Obedience! One who is infallible inspires respect. One who seeks no gain for himself inspires reverence. Every Mongol from here to Kambalu lives only to serve the Khan. And,” he added with a smile, “he is aided by the wisdom of Cathay.”

“The Muhammadans say thou art a magician.”

“It was said also of Prester John, the Christian. When men do not understand a thing they say it is witchcraft.”

Kutsai withdrew a hand from his sleeve and showed in his palm a round box of bamboo. The cover of the box was transparent crystal, a silk thread suspended from its center. At the end of the thread hung a long splinter of steel, so balanced that it quivered and turned slowly from side to side.

“The blue tip of the needle,” the Cathayan explained, “points always to the south. It hath been touched by a lodestone. This needle would guide thee on a straight path in the darkest night.”

Sir Hugh looked at it curiously. Indeed, no matter how the Cathayan moved the box, one end of the needle turned ever toward the tent pole.

“Without this,” the philosopher added, “we could not cross the deserts. Only the commanders of a *tuman* and the higher officers are allowed to possess the south-pointing boxes.”

“Nureddin said you broke down the strong walls of cities by enchantment.”

“By mixing saltpeter with a little sulphur and clay we have made what we call *pao*, a blasting fire. By penning the *pao* within large bamboos and stopping the ends with iron, and then touching it with fire we have found that the blast will shatter a gate or uproot a tower.”

In silence the crusader pondered this until it was clear in his mind.

“In my land we would call thee an alchemist, and doubtless we would set thee to making gold so that merchants and princes would profit. I have been reared in the use of weapons and my knowledge is no more than that. Tell me, then, of what I would know. How did the Horde know that Muhammad would come down the valley with his host?”

Kutsai replaced his south-pointing box in his sleeve and smiled a little.

“Subotai — the Eagle. His scouts were leagues in advance of the Horde; they watched during the night when the Muhammadans made a great tumult, praying and shouting and mustering their forces.”

Above the lash of rain on the pavilion top the slapping of hoofs in mud could be heard, the jangle of bit chains and the muffled clash of steel, echoed by deep-throated laughter and shouts of greeting. Kutsai stepped to the silk partition, listened and hastened back to his companion.

“Now will thy fate be decided, lord of the Nazarenes. The Eagle has come back from the Horde, without sending word to me. If thou art able, stand!”

Sir Hugh rose to his feet, resting his good arm on the wide hand guard of Durandal, for his shoulder pained him and loss of blood had weakened his limbs. Kutsai glanced at him with some anxiety and whispered swiftly.

“Do not look for mercy. The Eagle tears with his

talons more often than he lifts with his wings. Bear thyself boldly and answer from an open heart — that is the only help for thee.”

The flap of the partition was thrust back, a gust of wind whirled through the chamber, setting the lanterns to swinging, and a man stood between them — a warrior whose like Sir Hugh had never beheld.

Tall as the crusader, his limbs were massive as a bear's, and his mighty body seemed to roll forward on its bowed legs as if driven in by the wind. In a single movement he unclasped and tossed away a dripping sable cloak and lacquered helmet from which hung an eagle's feather. His armor was black lacquer, his under tunic, wide-sleeved, was soft shagreen. His broad, dark face outthrust from high shoulders had an animal's alertness and vitality; but his long hair was red and his eyes — to Sir Hugh's utter surprise — a clear blue.

“*Ahatou noyon Kitai!*” His drawling voice greeted the Cathayan, and his eyes went to the simitars lying on the carpet. He picked them up instantly, weighed them in a gnarled hand, tried the flexible steel and cast them down on the *khalat* of the Shah. “We have pulled a little hide from the running hare,” he said in Mongol, “but the hare has vanished like an arrow shot into thick reeds.”

Then his blue eyes fastened on Sir Hugh, and after a moment he held out his hand.

“*Timur* — the sword.”

The crusader extended Durandal, the scabbard



THEY FACED THE MASS OF THE HORDE, BUT
ALL FIRE HAD LEFT THEM AND FROM OTHER SIDES
CAME STEADILY THAT STORM OF SHAFTS.

grasped midway in his right hand. He was captive to this pagan lord, and Subotai was privileged to ask the surrender of his weapon. But Kutsai's fine eyes were shadowed by anxiety.

The Eagle gripped the hilt, and drew the long blade from the scabbard, still looking squarely at the wounded knight. The weight of the sword seemed to surprise him, and he took it in both hands, raising it above his head. Sir Hugh, holding the empty scabbard across his knees, made not the slightest movement when the Mongol general began to swing the sword.

To wield such a heavy weapon, skill and supple muscles were more necessary than the sheer strength of a man like Subotai. The steel blade moved slowly over Sir Hugh's head, but the Mongol's sinews cracked, and he breathed deep. The gaze of neither man faltered.

"*Khai!*" Subotai said abruptly. "In the battle I saw this man wield the sword."

"And before that," Kutsai put in at once, "O *noyon* of the Horde, I saw him swing it in one hand, so that it whistled in the air. But now his bones have been broken, and he has bled much."

"Who could lift it in one hand?" Subotai shook his head, unbelieving. "Let him take it, and I will judge of his strength."

Returning the sword to Sir Hugh, he stepped back, dropping a powerful hand upon the head of a short ax in his belt.

“Canst lift thy weapon, Nazarene?” Kutsai asked anxiously in Arabic. “Beyond all feats, the Eagle loves a feat of strength.”

Without answering, Sir Hugh planted his feet wide on the carpet, resting the tip of the long sword on the ground before him. He glanced at the teak pole that supported the pavilion, seasoned wood, as thick as a man’s thigh. Setting his teeth and letting his left arm hang limp, he whirled up the blade.

He put forth every ounce of strength in him, heedless of a flame of agony in his left shoulder. Skilled in handling the sword, he swung it high and lashed down at the teak pole, striking it a yard above the ground.

So keen the edge of the sword, so great the impact, the hard wood cracked and split. The jagged end leaped out and darted into the earth, piercing the carpet at Subotai’s side. The whole pavilion sank and billowed as the top was loosened by the shortening of the pole. The lanterns set up a mad dance.

Subotai had not moved, though the pole had brushed his hand.

“*Khai!*” he shouted, and his blue eyes gleamed. “A good stroke.”

As he spoke he placed himself astride the slanting pole, wrapped both arms around it and lifted. Sir Hugh, amazed, saw the Mongol walk back the five paces to the stump projecting from the earth, bearing the weight of the pole and the rain-soaked pavilion top. Sticking the

shortened tent pole beside its stump, he turned upon Sir Hugh swiftly.

“This youth rode alone against the *orda* of the Shah. I sent a *gur* (one hundred warriors) to shield him with arrows and bring him back because he stood his ground well. What quarrel had he with the men of the Shah?”

Seizing his opportunity, Kutsai related the crusader’s story as he had heard it from Nureddin — the death of Khalil, and the challenge in Rai. “And there is a tale, Subotai Bahadur, that once this Nazarene held a castle gate against the emperor of the Roumis and his men. In him is high courage, and no falsehood.”

“And in thee a woman’s pity.” Subotai’s blue eyes were expressionless until his wide lips smiled. “At least he is a warrior, though a little blood-letting weakens him. He shall come with me and find his death in the Horde.”

Kutsai, arms folded in his long sleeves, bent his head. He had learned that it was useless to argue with a Mongol.

“Bring *tcha*,” Subotai ordered, “and use thine arts to seek trace of the Shah. Be like a ferret in cunning. I will sleep.”

He waited until the Cathayan summoned some attendants with a steaming bowl of tea. Quaffing this slowly, his eyes fell upon the crusader.

“Tend his wound. A man cannot ride with broken bones, and he must go far in the saddle and fast.”

So saying he flung himself down on the carpet, drew the wet sable cloak over his limbs, and after a few deep breaths slept as quietly as a child. He had been in the saddle for two days and nearly two nights.

“He saved thy life this day,” Kutsai whispered to Sir Hugh, “and he wishes to see thee again in battle.”

Persuading the crusader to lie down on the couch, Kutsai and his Chinese servants washed out the knight's wound with warm water and balsam, and set the broken collar bone cleverly. Then he bound Sir Hugh's left arm to his side and brought him the bowl filled with hot tea. Into the draught he must have put herbs, because drowsiness came upon the wounded man at once.

Fitfully — for the fever in his veins fought against the sedative the Cathayan had administered — Sir Hugh slept, waking at times when Mongol officers came to the tent and talked with Subotai. Then the pavilion was deserted, all the lanterns but one darkened. Kutsai alone was visible, sitting by a little table on which was a board marked in silver and gold squares. In this board stood tiny images of kings and queens and priests and bowmen on prancing horses. From time to time, the philosopher would stretch out his hand and move one of the pieces to another square.

It seemed to the feverish knight that this man was, after all, a magician, weaving a spell by the aid of these effigies.

The rain still pattered on the pavilion, and a voice

cried out of the storm: "Woe to Islam! O ye who believe, the wrath of God is at hand!"

The next day the rain had ceased, but the air was chill and some Mongol guards came in and made a fire in a brazier by the couch. They gave Sir Hugh fermented milk to drink, and he fell into a heavy sleep, troubled by a curious dream.

It seemed to him that he was mounted on Khutb, riding along a shore of a sea. The rush of the surf came nearly to the horse's hoofs, and the cries of gulls filled the air. They were galloping, Khutb and he, along the shore seeking a road that would lead back to England and Christian folk, but whenever he looked away from the sea only the salt desert met his eyes.

They dared not draw rein, Khutb and he, for fear the sea would disappear and the road be lost forever, and they would be alone in the salt desert.

“

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CHAPTER IX

TWO ROADS

For several days Sir Hugh saw nothing of the Cathayan or the Eagle. The fever had left him, and he was possessed by a vast hunger, to which his guards ministered methodically and in silence. They brought him roast joints of mutton, and sugared fruits and jellies that were part of the spoil of the Shah's camp.

When Kutsai appeared again it was in haste and clad for the saddle. He examined the crusader's shoulder, nodding with satisfaction.

"Our scouts brought in captives," he said, "and I have learned from them that Rokneddin fled to the east, taking the road to Bagdad. But Omar was seen, going with a few camels to the north, toward the mountains. It is clear that Muhammad hath departed from this camp and is hastening in disguise upon one of the two roads. Subotai gave command to divide the Horde, half to go with him to the north, and half to ride toward Bagdad under the leadership of the khan of Almalyk. I go to Bagdad."

While he talked, he replaced Sir Hugh's bandages and deftly wound upon his shoulder a loose sling to hold the left arm.

"Do not use that hand. In Bagdad I have heard are the academies and mosques of the caliphs — the library of a certain Haroun al-Rashid, and there will I find scholars who will help me finish my map, who will have tables of the movements of the planets, to verify mine. A pleasant city, a place of ease. Come, then, with me, for the road is smooth and straight."

"What of the Eagle?"

Kutsai's brow clouded.

"His is the road beset by peril, guarded by the tribes of the *shan* — of the hills. I do not know what lies beyond the ranges, but winter draws on and the snow increases on the far summits. Subotai will never turn back. He will ride with his men even to the *ta tsin*, the edge of the world. With him, life will not long endure. The choice is thine."

"Whose captive am I, Lord Kutsai?"

"Ah!" The Cathayan smiled. "The Mongols take neither slaves nor captives. What king dost thou serve, O Nazarene?"

"For twelve winters I have not set foot upon the land of Frankistan. My liege lord is in his tomb, and of his successors I know not."

"Good!" Kutsai seemed to draw satisfaction from this. "Wilt give obedience to the great Khan, Genghis?"

Sir Hugh considered, chin on hand.

“Aye, so. For the sultan of the Kharesmians is my sworn foe, and to the warriors of the Eagle do I owe my life.”

“Then ponder the debt of obedience. Thou must obey without question all commands of the *gur* and *or-khans*, of the bearers of the falcon and eagle and tiger tablets. It will be forbidden thee to lift hand against a Mongol, to steal or to utter an untruth. Death is the reward of transgression. In battle thou must keep thy face toward the foe, save when the standard is carried back. When a comrade of thy ten (the smallest unit of the Horde) is wounded, thou or another must bear him from the conflict; if one is taken, thou or another must succor him.”

“In that there is no dishonor,” Sir Hugh made response. “And this obedience I will give.”

“Forget not, it is forbidden to take spoil, even though no eyes may behold thee. All weapons and gold and horse must be given to the officers of the Khan.”

“Aye so.”

“And think not to flee from the Eagle. In the darkest night, eyes will see and swift hoofs will follow. The road of obedience will try thy strength and at the end — what awaits thee?”

Sir Hugh sprang up and clapped a stalwart hand upon the thin shoulder of the philosopher.

“Verily, the Dragon was a fair omen! Aforetime the Arabs told me a tale of far-wandering. They said that

beyond these mountains lies a sea, wherein all the birds of the earth do come at certain seasons — a vast sea, penned on two sides between mighty ranges, and on two sides between deserts. And the name of it is the Sea of the Ravens.”

Kutsai’s fine eyes were incredulous and when he had thought for a moment he said gravely:

“That may not be. In the first cycle of the Heavenly emperor, the great waters were divided from the earth, so that the seas surrounded the land. In this desert country there can be no great water.”

“And yet, Lord Kutsai, thou hast seen the desert of salt and sand. Was not that once the shore of this hidden sea?”

“Ah! It may be so. My son, thou art wise beyond thy years. Come with me and help draw my map.”

Sir Hugh shook his head.

“Nay, father of wisdom, I was bred to the sword, and I have no skill save that. If the sea is there, I shall embark upon it. Surely it must lead beyond the lands of paynimry, to Christian folk.”

“I, too,” observed the prince after a pause, “long for my home. I would like to go back to my garden that is fringed with bamboo and azalea and dark pine trees, above a pool that is a haven of meditation. I would like to watch my grandchildren eating mulberries. Upon my roof I would sit, studying the course of the Fire Star (Mars). Alas! I grieve because we must part.”

“Farewell, Lord Kutsai. I shall follow the Eagle.”

“Aye — I knew thy mind. I fear for thee. Nureddin, who stripped gold from the slain, was seen by the Eagle and now he waits at the *yamen* gate. Wait thou in the pavilion until a summons comes.”

Clasping his hands over his breast, the Cathayan philosopher bent his head, turned and strode from the pavilion. Sir Hugh heard chariot wheels rattle away, followed by the hoofs of the escort. After a while, bethinking him of Nureddin, he went forth to stand by the guards and look around the camp, rejoicing in the sunlight and the brisk wind.

In the cleared space before the entrance Nureddin hung. His curling beard was sadly limp, his shaggy head rested strangely on one shoulder. Going closer, the crusader saw that he was bound to a stake by a cord passed under his arms. The astrologer's mouth was open, the tongue hanging upon one side, and from his throat protruded the end of a pearl necklace that had strangled him.

At the end of a week, Sir Hugh was able to move his left arm, and rest and good food had restored him to strength, so that he took long walks about the camp, observing the Mongols and picking up some words of their speech. And then he was roused from sleep before sunrise by a young warrior who held an iron lantern close to his eyes.

The visitor wore a sheepskin jacket and heavy woolen breeches, thrust into high deerskin boots. His forehead was bound with leather strips, to which was attached a hood that covered his features except a pair of alert black eyes.

“*Khoudsarma!*” He raised his hand to his lips and forehead. “My lord! A command hath come for thee.”

He spoke fluent Arabic, and Sir Hugh, rising at once, saw that he wore no weapon but a short saber. Around his throat hung a silver falcon tablet, and a leather wallet — insignia of a dispatch rider.

“Is thy strength mended?” he asked earnestly. “I have orders to guide thee, but I may not wait for thee to pick thorns from thy skin or to make fires.”

Sir Hugh, drawing on his mail hauberk, looked up suddenly.

“My horse Khutb — ”

“Aye, the Master of the Herds hath an order to forward the gray stallion by the first northbound caravan. He will be led, not ridden. Be thou at ease as to him, for no one horse — nay, not Afrasiab’s own — may carry thee upon the road we take.”

He held out a long wolfskin surcoat with a hood.

“Snow is in the passes, my lord. Subotai bids thee hasten.”

Two horses were waiting for them — a slender Arab pacer that the courier mounted and a big-boned Persian charger. Sir Hugh bound his surcoat on the crupper of

the saddle and noticed that saddlebags were already in place. He wondered why there was no escort and where they would get fresh mounts, until a mandarin of Cathay came up with a lantern and handed the Mongol rider a roll of paper bound with red silk.

This the courier put into his wallet, and the mandarin made a note upon a tablet, the guards stepped back, and the two riders trotted through the shadowy masses that were the pavilions of Muhammad's camp. At the outer sentry post mounted archers drew aside at a glimpse of the silver falcon.

Without a word, the young Mongol bent forward, the bells attached to his girdle jingling, tightening knee and rein, and the pacer began to glide away from Sir Hugh. He touched the charger with his spurs, and they went forward at a gallop, the horses snorting, the men chilled by the frost in the air, watchful of the darkness into which the gray ribbon of the road stretched.

The sun came up in a haze and the day grew no warmer, but the steady riding stirred Sir Hugh's blood and he felt at peace with the monotonous world on either side of them. Not a living man was to be seen, though there were villages in the clearings by tranquil streams. Through the blue haze he could make out a dark ridge white on its summit and — although they pushed the horses hard until noon — the mountains drew no nearer.

When they came suddenly upon a company of Mongols escorting some camels northward, the courier pulled

in and dismounted, taking the best horse he could find among the warriors and giving Sir Hugh the next best. Here they were given drinks of mare's milk and a little cheese.

"I am Arslan of the Uighur *orda*," the young rider vouchsafed as they started off, again at a gallop. "Until the last grass I carried the *yamkh* (post) from Kambalu."

"Do the Muhammadans make trouble for thee upon the road?"

"At first they shot arrows; now they have gone away. But bands of dogs in black hats make raids on the caravans. *Akh*, they are more ready to run than to raid."

"Is it far to the *Orluk*?"

"Aye, far!"

"Is he in the mountain passes?"

"We will know when we find him." Arslan glanced at Sir Hugh's big body and the heavy sword askance. "*Akh*, thou art weighty. Thy horses will fall behind."

This seemed to trouble the carrier of the *yamkh*, because he shook his head from time to time and glanced impatiently at the sun. He was careful, however, to pull in and breathe his horse every little while.

"What was the command of the *Orluk*?" Sir Hugh asked.

"To bring thee alive and unhurt to the Horde. They have come upon the tracks of the sultan."

"The Shah? Where?"

Arslan pointed to his left.

“At a place called Hamadan. He wore the garments of a pilgrim, and there were many with him. A *gur* khan scattered them and learned afterward that he was the Shah, Muhammad. Then the Eagle took up the chase. It led north, into the foothills.”

Sir Hugh thought that Kutsai, after all, had the easier road. Nothing was more certain than that there would be hard fighting where Muhammad fled.

A little after sunset they arrived at the first station of the post route — a group of heavy wagons bearing dome-shaped felt tents. A score of Mongols seated around a dung fire greeted Arslan respectfully and stared at the crusader.

“It was in the command, O Nazarene lord,” said the courier, as he dismounted and went to sniff at the pot boiling over the glowing dung, “that thou shalt sleep for three hours during the night. Eat now and then sleep.”

And he muttered to himself as if begrudging the waste of precious hours. Well content, the crusader drew near to the fire and explored the simmering pot with his poniard, spearing strips of mutton until the first ache of hunger was satisfied. Then one of the warriors handed him a wooden cup, and he ladled out the savory broth, quaffing mightily.

“Health to ye, messires,” he smiled, “be ye paynim folk or wolf-men!”

The lined, bronzed faces of the nomads turned toward him silently and they watched with intense curi-

osity while he quenched his thirst and then washed hands and face in fresh, cold water. Some of them rose and made place for him close to the embers. Rolling himself in his fur surcoat and laying Durandal against his side, the crusader lifted his eyes to the stars, trying to pick out the Great Bear among the constellations that glittered in the cold air. Close to the ground, his ear caught a distant monotone of voices and a measured treading of hoofs from the outer darkness where the Mongol herders were singing as they rode around the horses of the station.

Then the stars seemed to lift to an immeasurable height, the Bear became distorted and took on the shape of a flying dragon. Almost as soon as his shoulders touched the ground, Sir Hugh had fallen asleep.

And still the warriors gazed stolidly at the mighty body of the knight, the sword that was longer than any they had ever seen — at his white forehead and the thick beard and hair the color of gold.

“What chieftain is he?” they asked Arslan, who was still eating methodically.

“*Akh!* A wandering chieftain who can not find the trail to his tribe’s grazing ground.”

“He has shoulders like a bear.”

“True. He is strong.” Arslan wiped greasy hands on his sheepskin and squatted nearer the embers. “And yet, O my brothers, he can not eat without sitting down, as ye have seen. Nor can he sleep without stretching out — thus, instead of gripping the saddle as a man should.



ASIDE YE MEN OF THE HORDE !
MAKE WAY FOR THE BEARER OF TIDINGS FROM
THE GREAT KHAN GENGHIS.



When he rises up, he splashes in cold water like a buffalo in a watercourse on a hot day.”

“*Hai!*” exclaimed the listeners.

“One merit he has,” Arslan went on, mindful of his own importance. “Alone among the men of the Horde he knows the face of the Shah whom we seek.”

They nodded understanding.

“He who rides down the Shah will be honored greatly — he will be given rare horses and the baton of a *gur* khan. From all punishment he will be free — even from the death punishment nine times. So the Eagle has promised.”

Arslan assented, one eye on the stars, another on the treetops.

“That is good. But it is better to carry the *yamkh* over the roads of the world.”

CHAPTER X

BEYOND THE RANGES

The next day Arslan's bearing changed. He went on at a gallop as before — they had taken an extra horse from the station — but he bent to the side to study the ground he passed over. At times he reined in, to look closely at strange marks in the earth. After watching him for some time, Sir Hugh understood that they had left the highroad and were following the trail of the Horde. Certainly a multitude of horses had been over the ground before them.

And the aspect of the country had changed. They had climbed steadily, and swirling mists shut out all view of the heights above them, the plain that lay behind them.

They passed through dense timber — poplars at first, and bare gray beeches that gave place to dark masses of fir. At times the croaking of ravens was heard overhead, and the flutter of great wings. Arslan grinned under his leather hood.

“*Ai*, Nazarene, this is the pass. The birds choose the lowest path through the mountains.”

Although Sir Hugh saw them not, the young Mongol said that flights of duck and herons had swept over the forest. The wind rose as the short day merged into cloud-dimmed twilight and rain began to beat into their faces.

“Where is that station?” the knight asked when it was utterly dark and the wearied horses began to lag.

“Where is the moon?” retorted Arslan, irritated at their slow progress. “It is where it is and we are hanging back like women bearing burdens.”

He dismounted to feel the ground underfoot, and the horses stood with lowered heads and heaving flanks. Presently he appeared beside Sir Hugh and shouted above the rush of wind in the forest mesh.

“My lord, if we take thy three hours of sleep in this place, we will not come to fresh horses before daylight. Wilt thou go forward?”

“Lead, then,” assented the crusader grimly.

The rain had changed to sleet, and he drew the fur hood close about his throat, settling himself in the saddle and dropping the rein over the saddle horn. Better in such a storm to let the horse pick its own way.

Snow whirled down on the two men and the three horses that plodded over a bare shoulder of the range, above the timber line. It was no longer dark, because the

white surface of the ground revealed boulders and the occasional twisted shape of a stunted tree. The wind no longer sighed overhead; it screamed and tore at them and rushed off to howl through unseen gorges. And the horses went forward more slowly with hanging heads.

“They will not face the storm!” Arslan came to Sir Hugh’s stirrup and shouted above the blast of the wind. “This night the *tengri*, the demons of high and desolate places, are on the wing. Hark to them.”

The rain had soaked through Sir Hugh’s leg wrappings, and the increasing cold numbed his feet.

“Dismount!” Arslan barked impatiently. “Lead thy pony.”

Stiffly, the crusader swung down, stifling a grunt of agony as the blood started to course through his feet. Taking the rein over his arm, he stumbled after the Mongol, who plunged ahead, stooping over the snow as a hound quests for a scent.

The ponies, sheltered somewhat by the bodies of the men, quickened their pace a little. Sir Hugh found that when his limbs were warmed he was able to keep pace with the warrior easily, in spite of the weight of the sword. They climbed interminably and only the comparative evenness of the footing convinced the crusader that they were still on the trail made by the Horde. Then they began to descend, and the third pony suddenly galloped ahead.

“*Akh!*” cried the courier. “He knows. There is some-

thing before us. Let us mount to the saddles, and the horses will find it.”

For a while they dipped down, and the force of the wind increased. The snow seemed dryer — instead of large flakes it beat against them in hard particles that smarted on cheek and forehead.

But the wind had cleared long stretches of snow, and here Sir Hugh made out huddled forms of horses and men. On the far side of these bodies the snow was piled, and it seemed to him as if a caravan caught by the blizzard had lain down to sleep. Only the bodies were twisted and sprawled sometimes one upon the other. Arslan paused to examine them and reported that they had not been plundered, and so must be Muhammadans slain by the Horde in passing.

Then one of the horses neighed and the other turned sharply to the right. In the driving snow a cluster of Mongol tents took shape, behind them a black huddle of horses crowded together, tails to the storm.

Arslan lashed the felt covering of a *yurta* with his whip, shouting shrilly.

“Out, ye squint-eyed devils — out, sons of a dog tribe! The post to Subotai Bahadur waits!”

He reenforced his whip with kicks that threatened to topple over the wicker frame of the tent, until dim figures crawled out of the entrance flap, and a torch flamed dazzlingly in the glitter of the snow. Sir Hugh noticed that smoke curled from the tops of the domes,

and he thought that the guards of the post station had been snug enough.

While fresh horses were being saddled, Arslan came to his side and bowed, touching his hands to his forehead.

“Three hours of sleep was commanded, my lord, that is true. But thou canst sleep very easily in the saddle, if — ”

“And it was also in the command to bring me alive to the Horde,” laughed Sir Hugh. Strangely, he no longer felt any pain and did not want food. “Go forward, if thou wilt. I will not fall behind.”

“*Akh!*” Arslan showed his white teeth in a hearty grin and hastened off to bully and lash the men of the station. He had food — barley cakes and warm milk — brought to his companion and sheepskins to wrap around the knight’s legs and feet once Sir Hugh was installed in the saddle of a shaggy pony. The little steed grunted, feeling the weight of its rider, but made off nimbly after the others.

A dozen Mongols accompanied them, at Arslan’s order, to point out the trail.

“Eh, my lord,” he shouted in Sir Hugh’s ear, “the wolves of these mountains showed their teeth. The riders of the black hats (Kara Kalpaks — probably Turkomans or Kurds) attacked the rear of the Horde, to carry off horses.”

“Where is the Horde?”

“At the heels of Muhammad.”

“And where is he?”

Arslan glanced into the drift beyond the circle of leaping torchlight and shook his head. “Heaven knows.”

The warmth of the dry sheepskins and the inner glow of food filled Sir Hugh with delicious drowsiness. He could still hear the creaking of saddles, the spluttering of the pine torches, but wind ceased to beat against him, and he must have slept because he roused suddenly, aching in every limb. His horse had stumbled and nearly thrown him.

He opened his eyes and ceased to feel drowsy. He could see the black forms of the riders, the trampled snow of the trail. The blizzard had ceased, and dawn was breaking to his right. And beneath his right foot was an abyss, still veiled in darkness. From a thousand feet below him ascended the murmur of a rushing torrent.

His horse had stumbled within a foot of the precipice. Thereafter, though Arslan slumbered tranquilly, propped in the high peaked saddle, Sir Hugh kept wide awake.

They rounded a ridge that seemed to be one of the high points of the pass — he could see the snow summits of the range stretching away to the right. From dull red to glowing crimson these peaks changed, and then to flaming gold as the sun’s rays struck them. Another moment and the snow-covered slope shone with intolerable brightness.

Arslan woke with a grunt, dismissed the escort and whipped his pony to a trot.

“The third day,” he cried, “and we are not up with the standard.”

As he spoke he pointed below them and, shading his eyes, Sir Hugh made out hundreds of black dots moving northward. Here the precipice had yielded to a long slope, boulder strewn and carpeted thick with soft snow. The riders who had gone before them had followed a traverse down the slope, winding back and forth a weary way to the bottom, some five hundred feet below.

Refreshed by sleep, Sir Hugh surveyed the sharp slope and dismounted.

“We can lead the horses straight down.”

“Arslan’s nostrils expanded and his slant eyes glimmered. “*Akh!*”

He shook his head, but swung down as Sir Hugh went over the side, drawing the pony after him. Once started, the horse crowded down on the crusader. A hundred feet or so they made safely, then the man stepped on ice under the snow and lost his footing.

He began to slide, turning over and over, kicked by the struggling animal, until he loosed the rein and shot downward. By degrees the snow, wedged in front of his body, slowed his progress, and he came to a stop among a mass of boulders. Rising and shaking himself, little harmed — for the mail hauberk and the wolfskin sur-

coat swathed him completely — he beheld Arslan shoot past, caught between the forelegs of his pony.

The Mongol and his mount had gained considerable impetus and their slide lasted nearly to the bottom of the slope where they brought up in some brush.

Sir Hugh ran and slipped down, laughing heartily as he watched Arslan get up and shake himself and pull the snow from his neck. The courier glanced up at the trail they had left, felt of his wallet, and looked long at his companion. Arslan's lips were bloody and his pony limped.

"What is thy name?" he demanded abruptly.

"Hugh," the crusader responded.

"*Hui*," the Mongol repeated, and grinned. "*Hui-hui*, the swooping hawk! They named thee well. Come, let us get fresh horses from these laggards."

The two had arrived at the tail of the horsemen who were escorting the few pack animals of the Horde. Without delaying to eat, the courier selected new mounts and set out at a gallop. They could make fast time now, because the trail was trodden down, and the descent through the forest was easier going. They began to pass masses of the heavy cavalry of the Horde, the warriors drawing out of the road at sound of the courier's bells. Often, too, they came upon dead and exhausted horses and heard in the depths of the forest the howling of wolves.

Sir Hugh drew rein with an exclamation of wonder.

The forest had thinned out, and he had come to the edge of a plateau. Below him there was no snow, but fertile fields and vineyards, and beyond that miles of tall rushes, bending under the breath of a warm wind.

And beyond the rushes there stretched to the skyline the gray waters of a mighty sea. He could hear the pounding of the distant swell and the air in his nostrils was heavy with salt.

“Come!” cried Arslan. “We have not found the standard.”

“It is the sea!”

“Aye, the sea. It will be there on the morrow.”

Reluctantly — for he was feasting his eyes on the wide circle of the shore and the barrier of mountains that girdled it as far as the eyes could reach — Sir Hugh spurred after his escort.

By noon they had passed other companies of Mongol archers, all trotting toward the shore. Here the sun was warm as in Rai, the grape-vines still green. And about them — aroused by the multitude of horsemen — clamored all the birds of creation.

In the marshes stalked flamingoes and gray herons. Overhead in the willow and poplar growths resounded the clatter of crows and magpies and cormorants — and upon the branches sat in somber silence brown eagles and ruffled vultures.

“They will not go hungry this night,” laughed Arslan, lifting his tired, bloodshot eyes.

Solitary among the flights of other birds, Sir Hugh observed slender falcons wheeling and dipping along the shore, and above these great swans that passed southward, long necks outstretched. Over the surf swooped and screamed white-breasted gulls. The crusader watched one dart down suddenly and come up fluttering upon the swell with a fish glistening in its claws.

“It is the Sea of the Ravens!” he said under his breath. “God grant it lead me to a Christian land.”

Arslan glanced at the shore indifferently.

“It is vast and wide, but there are no sails upon it. The water is fit for fisher-folk, the land for warriors.”

“No man of my people has set eyes upon this sea before.”

The Mongol grunted. “Then, if thou live to tell of it in thy *serais*, the wise men and merchants of thy place will mock thee, saying, ‘Lo, this is an idle tale of a dog-born-dog!’ ” He nodded reflectively. “It is better,” he added philosophically, “to bring back gold and silver things, even ivory.”

All at once, he lashed his horse with his whip and uttered a shrill cry. They had rounded a promontory on the shore, and ahead of them he saw some five hundred Mongols urging on their jaded beasts. Far in advance of them galloped an unmistakable figure, beside the standard bearer — a stalwart warrior with flaming red hair.

“Aside, ye men of the Horde!” growled Arslan.

“Make way for the bearer of tidings from the great Khan Genghis.”

But, as the Mongols made way for them, and they were able to see the road ahead, Sir Hugh’s gray eyes quickened with interest. The road swept out to the shore’s edge, and here on a point of land that stretched far into the sea stood a walled city, its domes and minarets rising against the cloud-flecked sky.

CHAPTER XI

THE END OF THE ROAD

That morning the *Shah-im-shah*, the King of kings, had come to Istar, the westernmost stronghold of his empire, the very gate of Islam.

Unheralded and almost unattended, he had entered the house of the governor and seated himself in the guest room — whispering to himself, his head swaying on shoulders that had once been heavy and strong, his eyes dulled with fever. Even the governor, who had seen Muhammad in Samarkand, did not recognize the wasted man in the mud-stained garments of a *hadji*, though Muhammad extended to him the emerald seal ring of Kharesmia. But Omar had proof of his master's identity, and this proof he showed the Istarians, opening the seven chests that held the blue diamonds, the long ropes of pearls, the treasure of the Throne of Gold.

"The *Shah-im-shah* hath need of a boat — a boat with sails," he announced to the men of Istar, who were filled with wonder. "He goes upon a journey, out to sea."

It was Omar's plan that his master should take ship at the port of Istar and find sanctuary upon one of the islands of the Sea of the Ravens. The Horde that had followed him through the great cities of Islam and across the salt desert, and had trailed them into the mountain ranges would not be able to pursue upon the water.

"Thou art safe beyond all mischance, my Sultan," he said to the silent Muhammad. "I go to make ready a ship."

Restlessness gnawed at Muhammad, and he went to the roof of the *dar*, the governor's house that overlooked the shore. Here the *kadis* and the grandees brought him wine and mastic and good things to eat, and he gorged them, sitting in the sun. It was pleasant in the sun, and the breath of the sea was cold. He thought that he would not go upon the boat for a while, though Omar sent a servant with word that all was ready. On the island would be no terraced roofs like this, no such throng of courtiers, or people in the streets who had come to stare at the Lion of Islam.

Muhammad looked back at the mountains that had caused him such suffering. The summits were hidden by clouds, but here the sun filled him with warmth, and the scent of the vineyards struck pleasantly into his nostrils.

Then came Omar, urging that the sail had been hoisted on the boat — a single-masted fisherman's skiff



HAI~THE HUNT IS AT AN END!



was the largest to be had — and his men were waiting to cast off. Muhammad was too tired to want to move. Perhaps he had a little fever.

Surely Omar had sworn that he was safe. He would sleep for a while and then go to the *hammam* bath. The boat would still be there after another hour or two —

It was late afternoon when Muhammad was roused from his stupor, and the throng on the roof had disappeared except for Omar who was gazing steadily toward the shore.

“My Sultan,” he cried. “The hour of our going is at hand.”

He pointed toward the shore, and the first thing that Muhammad noticed was that the Istarians were all hastening through the streets in the same direction. The wall was crowded with men holding drawn simitars, and the gates were closed.

On three sides the wall of Istar ran down to the sea, but on the fourth a long neck of land stretched back into the hills. And the road that ran from the shore along the peninsular to the gates of Istar was covered with rising dust. Through the dust could be seen masses of horsemen, moving at a gallop, plying their whips. From the mass uprose the horned standard of the Mongols.

Then did Muhammad know the fear of a hunted thing. His flushed forehead became damp, and a mist

spread before his eyes hiding the dust and the road. His heart quivered and leaped, and in his nostrils was the scent of death.

“Come,” repeated the minister, pulling at his sleeve. “The way to safety lies open.”

Subotai, the *Orluk*, did not draw rein as he galloped under the wall of Istar. He had cornered his quarry, but he had no means of laying siege to the last town of the Kharesmians.

The Muhammadans, accustomed to raids of the hills tribes, took this rush of the Horde for mere defiance, and they expected the Mongols to draw back as swiftly as they had come. From the rampart rained down taunting shouts — arrows flashed and javelins flew among the horses.

Wheeling his white charger so abruptly that he almost crashed into Sir Hugh who rode behind him, the *Orluk* darted toward the nearest gate, throwing high his right arm.

The Horde, that had followed him as hounds press upon the leader, converged on the gate silently and divided in two. Some three hundred bowmen began to trot back and forth a stone’s throw from the wall, plying their shafts at the parapet on both sides the massive oak portal. The others did not rein in until their ponies were jammed up against the wall.

For a moment the missiles of the Kharesmians

wrought havoc among the close-packed warriors. Then the arrows from the mounted archers cleared a space of defenders. The Muhammadan bowmen dropped with shafts through throat and brain — the shields of the spearmen availed them not.

“On the lances!” shouted Subotai, rising in his stirrups. “Cast the lariats! On!”

The warriors nearest the wall stood on their saddles; others dismounted and pushed their lances up to the parapet. The long shafts had been bound together near the head in pairs, and when the butts were planted on the ground, the points caught in the mortar. More lances were brought, and the Mongols who could not get near the wall at the point of attack drew long, pliable ropes, from their saddle horns. These ropes, noosed at one end, they were accustomed to cast upon running horses. Now they whirled the loops over the crenels of the battlement and let the ropes hang for the eager hands of their comrades to grasp.

Climbing upon the shoulders of the nearest warriors, swarming up the lances, hauling themselves by the lariats, the Horde ascended the face of the wall — pierced by spears from above, shattered by mace and simitar, they fell back bleeding. The shafts of the lances became slippery with blood. Horses, mangled and trodden, screamed and reared. Like the surf rushing against high rocks, the tide of men rose and sank, while the deep-throated shout of the Mongol onset rolled forth.

"Hour-ra — hour-ra!"

Subotai had launched his attack without waiting for more Mongols to come up, before the Istarians could recover from their surprise. Half his men lay dead around him, but a score of swordsmen had gained a footing on the wall and others swarmed after them.

"The gate!" cried the *Orluk*.

His men on the wall heard and ran down the steps that led within. They fought their way to the gate, and a dozen of them turned savagely on the Muhammadans while two Mongols lifted down the massive iron bars from the sockets. The dozen had dwindled to five when the gates swung open. Meanwhile, Subotai had called in his bowmen who had suffered little. The *Orluk* reined his charger against the oak portal, listening to the struggle within, and when the bars were down the weight of a hundred horses forced open the gates.

When his detachment was in the streets, Subotai called a score of riders to him, leaving the others to hold the gate. On the distant shore he had seen the first of the heavy cavalry of the Horde coming up at a gallop. His eyes glowed with a greenish light as he watched the throngs of disordered Muhammadans, and his thin lips smiled as he gathered up his reins, speaking to Sir Hugh for the first time.

"Hei! The fox is in his hole, and we will dig him out."

When Arslan had interpreted this, the crusader shook his head.

"Thou wilt not find him."

Subotai pulled the battle ax from his girdle, and his white teeth ground together. "We found his trail. He is here. Look!" He pointed to a body lying near the forefeet of his charger, a tall Kharesmian with a haggard face and henna-stained beard, an arrow buried deep under his heart. "The jackal lurked by the gate."

Sir Hugh recognized Omar, the minister of the Throne of Gold.

"Thou wilt not find him," he said again, "because he will flee in a boat."

When this was explained to the Mongol, he muttered under his breath and struck his horse with the flat of the ax. Lifting his arm, he called to the detachment that had drawn up around him to shield him from the arrows of the Muhammadans. They galloped through the street that emptied before them, and swept into narrow alleys, crashing over merchants' stalls, leaping ditches and skirting garden walls until they emerged into an almost deserted alley that led down to the end of the promontory upon which the city stood.

Here was neither wall nor harbor. A stone watch tower rose from a huddle of fishing huts. And here, at the end of a wooden jetty, a sailing skiff was moving out from the shore.

Three or four men were in the skiff — one hauling up the stone that had served as anchor, another making fast the sheets of the square sail. Crouched in the belly of the boat was Muhammad.

The Mongols, urging their weary horses toward the

jetty, saw him — saw that two of his companions wore armor and the *khalats* of nobles. Then a puff of wind caught the boat; the sail filled, and it began to move more swiftly, rising in the swells.

The wind was off shore, and the skiff heeled over as a Kharesmian took the steering oar and headed out to sea. The first Mongols reached the jetty and reined in, reaching for their bows and sending arrows flashing toward the fishing craft. Some of the shafts struck the skiff, but in a moment it was out of range. Subotai turned and spoke a single word to his warriors.

One after another, the Mongols leaped their ponies into the water. Slipping from the saddles, they clutched the horses' tails, striking at the heads of the animals that tried to turn back to shore. Horses and men moved steadily after the skiff that was drawing off slowly under the light breeze. Sir Hugh, breathing deeply, could not take his eyes from them.

"One has gone!" he muttered to himself after a moment. And he wondered whether the followers of Muhammad would have jumped into the sea at the command of their lord. Knowing that the beasts must be tired, he waited for them to turn back.

After a while, he knew they would not come back. Only five or six were visible on the breast of the swell, following the skiff. They seemed to be closer to it.

"*Akh!*" cried Arslan, pointing.

One horse and the head of a warrior was still to be seen, and the watchers on the jetty strained their eyes into the twilight. Subotai lifted his head and drew breath between clenched teeth.

“Ahatou!”

He raised his hand and let it fall.

The solitary rider had disappeared under the swell, and only the skiff was visible, moving sluggishly into the gathering mists. For a while the *Orluk* was sunk in meditation, paying no heed to the tumult in the streets behind him.

For an entire summer he had ridden in the track of the Shah without rest. He had fought times without number; he had stormed cities and galloped through unknown kingdoms to hunt down the lord of Islam, and now he was confronted by the sea. It was the first time this nomad of the Gobi had beheld the sea and the boats that went forth upon it.

He turned back from the jetty and went to look at the few fishing craft drawn up on the beach.

“Will these go over the water like that one?” he asked Sir Hugh, and Arslan interpreted.

“Nay,” the crusader pointed out. “The bottoms have been stove in. They would sink.”

Subotai looked up. Muhammad’s skiff had changed its course and was lost to sight.

“It leaves no trail. How can it be followed?”

“Along the shore,” the crusader suggested, “there must be other boats. The wind is dying and Muhammad is still near.”

The Mongol turned on him swiftly. “Canst make a boat follow on the water?”

“Aye.”

“Take a *chambul* of bowmen. Go and seek!”

Wheeling his charger, the *Orluk* galloped back to the fighting, and presently Arslan who had accompanied him reappeared with some thirty warriors, saying that they were under the orders of the crusader.

It was utterly dark on the shore of the Sea of the Ravens. Only on the promontory of Istar did lights gleam and, from the quiet that prevailed, Sir Hugh judged that Subotai was master of the town.

He had sought through the dusk for fishing villages and had found only abandoned huts in the forest of rushes. Arslan he had sent back for lanterns, and the Mongols he had divided to search the shore in both directions. They had gone off like hunting dogs, questing in the shadows and — though he reined in and listened — he could no longer hear them splashing in the mud near him. His pony was played out, and he dismounted, to sit and wait for lights.

Muhammad had escaped, that was certain. But Sir Hugh wanted a boat for his own use. If he could get food

and water from the Mongols at Istar he meant to embark on this sea —

Raising his head, he listened, thinking that the archers were coming back. A slight sound came over the water, a bird rising from the rushes, or the whisper of the swell.

Then he heard a creaking of wood and a murmur of voices. Men splashed through the shallows on foot, making as little noise as possible. The crusader sat where he was until the shore was quiet, and then he rose to investigate. Somewhere the faint creaking and slapping persisted, and presently he made out a vague shape against the stars — a shape that moved to and fro and changed as he watched.

Toward it he made his way, going knee-deep into water, and parting the rushes that rose over his head. His hand, outthrust, touched solid wood, and he knew that the thing that had come between him and the stars was a sail. He could feel it now and see the outline of the mast. A reek of foul water and rotten fish was in his nostrils, and a man rose up beside him from the bottom of the boat.

"Wallahi!" The man had stooped to peer at Sir Hugh, and the crusader gripped his arm. "Who art thou?"

"Death," whispered the knight, "unless thou keep silence."

As his eyes searched the boat he made out in the

starlight another figure outstretched. Still gripping his captive, he bent down and drew in his breath sharply. From a bloodless countenance, the dark and sightless eyes of Muhammad seemed in that illusory light to seek his.

“Aye,” said the man he held. “That was the Shah. It was written that he should not go upon the sea.”

Sir Hugh touched the head of the prone figure. It was cold, and the hands and feet moved idly with the swinging of the skiff. And yet the garments were not disordered, nor could he make out any wound.

“What befell the Shah?” he asked.

The solitary occupant of the boat sighed and answered with the resignation of his race.

“It was the hour appointed. No Mongol arrow touched him. A fever was in him, and perhaps fear weighed upon his spirit. When he watched the horsemen jump into the sea after him he said no word. After the hour of the *namaz gar* he died. Who art thou?”

When Sir Hugh remained silent, the Muhammadan went on sadly.

“This also was to come upon our head. Why should we go to the island? *He* lacked even a shroud for burial. We came back — to dig his grave in his own land.”

Beside the body of the Shah, Sir Hugh had seen half a dozen chests, and the one nearest the servant of the Shah was open. Even in the starlight the gleam of precious stones and the white shape of pearls was un-

mistakable. And the cover of the open chest had been split and pried off with an ax.

He looked around and thought he saw the ax near the slippered feet of the Muhammadan who had remained to guard the body and the treasure when his comrades went ashore — who had been taken unawares by the quiet approach of the crusader.

“Not in his own land,” Sir Hugh made answer, “for the Mongols have taken Istar.”

“We did not know.”

The lean arm of Muhammad’s follower grew tense under his grasp, and the knight reflected that these men had found themselves masters of the wealth in the chests. They had put back to shore, perhaps to bury Muhammad, but undoubtedly to seek for horses. They had left a man to watch the boat, hidden in the darkness and the rushes. Sir Hugh had heard the others go past him after the boat had reached the shore.

“Who art thou?” the man asked for the third time.

“The foe of thy Shah!”

Pulling the Muhammadan toward him, Sir Hugh caught the man in his arms and cast him among the rushes. Then he thrust the skiff out into deeper water, wading beside it until it drifted clear of the rushes. With a final shove he hauled himself in over the bow and went to the steering oar. Working this oar back and forth, he turned the bow of the skiff to breast the swell. There was a little air stirring, and he sought for the sheets, making

them fast to the thwarts. Then he sat down with the steering oar in his hand to think.

Of all those who had gathered at the caravanserai in the salt desert nearly a month ago, he alone had lived to reach the Sea of the Ravens. Mir Beg had died at his hand, Omar had been struck down by a Mongol arrow, and the Shah had perished from exhaustion and fear.

The head of Muhammad, rocking with the motion of the skiff, rested between his feet. The precious stones of the Shah were at his side, but Muhammad was beyond need of them.

Sir Hugh counted the chests. There were seven, and if all held such jewels, the treasure of an empire was in this skiff — reeking of fish, on the shore of an unknown sea. That he himself was still alive, he owed to the Mongols. And he thought of his companions of the caravan track, of the reckless Khalil, the wise Kutsai and the Eagle. He thought about Subotai, the Eagle, for a long time.

He had his boat at last — he was beyond the Muhammadan frontier — but he had pledged allegiance to the Mongol lords. After he had considered all these things, Sir Hugh took up the oar and headed the skiff toward the lights of Istar.

When he came within hail of the jetty, the crusader loosed the sheets and drifted in to the shore where some Mongol warriors stood guard with blazing torches. See-

ing the skiff, they came to the water's edge and looked at him silently as he poled the fishing craft in.

"*Subotai Bahadur!*" he called to them, and one departed at a run.

Meanwhile the crusader beached his boat and stepped out on the sand. The warriors were talking among themselves, watching him, until horses appeared in the nearest street, and the *Orluk* with his officers and the courier Arslan came down to the water. Subotai pulled in his charger at the bow of the skiff and observed the body within. He bent down in the saddle and studied it, then spoke curtly to Arslan.

"What man is this, O Nazarene?" asked the courier.

"Muhammad Shah."

Subotai's blue eyes glowed, and he raised his right hand, his great fist clenched.

"Proof!"

Sir Hugh lifted the Kharesmian's arm, already growing rigid, and pointed to the signet ring. Then he picked up the opened chest and dumped out on the sand a glittering flood of precious stones. Subotai swung down from the stirrup, glanced casually at the jewels of the Throne of Gold, and put his hand on the face of the dead man.

"Life is gone from him." He struck the hilt of his saber with an open palm, as if sheathing the weapon.

"*Hai* — the hunt is at an end."

The warriors who pressed about him murmured

assent, their dark faces triumphant, and from a group of Istarians who had drawn near there rose a low wail of lamentation.

“His treasure availed him not,” growled the Mongol leader. “He died without a weapon in his hand and in a boat. Better for him if he had never gone upon the sea.” Abruptly he turned to Sir Hugh. “And thou — what dost thou ask of me?”

“My horse, Khutb. He will come up with the caravans.”

“And what more?”

“Freedom to choose my road. I go to seek an enemy in the western world.”

Subotai folded his arms on his broad chest and fell silent. When he spoke it was to the nearest officer, who dismounted swiftly and stood by the stirrup of his mount, a black mare. Then the *Orluk* asked a question of the crusader.

“Why didst thou come back from the sea?”

“My life I owed to the Horde and now I have paid the debt.”

When Arslan had interpreted this, Subotai made response in his slow drawl.

“*Hai*, thou art mighty in battle. Mine eyes beheld this. Thou hast kept the saddle with a rider of the *yamkh*, untiring as a hawk. Thou art without fear, since thou has gone alone upon the sea. Come then, to my house as a guest.”

Swinging himself into the saddle of the officer's mare, the Mongol conqueror motioned to Sir Hugh to mount his own charger.

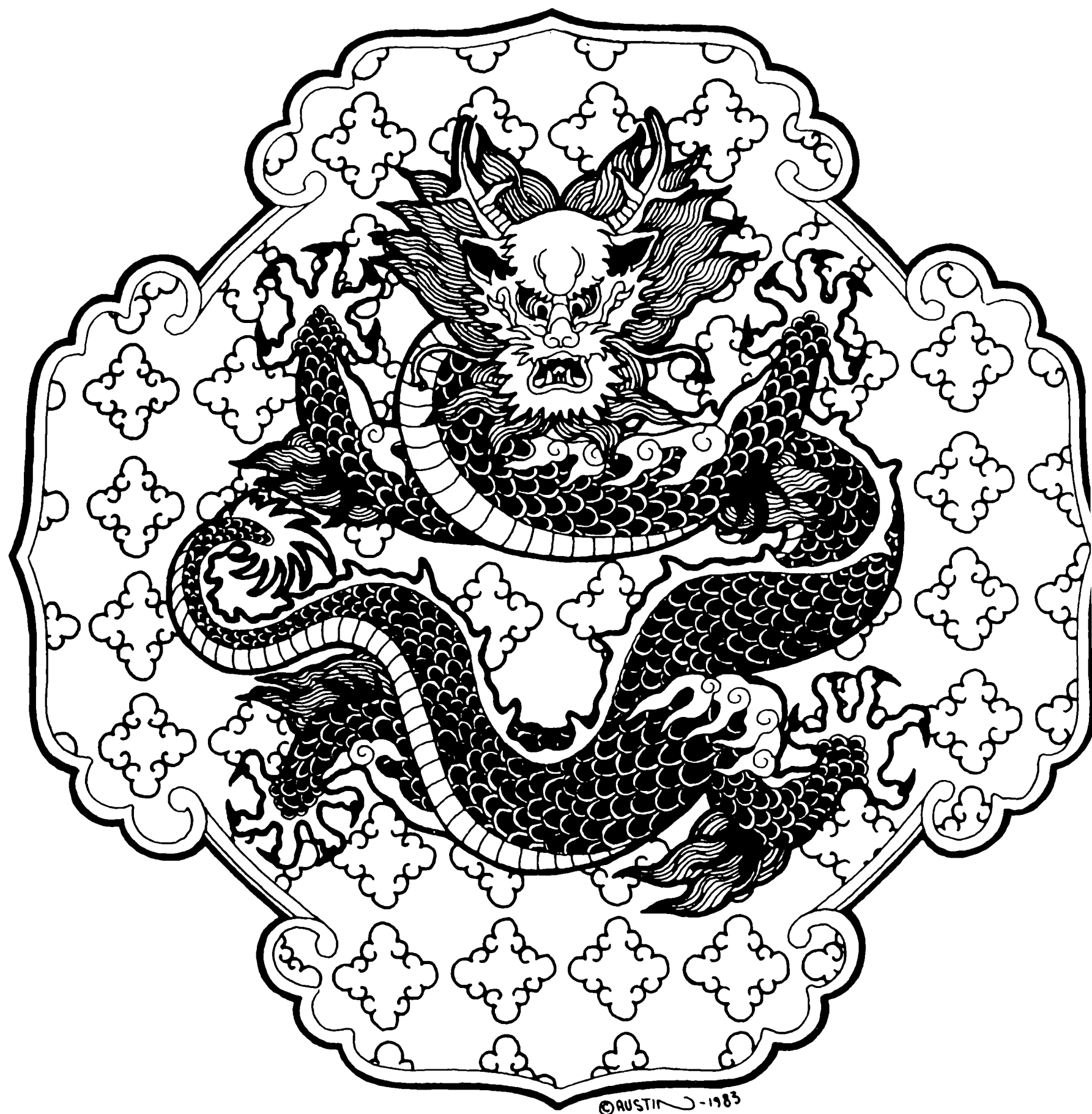
"*Hai*, the command of the great Khan was that I should go into the western world when Muhammad was slain. Come thou with me, and we will open up a path for our horses."

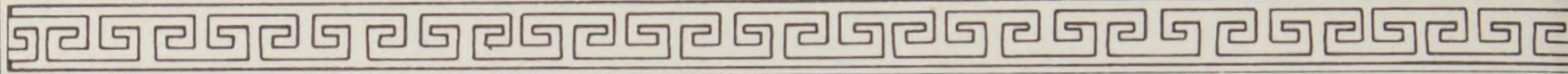
Sir Hugh picked up his rein and made his decision without hesitation.

"Aye, so."

Before turning back to the city, the leader of the Horde glanced a last time at the body in the skiff that was grating against the stones of the beach. Something like a smile touched his hard lips.

"Kutsai would have kept thee, to make marks on his map; but I shall take thee, to shape a new world."





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DURANDAL

by Harold Lamb

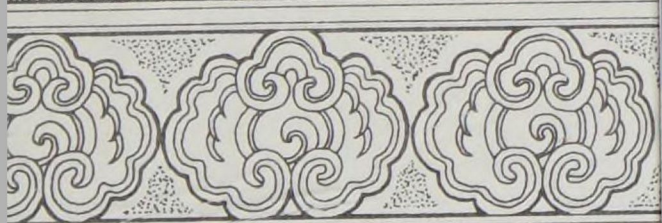
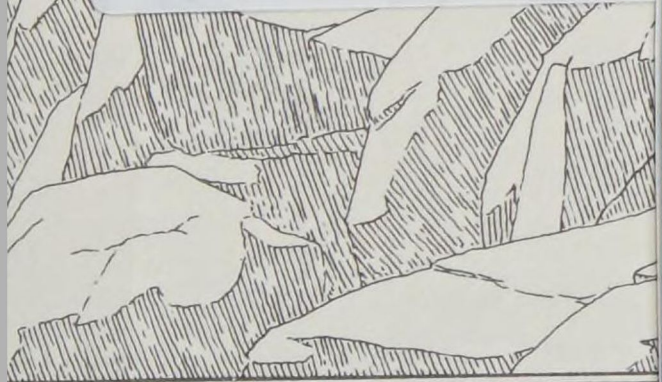
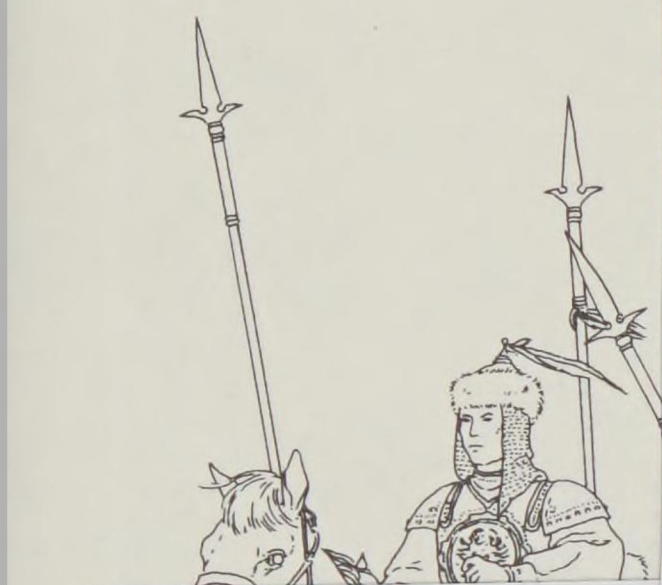
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