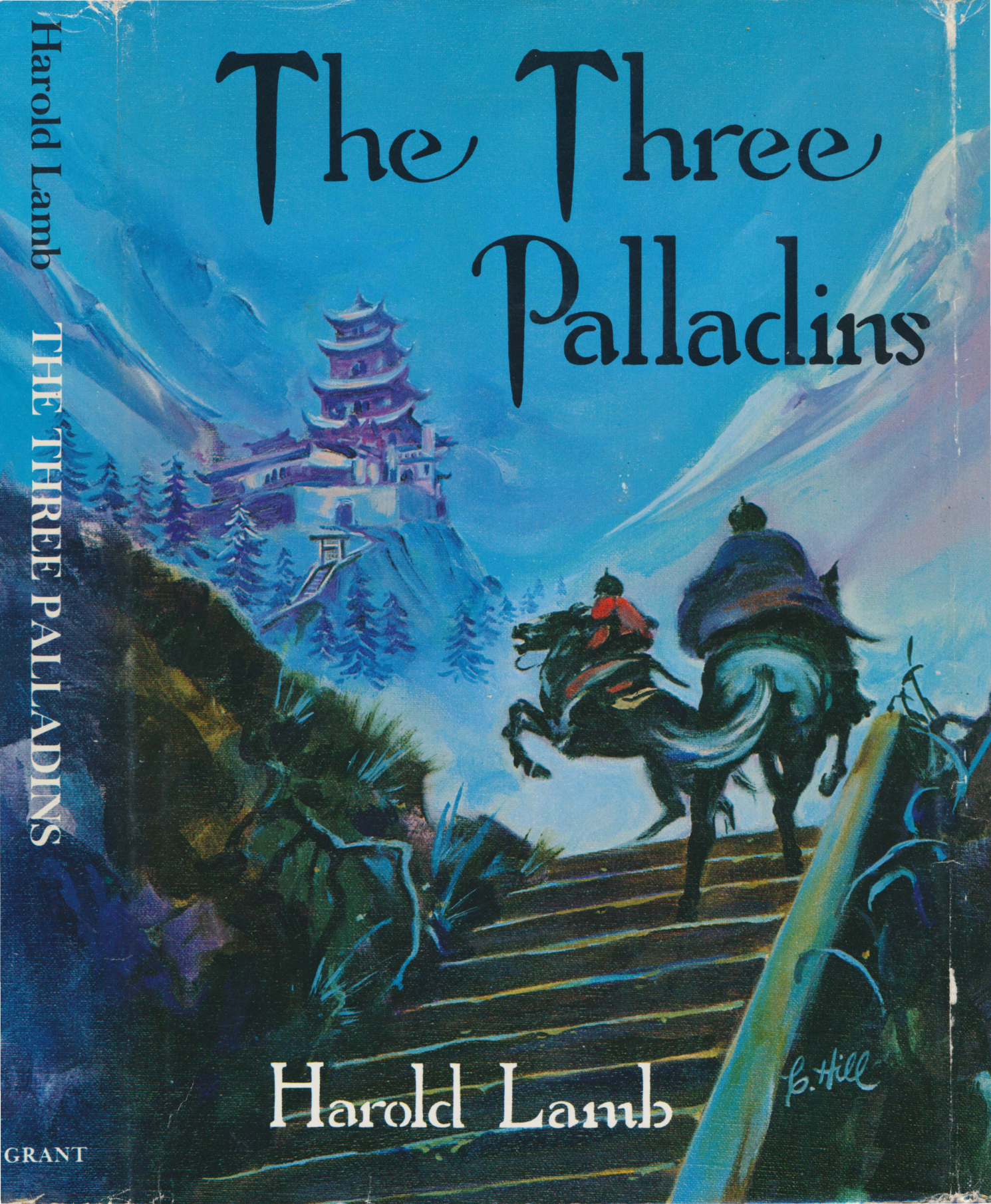
The Three Palladins
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THE THREE PALLADINS
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A TALE OF THE WARRIOR-HEROES

The Three Palladins

by HAROLD LAMB

THE THREE PALLADINS is a novel of Temujin, who became the Great Khan, and his *palladins* — his warrior-heroes — in a day of the sword. Originating and returning to its climax in the courts of Cathay, here are high adventures that move across the mysterious and mighty Asiatic continent. The *palladins* are led close by the "roof of the world" to fabled Tangut, land of fertile fields, blue lakes, and the black walls of the castle of the magician, Prester John of Asia.

The author is the same Harold Lamb whose marvelous historical biographies of GENGHIS KHAN, ALEXANDER, and HANNIBAL have been best sellers for decades. His fiction — great high adventure sometimes blended with modest elements of fantasy — is a delight for the reader, as it was in the days of Robert E. Howard. Indeed, there seems little doubt that the writings of Harold Lamb in the remarkable old *Adventure* magazine had tremendous impact on a youthful Robert E. Howard.

With designs and four full-color illustrations by Cathy Hill.

DONALD M. GRANT, PUBLISHER
WEST KINGSTON, RHODE ISLAND

THE THREE PALLADINS

The Three Palladins

by Harold Lamb

ILLUSTRATED BY CATHY HILL

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1977

First Edition
Printed in the United States of America

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ILLUSTRATIONS

THE THREE PALLADINS appeared as a three-part serial in *Adventure* during the year 1923, at a time when that popular magazine was published three times a month. Noted here are some of Harold Lamb's observations, written at the time of publication.

Genghis Khan is almost unique among the conquerors of the world, because he came out of the desert. No armies were ready to his hand: no cities offered him the thews and sinews of war. He had had no schooling, of the book variety.

When he was fifteen or sixteen this chief was at the head of a tribe of forty thousand tents, about two hundred and fifty thousand souls, all told. He was surrounded by enemies. The northern Gobi desert was — and is — much like our northwestern plains. A place of extremes of cold and heat, of a never ending struggle for existence.

Out of these high prairies, just below the Arctic Circle, the Mongols rode to the conquest of China, and — as we know them to-day — the Himalayas, Afghanistan, Persia

and northern India. Eventually his followers overcame the Russians, the Magyars, and defeated the Hungarians and the knighthood of Germany in Silesia.

We have gained the idea that the Mongols were a great mass of barbarians that conquered their enemies by weight of numbers and a vague kind of ferocity. As a matter of fact the Mongol Horde numbered only a hundred and fifty thousand horsemen. It had no infantry. Sometimes, of course, it had allies.

Instead of having numbers on his side, Genghis Khan usually had the smaller army, and displayed strategic powers of the highest order. It is rather amusing that our histories should try to teach us that the Mongols and Tatars were unthinking barbarians when our language uses the phrase "catching a Tatar" to imply a clever trick.

To rank Genghis Khan with Caesar and Alexander would raise quite a clamor of protest. Just by way of starting the debate — both the Roman and the Macedonian were generals of great empires that had been established before they were born, while the Mongol had only a tribe of herders and cattlemen to work with. Also Caesar and Alexander were products of a high civilization — both carefully schooled. Their conquests did not extend as far as those of the Mongols. (By the way, neither of them had to tackle the great wall of China.) The enemies they encountered were of a lower order of intelligence — always, in Caesar's case, usually in Alexander's. They did not find in their path such cities as Pekin, Samarkand, Bokhara and Herat.

It usually happens that the feeling of the men of an

army for their leader is the best possible indication of the leader's character. No man, the proverb runs, is a hero to his valet. Certainly no commander ever fooled his enlisted men.

While Caesar and Alexander were trusted and admired by the soldiers who followed them — Alexander particularly — both had to deal with mutinies at various times. Genghis Khan was beloved by his warriors. It is said that, in a battle, the Khan would give his horse to an injured man. One of his followers was frozen to death holding a fur windbreak over the sleeping king during a blizzard. In the annals of the Chinese — his enemies — appears the phrase that he led his armies like a god.

It looks as if Alexander were a greater strategist than the Mongol, but as a leader of men and as a conqueror Genghis Khan ranks ahead of him. And of Napoleon, too, for that matter. In comparing the achievements of men of other ages we have no standards except results. The empire of Napoleon fell to pieces before he died, and before that — there was Waterloo, you know. And then crossing the Alps is not quite the same as taking an army over the Himalayas.

The story of Genghis Khan is one of those things that grow on you in writing, and for the last year I seem to have gathered enough knowledge of the Mighty Manslayer to try to tell his story. As to that, it is a story that never will be told in full because the Mongols, unlike most nations, kept no annals. There are no "tombs" to be opened. So one has to proceed from Mongol myth — the few legends, anecdotes, that have come down to us — to the histories of the

enemies of the Mongols. That is, to what the Persian, Arabic, Greek, Chinese and Russian chroniclers have said about Genghis Khan.

No work for three years has been so full of interest in the doing! The tale is imaginative for the most part, but is based on events that actually took place. Prester John for instance — legendary as far as medieval Europe is concerned, but a real king in the annals of Asia.

The "pony express" of Genghis Khan in the Gobi is rather interesting for the reader who remembers the pony mail of the far West in the late sixties and seventies. I'm working up some information as far as possible on the relative speed made by the Mongol couriers. They covered more ground in a day than our express riders, but conditions were in their favor.

Mingan is one of the vague shadows of history — a prince of Cathay who acted as guide, councilor and friend to Genghis Khan and his sons, and who, in fact, built up the wisest and most enduring part of the Mongol system of government. Ye Lui Kutsai Mingan is known to present day historians as Yelui Chut-sai.

Harold Lamb

THE THREE PALLADINS

I

THE SHADOW

The gong in the palace courtyard struck the third hour of the morning, awakening Mingan, prince of Cathay, from what would otherwise have been his last sleep.

He was a boy of fifteen, and the echoes of the gong had not died in the upper corridors of the slumbering palace before he was wide awake, before he had slipped from his teak pallet and opened the lid of the ebony chest beside it.

The day was the fifth of the fifth moon, and it was to be a feast day — the feast of Hao, in mid-Summer of that year of the Ape, by the Chinese calendar, otherwise the year of Our Lord 1100. But what had aroused Mingan was the recollection that at dawn the old emperor would assemble the court and ride forth on the customary hunt of the festival of Hao.

The hunters would go from the palace, out of Taitung — the Western City — to the Western Gate of the Great Wall, and beyond, to where Cathay ended and the wide desert began. Mingan wished to be ready in plenty of time. He was quivering a little with excitement — and the damp

air that swept through the open arches of the sleeping chambers — as he took out from the chest the new garments he was to put on.

And then he saw the shadow.

Inside the entrance to his room stood a screen, placed there so that evil spirits might not have easy access, because demons must walk in a straight line and can not turn corners. In the corridor outside the screen a lantern was hung. Athwart the embroidered silk of the screen was now the black figure of a tall man whose head was bent a little forward.

Mingan smiled — he hardly ever laughed — thinking that it was one of the men-at-arms on guard in the upper halls, who had fallen asleep. The figure, however, held no spear, nor did it wear the helmet with the dragon crest of the Liao-tung guardsmen, who came from Mingan's province on the northern coast and were the picked men of the emperor's host. As he watched, the figure advanced a step, and Mingan knew that it was a man standing against his screen, listening. A cupbearer or slave might, perhaps, do that. Many such were paid to listen at doors in the imperial palace — Mingan had surprized them more than once, because the boy had been bred in the northern forests and could move as quietly as a panther when he chose. He wondered who paid them to do it.

Mingan put on the new garments, the soft boots, the silk tunic and wide, nankeen trousers, the over-robe of yellow and cloth-of-gold, and lastly the black velvet hat with its peacock feather — the insignia of manhood and nobility that he was to wear for the first time that day.

By now the man at the screen had come into view around the end, and proved to be a Cathayan of unusual stature, clad altogether in white, his head shaven.

"The Servant of Mercy," breathed Mingan, and no imaginable devil could have been a less welcome visitor in that place and hour.

Because the Servant of Mercy was the executioner of the court, serving the emperor by strangling culprits whose rank made them immune from beheading, Mingan's heart leaped and struck up a quick beat, akin to the roll of the kettle-drums of the mailed cavalry of Liao-tung whose regimental emblem the prince wore and whom he should command in a few years.

Without a sound Mingan moved backward, and out of the tall window that gave access to the balcony of the tower where he was quartered. There was only the one door to his room, and there was no other entrance or exit to the balcony than the window. Leaning against a carved pillar, Mingan observed the Servant of Mercy advance soundlessly to the bed, feel of it and peer around the ill-lighted chamber. The quilts in which the boy had slept were still warm.

"*Wan sui* — live for a thousand years!" The executioner whispered. "Ye Lui Lutsai Mingan, Bright One of the North, Prince of Liao-tung, it has been decided that you must go in this hour to the guests on high, to face the honorable ones, your exemplary ancestors. Are you afraid?"

Mingan had seen two of his kindred take the happy dispatch by poison put into their wine cups, and he was

afraid. The tall man was listening again, his head on one side. And then he was moving toward the balcony, where he had heard the prince breathing. From his right hand hung the loop of a silk cord.

The boy's body did not move, but his mind probed for the reason of his death — secret, and bloodless, by token of the strangler's cord.

His uncle, the emperor, had never noticed him; his father and his Liao-tung mother were dead: Chung-hi, the heir and son of the emperor, was his classmate — a powerful youth, given to brooding and superstition.

Chung-hi had been good-natured with Mingan, had gone on escapades with him, when the two princes went out incognito and joined the ranks of the court troupe of actors, or played on the ten-stringed lute in the gardens of the courtesans.

Now Mingan's studies were at an end, and his tutors had announced to the emperor that Mingan was a little inclined to shirk his books for the hunting chariot, at night, when he climbed down from his room, and drove his matched horses out of the walls of Taitung. He was expert in sword-play, well-versed in the wisdom of the sages, and in history.

An old proverb came into his mind as he pondered.

"A hunted tiger jumps the wall," he said in a low voice.

The Servant of Mercy stepped through the window, made the triple obeisance of respect, and paused.

"An intelligent man recognizes the will of the heavens," said he.

"Panthers," rejoined Mingan steadily, "eat men in the northern mountains, and," he added reflectively, "panthers eat men in the southern mountains too. Yet it is written in the books that for everything there is a reason."

He perched himself on the railing by the pillar.

"Tell me who gave the order for my death. I will never speak of what you say."

The Servant of Mercy moved a little nearer, and the ghost of a smile touched his thin lips. No, Mingan would not speak hereafter. Yet now!

"Pledge your slave," said he, "that you will make no outcry, and I will relate the cause of my coming."

"I pledge it you."

"Then, O Prince of Cathay, look into the sky behind you and see the cause."

Mingan turned a little, so that he could still watch the man in white. Hovering at the horizon was a red moon, as if a film of blood had been drawn over a giant eye of the sky.

Miles distant, outlined against the moon, Mingan could trace the line of the great wall. That night he had dreamed of the wall. Standing alone on the summit he had labored at casting down rocks at a mass of beasts that had run in from the vast spaces of the steppe and the desert of Gobi, to leap and snarl at him — the beasts changed to a pack of horsemen clad in furs, figures that grinned at him and rode their shaggy ponies up the sheer side of the wall —

Mingan knew now that he had been thinking of the men from the country of the Horde that lay even beyond

the hunting-preserves of the emperor. He had often been tempted to drive his chariot out to the steppe to catch sight of these barbarians, who — his tutors said — were no better than beasts. Perhaps —

"What mean you?"

He slid his boots from his feet and braced his toes in the lacquer work of the balcony.

"Your birth-star, ill-fated one, shines in the favorable constellation of the Lion, betokening power and success to you. The star of the dynasty of Cathay has entered into the region of ill-omen, foretelling disaster. So that the prophecy of the stars may not be fulfilled, your death has been decreed."

"By whom?"

Instead of answering, the executioner cast the loop of his cord at the boy's head. But Mingan gripped the pillar with both hands, and swung himself out, over the railing. His feet found holds in the lacquer work on the tower's side, and he let himself down swiftly, escaping the clutch of the executioner's hand.

Often in this way he had escaped his tutors, to snatch the forbidden joy of the stables and a ride under the stars.

For the nonce he was free; if the emperor was his foe, he would not be safe, even beyond the wall; if, however, some favorite in the court had sought his removal, now that he was about to assume his rank and ride with the armies, there was hope. Mingan had been taught to obey implicitly the will of the Dynasty, yet he had in him a wild streak that would not let him be taken easily. He shivered a little, as he felt a surging impulse to turn and flee. To run

would be to reveal his movements; to stay where he was would be impossible.

Mingan folded his cold hands in his sleeves and walked slowly to the stables, beyond the gardens of the palace enclosure. Here a Manchu slave nodding beside the glow of a horn lantern, started up at sight of a young noble, clad in the dragon robe.

"I will ride," said Mingan composedly, "in a small, hunting-chariot. Harness two horses to the shaft. Make no noise, for the Court sleeps."

The Manchu held up the lantern to look keenly into his face. Recognizing the prince he hastened away. Often in the last months he had obeyed similar commands from Mingan, yet this time he was prompter than usual and the prince saw that the two matched horses were of the best.

"Wan sui!" breathed the slave, making his obeisance. "Live for a thousand years."

As Mingan stepped into the chariot — a low, two-wheeled affair of light, gilded cedar — the man's glance fell upon his bootless feet. The slave hesitated, and put the lantern behind him.

"The gate of the palace enclosure is barred and guarded, by the order of Chung-hi, the Discerning, the elder prince. Your servant dares to mention that the lane to the horse pastures behind the stable is not guarded. Drive with a loose rein and — forget not that the night air is not healthy for a Northerner."

Understanding the covert warning, Mingan nodded and turned his chariot slowly in the stable yard, until he reached the grass lane. Here he tossed the reins on the

horses' backs and let them graze, while he slipped to the ground and walked back through the gardens, starting at glimpses of stone pillars and evergreens trimmed to the height of a man. He knew well the bypaths of the gardens and presently crossed a bridge over a miniature lake, entering a grove of plane trees where the shadow was like a heavy cloak over his head.

Feeling the tiles with his bare feet, he made his way to a wall illumined by the glow from an incense brazier. Taking fresh powder from the bowl under his hand, he dropped it on the smoking incense, and kneeled in front of the tablet of his ancestors that hung in the shrine.

"Honored Ones of the North," he whispered, bending his forehead to the tiles, "I unworthy, have put upon my person the insignia of a warrior prince, casting aside the garments of childhood. In this hour I, inexperienced, will set my feet on the highway leading from the palace where my elders have taught me wisdom. It is my prayer that no act of mine will make it impossible for me to look into the faces of my illustrious sires with clear honor."

Nine times he made the *ko-tow,* and withdrew, satisfied. The bronze tablets hung in their places as always, the smoke from the brazier curled upward; no sign was vouchsafed Mingan that what he was doing was dishonorable. His senses were keyed to perceive any omen. All he saw was a gleam in the upper corridors of one of the residence palaces of the enclosure.

It was the only light visible, and he stoppped to puzzle over it, realizing that it must come from the palace of Benevolent Youth, the quarters of Chung-hi, the heir-

apparent. Chung-hi, then, like himself, was awake. Mingan wondered if Chung-hi had sent the Servant of Mercy.

Then, as he passed the stables again, he caught the glow of the Manchu's lantern, and drew closer. The slave seemed to be asleep, but Mingan knew that he could not have dozed so quickly. The face of the slave was composed, but from the breast of the man who had warned him the hilt of a knife projected.

The Servant of Mercy had traced him to the stables, had discovered that horses were missing, and slain the attendant, and then — what? Although nothing was to be heard, Mingan caught the reflected glimmer of lanterns moving toward the gate of the palace enclosure. Guards were already searching for him in that direction; there would have been just time for the executioner to arouse them and order them to the gate to stop him. Then it was probable that his chariot, in the back lane, had not been discovered. Listening intently, he could make out the crunching of the horses as they moved over the grass, and the faint *slap* of the traces.

Seconds were precious and he ran to the vehicle, caught up the reins, and urged on the horses. They were fresh, and he passed out of the lane to the pastures swiftly, turning here into a path that led to the highway running out of Taitung to the northwest. Once on the road, smoothed and beaten for the passage of the emperor that day, he gave the horses their heads and sped on through the darkness.

The moon had set and the brightest of the stars over his head was the planet of his birth. Mingan, feeling the

damp of the dew on his face and the chill of the wind on his skin, wondered that men should so believe in the stars that they should be impelled to slay him because of this omen. It seemed ridiculous that he, cold, shivering, fleeing with throbbing pulse, should be destined to a higher fortune than the Dynasty.

And yet — he had been taught the stars never lied.

The dawn had flooded the sky behind him when Mingan reached the Western Gate of the Wall of China, and found a hundred men-at-arms drawn up beside the barred portal. The captain in command informed him respectfully that orders had been issued from the Court that no one was to pass through the gate before the emperor, who was on the way to the hunt.

Mingan decided to wait where he was. If he went back, he would meet the cavalcade from Taitung; if he turned aside from the highway into one of the earth lanes, his chariot would be bogged down in the mud before he had passed beyond view. So he stood in the miniature chariot, to hide his bare feet, and let his horses breathe.

By the eighth hour of the morning, the gong on one of the gate towers was sounded and the hundred soldiers lifted down the massive bar, swinging open the iron-studded gates. Then they threw themselves down on their faces. A troop of horsemen bearing wands appeared around the first bend in the highway.

Mingan, being of royal blood, and in robes, kept his feet while the horsemen passed, saluting him. He watched a company of the palace guards march past with drawn swords on their shoulders, followed by the dignitaries of

the Court, under canopies carried by slaves. Then, at the head of the princes of the blood, and the palanquins of courtesans, appeared the sedan chair of the Emperor.

The prince left his chariot and kneeled by the road, feeling his heart quicken as the sedan halted, and the side lattice was lowered at a command from within. The thin face and shrewd eyes of the Son of Heaven peered out at him. He heard the emperor ask his name, and the attendants answer.

"Young nephew," the modulated voice spoke from the opening in the yellow lacquer, "it was said to us that you had left our presence, during a revel of the night thus showing us disrespect, inappropriate in the young in years."

Mingan bent his head nine times.

"Live for a thousand years! I, presuming beyond my merit, ventured to await your passing, to pay my respects for the first time in the robe of a man."

"You are young to be a warrior and a councilor? Have you passed your examinations?"

Before Mingan could answer a sedan approached and was set down a few paces in the rear of the yellow chair that bore the monarch. From it dismounted Chung-hi, the heir apparent, a thick-set youth of twenty years with a broad, stubborn face. He bowed three times to his girdle and folded his hands in his sleeves.

"Live forever, O my father. Know that Mingan, cousin of the northern forests, has been lacking in his studies, and has given himself overmuch to driving his chariot of nights, and to making melody with his lute."

The old emperor tapped gently with his fan against

the opened lattice and the lines about his mouth deepened. The devils of sickness had been plaguing him of late and he felt that his years were numbered. Also, the astrologers had dared to point out that the star of his Dynasty was sinking, which troubled him.

"Why do you tell me this, Chung-hi?"

"Be it forgiven me, O beloved of the Dragon! Those who are enemies of Mingan would be affronted at sight of the boy, who is yet a student, appearing in robes; they might think him exalted by the ascendency of his star, and do him harm."

"Who are your enemies?"

The Cathayan turned to Mingan.

"I know not."

The emperor sighed. As his sight failed, he perceived nevertheless a growth of arrogance in Chung-hi, his son. Presently he looked up and began to question the heir-apparent as to what lay beyond the Great Wall. Taken by surprize, Chung-hi answered haltingly, proving ignorant of more than a smattering of geography and history, although he had just been appointed Warden of the Western Marches.

Realizing this, the emperor nodded to Mingan. "I will test your knowledge and so decide whether you are fitted to assume the duties of a warrior prince at our court. When was this wall built?"

Today Mingan was to have been examined by the old monarch on his studies. Now, however, he was caught leaving the palace before dawn, and he was forced to speak under the stolid stare of the elder prince.

"Thirteen hundreds of years ago, your majesty," he responded quietly. "It was built to keep out of Cathay the marauding tribes of the steppe and the desert of Gobi."

"What tribes?"

"In the steppes are the Taidjuts, who live by raising and stealing cattle and by largesse from your majesty's hand. They provide huntsmen for the time when the peoples of the world watch the Son of Heaven ride to the hunt.

In Mingan's thoughts was the question: Had the emperor ordered his death, or was it Chung-hi, or another?

"Beyond the Taidjuts?"

"Begins, O most wise of the sages, the desert and the people of the desert — Tatars, Mongols, the Jelairs of Turkish race, and the gipsies. The strongest of these are the Mongols, whose chief is Yesukai, and who are called the Brave. Of their homeland we know only that it is in the high prairies, by the Three Rivers. From there to the south they move their tents, which are their houses, thus giving their herds seasonal pasture. They number forty thousands of tents, and they are hostile to us — "

"Wherefore? Of what are you prating?" demanded the emperor testily.

"In your memory, O beloved of the Dragon, Kabul, khan of the desert tribes, was bidden to the court of Cathay, where he behaved like a wild boar. On his return he was given poison by servants of Cathay, and — "

"Enough!"

The man in the sedan waved his fan impatiently.

"The prince of Liao-tung," spoke up Chung-hi, "comes from the land next to the tatars on the north and speaks their language. Surely he shows knowledge of them, when he is close to their counsels."

The emperor frowned slightly. The Mongols were a thorn in his side. He questioned Mingan on strategy and the art of war, and was answered readily.

A gleam of pleasure penetrated the faded eyes of the emperor.

"We," he said, "sitting as judge, decide that the youth Mingan is qualified for the decree of master of scholars, and councilor. Would there were more of his merit to defend our western marches against the raids of the people of the Horde. He has put to shame your learning, O my son, and you are appointed Warden of the Western Marches."

His glance was an accusation, and the elder prince paled a little with anger.

"Lord of Ten Thousand Years," he responded, "while Mingan has spent his days in pondering books and shooting mock arrows, I have taken measures to safeguard your hunting, and the shaft sent from my bow will strike in the heart of Yesukai, khan of the Mongols, your enemy."

He hesitated, looking around at the bowed heads of the attendants, and lowered his voice so that Mingan could catch only snatches of what he said.

"By giving some gold to the Taidjuts — like Kabul, foe of your grandsire — nothing failed, and no one suspects — will not trouble your hours of pleasure."

Mingan thought only that Chung-hi had arranged for

the Taidjut tribesmen to protect the wide area of the coming hunt, and that a blow against the Mongols was in prospect. He drew a deep breath, knowing that he had had a narrow escape, for if he had failed to satisfy the emperor, he would have been sent back to the Taitung palace, and guarded closely and before many hours had passed he would have received a second visit from the Servant of Mercy.

He suspected now that Chung-hi, not the emperor, had plotted his death, and now it would not do to return to Taitung. The heir-apparent had lost face in the examination before the monarch of Cathay and he would allow Mingan little time to enjoy his success. Within the Great Wall, there would be no safety for the Manchu.

The emperor turned to him, after dismissing Chung-hi, satisfied with the tidings the prince had whispered.

"It is the feast of Hao, of the fifth day of the fifth month. Speak then, and say if there is any award we can make in honor of your new rank as prince-warrior."

Mingan thought quickly, aware of the covert scrutiny of Chung-hi and the ministers of the elder prince.

"If the Son of the Dragon is pleased, my reward is more than enough," he said slowly. "Yet I crave one thing, to drive my chariot in advance of the imperial guard, to be courier this day for the coming of your benevolent presence."

"It is granted."

The emperor shook his sleeve and signed to the bearers to lower the side of the sedan and take up the poles. Chung-hi seemed satisfied with the request, and Mingan

reflected that his enemy was in command of the imperial huntsmen, by virtue of his office as Warden, and that an arrow, loosed in the turmoil of the drive, would end his days as surely as the hand of the Servant of Mercy.

The voice of the old man reached him from behind the lattice.

"Swear to me, Mingan, that you will be faithful to the Dynasty and seek to build up by every act the greatness of Cathay, as the stone layers built up this Wall."

A rush of feeling swept over the Manchu, at the faint words of the oath administered to every one of blood kin to the emperor on arriving at manhood. The splendors of Pekin, the halls of the philosophers, the massive walls of a hundred cities, the never ending lines of junks on the rivers and the laden camels on the caravan routes — the myriad warriors he had watched at maneuvers during his childhood — these were some of the pictures that flashed through his mind. Cathay!

"I swear!" he cried, his voice unsteady, his heart thumping.

Chung-hi raised his fan to hide a smile.

So Mingan had the wish of his boyhood when he drove his chariot through the Western Gate, in advance of the wand-men and the court.

Not until the emperor's chair had passed did the guards of the gate venture to raise their faces from the dust.

"Live for ten thousand times ten thousand years!" they cried, holding up their spears.

A group of aged men in long robes, mounted on fat,

ambling mares, looked up at the shout and fell to talking together, disputing with much head-wagging. The astrologers were debating hotly the honor shown Mingan, wondering how the youth was to win to greater dignity and the Dynasty fall into decay at the same time, when Mingan had sworn fidelity, and Mingan was known ever to keep an oath.

The highway was broad and its surface level as a stone-paved courtyard. The horses were rested and drew the youth swiftly onward. They passed the villages of farmers that became more scattered as they began to ascend the foothills of the Kinghan Mountains.

Watch-towers, wherein beacons were placed ready for the torch, sped past them. When the horses tired, Mingan changed at a post-station: at mid-day he changed to fresh beasts again, pausing only to drink a bowl of tea.

By nightfall he had put eighty miles behind him and had outdistanced the cortege of the emperor. He slept at an inn. He was a light sleeper and in the early hours of the morning he heard a clatter of hoofs on the highway. Listening, he made out that the rider halted only a minute at the post station near the inn; then the crescendo of hoof beats again, dwindling out on the road. Only a courier from a high official, on business of the emperor, would be given a horse at the relay station.

A messenger from the court had passed him. And the odds were that the message was sent by Chung-hi, Warden of the Western Marches. Was it merely routine business — that sped a rider through the small hours of darkness?

Mingan thought not.

He knew that Chung-hi, superstitious to the core, feared the omen of the stars. Besides, he was jealous of the Northerner, who might, under favor of the old emperor, rise to an important post in the army — perhaps to the command of the Liao-tung swordsmen, the elite of the Cathayan warriors. So Chung-hi sought to remove Mingan from his path, as a man might pluck a thorn from his foot. And Chung-hi, failing to find him at the stopping-place of the courtiers, fifty miles back, had sent a courier ahead — perhaps to the hunting pavilion that was to be the headquarters of the court the week of the great hunt, at the edge of the Taidjut lands — some sixty miles beyond the inn.

At daybreak Mingan was on the road again. Here he circled the shoulders of massive hills, rising into the region of evergreens, where the cool air struck his face pleasantly. His chariot rumbled lightly over gorges, spanned by arched stone bridges.

Mingan changed horses frequently, and sang as he sniffed the odor of the damp forest. He was too glad to be at liberty on the open highway to ponder the future.

Before he was aware of it, he had passed the road leading to the hunting pavilion. So he turned aside into a lane that would take him, as he fancied, to his destination. There were no houses to be seen, and the rolling country cut off his view of landmarks. He let the horses slow down to a foot pace. Present he reined in and listened.

Faintly, he heard hoofs in the grassy lane behind him. After a moment the sound ceased. Mingan went on, around a bend in the trail, and listened again. The rider — only one horse was to be heard — was following him, because

when the chariot moved, its axles creaking, the horse advanced, and when Mingan halted the rider proceeded with caution.

Mingan took up the short hunting-bow from the side wall of the chariot, and fitted to it an arrow from the sheath under his hand. Around the bend in the trail came a rider, but not the spy Mingan looked for.

Instead he beheld a youth of his own age in a ragged woolen cloak and leather tunic — a boy whose keen, black eyes went from the Cathayan prince to the horses of the chariot. The shaggy pony he bestrode was dark with sweat and all but spent.

"Your horse," the stranger said promptly. "Give me it — one of them."

Mingan was surprised to hear the guttural speech of a Mongol, and more surprized at the request, which was little to his liking. He saw that the other was armed like himself — a bow of tough wood, a sheath of arrows behind him at the saddle, a knife in his girdle. But the Mongol's bow was unstrung, his hands empty.

"Who are you and whence come you?" he asked quietly.

The Mongol heeded Mingan not. His head, browned by the sun, projected forward from high, square shoulders; the skin was stretched tight over the bones, and his dark eyes glowed as if from fever.

"Your horses are fresh," he responded curtly, "and I have need of a fresh horse. Loosen one from the shaft if you would live."

"If you return not whence you came," Mingan warned

in his fair Mongol, "I will give you this shaft in your heart — "

As he spoke the stranger flung himself bodily from the saddle of the gray pony, striking the ground on hands and knees. Involuntarily, Mingan loosed his arrow, but it glanced harmlessly from an empty saddle. Before he could fit another shaft to string the Mongol leaped into the chariot, seized his shoulders and bent him back over the front wall of the vehicle.

Mingan writhed and twisted in vain. He felt the bones of his shoulders click together, and a sharp pain shot through his back. Realizing that the Mongol was stronger than he had thought and would break his back in another moment, he groped for the hunting-knife in his girdle, pulled it free and thrust the point through the leather shirt of his adversary, below the ribs.

When the Mongol felt the steel tip in his flesh, his eyes, not a foot from Mingan's twisted face, glowed and his wide mouth set in a straight line.

"I am Temujin," he panted, "son of Yesukai, the Mongol khan, and I am stronger than you. Bear in with your steel, but I will slay you!"

The two boys glared at each other, until a red mist floated before Mingan's sight. He knew that if he thrust home the knife, the iron fingers of the Mongol would snap his spine. Each held the other's life in his hand, and Temujin seemed to exult in the conflict.

Suddenly the Mongol released his hold and stepped back, freeing himself from Mingan's knife.

"You are not a coward, like most Cathayans. Why

should I slay you? Abide here and your horse will be brought back to you in the third hour of the night."

Mingan got back his breath slowly, and stood erect with an effort. He could have struck at Temujin with the dagger, but he had an idea that to try to do so would be a mistake. Temujin had judged correctly the intelligence and the honesty of his foe. Mingan noticed the poise of the other's lithe body, the rippling muscles of the wide shoulders under the sleeveless tunic, and the polished, iron armlets that bound each powerful forearm of the Mongol. These, he fancied, had given the boy his name — Man of Iron.

Mingan put away his knife, stealing a glance at the dark stain that appeared on the other's tunic, and folded his arms in his sleeves. By heritage and training, Mingan kept both his dignity and presence of mind.

"We are going in the same direction, O Mongol," he said reasonably. "I may not abide here, so you shall ride in my chariot to the place you seek. Meanwhile, shall there be fellowship between us?"

In silence Temujin eyed him. Friendship, to a Mongol, had a deep significance. He made decisions quickly.

"*Tahil tebihou,* the bargain is struck. Drive!"

Mingan would have liked to parley a while — to know what the son of Yesukai was doing three hundred miles from the Three Rivers, his homeland.

"Your horse," he began —

Temujin stirred impatiently.

"The gray pony will follow, in time. The shadows are turning to the east: we have far to go. Take the reins!"

Although Mingan put the horses to a sharp trot, Temujin was not satisfied until they were whipped into a headlong gallop that set the chariot to plunging dangerously. He watched the road ahead steadfastly. Mingan studied him, when opportunity offered, from the tail of his eye.

"In the ebony box behind you," he ventured, "you will find rice, and fruit and quail meat. You are hungry — "

Promptly Temujin reached down, without shifting his scrutiny. He emptied the box by fistfulls, gulping down the food avidly, as if he had been without a meal for several days. Then he gripped the side of the chariot and planted his legs wide. Presently Mingan saw that he slept, on his feet. It was a cloudy day and the mountain slopes were swept by a chill wind, while a light rain drove in their faces. But Temujin slept on.

After a while Mingan allowed the horses to slow down to breathe and the boy opened his eyes at once.

"This is not the place. We draw rein to a ravine. The road from the Taidjut steppe runs through it to these hills. In the time milk takes to boil we will be there."

"What seek you in the ravine? If we are to ride together as comrades it is fitting that you should tell me."

Temujin, always sparing of words, explained swiftly, his voice falling into the deeper notes of a Mongol who speaks of vital things.

"Four suns ago a party of Taidjuts came to the tents of Yesukai while the most of our warriors were out on the plains hunting. Yesukai, my father, gave them seats at the fire on the guests' side, and milk and mutton and drank with them in fellowship. When they rode off, at dawn, they

slew the boys who were guarding the horse herd at the tents and drove off the herd. Yesukai swore by Erlik, but he is old and the chill gets into his bones, so he called for one to pursue the thieves, and slay them."

As Temujin seemed to think this enough said, Mingan prompted him.

"How many were the Taidjuts?"

"Eight or nine."

"Where are your men?"

"I am alone."

"Why did you not rouse up the leaders of your tribes? You can not cope with so many warriors alone."

Temujin made no answer, and Mingan reflected that the Mongols would have thought it strange if the khan called for others to win back horses stolen from him, or if he had called back the *orkhons,* the heroes, from the hunt.

"There is peace between us and your emperor, O Cathayan," said the boy slowly. "If I had sent the boors from my household to pull down the Taidjuts, they would have become drunk and fallen upon some of your hunting parties. For this is the moon of the emperor's hunt. So said Yesukai, who is old, and wise."

Mingan hid a smile, but presently fell serious. If it became known that he had aided a prince of the Mongols against the Taidjuts, Chung-hi would accuse him of a crime. What was it that the Warden of the Western Marches had said of the Taidjuts? He had prepared some intrigue against Yesukai, with their aid.

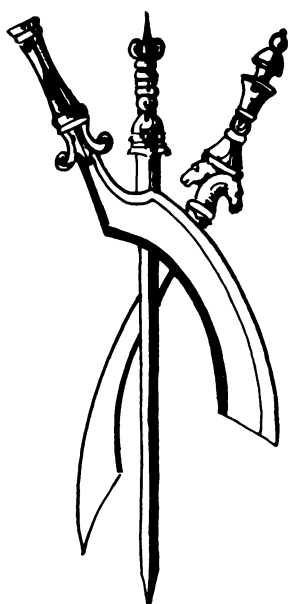
"Here is the ravine," quoth Temujin, signing for the Cathayan to draw rein.

The trail they were following dipped sharply down

into a wooded glade where it joined another road, marked by many hoofs, running east and west. This, Mingan knew, was the main trail from the Taidjut pastures to the Kinghan Mountains, whither many of the tribesmen had come to aid in the great hunt of the emperor.

The wind had ceased, and with it the mist of rain. Far out on the brown prairie the setting sun cast its rays in among the trees. Mingan saw, about a mile out on the Taidjut road, a mass of moving beasts, and the tiny glints that were the sun's reflection on spear tips.

"We have come in time," he said, and Temujin nodded silently.



II

A HOBGOBLIN AND A WOMAN

It was the part of wisdom for Mingan to withdraw now, especially as the Mongol youth did not want the chariot to descend into the ravine, where its wheel tracks would be visible to the approaching horse thieves. Especially, too, when after a few moments he heard a neigh, and saw the gray pony trotting up.

It would not do for the Taidjuts to see him with Temujin, to bring word of what they had witnessed to the Cathayan Court. That they would reach the hunting pavilion safely he had no doubt. They must be bound thither with the captured horses, to sell to the Cathayans. And how could one boy — or two for that matter — armed only with a bow and knife overcome eight men full grown, well mounted and armed?

Temujin guessed what was in his mind.

"Blood will be spilled here," he said, "and Erlik, the lord of the under-world will welcome new souls to his court of darkness before night falls on the ravine. Turn to

the left, and seek the road below you when you have gone three arrow shots, and you will reach the assembling place of the Taidjuts at the pavilion, if that is your wish."

As Mingan made no move to go, he added shortly —

"No man will know you have been with me."

But Mingan found that he did not wish to go. He was curious, and desired to see how Temujin would strive against the tribesmen. The boy's eyes were sunk in his head from weariness, yet the mist of sleep had cleared from them. He was not mad; still single-handed he was preparing to attack his enemies. Mingan's pulse began to throb, and he felt a thrill stealing through his veins, that was more than the exhilaration of driving a racing-chariot or the excitement of the chase. For the first time he stood where men would slay each other.

To Temujin, he knew, this feeling was an old experience. Born in the heart of the feuds of the great plain of the Gobi, the Mongol was older in experience than he, who had been weaned on books. And Temujin's quarrel was just.

"I will stay," Mingan said, under his breath.

And in a moment he was glad he had chosen so; he felt a great liking for the Mongol boy; at the same time his hands quivered, and his lips twitched.

Temujin looked at him sharply, grunted, and swiftly set to work tearing strips from his girdle to bind the muzzles of the chariot horses so that they would not neigh at the approach of the Taidjut beasts.

"What is your plan?" Mingan spoke in a whisper, involuntarily.

Temujin shook his head impatiently and signed for him to follow. Making sure that the three horses were screened by bushes from the trail below, the two boys scrambled down the bank and sought among the willows until Temujin found what he was looking for — a clear spring, about which were the ashes of former camp fires. He glanced out at the sun, now close to the horizon.

"Can you write words, O Cathayan?" His eyes were on the miniature silver jar of India ink, and the brush tied, as always, to the girdle on the prince.

As Mingan nodded, he continued.

"Then write these words: *Under this tree"* — hastily he ripped the bark from the hole of an aged chestnut with his knife, exposing the gray under-surface — *"will die the khan of the Taidjuts, a thief."*

Swiftly Mingan dipped brush and ink fragment in the spring and traced the six Mongol characters, a hand's length high on the bare bole of the tree. As he did so the last rays of the sun passed from the branches over their heads, leaving the ravine in obscurity.

Temujin raised his head, hearing the hoofs of many horses drawing nearer, and pulled Mingan back through the willow clumps until they were hidden from the spring and the message on the tree. Then he strung his bow, tested the gut, and squatted down, placing between his knees the quiver he had taken from the saddle of his pony. Mingan had to make two attempts to fit the silk string of his bow into the notch.

Then he found that he had no arrows. Temujin gave him two and whispered:

"Some of the dogs will be out of sight, at the rear of the herd. We must not suffer them to escape, or the whole tribe will be raised against us, and our graves will be dug not far from here."

Mingan saw a rider trot up to the spring, dismount, ward off his pony from the water with a blow and kneel to drink. He was a broad man with massive shoulders; a sword as long as his leg, and wide at the head as a battle ax, hung from his belt.

Five others came up in a group and four of them followed the example of the leader. The fifth, who carried a bow ready strung and wore the eagle-feather of a chief in his fur cap, glanced around keenly as if he had seen or heard something suspicious. He sighted the writing on the tree, moved closer to peer at it, and called for a torch.

Mingan felt Temujin touch his shoulder restrainingly. The boys held their breath while one of the Taidjuts kindled a light leisurely and ignited a torch taken from his saddle. When he had waved it around his head and the flames spluttered up brightly, he handed it to the chief of the Taidjuts.

Still Temujin did not move, and Mingan studied the brown, seamed faces and the evil, glittering eyes that peered around under bronze helmets and sable hats. Suddenly the khan gave a shout of rage, as he grasped the meaning of the writing. At the same instant Temujin stirred, and an arrow sped between the willow stems, thudding into the neck of the chieftain.

The stricken man rose in his stirrups, the torch still gripped in a rigid hand. Twice more Temujin loosed

shafts, while Mingan fumbling with cold fingers missed his first shot. His second shaft, better directed, pierced the chest of one of the warriors. Then the torch fell to earth, and the body of the khan slumped down on it, casting the glade into deep shadow.

Two of the Taidjuts were dead and two sorely hurt. Temujin began to creep away on hands and knees. Mingan had stood up, to loose his arrows, and now a shaft whizzed past his ear. He saw the first comer, the Taidjut warrior who had drunk from the spring, advancing toward him, gripping with both hands the hilt of the sword — the weapon that now seemed to Mingan to loom large as the warrior himself.

Tapering to a hand's breadth at the hilt, it widened to the length of a man's forearm at the tip. It rested on the Taidjut's right shoulder, curving down over his back. Mingan could see the small, black eyes of his foe fixed on him, and hear the grating of his pointed teeth as he snarled in rage. His two arrows being sped, the boy cast aside his bow and drew his knife, standing his ground.

The skin of his back prickled ominously and his muscles were rigid for action, yet what to do he knew not. The Taidjut leaped forward, letting the ponderous blade slide down behind him, while both fists raised the hilt over his head. Up came the blade and down at Mingan, who leaped aside.

His heels caught in the roots of the underbrush and he fell, while the warrior raised his weapon for a second stroke, grunting in triumph.

Then was heard the whistle of an arrow — a shaft that

thudded into the knotted chest of the man as if into a wooden drum. A wheezing of air from pierced lungs, a bubbling of blood in the throat; the Taidjut staggered, yet took another step forward grinning in a ghastly fashion at Mingan.

"Dog — Cathayan!"

A second arrow from the underbrush buried itself in the side of his head and he went down in his tracks. Mingan had not thought that a bow could be as powerful as that of his Mongol ally. He took up the sword of the dead man and looked around. The last of the six Taidjuts had mounted his pony and was riding off toward the horse herd.

Temujin left his cover and jumped on one of the best of the horses moving restlessly beside the spring. Leaning down in the saddle he caught up from the earth a lasso dropped by one of his enemies — a stout bamboo pole to the end of which was attached a cord terminating in a running noose. Wheeling his pony, he started after the fugitive, leaving Mingan breathless, with the great sword in his hand, but not a man on foot to face him.

He watched the two riders disappear into the gathering twilight. Then, half-disbelieving the reality of all that had passed in the last two or three minutes, went to the Taidjut khan, whom he found to be stone dead. So little time had elapsed in the fight that Mingan was able to light a fresh torch from the smoldering one on the ground.

Trailing the sword, he stooped over one of the wounded riders, and found him mortally hurt. Turning to the other who still breathed, he started. In the dim light he

had not seen that this was not a Taidjut warrior, but a Cathayan, and, by the feathers in his square cap, an imperial courier.

The man's sight was failing, but he made out the glitter of the yellow robe of the prince, and the peacock feather.

"Lord," he panted, striving to grip the edge of Mingan's dress, "you are of Cathay, not of the Horde. Know that I, an unworthy servant of the planets around the sun, have fulfilled my mission."

"What mission?"

The man peered at Mingan vainly, passed his hand over his eyes.

"I can not see your face, lord of the Dragon brood. But you wear the robe of the Dynasty and bear a warrior's sword — I was sent by him who stands behind the Dragon Seat — Chung-hi — who bade me give order to the Taidjut khan to see that Ye Lui Kutsai Mingan, a young prince of the north, was slain if he came alone to the hunting pavilion. Make it known, honorable sir, to Chung-hi that I — "

He coughed and fell back on his side.

"It shall be known that you delivered the message."

Mingan spoke mechanically, while he wondered if this were the rider that passed him last night. A swift courier, and faithful to Chung-hi. So the prince who stood behind the Dragon Seat was seizing already his heritage — issuing commands that should come only from his father! The aged emperor could not protect the youths of royal blood who came to his court from the outlying provinces.

Even the hunt was a scene set for intrigue. Mingan felt as if he stood on a quicksand, not knowing in what direction to take the next step.

His torch died out, and the darkness seemed to close in threefold. Wraiths of gray mist were forming in the hollows — smoke, the Mongols said, that rose up to the surface of the earth from the halls of Erlik, the lord of the lower regions.

In fact the mist veiled the rider that Mingan heard coming toward him from the plain. Not until horse and man were within arm's reach did he recognize Temujin.

The Mongol for once moved slowly. He was dragging at the bamboo pole of the lasso, and at the other end of the rope the body of the sixth Taidjut slid over the grass.

"Leave the chariot," said Temujin quickly. "It will avail not where we are going."

"Where?" asked Mingan.

"Not far; to the forest line of the highest of these hills. The three Taidjuts guarding the rear fled when they heard the music of weapons. They saw this one die. They will spread the word in our rear that Mongols are raiding. We can not go back through the Taidjut country to the Gobi; we must seek a safe place and spy out where our enemies gather."

"On your right hand, high on the slope of the mountain Pisgah, overlooking the Kinghan Range is the shrine of Kwan-ti, the god of war," Mingan observed. "In the week of the great hunt no one makes the pilgrimage to the place of Kwan-ti. Are you afraid to go there?"

"Why?"

Temujin leaned down to study the face of his comrade. Satisfied, he took the saddles from four of the riderless horses and left them on the ground. Leading up a pony for Mingan to ride, he instructed the Cathayan to go ahead to point out the way, while he gathered up all his arrows and rounded up the scattered ponies — no easy task in the darkness.

"Keep the Cathayan sword: you can not use a bow," he ordered. "Light no more torches to guide our enemies to us. In whose tent have you passed your days that you know no more than that?"

"In the palace of the emperor," said Mingan frankly. "My name is Ye Lui Kutsai Mingan."

"Min-gan, the Bright One." Temujin grunted. "You can not drive horses; can you ride one?"

"Yes," declared the prince.

As a matter of fact he had not sat in a saddle since childhood, but he would have been ashamed to admit that to Temujin.

Under the tall firs of the higher slope of Pisgah the fane of Kwan-ti overlooked the brown plain of the Gobi, behind the green hill country that formed the heart of the Taidjut lands. As Mingan said, the shrine was deserted, for no one would have presumed to enter the lines of the beaters that drove game from the plain and the ravines, to be killed by the courtiers.

It was a clear day, and the two boys sat comfortably on the stone steps leading up to the pagoda, watching the panorama of the hunt. So vast was its extent that they could

observe only the lines of riders out toward the plain and the cavalcades of bright-robed Cathayans who, with their slaves, rode out to the rendezvous of the kill each day. Temujin's ponies grazed and rested in the open glades of the forest, and Temujin himself shot down quail and hares for the pot, and kindled the cooking fire in among the trees after darkness when the smoke would not disclose their presence. He never asked Mingan's help, although he always shared what food they had fairly.

"How long will your emperor hunt?" he asked.

"For three days more," Mingan thought this would impress his companion. "Each day they will kill twenty stags, thrice as many boar, and hundreds of antelopes."

Temujin looked up impassively.

"When the *orkhons* of the Horde hunt in the Gobi, they slay each day a thousand deer, and load a hundred camels with the skins. When the hunt is ended the prairie can not be seen for the wolves that gather about, nor the sun in the sky for the vultures that flock to our trail."

This was hard for the Cathayan to believe. He had seen the gray wolves of the northern forests harry villages in Liao-tung unhindered. He had heard that the Mongols of the Three Rivers lived by hunting and raiding — by eating the horses of their herds and wearing the skins of animals, and he thought that must be a miserable existence.

"Some of the Horde," went on the chief's son, "ride deer — reindeer, and wear their hoofs for heels on their boots. They are the Tungusi who dwell in the frozen

prairies of the north. They have red hair and are good fighters."

Now Mingan smiled, believing that Temujin jested, but the Mongol was occupied with his own thoughts.

"Could a horse jump your Great Wall?" he asked abruptly.

"Can a horse jump five times the height of a man?"

"When I am Khan of the Horde I will send my warriors to break through it."

Looking at the restless boy whose ragged sheepskin barely covered his brown limbs, Mingan did not take his words seriously. Later, he had cause to remember the boast of the chief's son.

"You have no siege engines," he pointed out, "and we have many stone and arrow-throwers on the Wall. Besides, you have not men enough."

"*Kai* — it is true. The tribes fight among themselves, and turn not upon their enemies." Temujin nodded, rubbing his iron sleevelets thoughtfully. "The Cathayans slew my grandsire's sire foully. It is also true that the strength of a wall is not in the stones that built it."

"In what, then?" Mingan was a little proud of his learning, and was not minded to be corrected by a herd boy — as he considered Temujin to be.

"In the men on top of it. If they are weak, the wall is useless, though high as a hundred spears." He pointed down at the plain. "Look — who is that Khan, riding on the shoulders of his men?"

Temujin had the eyes of a hawk. Only after a long

peering did the prince make out a yellow speck among other dots moving out toward the beaters.

"It must be Chung-hi, who some day will be emperor. He is sitting on the hunting platform, carried by slaves, so that no beast can harm him when he casts his spear."

The Mongol grunted.

"The jackal! He kills when others drive in his game — " He yawned and lay back. "I could take a wall that Chung-hi defended."

"How?" Mingan was interested, for the heir-apparent was Keeper of the Great Wall.

"By making the jackal afraid. Then he would run away. That is a jackal's nature."

Now, because it troubled him and because he fancied that after a day or so he would see no more of the chief's son, Mingan told Temujin of the plot against him, the deaths of his cousins, and the peril that stood in wait for him if he should return to the court. The memory of the overthrow of the Taidjuts in the ravine was strong upon him, and perhaps he wished to show the Mongol that he, also, was not without enemies.

But Temujin, watching the Cathayans on the plain, seemed not to heed his words. As a matter of fact he listened carefully, as Mingan discovered on the morrow.

"I could escape from you, O Temujin," he pointed out, annoyed by the other's silence, "and disclose your hiding-place to the emperor, thus winning his favor."

"You are free to go."

Two things restrained Mingan. After all, the Mongol had saved his life, and there was truce between the Horde

and Cathay. Besides, he had a suspicion that if he led a party to the shrine of Kwan-ti, the boy and his herd would not be found there, for Temujin would take a chance with his enemies on the plain rather than be cornered by the Cathayans.

Temujin observed him, and looked away, satisfied. If Mingan meant to betray him, the prince would not have spoken his mind.

"You are a *usenin* — a teller of tales. Is that how you pass the time when you are shut up in the houses of Yen-king?"

To the Mongol it seemed strange that the Cathayans chose to dwell under a roof. Mingan, falling in with his mood, told of the tens of thousands of mailed warriors that drilled under the generals' eyes in the fields within the walls of the city — walls that a rider on a swift horse could not circle between sunrise and sunset, and of the myriad junks that came up the river from Zipangu, the island of savages, and other places of the sea.

"It is time for me to go forth with my bow," Temujin observed, "and seek out meat for our eating. Will you watch the horses?"

This was the first time he had asked Mingan to do anything for him, and the prince was surprized. He waited a long time after the other had disappeared into the forest, but Temujin did not return. The sun went down — a red ball that sank into the golden prairie out of the purple vault of the sky. A whippoorwill began its evening plaint, and somewhere behind the bulwark of the mountains the moon rose. Mingan could make out the dark blur of the

ponies that clustered together with the coming of night.

He felt the chill touch of damp air and turned toward the pagoda of Kwan-ti, god of war, drawing in his breath sharply upon beholding the dark form of the god outlined against the pallid sky in the east — for the temple was no more than a roof, set upon bamboo pillars.

"What shall I do?" he thought. "Harm may have befallen Temujin. If I am absent from the hunting pavilion another night, they will search for me, and when I return the emperor will look at me with a darkened face. O Kwan-ti, to whom all things are known, send me a sign to show the path that I must follow."

No sooner had he said that than he was frightened. Here were no priests to frighten away the evil spirits that dwelt on the mountain summit, and the deserted shrine seemed to be peopled with shadowy forms. If he had not promised his companion to watch the horses, Mingan would have fled —

The whippoorwill ceased its song abruptly, and the boy sprang up, grasping his heavy sword. From the edge of the forest a rider was moving toward him soundlessly. Mingan knew that no Cathayan noble would seek the shrine of Kwan-ti without attendants with lights and cymbals to drive away the mountain devils, and no one but a noble would possess a horse.

The newcomer halted at the foot of the steps, almost within reach of the boy, who, feeling the hot breath of the horse's nostrils, knew that it was no apparition but a living being.

He lifted the long blade, and the rider moved.

"Stand and stir not. I have an arrow fitted to bow, and if you bring down your big sword I will loose my shaft."

The words were Mongol, and Mingan, straining his eyes, could make out in the treacherous light what seemed to be a child, muffled in a fur cloak, a child with tresses of dark hair bound by a silver fillet. Surely the voice was a girl's.

"Do you understand, Cathayan? Where is Temujin?"

Mingan lowered his sword.

"I do not know."

"Ahai! Does the kite not know where the dead hare lies? Here are his ponies — I have felt of the *tanga,* the brand on their flanks. Have you slain him, Cathayan, for a sacrifice to your god?"

Mingan explained that the chief's son had gone in search of game and had not returned. By now he could see the delicate features and dark eyes of the girl, and the arrow that she still held on her bow.

"What man are you? What are you doing here?" Her voice, soft, with a quick lisp that Mingan found hard to understand, made the harsh gutturals musical.

He told her, not without some pride, his name and how he had met with Temujin; and she was not satisfied until she had heard the story of the fight in the ravine. Then she laughed, under her breath.

"Kai — it is true. You are the fool."

"How?"

"So your Cathayan warriors said — they who are camped in the ravine of the Taidjut road. They said that you were witless and blind with pride in your new finery."

She stopped to gaze, wide-eyed, at the yellow robe and the peacock feather, then continued: "*Kai* — it is true that you are like a wood-pheasant, fair to look at. But the talk at the Cathayan fire was that your enemies would put out your life like a candle in the wind."

"How did you understand our speech? Are you a Mongol?"

"Nay, I know many things. The night speaks to me, and the raven sits on the ridge-pole of my tent — "

"Daughter of Podu, the gypsy — " Temujin's deep voice came from beside them although neither had heard him approach — "you have the tongue of the cat-bird that is never still. Peace!"

The girl unstrung her bow and perched sidewise in her saddle with a little sigh of relief.

"Son of Yesukai, have you become a Cathayan house dog, to think only of food, while the wolves gather around you, sitting on their haunches — "

"Peace, I said." The gypsy fell silent. "Little Burta, has the smoke of Podu's tent fire died away, that you seek me in such a spot?"

At this the corners of her small mouth drooped and she lowered her eyes.

"Nay, Temujin, it is your tent fire that grows cold. Yesukai, your father, is dying, and asks for you."

The Mongol threw down the brace of quail he was carrying and his eyes went out over the moonlit plain.

"He has been poisoned," she went on. "The Taidjuts who came to his *yurt* as guests put poison in his drinking-cup. May they be torn by the dogs of Erlik! Because you

had passed our camp, when you pursued them, the Mongols who went in search of you took me with them to point out your trail. When we came to the lines of the Cathayan hunters, they could approach no nearer, but I went among the Taidjut fires at night and heard of the death of their khan at your hand in the ravine. I was glad, and from the place of the slaying I followed your trail to this mountain, and at sunset saw the horses."

"The slayers of Yesukai have already gone to give greeting to Erlik," the Mongol said slowly.

Burta's teeth flashed in a smile, then she glanced at Mingan coldly.

"Why do you suffer him near you?"

Temujin, sunk in thought, seemed not to heed her. But Mingan started, remembering the words of Chung-hi spoken several days ago at the Western Gate:

"By giving gold to the Taidjuts — nothing failed and no one suspects — will not trouble your hours of pleasure."

The party of the horse-thieves had returned from the Mongol prairie to the road to the hunting pavilion: Chung-hi had sent a messenger to them. Surely the Taidjut khan had been acting under orders from the Warden of the Western Marches.

And this messenger had given the Taidjuts the command to slay him — Mingan — if they found him alone.

"Mingan — " the chief's son roused himself — "is my comrade. Do him no mischief!"

The gypsy child pouted and, from the corners of her eyes, peered at the tall prince with distrust, even with jealousy. Leaning toward the Mongol she whispered

anxiously, until Temujin silenced her by taking the two heavy braids of hair, crossing them over her lips and knotting them forcibly behind her head. Mingan gathered from her gestures that she wanted Temujin to kill him, strip him of his clothes and use them as a disguise in penetrating the Cathayan lines.

"We must mount and ride swiftly to the country of the Three Rivers of my father, Yesukai," Temujin declared. "You must come to clear the way for us if we fall in with a strong band of your Cathayan hunters."

At this Mingan would have protested, when he thought of the plot of Chung-hi against the boy's father. If Temujin should be caught by the soldiers of the warden, he would be tortured, if not killed; if the Taidjuts captured him, his fate would be no better. As for Burta — "

A proverb of the Master K'ung occurred to him —

"A man who slays an enemy with his own hand is better than one who stirs up others to kill."

"I will go," he agreed thoughtfully, "as far as the last cordon of my people."

But Temujin had left him and was already rounding up the ponies, assisted by Burta.

It seemed to the prince that it would be fatal to attempt to take the horses with them through the encampments of the Taidjuts.

Temujin, however, would not think of leaving them behind. That evening he had descended the mountain slope to scout around the nearest fires of his foes — this had delayed his return — and had discovered a trail leading down among the gullies on the left flank of the hunters' lines. Mounting a big, roan stallion, the leader of the herd,

he led the way thither, followed by the other ponies, with Burta and Mingan bringing up the rear.

The night was young enough for them to make out the ruddy glow of the fires, where men had settled down for the night, and to avoid them. And the clear moonlight enabled Temujin to pick out the trail easily.

Without being challenged they descended the forested slope of the mountain, wound among the gullies of the foot-hills, and felt themselves in the warmer air of the wide plain. Heading from copse to thicket, and keeping clear of the sky-line on the ridges, the Mongol finally left the last of the cover and struck out into the sweep of high grass, going slowly to make it seem as if he were leading the ponies from one camp to another.

Often he stopped, taking warning from sights or sounds unperceived by Mingan. They came presently upon a stream, lined with gnarled willows through which the moonlight filtered sparingly, and here Temujin led the ponies down to water, and to let them breathe.

Mingan presently heard him grunt warningly at Burta and stride up the bank to look out. Voices approached, and Mingan stepped back into the deep shadow of the trees.

Four riders descended the bank and, halting to let their horses drink, noticed the other ponies.

"What herd is this?" one called out in the western dialect of Cathay. Mingan could see that it was one of the palladins of the court, a stout warrior encased in a mass of quilted armor, a ten-foot spear hanging at his back.

"Mine, if it please you, uncle," responded Burta, advancing to his stirrup.

"And whose are you?" ejaculated the warrior, some-

what vaguely, being a little the worse for wine at the festival. "A star-eyed, lissom maid, by all the *rakchas* of the air!

A pavilion of trees,
And a goblet of wine.
Alas, what are these,
No companion is mine!"

He stooped to kiss the face of the girl, but she bent her head under pretense of stroking the silver-inlaid breast-strap of the charger. Recovering his balance with some difficulty, the hero seemed inclined to continue his song, when one of the men-at-arms pointed out the figure of Temujin, advancing toward them in the gloom under the trees.

"You have your shadow, O Commander of a Thousand! Is not that companion enough?"

The mirthful rider bent his head cautiously, stared at his image in the pool and smiled. Whereat the others urged their horses on, and the charger splashed across the stream after them, bearing with it the palladin whose thoughts seemed to have turned from women to wine, for the last heard of him was the announcement in a hearty voice:

"The moon can not swallow
Her share of the grog,
And my shadow must follow
Wherever I jog!"

Mingan drew a long breath of relief, for he had expected that any second the Mongol's arrows might begin to fly through the air, and Burta was silent as they changed their saddles to fresh beasts and started forward again.

Cre-ak — *cree-eek:* the leather of Mingan's saddle squeaked louder and louder. *Slap — flap, slap,* went the breast-strap and reins. He started out of a doze, aware that he was shivering in the early morning chill, and that his legs ached.

The herd had struck up a smart pace and was passing over a stretch of rolling country, dotted with thickets. The rising sun warmed his back, and he felt refreshed.

"Are we out of the cordons?" he asked Burta, seeing no sign of other riders.

The girl made a face at him and shook her head. Temujin, too, was uneasy. Mingan sighed, for he would have liked to halt and rest — though not to sit down, as yet. His glance was caught by several antelope, breaking from cover before them. A fox appeared out of a clump of sage, and turned in its tracks at sight of them, vanishing before it was fairly seen.

Then Mingan was aware of a clamor behind them, a medley of cymbals, drums and hand-gongs, and knew that the beaters of the royal hunt had started forth to the plain, evidently driving west.

Temujin turned his horse's head more to the left, and quickened his pace. For some time they made rapid progress, leaving behind them the tumult of the beaters.

Then, topping a rise, they saw along all the left flank a long line of Taidjuts bearing in toward them.

Reining in sharply, Temujin scanned the line in vain for a break, and then started forward to the right, away from the riders. Now the ponies bunched close together, heads up, snorting with sudden fear. Here and there more deer came into view, racing away from the Taidjuts, and a leopard turned up almost under the horses' noses, streaking away like a shaft loosed from a cross-bow.

A fine wapiti stamped up to the summit of a knoll, and wheeled about, laying its antlers low on its back. The sight and smell of the plains animals made the ponies frantic, and Mingan had all he could do for a while to manage his horse. He thought that they must surely out-distance the hunt, at such a pace. But Temujin pointed out that many of the animals appeared from in front, running toward them. They swept down into a long, grassy gully, among groups of darting antelope, and rounding a bend in the declivity, came full into a confusion of beasts.

Across the ravine in front of them a squadron of mailed cavalry was deployed, shouting and waving mantles at the game.

The headlong rush of the ponies carried the three fugitives up to within arrow-shot of the Cathayan horsemen before Temujin worked his horse out of the press and halted, his bow strung and an arrow on the string. Burta forced her pony to his side. The Cathayans promptly took up javelins and bows and slowly drew nearer.

Mingan, seeing that they were nearly hemmed in,

called to his companions in Mongol not to resist, and searched for the leader of the mailed archers. At sight of the young prince in court dress the captain in command dismounted and came forward to hold Mingan's rein and hear what he had to say.

"Leader of a Hundred," the boy ordered clearly, "I am Ye Lui Kutsai Mingan, and I have rank in your country, Liao-tung. For the first time since coming of age I see the warriors of Liao-tung — " with pride his glance went around the circle of watching men — "when, by command of the Son of Heaven, I am to ride before all others of the hunt. With these two barbarians I would pass your line, taking with me their ponies."

He indicated the emblem of the Northern banners on his shoulder, in which command the mounted archers were included.

The captain bowed several times, then made pretense of adjusting a buckle on the pony's halter. Mingan noticed that his fingers trembled.

"Your servant is honored by your discerning order. O son of illustrious fathers, when you have passed beyond the sight of the Cathayans, heed these words. Evil awaits you in the Dragon Court. Do not return, but ride with your companions to your people of Liao-tung who impatiently desire sight of their prince. Favored of the stars, has your servant leave to withdraw?"

Mingan nodded, shaking his sleeve slightly. The Cathayans drew off, staring awhile at Temujin and Burta, then set about the business of the hunt. Beyond their ranks

the nearest Taidjuts were coming into view and Mingan and Temujin lost no time in trotting out of sight down the ravine.

When they came to the open prairie again, Mingan reined in.

"Here you are safe, son of Yesukai. You are in the land of the Horde. Now will I say farewell and go to the emperor."

Temujin brought his pony up and stretched out his right hand, clasping both the prince's wrists between his fingers with a sudden motion.

For a moment Mingan strained to free himself, and realized that the grip of the stronger one could not be broken. Temujin, still holding Mingan helpless, dismounted, drew with his free hand the Cathayan's long girdle from his waist and bound his wrists; then, taking a rope from his own saddle, tied the boy's feet together under the horse's belly.

"Fool," he grunted, looking up quizzically. "Would turn back into a snare set for your feet? Have you forgotten the ill-will of the son of the emperor? Burta whispered to me the words of the commander of the archers. Would you escape to Liao-tung?"

Mingan shook his head. It would be useless — he would be sent for, and, failing to appear, would be proclaimed a rebel at the court of Yen-king, and the tablets of his fathers would be taken down and broken — which was not to be thought of.

"Then," said Temujin gravely, "you will be my friend, and my *usenin* — teller of tales. Come, we will take the trail that leads to the desert."

Meanwhile the feast of Hao was nearly at an end, and the aged emperor of Cathay declared he had seen enough of hunting and summoned his councilors and astrologers to hear the evidence of the disappearance of the prince of Liao-tung, and to decide what had become of him.

The Taidjuts who had escaped from the fight in the ravine gave their testimony, and, to justify their flight, stated emphatically that a hundred hobgoblins of the steppe, armed with thunderbolts, had attacked them and had slain their chief after writing the mysterious prophecy on the tree-trunk.

They had not seen Mingan, and they said that if Temujin had been in the ravine, he must have been in league with the spirits of the waste-places, because the chief's son could not write, and there was the inscription on the tree for all to see.

Cathayan priests who had gone to offer belated sacrifices at the shrine of Kwan-ti reported hoof-marks all about the pagoda, and heaps of ashes where spirit fires had been kindled — surely supernatural, because they had been seen by no man.

Mingan's abandoned hunting-chariot and horses were shown to the emperor, and those who found it reported that there were no boot tracks visible around it in the moist earth by the stream — only the prints of bare feet, which surely could not belong to the prince.

Lastly, rumors came from the Liao-tung banner-men that Mingan had been seen riding in company with a hobgoblin and a woman like no other in Cathay, beautiful beyond words, and clad in ermine skins.

This jogged the memory — a trifle wine-tinted — of a

certain fat under-officer, who proclaimed loudly that he had spoken to the woman herder of the horses and without doubt she was a *rakcha*, a female vampire, who had tried to fasten herself on him.

So it was decided that Mingan had been carried off by devils.

Perhaps he had been turned into a horse or wolf by the woman-spirit of the steppe; perhaps he wandered through the wastes of the Gobi in human form, but a devil incarnate. In any event,if he reappeared in Cathay, he was to be bound and turned over to the priests.

The old emperor sighed and said in a solemn voice:

"The spirits of the steppe are very powerful and this place is ill-omened. Let us return to the wall, and to our palace at Taitung where our actors will devise a new play portraying the virtues of the Cathayans and the evils of the demons of the sandy steppes. Let gongs be beaten, and paper-prayers burned; let paper also be scattered across the path behind us, so that any devils who follow will be led astray. I grieve for the evil fate of Mingan, who was my second son."

Thereafter no men of Cathay ventured in the ravine where the dead bodies lay under the tree, and the Taidjuts made a new road around the place. Only Chung-hi, struggling against his deep superstition, passed that way to make sure that his messenger and his hired slayers, the Taidjuts, were beyond all doubt powerless to reveal his plot.

He was well content: those who could have betrayed him were dead, Mingan was powerless, even though living,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He lifted the long blade and the rider moved. (See page 52.)

and the prestige of Chung-hi was greater than ever. Only one thing troubled him.

In the heavens Mingan's birth star glowed in a favorable constellation, and the northern warriors whispered among themselves that the time would come when the Prince of Liao-tung would return to dwell among them again, and take his place as leader. Chung-hi shifted uneasily when he thought of it.

III

THE MASTER OF THE HORDE

For several days Temujin and his two companions passed swiftly over wide prairies where the dry grass rose high as the horse's noses.

Here were no villages, but only clusters of gray, Tatar tents visible at times on the horizon, and scattered herds of ponies and cattle. Temujin avoided these and pressed on without halting, except to rest the horses. He and Burta slept in the saddle, and Mingan from very weariness learned to do likewise.

The son of Yesukai touched no food for four days, and Mingan would have fared badly if the Mongol boy had not ordered Burta to share her dried mutton and raisins — with which her saddle-bags were filled — with him. This, seeing that the prisoner was suffering, she did willingly enough, and even prevailed on Temujin to take off his bonds on the morning of the second day.

Mingan was too tired to think of trying to escape from the Mongol that night — even if he could have stolen away from the keen eyes of the children of the plains.

The third day, Mingan judged that they covered four hundred *li* (about a hundred and forty miles) by the late afternoon. Temujin's will to go on would suffer no hindrance, his eyes were smoldering, as if he were faced by a visible foeman. It was a hard race, that ride over the plateau of the northern Gobi; to Mingan it was torment. But Temujin was racing against time, and the hand of death.

"Look toward the sun," said Burta to Mingan.

The chief's son already had seen what she noticed — a long line of dust ahead of them. They were on a small knoll in the prairie, and the wind from the west whipped at the girl's dark tresses, and dried the sweat on Temujin's hollow cheeks. Mingan watched the dust draw nearer, revealing dark specks that proved to be horsemen, riding along a front of a half-mile.

As the gap between the strangers and Temujin closed, Mingan saw that there were other lines, evenly spaced, behind the first — several thousand riders in all. In the center of the moving square above the film of dust that rose from the dry soil appeared a long pole, topped by the antlers of a wapiti — a rude enough standard.

"Tatars," said Burta briefly.

They rode not close together with the slow pace of the chargers of the mailed Cathayan cavalry but in squadrons of a hundred, each with its leader in front. They were thick-set men, brown of skin and clad in black, rawhide armor, coated with dust, and Mingan looked in vain for supply train or pack-animals. The Tatars had goatskin saddle-bags tied to the peaks of the high saddles, and two

bows slung at their shoulders, with a sword or ax in their belts. And every warrior had a spare pony.

As if the three wanderers on the knoll had been an islet and the riders a succession of swells, the Tatars dashed up and divided to pass them. Mingan caught glimpses of scarred faces, and occasionally steel ring mail gleaming under flying fur cloaks.

"Hai, aho-ho! Koke Mong-kü, hai! (Ho brothers, warrior Mongols, ho!)"

The lines took up the shout as they came abreast, and echoed the war-cry of the Horde. Mingan stared at them, aware of power in the steady gait of the ordered ranks, in the deep voices of the riders. It was his first glimpse of the fighting men of the Horde that was made up of Tatars, Mongols, Merkets, and even the strong Keraits of the west, the desert tribes of the south and the reindeer folk of the white regions in the north — but of which the Khan of the Mongols had always been the leader.

As the standard passed close to them a burly rider, hatless and white-haired, galloped up, and reined in sharply by Temujin.

"Are you hale and well?" asked the boy quietly, raising his hand in greeting. "O Mukuli, Khan of the Tatars, are your cattle fat, and your herds numerous? Have your sheep fat tails, and is the grazing good in your land?"

"Hale and well," growled the old chieftain, responding to the customary salutation, while his black eyes scanned the three keenly, thereafter shifting to the mist on the horizon through which the sun flamed dully. "Why are you in my land, far from the Three Rivers?"

"I have slain the Taidjut khan who put poison in Yesukai's cup."

Mukuli considered this, with approval.

"Good! A snake has been trodden down." He pulled at his mustache thoughtfully. "It is well that you did this. You are a slender arrow, but you are Khan of the Mongols and Master of the Horde. Yesukai died last night. The women are wailing in the death tent."

The corners of Temujin's lips drew down, and his shoulders stiffened. Beyond this he displayed no emotion. Mukuli, squinting at the setting sun, fingered his reins.

"Do not stop to pull thorns from your feet, or stones from the hoofs of your ponies. Go swiftly to your *ordu*, your encampment."

When Temujin made no response the Tatar explained that the *orkhons*, the chieftains, who had assembled at Yesukai's side on learning of his illness, were talking now of dispersing to their various tribes. They had acknowledged the leadership of Temujin's father, not without some discontent — for Yesukai had been more of a leader in the field than a chief of a confederacy.

Now that the mastery of the Horde had fallen to Temujin, most of the khans declared that they would not be ruled by a boy.

"What said you, Mukuli?"

"When Yesukai sat on the white mare's skin at the head of the *kurultai*, the council, I was his sworn brother, as was Wang Khan, master of the Keraits."

"He who is called by some Prester John of Asia," nodded Temujin. "And now?"

"Can a nursling carry the yak-tail standard?" asked the Tatar dryly. "Nay, it is heavy. It was for this talk that I left the *kurultai*, to seek you, hearing that you had crossed the Tatar grazing-lands to follow the path of vengeance into Cathay. It is one thing to slay a thieving Taidjut; it is another to lead a million warriors."

"What is your mind?" observed the boy again, quietly.

"True, the Tatars are knitted to Mongols as flesh is to bone. As a friend, the tents of my people are open to you — we will give horses and food without stint. But if you seek to be verily Master of the Horde, and my overlord, then first you must prove your worth, as good metal is tested. Then will I place my standard behind yours. That is my word, and by the white horse Kotwan I will not unsay it."

"Am I a dog, to come to your heel?"

Temujin's lips drew back a little from his teeth.

Mukuli nodded, as if he had expected such an answer, and watched with interest the sun disappear behind a pall of gray.

"Yesukai, who was my comrade, gave me a message for your hearing. 'Go,' he said, 'to Wang Khan, in the south and west of the Horde, who holds the castle above the sands. He is the king called Prester John and he will aid you, being wise in all things, and my friend.' "

Temujin shook his head.

"Was Prester John at the council?"

"Nay, for he goes not beyond the walls of his castle, wherein you must seek him."

Mukuli gathered up his reins. "The wild-goose, Temujin, takes flight in the face of the storm, but the snow-

pigeon seeks safety in the earth, when the Winter is hard, among its kind. Turn not aside from Prester John, who is shrewder even than Jamuka, our Master of Plotting. You and he and I could conquer the world."

"I have heard your word. May the rain make your pastures green; may the way be open before you."

He lifted his hand to his head and dropped it to his lips, in farewell. Mukuli, ill-pleased at this sign of authority, glanced at him briefly, hesitated as if he would urge him further to make the alliance he suggested, and then wheeled his horse away.

"May you come in peace to the end of your journey," he growled over his shoulder.

The standard-bearer and the group of officers who had awaited him at a little distance, put their horses in motion. The last line of the horsemen, that had halted behind their khan, swept past, with a shout.

"Hai, aho-ho. Koke Mong-ku ho!"

A drumming of hoofs on the baked earth, a taste of dust in the air, and the array of the Tatars left them.

Mingan had thought of the Gobi as a waste of sand. In the last day's ride they galloped over a level sward, sparkling with daisies, where the rarefied air was like wine. They crossed a river near a range of blue mountains, and in the early afternoon came to the *ordu* of the dead Yesukai — a city of tents in a shallow valley, where large herds of horses were grazing under guard of boys little younger than Temujin.

At the crest of the valley Burta dismounted and picked

out her pony from the small group that had survived the journey.

"It is better that I should depart to Podu's lands," she said to the Mongol. "My father would be angry, if he has been drinking *kumiss* and sees me come to the *kurultai* at your side. Are you — " she lowered her eyes — "pleased with me, or angry?"

Temujin had been silent all day, and now he frowned.

"*Kai,* so you fear to be seen at my side!"

Burta flushed and tossed her head, the silver earrings jingling.

"I go where I will and now, because I am weary, seek the path to my home."

As Temujin watched her without comment, her flush deepened.

"Because you are Master of the Horde you can not summon or dismiss me at pleasure. You can be angry, if you like — it is all one to me!"

The boy suddenly drew his horse close to her and placed his hand under her chin so that he could see into her eyes.

"Little Burta, I am pleased with you."

"Verily! The king is kind!"

She tried to free herself, and, failing, fell to whimpering. Temujin released her.

"I will come to your father's tents before another Summer has passed."

Burta glanced at him fleetingly, and turned away. Yet Mingan noticed that she rode slowly, and presently she called over her shoulder softly —

"I will pray that the spirit of Yesukai finds peace in the sky world."

Nearing the tent village, Temujin waited until the girl was lost to sight and then turned his ponies loose into a herd belonging to the Mongols. Mingan noticed that his hands trembled a little and the pulse in his brown throat beat furiously as they rode in among the tents, prepared to face the council that sat by the death tent of Yesukai.

Word of their coming had preceded them, for men lined the path they took — squat warriors, bow-legged but massive of shoulder, with the skin of their faces wrinkled like dried grapes. They wore high boots and walked with the short, clumsy step of those more at home in the saddle than on foot. They were armed with bows, javelins and short, iron maces. As Temujin passed, paying no attention to them, they grunted in pleasure and tried to touch his horse or stirrup. These, Mingan learned later, were the warriors of Yesukai's clan, the backbone of the Mongols.

But as the young chief neared the largest tent, a cavalcade of riders hemmed in by the assembled throngs, barred his way.

The leader of the horsemen, an old desert man brilliantly clad in a crimson Turkish *khalat* and a purple, plush cap, seemed ill at ease at seeing the pair.

"Greetings, Podu," observed Temujin. "Has the fire of the council died out, and is the cask of liquor empty that you mount to leave the *ordu* before the new khan comes to take his seat?"

Podu's fine brown eyes were moist with the warmth of wine, and his white teeth bared in a smile.

"Nay, Temujin, I have paid honor to the dead hero Yesukai, your sire. I have left a fine white horse to be slain on his grave, so that he can ride fittingly in his journey through the sky-world to the banquet hall of the dead palladins. As for the *kurultai* — " he fingered his gold earrings slyly — "that is quite broken up, quite."

"How, Khan of the Gipsies?" Temujin's eyes narrowed.

"Why, like a raven's nest when the black sand-storm sweeps it away. *Kai*, it is so! Mukuli has turned his back, and the khan of the spear-bearing Merkets, and the chief of the reindeer folk have ridden off on their horned beasts. They bayed like dogs — " old Podu swayed in his saddle and his words were twisted — "and slunk off like foxes. May their heads be cut off and salted down — "

"But the ten Mongol khans abide my coming?"

Podu shook his head mysteriously.

"The half of them have gone back to their clans saying that they will not follow in battle a nursling yet smeared with milk."

The veins in the boy's forehead stood out, and the muscles of his arms tightened. Podu started and, eyeing the motionless throng of warriors, sobered visibly.

"Nay, Temujin. It is only that your khans grumble like camels when the load is bound on. I would not leave your side, but I must assemble my trade caravans before the Autumn storms."

Temujin's fingers caught at the arrows in the quiver at his saddle peak, and his men surged forward, waiting for his word. But his glance went to the valley's side where

Burta had said farewell, and he sat silent a moment, thinking.

"Pass, Podu, and seek your tents. Yet give up to me the gold tablet that marks you for an *orkhon*, a palladin of Yesukai. When you have left this camp you will be no longer a khan of the Horde."

Slowly Podu obeyed, his eyes watchful. With a sigh he handed over a small square of gold, inscribed with writing, hefting it reluctantly as he did so. Temujin put it into his girdle and waited until the nomads had ridden off before he sought the council tent, and dismounted.

A tall chieftain, clad in rich nankeen, with a sapphire-studded scabbard and a sable hat, came out of the tent and held his horse, smiling a welcome.

"Successful as always, you return O Temujin, my khan," he said. "This time with a Cathayan captive."

Temujin greeted the newcomer by name, Jamuka. This was the Khan of the Jelairs, of Turkish descent, called in the Horde the Master of Plotting. By his proud bearing and quick, intelligent eyes Mingan judged him to be wiser than the Mongols — a judgment that afterward proved most true. He saw, too, that Temujin was pleased to see his cousin.

The more so, because, drawing back the entrance flap of the council tent, the young Khan beheld no more than five elderly Mongols awaiting him — some sleeping and some the worse for wine. In truth the leaders of the Horde had forsaken him.

He let fall the flap and put his hand on Jamuka's shoulder, his eyes blazing from his gaunt face.

"O my cousin, the *orkhons* have scattered to the far corners of the earth, and you alone, save these five, stand to await me. I will not seek them."

He raised his hand toward the high standard before the tent — a pole bearing a yak's horns and cross-piece from which hung the long, yak's tails. "I will find new palladins to take the seats of the old. This is my word and it will not change."

Jamuka shook his head reflectively.

"Where will you seek for new heroes? You are lean with hunger, and consumed by the fires of anger." His glance shifted to Mingan. "It is well you have brought this Cathayan, to be slain at Yesukai's grave."

Temujin's eyes narrowed.

"I have gone among the riders who went to the edge of the emperor's hunt to seek you," went on Jamuka gravely, "and I have learned what they heard whispered among the followers of the Dragon around the fires at night. The Taidjuts who slew Yesukai had gold upon them, and it was coin of Cathay. Two of them escaped your arrows and went back to rob the bodies of their comrades; having great wealth, their tongues wagged.

"This thing is true."

A murmur of assent came from Jamuka's retinue of nobles, and an answering growl from the Mongol warriors massed around them. Those who could not see Mingan pressed forward upon their fellows; those who stood nearest laid hands upon weapons.

The prince folded his arms and looked at them calmly; he had been schooled to keep from betraying emotion, nor

did he lack dignity. Those who saw him, so, did not realize that cold shivers were chasing up and down his back, or that utter fatigue gripped mind and body.

He, too, knew that Jamuka spoke the truth.

"Yesukai," Chung-hi had whispered to the emperor within Mingan's hearing, "will not trouble your hours of pleasure."

From the death tent near at hand sounded the subdued beating of a drum, mingled with the shrill lament of women.

Chung-hi, Mingan reflected, could not have planned more shrewdly if he had schemed for the prince of Liao-tung to be slain beside Yesukai. Temujin, grieving for his father, and sorrowing over the loss of his heroes, could hardly fail to give him up to the throngs that thirsted for his death. For one thing, the young khan could not afford to deny the wishes of his men.

"Why do you hesitate, Temujin?" questioned the Jelair chief carelessly. "Let your followers take life from the Cathayan."

"Aye," said another. "Surely this thing must be!"

"Kabul also died of poison from the Dragon's claw."

"Twenty pieces of gold, it was — "

"We will throw this youth's head over the wall — "

"Nay, Temujin will make of it a silver drinking-cup."

All the whispers that reached Mingan's ears were hostile. Only one voice was lifted in his favor:

"He bears himself well; he is no black-boned knave," a Mongol warrior said judiciously.

All at once Temujin flung up his head.

"Peace, dogs! I am the khan. No man speaks before me."

At this Jamuka, who was the boy's elder by ten years or more, started angrily, and would have spoken, but Temujin was before him.

"Abide in this place, Jamuka. I go to the tent of Yesukai. When I come forth the lot of this Cathayan will be decided."

He instructed several Mongols to take Mingan to his own tent and to keep him there until other orders were issued.

Mingan was led out of the gathering to the leather *yurt* of the khan, which his guards did not enter, contenting themselves with squatting in the entrance where they could watch him. He sat down on a pile of leopard skins, paying no attention to them. Presently others came with a bowl of fermented milk thickened with rice, and cheese, and offered it to him.

His hunger was acute and, finishing off the food, he asked for more. The men glanced at each other in surprize at being addressed in the Mongol tongue, and when Mingan had emptied a second bowl, one — the officer who had commented on his bearing heretofore — muttered that he ate like a noble.

The truth was that Mingan's exhaustion was so great that the peril of death was no more than a new, numbing pain.

After a while Temujin appeared and sat down by him.

"I have said to my men that you are my comrade. Speak openly and tell me what you know of the death of my father."

Dust was rising behind a cavalcade of warriors.
(See page 97.)

Mingan hesitated but, aware that the Mongols already knew the truth, explained that it had been a plot of one of the favorites of the court, and that the emperor had had no hand in it.

"Chung-hi!" said Temujin.

Mingan remained silent, the young khan went on to say he had thought, from his talk with Mingan at the shrine of Kwan-ti, that the prince of Liao-tung had not been concerned in the plot against Yesukai. Under the circumstances, he said, he — Temujin — would be a dog and the son of a dog if he let Mingan die.

"You must pass between the fires, O my first friend," he concluded. "That is our test of all strangers. If you are brave you will not be harmed, if you are a coward, you will be burnt by the fire and we will break your limbs and throw you to the dogs."

Mingan could smile a little, thinking that it made little difference if a man were innocent or not, so long as he was bold enough to satisfy the Mongols.

"Heed what I say," went on Temujin earnestly, "and you will not be marked by the flames. You are brave and hardy, I know. First, strip off these long garments and put on no others. The heat is such that clothing will catch fire, and the man who wraps himself up will be marked."

When Mingan had rid himself of all garments, Temujin rose and added a low-voiced warning.

It would seem, when he was led to the fires, as if they were a solid mass of flames without interval of any kind. As a matter of fact they would consist of two lines of fires, some ten feet apart, but with the end of this lane nearest the victim closed by a heap of blazing brush.

If he leaped over this, he could then run swiftly through the narrow lane and come out unharmed. There was no wind, and the flames rose straight into the air. If he did not jump with all his strength, his feet would be caught in the brush and he would fall. To hesitate after he was once in the lane would be equally fatal.

"And do not hang back when you are led up to the fires or twenty arrows will seek you out. Fear not, for only a weakling dies in this test."

Mingan nodded, and was surprized when the Mongol officer who had brought him food, asking consent of his chief, knelt in front of him and fell to chafing his legs vigorously, starting up the circulation in the stiffened limbs. Then he was led from the tent, through the gathering to where, in a cleared space between the tent-lines, flames crackled and smoke poured from small heaps of rushes and brush for a length of some fifty feet.

It looked, as Temujin said, as if the fires were in a solid mass, for the biggest pile in front of him gave forth a dense smoke that hid the lane of which his friend had spoken. For a second Mingan wondered if Temujin had tricked him.

But he was allowed no time for reflection. At one side of him he noticed the Jelairs, mounted on fine looking horses, watching him as he was conducted to the end of the fires. Some one gave him a push, and he sprang forward.

Taking off at the edge of the flames he leaped, drawing in his breath and holding it as he did so. A hot wave seemed to engulf him and his knees smarted. Then his feet came down upon cool earth, although the heat around him was unbearable.

Mingan stumbled, caught himself up, and ran on, his eyes stinging with the effort to keep them open in the smoke. In spite of himself, he was forced to close his eyes, while his legs still urged him forward.

He ran into something solid, felt himself clasped by mighty arms, and opened his eyes to gaze with blurred vision into the seamed face of a Mongol warrior at the edge of the crowd. The fires were a dozen paces behind him. Other men crowded about to inspect his skin for burns.

A shout announced that he had passed through the fire safely, and he was brought to where Jamuka was bidding farewell to Temujin.

"You are a fool, my cousin," he heard the thin Turk say, "to keep this Cathayan alive. He will work you harm. The spies of Chung-hi are thick as jackals in the trail of a hunt. I go to my lands, beside Tangut, the city of Prester John, whom you call Wang Khan."

"Will you go to the castle that is guarded by beasts?"

Laughing, Jamuka shook his head.

"Not I! A word of warning, stripling. Prester John is your foe, because he desires the mastery of the Horde. May the way be open before you!"

Temujin raised his hand silently and the Jelairs cantered off.

Mingan was taken to the Khan's tent, where he was clad in the rough Mongol garments, and more food was brought him by the warrior who had befriended him and who seemed anxious to observe how much he could eat.

Being hungry again, Mingan did justice to the milk and cheese, and the Mongol growled approvingly —

"He eats like a king of a great people."

Temujin, brooding beside him, glanced at him with keen surprize. But Mingan's head sank on his shoulder and drowsiness overcame him.

It was night when he was awakened by the sound of a groan near at hand. Temujin was sitting over a fire in the hearth of the small tent that reeked of leather and horses, his chin propped on his iron-bound arms, tears running down his cheeks.

When Mingan stirred, the Mongol bent his head to hide his emotion.

"Except for a few, my palladins have left me. Will you abide with me, my first friend, and become my teller of tales? Unwillingly you came to my place, the country of the Three Rivers, yet your voice comforts me and your fellowship strengthens me."

For a long time Mingan stared into the embers, and then answered gravely —

"Aye, Temujin, for so long as the gods permit, I will remain at your side."

Fate, he thought, and the hand of Temujin, had brought him into the Horde, so that he could learn its secrets, and return to Cathay to place the knowledge he had gained on the step of the Dragon Seat, thus lending aid to the Dynasty of his father.

So the Cathayan youth reasoned, not knowing that it would be his lot to make out of his adventures in the Horde, a song to which kings would listen with bowed heads.

IV

THE RACE

Two years passed, and Mingan found he was faced with a riddle that neither the wisdom of the sages nor the reading of the stars would help him unravel.

Of the five Mongol khans who had been faithful to Temujin, two died, and one fell sick of a wasting illness. Temujin's herds were thinned, and of the best horses kept near the *yurt* of the young chief, many disappeared in the night in spite of the most vigilant watch. True, the last Winter had been a hard one, the prairie swept by blizzards, and the rivers frozen over. The horse thieves had left traces of boots with heels fashioned of deers' hoofs, but none of the reindeer people had been in the Three Rivers country.

Temujin himself was tireless in his efforts, riding in snow or wind storm, from clan to clan of his tribe, leading his fighters in pursuit of the raiders who seemed to descend upon him from every quarter. He recruited supplies from raiding, in turn, caravans that crossed the southern edge of his pasture lands bound to Cathay from India, gaining wine, weapons, cloth and camels that he sorely needed.

Once he was taken prisoner by riders who attacked his camp at night, but escaped, with the wooden yoke that was used by Tatars to confine their prisoners still on his shoulders. When his men had chopped off the *kang*, he sent it by an envoy to Mukuli, saying that he would not keep the property of one who had been his ally.

It amused Mingan that old Mukuli gave the envoy a feast and sent back the message that he had nothing to do with the *kang*.

But from an unknown source, Temujin was still harrassed and Mingan knew now that it could not be by the horse thieves who had taken gold from Chung-hi.

And then came a messenger from Podu's camp, in the southern Gobi, to invite Temujin to a feast that would be shared by the other khans of the Horde.

Temujin had disappeared from the Mongol pastures, when his herds were nearest the gypsy lands more than once, and Mingan knew that he had taken the gray pony and gone to have speech with Burta. The last time he returned from his long ride he was moodier than usual. Podu, he said to Mingan, intended to give his daughter in marriage to a khan of the Horde within a few months, at the frost of the Autumn hunting season.

"The number of the Mongol *orkhons* is growing smaller," he meditated aloud. "The sword of an enemy is thinning our fellowship. Podu sees this — he is a great trafficker and trader."

It was the first time Temujin had mentioned the girl to his comrade, and Mingan asked a question —

"Do you wish for Burta to be your wife?"

Temujin's keen eyes darkened.

"I will take her."

"Not at the feast of Podu, in the next moon. You must not be among the assemblage at the feast. Your warriors are too few to protect you against your enemy, who will be there."

"What enemy? I have as many as a litter of dogs." The khan laid down the arrow he was whittling into shape and frowned. "What is your thought? No hidden thing must come like a snake between us."

Mingan, however, had not solved the riddle that perplexed him; so far, he could not put a name to the foeman who worked under cover of darkness, striking at Temujin each time with more deadly aim. Who were the riders who, purporting to be Tatars, had taken the Man of Iron captive to bear him alive to their master? Mukuli, the Tatar, would have slain the Mongol rather than take him prisoner.

And who were the raiders that left, instead of the tracks of men, the print of deers' hoofs in the snow?

"This is my thought," he explained frankly, knowing better than to conceal anything from Temujin who was intolerant of secrecy. "Instead of many foes, as you say, you have but one. His messengers of evil have taken the guise of other tribesmen. The *kang* was placed on your shoulders so that you would muster your standards against Mukuli, and so destroy yourself. The deers' hoofs were donned by the men of this enemy so that you would bear hatred against the reindeer people of the north, who had not come from their fastness in a month of moons."

He swept his hand before his eyes as if brushing away a veil.

"This foeman is wiser than you, and stronger. Who can tell his name?"

"If we go to the feast of the desert men, then we can make him uncover his face."

Thoughtfully, Mingan shook his head. Although, in the Gobi, he had been deprived of books and his astronomical instruments, he had not lacked of knowledge. He had learned to train falcons and fly them at game, even the *bouragut*, the golden eagle that would pull down a deer. He was able to keep to the saddle for days, and he knew the prairies almost as well as Temujin who — perhaps because he could not read — never forgot what once he saw or heard. Hardship and constant suspense, holding himself ready to rouse up by night and take to the saddle and flee, had sharpened Mingan's keen wits.

"Like a play actor in Cathay, this foeman has a mask over his face, and he would strike you before you could guard against him."

Temujin took up his arrow and fell to sharpening it. "Jamuka bade me beware of Wang Khan, Prester John, who is a Christian (Kerait or Krit is the Mongol version of the word Christian) and strongest of the lords of the west. Sixty times a thousand tents are on his lands. But he alone of the chiefs of the Horde dwells in a castle. He gives no feasts, nor does he ride forth from his hold; perhaps because he has under his hand treasure of gold, of silver, of carved ivory and sable furs, of jewelled saddles and fine, red leather. Yesukai, my sire, visited his castle, and at that

time the beasts that guard it were chained — he could hear their snarling.

"Nevertheless, many of his men died from the *burans*, the black sand-storms of the southern Gobi. He said that as they drew near to Tangut — the castle of Prester John — he saw it first on one hand, then on another, and oft-times in the air before his horse. He saw a rich land, with wide rivers and trees, though no trees stand in that quarter of the earth."

Neither Temujin nor Mingan had seen a mirage. Yet the Cathayan did not doubt Yesukai's words — he had learned the bluntness of the Mongols.

It was said that the master of the Keraits had been alive for many generations. Also that, since Prester John did not go forth from his castle, he sent a trusted leader in command of his horsemen, who — so that enemies might not know the faces of his lieutenants — wore the skin of an animal's head over his own.

"Did Yesukai see the god that Prester John worshiped?" Mingan asked.

It was said too, that the power of Prester John, the friend of Yesukai, had been due to a talisman that was closely guarded in his castle, but to Mingan this meant a god.

"Nay, my first friend, he saw gold cups, and a white cloth under them, and a bird with feathers of every color that talked like a man. That, to my mind is enough. When we go to Tangut we must be wary and look on every side, for Prester John has sent me no word, and I know not what is in his heart toward us."

Temujin lifted his head, and Mingan put behind him the lute that he was fingering.

A rider was passing between the rows of tents of the Mongol camp, glancing carelessly about. Seeing the yak-tail standard planted at Temujin's side, he wheeled toward it, and drew up sharply, the forefeet of his pony not a yard from the Mongol's knees. Temujin did not put his hand to a weapon, not liking to make a threatening gesture without intending to strike, or, for that matter, to give warning when he meant to use a weapon. He had noticed that the newcomer rode the pony that was Burta's special property — a sorrel mare.

"O khan," said the messenger without dismounting, "I bear word to you from the daughter of Podu. Grant me freedom from harm, and I will dismount and speak; otherwise, the saddle suits me best and you will burn in the entrails of Erlik before you will catch this mare. Speak your mind."

He was a youngling, neat as a fawn from red morocco boot-tips to silver adorned sable-cap. His brown eyes danced in a round face and, as Temujin observed, the scabbard of his long simitar was set with sapphires.

"What name bear you, O sharp of tongue?"

"Chepe Noyon, O long of face."

"The Tiger Chief," Temujin repeated, grimly. "Sit, and drink, and speak, and fear not for your swaddling-clothes or the limbs in them. Whence had you that mare?"

"From the hand of Burta, who is like the moon in the sky at night," quoth the stranger, following out Temujin's suggestion without further reluctance.

Mingan judged from his attire that he might be Jelair or gypsy; at any rate his restlessness and his smooth, olive skin might well have earned him the surname of tiger.

"Burta sends this warning," the stranger continued. "Do not come to the feast of Podu, or the feasters will sprinkle your blood as a libation on the sand, and hang your skin on the tent ropes. At least that was her meaning, the words are of my fashioning."

Hereat the Tiger Lord paused to quaff deep of the mare's milk that Temujin's mother brought from the *yurt.* Catching sight of Mingan's lute, he brightened.

"You are no Gipsy," said Temujin bluntly. "What are you?"

"O khan, a Kerait, and a better man than your minstrel. I have a gold lute. Harken, lutist, come not to the sands of the Gobi, to the feast, to sing *ting-tang,* like the thrush, before the hawk swooped and the song-bird squawked by way of a last note. Get drunk and sleep in a wolves-lair if you will, but drink no wine of Podu's making."

"Wise counsel from a beardless mouth," smiled Mingan, and the Tiger — as they came subsequently to call him — looked up in surprize at the pleasant accent of the Cathayan. "Did the beauty of Burta bring you from the sands of Tangut — alone?"

"Alone as a lame fox, O minstrel. Nay, I set forth to find adventure, and heard before long of the great feast of Podu. When I rode thither the daughter of the chief smiled at me, and I was her slave. Would I might be among the suitors that Podu sorts out in his shrewd brain! But she gave me a quest, and I am here."

Mingan nodded politely, thinking that the Tiger, young as he was, could play a part as well as the Cathayans. Certainly the western chief was no fool, for as he spoke his eyes took in the camp shrewdly, sizing up the horses, the raw-hide armor of the Mongols, the weapons in Temujin's tent.

"Why alone," murmured Mingan, "if Prester John, your master, rides to the feast?"

"Not he. Nor his men. I tired of watching horses in our lands. Nay, give me the nomad's tents. O khan, if my words are clear, I mount to retrace my journey at sun-up. Have you a message?"

"Your words are clear," acknowledged Temujin promptly, "yet you will bear no message from me, for I will draw my reins to Podu's tents and speak for myself. If any fox sent you to turn me aside with your threats, I will give you your fill of adventuring."

The same thought had crossed Mingan's mind — that Chepe Noyon might have lied. As warranty of the boy's faith there was the sorrel mare and the Tiger himself. For certainly no spy could be so careless of events, or could chuckle so heartily as the Tiger at Temujin's warning.

"You pledged me freedom from harm," he pointed out, "and I have heard that Temujin forgets not, nor fails to keep a promise." The mirth faded from his clear brown eyes, and he glanced at Temujin as if seeing him for the first time. "I have caught rumors in the Gipsy tents, the black tents, that there will be a new khan over the Horde before the snow comes."

Mingan, too, added his remonstrance, aware that

Temujin had not men enough to insure his safety, nor — which was more to the point — to make an impressive display among the other chieftains. It struck him suddenly, comparing the young Kerait and the powerful Mongol, that Temujin was no longer a boy. Mingan did not know that he himself had grown in stature and wisdom to manhood.

"If I lurk in my tent like a dog," snarled the khan, "my enemies will take counsel together and elect a leader. Nay, I have a mind to the feast." He caught the Kerait suddenly by the wrist. "Tiger, you are bold and open in speech. Will you stand with me? When the snow comes, I will still be master of the Horde, and Burta will be in my tent. She waits until I take her from her father's *yurt*, and this shall be at the feast. Before the feast is ended," added Temujin dryly, "you may be in your grave, and Mingan too. Otherwise, you shall have honor rare in one of your years. Of my *orkhons* two are gone from the earth and one is ailing. The remaining two are needed to guard the herds at the Three Rivers and to watch the Tatars. That leaves no more than two or three *gurans* (thousand) of riders to attend me, and no palladins. That is too few and too many — too few to guard me at the feast, too many Mongols to die. So we take three hundred picked men, a hundred to each of us."

Chepe Noyon flushed with pleasure, while Mingan nodded assent.

"As for *orkhons* to attend me, I will take two even though they be but sham heroes."

Temujin rose and went into his *yurt*, reappearing with

two gold tablets in his hand, each engraved with an inscription. He gave the first to Mingan, the second to Chepe Noyon.

The Cathayan and the Kerait, surprized, bent their heads and lifted their hands. Temujin's eyes were cold.

"I mean this as a truth. At the last *kuraltai* of the Horde I swore that I would choose new heroes, rather than take back those who left me. Now, each of you is raised above other men; you are immune from punishment; you are inviolate from the death penalty nine times. Wherever you go in the country of the Horde, you will be honored; you are to command, each one, a *tuman* of ten thousand chosen warriors."

Mingan looked down at his tablet and read the words —

PALLADIN OF THE MONGOL FELLOWSHIP

"Are you content?" Temujin's keen glance searched them. "Good. Guide and support each other, steal not, and remember that a lie earns for others than the *orkhons* the death penalty. Be falcons, going before my coming, spying out what is hidden and the place of danger; be the harbingers of war — aye, of death. Never spare a foe who still has a sword in hand, waste no thought on the weak; learn to care for your men and their ponies, for a brave man is useless if he aids not those under him."

He considered a moment.

"Take Chepe Noyon to your tent, Mingan, and share it with him. Then do you both choose a hundred to follow you, also the swiftest of our racing horses and the strongest wrestlers among our warriors for Podu's games."

Podu, seated under a pavilion at the finish line of the racing field on the hard, sun-baked clay of the Gobi, fingered his gold ear-rings and sipped pleasantly the red Cathayan wine, spoil of an excursion before the moon of his feast. For several reasons he was well content with life.

As far as the eye could reach on one side the race course stretched his wagon *yurts* — black, felt tents mounted on the framework of carts — and the herds of cattle that drew his clans from place to place as his whims elected. His horse herds had never been fatter or more numerous, because the Gipsy wasted no opportunity to trade beasts at the festival, and his trades were good ones — for him. Wagers upon the games, too, had gone his way.

That was one reason for his content. Another was Burta, who sat on a fine carpet behind him. Youths from the distant tribes of the Horde had come to woo the daughter of Podu, and lay gifts before her father whose choice would decide the matter. Jamuka especially had given freely rare, river-sable skins, gold-inlaid weapons, Cathayan cross-bows, white camel-skins and jewels from the mountain mines of the west.

Podru liked the gleam of pearls and the fire of rubies, and he liked an open-handed suitor, who gave whenever he drank Podu's wine, and drank the more he gave. The Gipsy had just sent a cask to the Jelair's tents that stood opposite, blue and purple pavilions, heavy with silk and topped with long banners. That was another reason Podu found life good. All the khans of the Horde were guests at his board, save Temujin, who, Podu knew, was hard pressed guarding the country of the Three Rivers, to the north.

As soon as it was clear that Temujin would not attend the feast, Podu had heard whispers that if Mukuli, the veteran Tatar, would call together a council, a new master of the Horde would be chosen. Podu did not greatly care who was elected by the voice of the council — he would see to it that Burta married the fortunate man, and his own life would be one of ease henceforth.

"Little squirrel," he addressed his daughter, "I see you wear the cloth-of-silver cap, the gift of Jamuka. He looks long upon you; he is a clever soul."

"Aye, that is why you cheat him so easily. Is he not the Master of Plotting?"

Burta went on sampling the sugared fruits in a bowl under her hand; she always gained something from the spoil of a caravan.

Podu looked at her uncertainly. Of late her temper had been like the clear sun of a fair day, and when his daughter was tractable it meant she had a secret that she did not wish him to know.

"If the young Temujin rides hither alone, as he has done in the past," he ventured, "he would be like a lone raven in the company of vultures; he would be a thing made for mockery by these palladins who have each one a thousand tents behind their standards. If he brings the remnants of his dark-faced Mongols, his herds on the Three Rivers would be plundered, and his pastures taken. Temujin is like an arrow that has sped."

"True," nodded Burta, selecting another dainty. "And yet, O my father, Temujin would provide horses for more races, while now none will match their beasts against yours, so often have you been the victor."

Podu nodded regretfully. He was just about to declare the races at an end, and call for the wrestlers' carpet and the archers' staves. Temujin always matched him closely with horseflesh, especially with the gray pony, and Podu, always provident against possibilities, had a card up his sleeve as it were, that he would have liked to play against the Mongol.

"There will be another race," observed Burta. "Harken to the dogs!"

A clamor of yapping hunting dogs resounded from behind Podu's pavilion, and presently he heard the muttering of kettle-drums drawing nearer on horses, and the clangor of cymbals. He rose and peered out.

Dust was rising behind a cavalcade of riders at the head of whom advanced the yak-tail standard of the Horde, escorted by two youths in brave attire, one very tall, the other slender and small. Behind the standard rose Temujin, in hunting dress, carrying only a light spear beside the sword at his girdle. Podu concealed his surprize and pushed through the throng that gathered to stare at the small body of Mongols, who had announced their arrival by the drums and cymbals.

"Dismount," said the Gipsy heartily, taking the reins of the gray pony himself, "and sit at ease in the shadow."

He called for attendants to bring more wine, fruit and meat, and others to care for the horses of the heroes, and more to set up three-score tents near the Gipsy camp. "Are your herds fat? Is your health good, O my Khan?"

"Fat — and good," nodded Temujin, stooping under the pavilion, and, after a quick glance, taking no heed of Burta. "Have cushions brought for these two *orkhons,* O

khan of the black tents, and take your place behind them. They have each the rank of commander of a *tuman*, and you are no more than leader of four thousand."

Podu quivered at the reminder, but after a moment's hesitation obeyed. His complacency was ruffled. With Temujin in the camp and in no conciliatory mood, trouble was a certainty between him and the other khans, and Podu fared best when he hitched his wagon to one of the brighter stars. Now his position of host would make it necessary to struggle to keep peace, and, in any event, he would suffer from a quarrel in the Horde. And there was Burta.

He writhed as Mukuli and others drifted in to share the refreshments and pay their respects, in duty bound, to the chief of the Horde. Only Jamuka was absent. And Temujin calmly allotted all who came places behind his two heroes.

Stimulated by several cups of hot liquor, Podu addressed Mingan, whom he failed to recognize as the Cathayan prince who had come with Temujin to the death tent of Yesukai, owing to the *orkhon's* beard and long hair worn Mongol fashion, coupled with his rawhide-armor, faced with silver trimmings.

"Where is your *tuman*, O hero?"

"Where it can be summoned at need."

Mukuli was regarding Chepe Noyon with disfavor as the Tiger sat in the place formerly occupied by the Tatar, at Temujin's left hand.

"And where is yours, O maiden cheeks?" he growled.

"I left it at Tangut, by the palace over the sands, O

bear's paws," smiled the youth who was not at all slow-witted.

The feasters looked up with interest, and Podu fingered his ear-rings thoughtfully. He knew Chepe Noyon for a Kerait; the sudden honor shown the youth by Temujin must mean that the Mongols were allied in some fashion to Prester John, and Tangut held the balance of power in the Horde.

"Verily," he asked, "do you draw rein toward Tangut, my Khan — with how many warriors?"

"You have already counted them," responded Temujin quietly, and Podu turned the talk to the absorbing topic of racing. He suggested that Temujin match his beasts, and the Mongol assented.

"Yet, my Khan," the Gipsy pointed out craftily, "your animals are tired from a half-day's travel. So we will shorten the course to the length of six *li.*"

This was about two miles. The usual race of the Mongols covered twenty miles, being a test of stamina, both of rider and horse; three ponies started for each contestant, matched in pairs, and the ride took several hours before the winner of each pair crossed the line in front of the khan's tent. It was customary to allow a few minutes between each pair, to prevent any confusion as to the order in which they were matched.

"As you will. My ponies are strong and fresh."

Temujin called for three boys to lead from the horse lines the gray pony, the sorrel mare that now bore his *tanga* — branding mark — and a piebald horse of unusual endurance that had won many events in the past.

Podu on his part entered two black ponies, and a small gelding that had not appeared on the course as yet. The khans scanned this curiously, struck by its unfamiliar marking — white with blackish streaks rising from the fetlocks. It had dainty, small-boned legs, and carried its intelligent head high; its tail was sweeping.

The horse was an Arab, secured by Podu on one of his trading ventures into India, and the Mongols had never seen its like.

Temujin instructed his boys to start the piebald first — it being the worst of the three, the mare second and the gray pony last, in the customary order, reserving the fleetest for the last. Podu arrayed his beasts and sent one of his *gur*-khans off with them to the starting point, a rocky knoll barely visible on the plain. While the visiting warriors, hearing that a race was on, flocked to kneel by the course, the Gipsy turned to Temujin after sizing up the opened loads of the Mongol's pack-camels.

"You are the Master of the Horde and bring no gifts to me. It is fitting that we wager worthily on this race. Do you place two camel loads of musk on the first race, a dozen *tarkaul*, white camel's skins on the second, and on the third — " he pondered a moment — "enough weapons, gold-inlaid, and of good steel, to cover this carpet."

It was a valuable stake, and about covered all the riches Temujin had brought with him.

"I will place against your goods," Podu concluded, "silver bars and gold ornaments enough to equal your stakes."

"So be it." Temujin was no quibbler.

A ball of dust out on the clay flat showed that the first pair of ponies were off. The khans crowded forward to see the better, and Burta clapped her hands. The dust rolled nearer and two black specks grew into the forms of ponies, saddle-less, two boys urging them on with heel and whip.

When they reached the lines of spectators it was seen that Podu's black horse had the lead easily. It finished a half-dozen lengths in front of the piebald, which coming on in a long stride seemed to be hardly in the race as yet, while the black was sweating.

Chepe Noyon grimaced and turned to Mukuli.

"My scabbard against your sable cloak that the mare finishes first in the coming pair." They were still distant, in the dust.

"Agreed!"

Podu smiled and suggested to Mingan that they also make a wager. The Cathayans eyes twinkled and he shook his head. Barely had he done so than the black pony of the Gypsy crossed the line of the tent a length ahead of the sorrel mare, which was closing the gap at each stride. It was clear to Mingan that Podu had trained his beasts over the shorter course, while the Mongol horses were unable to strike a pace that would win in two miles. There was, however, the gray pony, coming between the two lines of men.

Podu shaded his eyes and called to Mukuli —

"My jewelled hunting-saddle against the gemmed scabbard you have just won, that my white horse conquers the gray."

The Tatar nodded eagerly. More than once he had

seen the pace of the swift little pony that Temujin prized, and he had observed that the two beasts, for the first time, were reaching the finish abreast. Even the cup-bearers crowded the khans to see the end of the last race.

Temujin's boy was stroking his whip against the mane of the gray, for the pony was trained to do its best without the lash; and Podu's rider leaned low over the arched neck of the Arab. An arrow's flight from the finish, the white pony seemed to take wings — at least it pressed low over the ground and fairly skimmed across the line ahead of the gray.

Temujin clapped his hands.

"Bear the goods to Podu," he ordered his few attendants.

The Gipsy smiled. He liked a good loser almost as well as a liberal giver, and he bowed acknowledgment of Chepe Noyon's tender of his scabbard.

"In your camp," said the Tiger, "I will need no sheath for my sword."

After the feasting was over that night, Temujin came to the *orkhons'* tent, chagrined by the defeat of his best ponies.

"It was an ill thing to make a remark such as yours," he told the Kerait, "to stir up ill-will before the time of sword blows is at hand."

"O my Khan, that is true; yet in my country we strike a thicket with a stick before lying down to sleep near it, to rout out snakes. Yet Podu is not the enemy whose face you seek to uncover."

"Why is that?" Mingan was interested.

"He who thinks of slaying will not have his blood stirred to fever by the racing of swift horses."

Mingan assented to this. He was beginning to realize that the brain which directed the attacks on Temujin was of a higher order than the intelligence of Podu or Mukuli. And he suspected the unknown king, Prester John.

"If you will have Podu race again on the morrow, I can win for you two of the three races," he offered, noticing his friend's moodiness.

Both Temujin and the Tiger were lovers of horse flesh, while Mingan had not this leaning, and they grunted incredulity.

"Have you better horses than mine, O my *orkhon?*"

"Nay, I will race your three ponies and win twice. Ask of Podu naught save that I be allowed to start your horses as I please."

On the morrow, after the dawn trumpet had sounded and the khans of the Horde had assembled, Podu acceded willingly enough to this request, but asked again for a good wager. It was unexpected luck, as he saw it, that Temujin should want a return match — although it was like the Mongol not to sit at ease under a defeat.

In fact the young Khan did not change countenance under the prospect of a second heavy loss.

"So be it," he nodded. "I will stake my three ponies against yours, that the Mongols win two of the three starts."

"The distance must be the same."

"Aye, the same."

Podu hesitated only a moment. His racers were trained

in the shorter dash, and each one was swifter than its Mongol adversary. He would send along his official to the starting point to see that the ponies were given a fair break — how could he lose?

"The bargain is struck!"

So Mingan led off his cavalcade to the point of rocks, where they dwindled to specks in the plain. This time the khans who were watching made no bets among themselves, believing that Temujin's ponies could do no better than before. The Master of the Horde himself had no great hopes, but he had never known Mingan to make a promise that he did not redeem.

It was hard for him, however, to sit on the carpet and watch the first pair draw nearer on the course without shading his eyes and peering to see which was ahead. He would rather have lost an arm than the gray pony that he had broken in with his own hand. Harder still, when Mukuli swore vehemently, and Podu chuckled —

"I have drawn the first blood, O Mongol."

In truth it was not so much a race as a pursuit, Podu's pony being a hundred yards in front of the laboring Mongol horse. Chepe Noyon leaned forward and shaded his eyes against the level rays of the rising sun.

"My saddle and cloak against the jewelled scabbard you won from me yesterday that we win two races," he offered quickly. "I may need the sheath — after I have left the dust of this camp behind me."

"The bargain is struck," nodded Podu eagerly. Then, as the ponies came into full view at the finish line he looked puzzled, perceiving what the sharp-witted Kerait had seen before, that the winner was his prized Arab, and

the loser Temujin's plugging piebald that could encompass no faster pace than a loose canter.

Still, he reasoned, his second entry had scored over Temujin's new mare, and — Podu was a race in hand.

All at once he sprang up with an exclamation, and subsided into a tense silence. The second pair were entering the stretch close together, but Podu, alert now, saw that Temujin's swift gray was matched against the better of his pair of blacks. He watched the shaggy pony of the Mongol drive forward with drumming hoofs under the touch of the stick its rider carried and sweep past him two lengths ahead of his second entry.

Temujin's face revealed no emotion, but he took up a cup of wine and emptied it with relish. He could not have been better pleased if his heroes had conquered in all the coming games that were so vital a part of the life of the Horde.

A few moments later the sorrel mare won the third race, finding her speed in the last quarter and getting her neck ahead of the tiring black pony. Podu snarled and his hand crept toward his belt, but fell to his side, feeling an empty scabbard — the weapons of the khans were stacked outside the pavilion carpet.

"Trickery!" The Gipsy raged. "You matched your poorest horse against my Arab, and so, undeserving, won the last races."

Temujin had not been unobserving of Podu. He signed to Chepe Noyon to answer, which that youth did right willingly by ripping the scabbard out of the Gipsy's girdle.

"O small of wit," he mocked, "yours was the trick, for

you persuaded the Khan to race over a course on which your horses were swifter. Did I hear you grant him the privilege of starting the ponies as he pleased?"

Being wise, Podu swallowed his anger, or rather took it out on the skin of the hapless officer he had sent to the starting point, beating the man with a stick until he howled. Mingan would have dismounted and taken his seat unobserved. The trick of the ponies was a small matter to one who had played at chess with the sages of Cathay; but Temujin signed to him as the racers were led up to be delivered.

"Henceforth," said the Khan, "you are the master of the gray pony. Cherish him, and strike him not with the whip. It serves to stroke his mane to gain his best speed. Mounted and afield, you can overtake any man; no man can overtake you."

Mingan bowed respectfully as Temujin with his own hand placed the reins of his steed in the grasp of the Cathayan. To Chepe Noyon, the Khan gave the mare, saying that the youth had ridden her in a good cause once, and was privileged to do so again. The Arab he kept, being a judge of horseflesh.

Of those who watched enviously, perhaps only Temujin guessed how important it would prove to the Mongols to have at hand the four best horses in the Gobi.

V

THE MASKED FACE

Mingan was accustomed to use his ears as well as his eyes, and was gifted with a sense of undying curiosity. He made a point of going about in the crowds that looked on at the games, and so became aware of a whisper.

It was no more than a whisper, although its purport was plain enough.

"The Mongols are no longer heroes, their leaders are unskilled boys who are mock-heroes; they can not prevail in the test of the strength of men."

The source of the rumor was not to be traced, but Mingan suspected that warriors were passing through the ranks of the Horde, scattering the words as they might live coals in the dry grass of the prairies, hoping to fan into being a devastating fire.

But this did not alter the fact that honors in the games went to tribes of the Horde other than the khan-tribe, the Mongols. The Merkets, a branch of the Tatars now aloof from the Horde, won the javelin cast; the Jelairs — fine riders, they — were first in the arrow test; the men of old Mukuli overcame the others in wrestling.

Temujin, if he could have competed, would have been unmatched in archery or wrestling; but the Khan could not take part in the sports of the warriors, custom decreed.

Mingan, while a skilled bowman, found the test too severe for him — to ride at the full gallop of a horse, discharge three arrows from the right side, unstring his bow, use it as a whip, and, stringing it again shoot three more shafts from the left side. This he could manage, but the winning Jelair planted five out of six arrows in a mark placed on a stake as he galloped past; Mingan scored but three hits. Nor could he wheel, on a pony, around a great tree, lopped of its branches and hit, with three shafts out of three, a large crane tied to the summit of the tree.

As for Chepe Noyon, he earned not a single hit, being careless of bow work, loving best his sword play. Temujin knew that he was a skilled swordsman, but Podu, master of the sports, had forbidden contests with bare steel, knowing that they would lead to a killing and fan the old feuds into life.

"Temujin no longer is the victor at the tests," the whisper went on. "He fears to compete now as he did aforetime. His heroes are dead, or have left him. Nothing is left him but his shadow."

The fiery Tiger heard the whisper and lifted his voice in prompt rebuttal. Hands were put to sword-hilts, and it needed all Mingan's diplomacy to prevent bloodshed. He sent a warrior with word to Temujin, but the man returned saying that the master of the Horde was drinking heavily in his tent and would not come forth. By this Mingan knew

that one of his black moods was on the Khan, and that he strove to hold his temper in leash. The whisper had come to Temujin's ears.

"Go among our men," he murmured to the Tiger, "and warn them to say no angry word or to draw weapon. The one who is our enemy is starting this talk, to breed trouble. Temujin knows that he must not show his anger."

"Temujin broods because the Mongol wrestlers have been vanquished, with aching limbs and broken ribs. Go among the men yourself, minstrel, and prate of gentleness. I came not here to anoint wounds but to open them up."

Chepe Noyon checked his words, and pointed to where a crowd gathered about the empty wrestling mats —

"Now here is a moil to my mind."

Unwillingly, Mingan followed the youth, and the two *orkhons* shoved through the spectators until they paused in surprize.

In the center of a ring of warriors stood a strange figure — a man as tall as Mingan, who stood well over six feet, but broad across the shoulders as Temujin, and as heavy as the two combined, almost. His body was bare save for a white reindeer skin that served as a cloak, his naked arms were scratched and scarred — massive as a bear's; the low boots were tipped at the heel with a deer's hoof, his long, fiery-red hair was plaited instead of falling back, Mongol-fashion, in a scalp lock. Gray eyes, greenish-tinted, gazed at the crowd with no more expression than an animal.

"It is a khan of the reindeer folk," said a Mongol captain of ten to Mingan, after saluting. "He left his beasts

and came hither on a camel to attend the feast from afar, and because of the sun of the Gobi he has ripped off his garments."

The man bore no weapon of any kind. Seeing this, some of the Gipsies were plaguing him.

"He will not wrestle or hurl a spear. He is afraid," they said.

As the stolid visitor from the frozen tundras of the north made no objection to this statement, the warriors grew bolder. A Tatar champion, almost of a size with the giant, challenged him to a bout at grappling, but the reindeer man shook his head.

"Ahai," growled the Tatar, "he is *subotai,* the buffalo. He stands his ground and lowers his head, yet will not fight."

In derision he pointed out the small pair of antlers that formed the crest of the hood the man wore.

"Subotai!" the others chuckled.

Mingan would have passed on, but just then he saw Mukuli approach with Temujin and lingered. The old Tatar khan was looking about for trouble, having looked well on the wine cup, and pushed forward, perceiving the towering body of the Tungusi, the reindeer tribesman. He knocked off the cape the other wore, and pointed to his hair, gleaming red in the sunlight.

"Mao tze! A red man. Ho, cousin of the tundras, why will you not wrestle my champion, hey?"

"I fear," said Subotai earnestly.

At this a sudden silence fell on the watching throng. For a man in the Horde to confess to cowardice was an

unheard of thing; to plead with Mukuli was madness. Yet the red-haired man had acted like a fear-ridden clown — and assuredly he was not mad. Mukuli swept away with his arms those nearest him and strode to a great fire close at hand over which boiled and sizzled in a caldron the sliced flesh of a horse, cooking against the feast of the evening an hour hence.

Jerking the pot from its supporting stakes, the Tatar wheeled and in the one motion cast it — meat, water and caldron at the giant. It struck full against Subotai's chest, and he roared with pain, while the skin of his body turned red with the sting of the scalding water. Pawing at his face, he staggered, shook his head.

"A little sting makes the Buffalo bellow," chuckled Mukuli, and the crowd shouted approval of his words.

Even as he spoke, the Tatar chewed at his mustache, and with all haste drew his sword — a wide-bladed affair a hundred pounds in weight.

Subotai's eyes had turned red. He snatched at the weapon nearest him, which happened to be the simitar of Chepe Noyon. Yet, measuring the slender length of blue steel in his fist, Subotai cast it down on the sand and probed the throng with gleaming eyes until he spied a Mongol *gur*-khan leaning on the handle of a battle-ax as massive as Mukuli's sword.

Striding forward, Subotai put his hand on the ax, and, although the surprized captain clung to it with both fists, drew it free of the other's grasp as easily as he might have pulled a knife from a piece of meat.

At this the crowd gave back discreetly with huge relish

and Mukuli's eyes gleamed with pleasure. It looked as if there was fight in the Buffalo after all. Instead of swinging the ax over his head in both hands, he gripped it half-way up the handle with his right and extended his left in front of him, meanwhile striding toward the Tatar.

Mukuli waited until one of Subotai's feet was midway in a step, and — sure that the giant could not sidestep or leap away — whirled his sword up and down at the outstretched arm. The blow would have sliced Subotai's limb from the shoulder, even as it would have shorn through the back of an ox. It would have done so, that is, if the Buffalo had not checked his stride and let his arm fall to his side.

The sword of Mukuli whistled through the air, grazing his chest, and the blade was buried deep in the sand a yard in front of the man of the reindeer folk. Seeing this, Subotai completed his step forward, but placed his booted foot on the sword of his adversary and gripped Mukuli's right wrist with his left hand. Instinctively, the Tatar tried to pull free.

While he tugged, Subotai's ax chopped down sharply. Mukuli thrust his head forward and the blade of the ax rang on his bronze cap, glanced down, sliced a segment of the rawhide armor off his shoulder, along with a goodly bit of skin.

"Hey," chuckled Chepe Noyon, "the Buffalo can gore."

It was Mukuli's turn to roar with anger, and, dropping his sword-hilt, to spring at his foe. Subotai let fall the ax and planted his legs firmly in the sand, meeting the rush of

his foe with the weight of his body. The two warriors grappled, and the gray eyes of the Buffalo glinted with pleasure.

He let the veteran maul him for a moment, while he worked his arms free and encircled the other's body. His arms tightened and presently Mukuli's writhing ceased. A bone in the Tatar's body cracked.

And then Temujin put an end to the fight. He had gone to the fire and pulled out the blazing branch of a tree. With this he smote the taller man over the eyes, knocking his head back and searing his flesh.

Subotai slid to the sand and Mukuli, dazed by the blow on his helmet, got back his breath with difficulty, investigating the while the damage done to his ribs. Then he recovered his sword, wincing at the motion, and surveyed Subotai in mild amazement.

"If you have let out his life, it was ill-done, Temujin," he observed sullenly. "Another moment and I would have strangled him."

"Another moment, Mukuli, and you would have been quaffing the cup of greeting with your ancestors in the sky-world."

Temujin ordered his *gur*-khan to see that the unconscious fighter was brought to his tent on a litter and set down by the fire.

When the man recovered consciousness, the Mongol khan, the Tiger and Mingan were sitting beside him.

"What brings you from the snow circle, O head of fire?" Temujin asked.

"Enough of fire," smiled Chepe Noyon, "has he had

on his head to suffice for the rest of his life, which will be short if Mukuli gets a second chance at him."

Subotai, however, seemed to take all that happened as a matter of course.

"I know not the customs of your Horde, O Khan!" he vouchsafed. "If you feed a guest with the pot itself, and put him to sleep with the fire, it is all one to me. But if I ask for a drink, and you ram the cup down my throat I will not stay any longer."

Chepe Noyon chuckled, but Temujin scanned the injured man seriously. He watched Subotai shake his head, brush the ashes out of his eyelids, and empty the goblet of wine Mingan gave him.

"Another," instructed Temujin.

But as Mingan was about to refill the goblet, Subotai climbed to his feet, apparently little the worse for his harsh treatment.

"If you are giving me wine, do not trouble yourself with that child's cup. I will take the cask."

"Give him the cask," nodded Temujin.

It was a gift of Podu, half-empty, true enough, but when Subotai had taken it up and poured liberal libations to the four quarters of the sky, there still remained enough to fill a half-dozen goblets. However, the big man raised the edge of it to his lips and began to tip it higher.

Chepe Noyon listened to his swallows.

"He drinks like a captain — like a colonel of a thousand — nay, like a hero. By the hide of Afrasiab, the keg is empty! We must go to Podu's tent or eat with dry gullets this night."

"Good!" said Subotai with a hearty sigh. "Let us go to the tent of this Podu."

"Only the khans sit at the feast," remarked Mingan, "and you have neither rank, nor weapon, nor horse, nor standing in any tribe here."

"I came, O Khan — " the Buffalo bethought him of Temujin's question — "from the reindeer country because word came to me that riders who left the tracks of our boots were in the southland and I meant to herd them back, because we are at peace with your Horde, which is well for you."

"Have you found your riders?"

"Not a hair of their hide, O Khan. I turned my steps to this place, but no men of mine are here."

There was no doubting the truth of the man's statement, voiced slowly as if he thought over every word. Mingan reflected that others than the reindeer people had left the tracks of hoofs in the snow when the Mongol ponies were stolen.

"What rank have you with your own people?" demanded Temujin.

"A smith, O my host, and the son of a smith. I can beat out on the anvil and weld the strongest axes."

"Yet you do not carry one."

"I feared to do that, coming into the Horde."

"And you feared to wrestle," assented Temujin, puzzled. "Why? You were not afraid of Mukuli, whom no man of the throng — save myself — would have faced when he was minded to kill, as then."

Subotai cracked his thumbs uneasily.

"O Khan, my nature is weak. It is my nature when a warrior wrestles with me or we play with swords to grow angry. Then the red comes into my eyes, and I kill the other. I can not take part in the games of the khans; it is better to make weapons."

After pondering this, Temujin looked up.

"If I name you, O Buffalo, my sword bearer, and give you a weapon like Mukuli's brand, will you serve me in all things and be faithful? Mine is no easy service, and there will be more blows than gold pieces."

"I see that." Subotai, in his turn, thought the matter over. "The wine is good, the meat is plentiful. Your men obey when you speak. All that is as it should be. I will take you for my khan. But I do not want a sword. Give me the ax I took up and I am your man."

"Granted, and the big piebald horse shall be yours — Mingan, see to it this hour. We will need horses before this moon is older. Chepe Noyon, and you, Subotai, come with me to Podu's feasting pavilion."

Subotai grunted with pleasure. Although they had not seen him before that hour, the Mongols felt that, his assurance given, Subotai would be faithful to Temujin. Mingan, knowing the khan's ability to judge men and attach them to him, suspected shrewdly that Temujin meant to form an alliance with the reindeer folk through Subotai. He was only sorry that they would attend the feast that night. Temujin, however, had not seen Burta in the camp for the last two days, and Mingan knew that although he did not speak of it, the girl's absence troubled his master.

The moonlight cut clearly through the dry air of the desert, and a warm breeze stirred the tent sides as Mingan left Subotai's new horse at the entrance of a small *yurt* between his own tent and Temujin's, and turned his steps toward the high pavilion where the warriors were feasting on this the last night of the concourse.

Yet, as he went with bowed head, the Cathayan heard a whisper other than the note of the wind — an almost inaudible murmur that came from the shadows where men sat unseen, and followed after him. So, coming into a darkened lane between lines of the Gipsy wagon *yurts*, Mingan stopped and waited, his eyes alert, his hand on the ivory hilt of the hunting-knife he always carried concealed in the folds of his girdle.

Standing so, he sniffed at the smoke that drifted from the fires, scenting the faint odor of the sun-warmed sand, listened to the movements of the horse herds — sampling the sounds and smells of the night, for he little expected to see that which followed him. He was being followed, he knew. But, after resuming his course and twisting among the carts, he felt that he had shaken off whoever might be on his track.

After convincing himself of this, he sought out the wagon where Podu's women slept, keeping still to the lane of the shadows. He was now directly behind the feasting pavilion, where all the khans of the Horde were gathered. Mingan wanted very much to know what had happened to Burta, and he meant to find out. The girl had warned Temujin of danger, in the black tents, and now the daughter of Podu had disappeared.

By pressing his ear close to the silk wall of the *yurt*, he could hear the lisping of Gipsy women's voices, but could not make out words. Mingan had unlimited patience, but his time was short. Presently he might be missed if any one in the pavilion should happen to call for a song or story.

So, taking out his knife, he slit the silk noiselessly and pried open the slit with two fingers. Darkness. Mingan sighed and felt upon the ground with an exploring foot. Turning over a stone, he picked it up and tossed it over the wagon, hearings its impact on the earth on the far side.

Mingan saw several old women, all looking warily toward the *yurt* entrance. He saw, too, Burta almost under him, propped up on cushions, her limbs bound tight to her slender body by veils, a fan thrust in her teeth and bound fast to gag her.

"A dog," muttered one woman, "made the noise. Are not Podu's men all about us, on this night? No one would come to that side of the wagon."

"Wine flows," observed another, shaking her head, "and when it does who can trust the guards? I shall be glad when the night is past and Burta is still here under our charge. Otherwise — for us the whipping-post."

Burta turned her eyes toward them and twisted angrily in her bonds. Mingan dared not speak to her. Besides, he had learned something. Podu expected fighting that night. It could be no trouble of Podu's making, or he would have sent his women away into hiding in the desert.

He was waiting to hear more, when he released the tent wall and dropped to the sand, rolling under the wagon. Near him — he did not wait to discover where —

sounded the muffled footsteps of men. Against the tent his form would have been outlined clearly.

The men, two of them, drew close and stopped, their boots within reach of Mingan's hand. Lying so, he could make out against the luminous sky that one was as tall and broad as Subotai. In fact this one seemed to have a head the size of a wine cask — a roundish head, gleaming at the top with jewels. The other, too, had something queer about his face. It did not look like a man's face, yet the voice that came from it was undeniably a man's.

Mingan listened attentively, but the two were speaking in a dialect he did not know. Round Head had a shrill voice; Mis-shapen Head whispered. Every one in the camp was whispering, it seemed, that evening. Presently they moved away a little and Mingan started to roll out from under the wagon to follow.

Then the smaller of the two said distinctly:

"If Temujin leaves the pavilion alive, he will not leave his tent so. Go to the riders; bid them see to their horses and await my command."

Whereupon the speaker glanced at the lighted tent, made a sign of caution to his companion and drew away.

Rising, Mingan went after them, out into a space bright with moonlight. Still in shadow himself, he coughed deliberately. The pair turned to stare behind them, and he saw that the bigger man had a round, black face, surmounted by a wide roll of white cloth; the other had no face at all.

That is, no human face. Over head and shoulders was drawn the skin of a bear, the jaws propped wide, the teeth

gleaming. His eyes seemed to penetrate the darkness in which Mingan stood. He clapped his hands softly, and Mingan heard the rush of feet behind him.

A second time he threw himself on the sand as a man's legs crashed against him, and their owner tumbled headlong.

Waiting for no more, the Cathayan leaped up and fled among the darkened wagons, fleetly for all his height, and presently found himself in among the fires where warriors sat eating. Here he fell into a walk, and, making sure that he was not followed, circled the tents to approach the feasting pavilion by the main entrance.

Once inside, he ran his eye over the ranks of the revelers, seeking if any were missing. If one were absent, he would know the name of him who had worn the bear's head. They were all present, the khans of the Horde, seated about the dais on which Temujin sat cross-legged on a leopard skin. In the outer-circle, near the wall of the tent, Subotai's red head reared up from the caps of the lesser officers.

Following the direction of his new friend's gaze, Mingan beheld first a wide carpet running from the massive teak pole of the pavilion to the foot of Temujin's throne-seat; second, prostrated on the carpet with his white turban pressing against it, the big man who had been with Bear's Face, half an hour ago. Mingan, as he went to his accustomed place in the gathering by Chepe Noyon, felt quietly in his girdle to make sure that his dagger was secure — then remembered that it had fallen from his hand in the scuffle behind the tent.

"What man is this one?" he questioned the Tiger in a whisper.

"A Turk, captured by Podu, 'tis said, in a caravan from India way. A mighty wrestler, he boasts himself. Just before your coming he walked in and challenged any of the Horde, asking that if he conquered he be given life and freedom."

"Did he come in alone?"

"As I said. No one is eager to step on the carpet, for the Turk is big enough to break a foe in twain."

Now Mingan was aware of the stir of excitement in the revellers, and knew why his entrance passed almost unnoticed. Podu was fingering his thin mustaches in chagrin.

"O my Khan," the Gipsy observed, "this wrestler of the Turks is a mighty wrestler. He has thrown the best of my champions, breaking of one the back, of another the leg, until my followers will not go up against him. The Jelairs of Jamuka have seen him at work and they likewise sit still in their places. The Tatars are licking their sore joints from the contests of the day. Yet we can not let the challenge of the stranger pass."

As if guessing the meaning of the chieftain, the swarthy Turk lifted his head and smiled contemptuously. The khans began to mutter, because it was without precedent that a champion came to the games of the Horde and held the carpet unchallenged. The muttering rose to a demand that Temujin call out a contender.

"O my cousin," spoke up Jamuka coldly, "have you sat so long on the carpet of the council that you fear to set your feet on the wrestling rug? It was not so with Yesukai, your

father. Show us, as aforetime, your strength and skill."

Mingan could not speak to Temujin without being overheard, but, catching his chief's eye, he shook his head slightly in warning. Whatever the Turk and the man in the mask had planned, it meant no good to the Mongol.

In the past Temujin had found that Mingan did everything for a good reason, and he glanced to where Subotai sat, looking on eagerly. A match between the Turk and the Buffalo would be worth watching.

"So the Khan is afraid?" the soft voice of Jamuka broke in on his thoughts. "Was Yesukai the last of the Mongol heroes?"

Hereupon men set down their cups, gently, so as to hear the better what would follow; the cupbearers ceased moving about, and there was heard the rustling of the long silk banners suspended over the head of Temujin. Podu twisted the turquoise rings on his thumbs, biting his mustache uneasily.

Old Mukuli chuckled with heavy amusement.

"Aye, Temujin, in the days aforetime the Mongols would start up at the trumpet heralding the day's march, but now you and your men love well the lute that summons to a feast. If you sit too long under the banners some one will roll you up, with one for a shroud — by Natagai, so it will happen."

Memory of his discomfiture at the hand of Temujin's new swordbearer that day rankled.

Very promptly at this Temujin stepped down from his high seat and threw off feast robe and mantle. Naked to the waist he advanced toward the Turk who had stripped

himself of turban, vest and shirt. A murmur came from the lips of the assemblage at sight of the Turk's solid chest over which rippled muscles, of the round arms and the white teeth agleam under a black mustache. For all his weight, he was quick on his feet as he circled his adversary warily.

Temujin was short in the leg, but long of body; his back was straight, his arms knitted to high shoulders by massive sinews — muscles better adapted to swinging a weapon than to quick and cunning hand grips. Mingan noticed that his chin came no higher than the Turk's shoulder, and that his skin was scarred by old wounds, and the flesh of his neck by the wooden *kang* he had worn when a prisoner.

The Khan followed the motions of the experienced Turk with expressionless eyes, but slipped aside as the big wrestler sprang forward to butt him in the chest, and strived to trip him. No whit disconcerted, the big man reached out, caught one of Temujin's wrists, and sent the Mongol flying over his shoulder by wheeling his body and pulling down on the wrist he held.

Before Temujin could roll clear, the wrestler fell on him heavily, driving both knees into the Mongol's stomach. He sought for a grip on the chief's head, but Temujin broke his hold and kicked loose, springing to his feet. Mingan saw that blood was dripping from the mouth of his friend.

"A goblet full of gold pieces," cried Podu, beside himself with excitement, "that the Turk pins the Khan to the carpet!"

No one took his wager, and it dawned on the Gipsy

that here was no friendly bout, but a struggle out of which one man might come crippled for life. If it should be Temujin —

"Let us stop the match," he exclaimed to Mukuli.

The Tatar wiped his mustache mechanically, but before he could answer an outcry filled the pavilion.

The Turk had thrown Temujin again, with one of his panther-like tricks of hand and body. Leaping down at the chief a second time, his knees met only the carpet. Temujin had rolled out from under in time. But what brought the spectators to their feet was the sight of a dagger that fell from the girdle of the big wrestler, shaken loose by the heavy impact.

"*Hai* — the man had steel upon him! Slay him!"

Chepe Noyon's hand went to his empty scabbard. Then, remembering that all their weapons had been left at the threshold of the pavilion, he was starting toward the entrance when Mingan pulled him down.

"Wait, and watch!" whispered the Cathayan.

The gleaming steel had caught Temujin's eyes, and he had kicked the dagger away from the wrestler to the carpet's edge where Subotai, surging through the onlookers at Chepe Noyon's shout, set his foot upon it and glared around, as if daring any one to try to pick it up.

Gaining his feet, the Khan rushed his adversary, and now his head was down, his deep eyes glowing with the fire of conflict. The two locked grips, chin pressing shoulders, fingers digging into flesh, and this time it was the Turk who strove to break free. He tried trickery, leaning his weight on the Mongol, then, all at once he began to squeal with rage; he was being hurt.

"By the beard of my sire," grunted Mukuli, licking his lips, and — finding them dry — handing up his goblet to a staring cupbearer who was quite oblivious of the act. "By Natagi, by — — — one will break the other's back. Ha! For all the gold in Cathay I would not set hand between the Khan and his foeman now."

For Temujin's narrowed eyes gleamed red under the beads of perspiration.

"Make an end!" a voice cried somewhere in the crowd.

Exerting all the remaining power of his big limbs, the Turk broke free. Wise in the way of his profession, he knew that Temujin was seeking his life, and he cast himself at the Mongol, forgetful of everything but the need of pinning the other's arms to his body.

Stooping, Temujin caught the man around the knees and raised himself erect, shifting his grip swiftly, so that the Turk balanced on one shoulder. A shrill sound came from the mouth of the wrestler as he felt himself helpless. Then Temujin caught his legs and whirled him through the air with all the strength of mighty sinews and straining back.

The head of the Turk thudded against the teak pole of the pavilion, and he dropped to the carpet, silent now, his skull shattered.

"A good match!" roared Mukuli. "Now — "

Temujin, staggering and gasping for breath, made his way toward Subotai, thrust the giant aside and picked up the dagger.

"A viper was sent to sting me: now the viper is crushed but his sting remains. Who sent it — who?"

"Cousin," said Jamuka's quiet voice, "I know not, save

that the dagger is Mingan's — your *orkhon's.*"

Mingan started as Temujin, his face a mask of anger, strode toward him.

"Though he has changed his skin," cried the Jelair, "I know him for the Cathayan who came to you through the Wall. I bade you slay him once, but there is still time, before he deprives the Horde of its master."

"He is a snake!" added Podu vindictively, thinking of his lost ponies, and thankful that Temujin's anger had been centered on one whose death would not promote a new feud in the Gobi.

Standing up, Mingan started to speak, but — aware of the blind rage in the heart of his friend — folded his arms and kept silence. No words would serve to turn aside the torrent that was ready to engulf him.

His calmness, however, did not stay Temujin, who caught his beard in one hand and raised the knife with the other.

A tensing of iron muscles, and the dagger flashed downward, but its course was checked abruptly by a more powerful arm. A hand gripped Temujin's wrist, and a voice spoke in his ear: "Your nature is likewise weak. Because," went on the Buffalo, "you, O Khan, like myself, can not take part in the games without lusting for blood."

A simpleton, thought the watchers — nay, a madman — to curb Temujin when he was angry. But the man of the reindeer people kept his grip on his master until, perforce, Temujin relaxed his arm.

"The knife is yours!" he snarled at Mingan.

And Mingan saw that it was the one he had lost when

he fell outside the tent. The Turk must have picked it up — or it had been given to the wrestler to use on Temujin.

"Aye," he admitted. "I dropped it within the hour, but the wrestler was no man of mine."

"For all of that," put in Subotai who seemed to have no sense of ceremony in the presence of his superiors, "there is a fine pile of weapons outside, and the fat brown man could have taken his pick. Wait until the sun rises on the morrow, O Khan, and then slice up your palladin if you want to — it is all one to me. But now your eyes are red, and if you slay him, you will grieve — like me."

Sheer surprize had kept Temujin passive. Now, thoughtfully, he put the knife in his belt, stirred the dead body of the Turk with his foot to see if the man were beyond telling the secret that had been his, and signed to Chepe Noyon to bring his mantle and robe.

"Master," whispered the young Tiger, as he put the garments over Temujin, "Mingan is not a traitor — a man's eyes can not lie, though his tongue be crooked as a ram's horn. The Cathayan was right. There is one in this assemblage who is wiser than you, and all but contrived that you should slay your friend. Wait until the morrow."

"Aye, be it so." Temujin nodded. "Subotai, guard Mingan, the *orkhon* — keep him ever under your eyes. Podu, the feast is at an end. Let no man leave the pavilion until the Mongols pass out."

His glance swept the lines of the watchers, probing and warning. Then, followed by the three palladins, he strode out, leaving the khans staring at the broken body of the giant wrestler.

In this fashion did the friendship of the three heroes begin, for that night they were together in the same tent, and that night was a memorable one in the annals of the Gobi.

VI

THE TIGER GOES A-WOOING

"Quick," said Mingan, when Chepe Noyon came in from mounting the guard, and the tent-flap fell behind him, leaving the three alone, "go to Temujin, tell him to rouse his captains and arm his men. Danger stands near us and there is little time."

"Little time, indeed, Mingan for you to abide among the living — if I disturb the khan now and bring you into his thoughts again. He is like a bear with a thorn in his paw. Let him sleep." He threw himself down on his sleeping furs. "Is danger something new, that you mew about it like a cat with a cup of sour milk?"

Mingan sighed and related his experience among the Gipsy wagon *yurts.* He repeated the words of the man in the mask, that Temujin, if he left the pavilion in safety, was to be attacked in his tent.

"A bear skin?" Chepe Noyon frowned. "That is the mask worn by the leader of the Kerait warriors — Wang Khan's commander." He yawned. "You are always dreaming about something or other, Mingan. Now you should be

thinking of your plight. It is said Temujin never forgets a friend, but, by Kotwan, he never fails to remember an enemy. As for the Keraits, they are all in Tangut."

Mingan stepped to the tent entrance to look out, but felt the hand of the Buffalo on his shoulder.

" 'Bide where I can see you, Cathayan. The story-tellers relate that all your folk are magicians, and I do not wish you to vanish."

Without turning, Mingan said softly.

"Burta lies bound and gagged in the tent of Podu's women, beside the wagon of the Gipsy chief. Does that mean nothing to you, O Tiger?"

"Now — the ——— take me — how can you see that from where you stand?"

"My eyes can see at night — if the moon is bright enough. But do you go quietly, Chepe Noyon and seek word with her, prevail on Podu's sentries to let you pass. But first visit the picket lines and have the three best ponies saddled and brought here."

Hereat the Tiger grumbled, but yawned no more. Presently his eye fell upon Mingan's lute and he brightened. Unobserved by his two companions he picked up the instrument and put it under his cloak, and went out, with a word of assent. He noticed that the light was still burning in Temujin's tent and pondered whether he should tell the Khan of Mingan's fears. Remembering the lute he was carrying, he decided to go to the horse lines instead.

He took his time about ordering the three ponies from the horse tenders and carefully tested saddle-girths and stirrups of the gray pony, the Arab and his mare. When he

was satisfied that the camp had quieted down to sleep, he swung into the saddle of the mare and took the reins of the two others, leading them after him at a foot pace. Their hoofs made no sound in the sand, and Chepe Noyon passed unchallenged into the dark lanes of the Gipsy wagons. From time to time men looked out at him, but the sight of a rider leading his ponies about at all hours in the camp was common enough, when the day's gaming had ended and wagers won and lost made new masters of horses.

Sighting the lofty summit of the feasting pavilion, the Tiger counted the tents behind it. Nearing the third one in the line, he tethered the ponies to a cart wheel, unshipped his lute and advanced, keeping to the shadow, a little surprized that he had not been stopped. But the guards of Podu seemed to be slumbering with the rest of the camp and Chepe Noyon squatted down under the side of the woman's *yurt.*

He cleared his throat and touched the lute's strings with a gentle finger. As nothing happened to disturb him he began to sing, under his breath, his favorite chant, the "Lament of the Doleful Hero."

"My way leads forth by the gate on the north;
My heart is full of wo.
I hav'n't a cent, begged, stolen or lent,
And friends forget me so.
So let it be! 'Tis heaven's decree.
What can I say — a poor fellow like me?"

Cocking his head, the Tiger listened for stealthy foot-

steps, for the scrape of an arrow shaft against the wood of the bow, for the *slick* of steel-sword drawn from scabbard. Almost beside his head the silk wall of the tent quivered and was still. Emboldened, he sang on, more softly:

"The pigeon is petted, the wild goose is netted,
The squirrel amasses a store.
When I enter your camp, they call me a scamp,
And thrust me from the door.
So let it be! 'Tis heaven's decree.
What can I say? A poor fel—"

The Tiger stilled his song and listened with all his ears. Near at hand he was aware of a tiny sound, monotonous as the drip-drip of water from a leaking bucket. He peered around him and noticed that from the wagon shaft of the *yurt* opposite something was dropping regularly into the sand.

This wagon should be Podu's and Chepe Noyon was not minded to risk an arrow sent in his direction if any one were astir. Squinting into the shadow that covered the front of the *yurt,* he fancied that a man was crouching over the wagon-tongue. After a quarter of an hour he was sure of it. But the man did not move.

Instead, the silk near his ear shook again, violently as if to convey to his understanding an urgent message. He heard the drowsy voice of an old woman mutter within the tent.

"Be still, Burta. After dawn you will be released, so Podu said. Are we to have no sleep, because of your fidgets?"

Still the figure opposite him did not stir, and the Tiger was puzzled, also his patience was exhausted. He could hear the ponies beginning to toss their heads and paw at the sand. So he rose, his hand on his sword-hilt. As he did so he flung a handful of sand into the face of the watcher.

Now that he was erect, he could make out a wide, dark stain in the ground where the moonlight touched the tip of the wagon-shaft. With a glance around, he strode across to the silent *yurt*, and stooped to feel of the figure, finding it to be the body of a man, warm to his touch. But in the throat of the man was a hunting-knife, and from this trickled a sluggish current that moistened the wooden shaft and dripped into the sand.

No longer wondering that the rear of the tent was unguarded, Chepe Noyon was about to withdraw as swiftly as might be when he glanced into Podu's tent. The moonlight on the thin, silk wall of the back cast a faint glow over the floor of the wagon, and here, too, was a form prone on the sleeping skins. The Tiger entered and felt of it.

By the heavy ear-rings and the jeweled belt, he knew it to be Podu, but a dead Podu, slain by an arrow that had pierced his brain.

Now Chepe Noyon cursed under his breath, and fell silent, harkening to a new sound some distance away, like the buzzing of bees. He had heard its like before, and knew that the buzzing was made up of the trampling of hoofs, the creaking of saddle leather, the low voices of men.

Whereupon, abandoning Mingan's lute, the Tiger leaped to the ground, circled the *yurt* and gained the spot

where he had left his horses, hardly checking his stride as he jerked the reins free and mounted the mare.

Drawing the others with him he sped like a drifting shadow past the dark pavilion, out into the central lane of the camp at the end of the race course, and shouted aloud in anger and surprize.

Torches flickered and smoked down the race course; groups of horsemen cantered up, to disappear among the tents of the Mongols. Here and there steel flashed, as Temujin's men ran out of their shelters to stand against the riders. The twanging of bowstrings and the groans of the injured mingled with the screams of wounded ponies and the splintering of tent poles.

The Mongols had been surprized. Chepe Noyon cursed his folly in going to the camp of Podu, who was dead and could in no wise come to the defense of his erstwhile guests.

He saw the captain of the Mongol guard struck down by a raider in front of the yak-tail standard; a young brother of Temujin, a boy armed with a toy bow, stepped out of his tent and discharged a shaft pluckily. As a horseman sighted him and flourished a javelin, the youngster cast down his shield and bow, knowing the uselessness of flight. As the Tiger watched, the raider passed a spearpoint into the youth's chest and cantered on.

Temujin's tent was surrounded by attackers, so that a ring of torches was formed, and in the bright glow Chepe Noyon made out that the riders were riddling the tent with arrows, piercing it in a hundred places so that nothing above ground might survive. The light still burned in the tent.

All this the Tiger perceived in the minute it took him to gallop up to his tent before which stood Subotai, wielding his ax, and Mingan a sword, back to back. A half-dozen men circled around them, warily, for two of the raiders lay outstretched in the sand.

Through this ring of horsemen Chepe Noyon dashed, striking a man from his saddle as he passed by, the two ponies rearing and kicking under his hand what with the lights and clamor that filled the night.

"Mount!" cried the Tiger to his friends.

The rush of the three ponies afforded the hard-pressed warriors a half-moment's respite, which Chepe Noyon used to advantage. Wheeling the quick-footed mare, he faced one of the assailants and feinted at the strange warrior's head. With a turn of the wrist he altered the direction of the blow, slicing the leather buckler from his foeman's arm.

"Jackal!" he snarled, his teeth flashing in his dark face. "Who is your master?"

It struck him suddenly that the raiders were fighting in silence, uttering no war cry, and apparently leaderless. The man in front of him responded by striking at the Tiger's throat — a blow that slid off the agile simitar of the swordsman harmlessly, while Chepe Noyon's return stroke severed the warrior's right wrist and set him swaying in the saddle. By now, Subotai and Mingan reined up on either side of him, and the four remaining horsemen hung back.

In the pause that followed Chepe Noyon was aware of two things; first, that the riders had finished their shooting to pieces of Temujin's tent, and, flinging their torches at it, had galloped off, not wishing, it seemed, to be seen in the

vicinity. Second, the leader of the horsemen, with another at his elbow, had sighted the two *orkhons* and Subotai together near by and had trotted over to their assailants, and it was clearly to be seen that he wore the mask of a bear's head.

"Arrows!" The enemy chief ordered.

And arrows he had, though not from the hands of his own men. Chepe Noyon trotted up with Mingan and the Buffalo guarding his back with drawn weapons, and uttered a question under his breath.

"Dog!" The Tiger said. "You are no Kerait. Take off the mask!"

His left hand shot forward, clutching at the bear skin. The chief swung over in the saddle, whereupon Chepe Noyon raised his simitar to smite, and urged the mare forward at the same instant. The other's pony, taken unaware and hampered by the weight of its rider hanging on the off-side, stumbled in the soft sand and threw the chief.

"Die then," snarled the Tiger, "as Temujin died — "

A javelin cast by the chief's attendant, clashed against his shield, but what stayed his hand was the sight of the sand stirring at the edge of Temujin's crumpled and blazing tent. The sand heaved and fell aside as if an enormous mole were rising to the surface, but instead of a mole a blackened face was revealed by the glow of the fire. Presently the body of a man followed the face, and Temujin climbed out of the hole he had dug in the loose sand while the arrows slashed through his *yurt.*

He reached behind him and drew out a bow and a fistful of arrows. Kneeling almost in the flames, and half-

screened by the whirling smoke, he began to loose shafts at the five enemies who still remained in the saddle.

"Ride him down!" cried the man in the bear skin, warding off Chepe Noyon's belated stroke.

His men started to obey, but one passed too near Subotai and had his skull shattered by a blow of the long ax. Another was knocked out of his saddle by one of Temujin's shafts, and the others cast their torches down and shouted for aid.

Meanwhile, Mingan had availed himself of the moment's respite to free Subotai's piebald pony that was straining at its reins before the Buffalo's tent. He rushed up to the Khan, who climbed into the saddle of the tall horse as reinforcements came up to their assailants.

Chepe Noyon was forced back from his prey and the three warriors formed around Temujin.

"Hai ahatou, koke Mong-hu — hai!"

The Khan of the Mongols roared his battle-cry, his voice carrying above the tumult. Here and there a wounded Mongol fought his way toward him. A *gur*-khan rode up on a sweating horse, followed by a single warrior.

For every one of his men that came, three enemies appeared, and Temujin, rising in his stirrups, saw that the butchery of the Mongols was nearly completed. His eyes glowed with a mad fire, but he saw the folly of making a stand.

"Follow me to Podu's tent!" he ordered, wheeling his horse.

"Podu is slain," Chepe Noyon cried, reining his pony beside his chief, "by one of these jackals of the night."

But Temujin did not alter his course. With his handful

of followers he reached the wagons of the Gipsies, the foemen close behind, hindered in their pursuit by lack of torches. Before the woman's tent a pair of Podu's tribesmen were struggling with a group of the riders.

The rush of the Mongols scattered these, Subotai's ax and Chepe Noyon's sword working havoc. Temujin tossed his reins to Mingan, dismounted and, thrusting past the exhausted guards, entered the tent. In a moment he appeared, carrying Burta, bound and gagged in his arms. As he did so, the pursuers rounded the pavilion and loosed a flight of arrows.

The *gur*-khan and one of the Gipsies fell, pierced by the missiles, and Mingan, as he assisted Temujin with his burden into the saddle of the piebald rose in his stirrups with a cry. Something seared his breast, and a warm flood rose in his throat. The vista of the tents and the moonlit sky whirled and tossed before his eyes.

He was aware of Subotai's arm that drew him out of his saddle, to the back of another horse. Then the air rushed past his ears. He coughed and pain wracked him so that everything disappeared in a red mist.

He felt vaguely the motion of a galloping horse, and in the mist beheld Chepe Noyon dismount, run beside a riderless horse and mount again without stopping. He wondered what it was all about — saw, presently, Burta sitting astride the Arab, her long hair streaming over her back, and on every hand the wide sweep of the desert, shining in the radiance of a crimson moon. And then — nothing.

The red glory of dawn over his head, the chill of dawn on his outer skin, and burning heat in his chest and throat — of these things Mingan became conscious, but chiefly of an all-enveloping thirst. Although he made no movement, his head was being raised by degrees until he looked into the strained, gaunt face of Temujin.

The Khan had Mingan's head on his knee, and was holding to the lips of the wounded man his leather hunting-cap filled with water. Mingan drank and straightway coughed, the sweat starting on his forehead. But his thirst was assuaged. The dark eyes of his friend searched his face keenly.

"Burta, my-wife-to-be," said Temujin, "the soul of this *orkhon* is near to the spirit world. He has need of your hand and the care of the Gipsies. Abide with him in this place, and leave him not until I come.

Mingan tried to turn his head to see Burta, yet could not. He wondered whither the multitude of the camp had vanished and why. Presently, Temujin and Chepe Noyon alone were working over a long figure stretched on a saddle cloth beside him. This was Subotai, he fancied, and his two companions were pulling into place a bone dislocated in the giant's arm. Subotai watched them at their labor, chewing his lip. His glance wandered to Mingan and he grinned widely, brushing the dust from his eyes.

"Eh, the hard blows were not long in coming. Yet we left a trail of dead foemen along the length of the camp — "

He shut his lips as the bone snapped into place, and Temujin rose.

"I must ride to the Three Rivers where my people await me," said the khan. "My enemies wax stronger, and few stand near me." His dark face lighted with a secret exultation. "Yet have I found three heroes, and now I know the name of my foe — aye, of him who smote my camp."

Burta questioned, and stamped her foot angrily when he shook his head, saying nothing more. Finally, Mingan heard her weeping when the men had left.

"It was the men of Prester John who slew Temujin's Mongols, and now there will be war in the Gobi," she said.

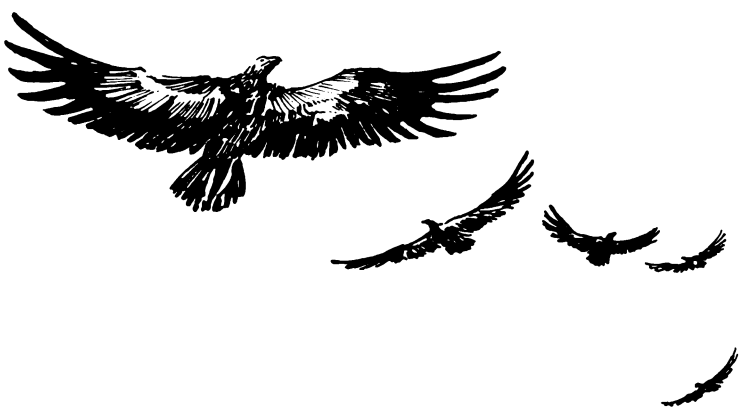
Fever-bred dreams tormented him. He was standing again on the great wall of Cathay, looking at the western plain over which hung the red ball of the sun. Against the wall the riders of the Horde were surging. Little by little they were forcing the gate that barred their way into Cathay, and Mingan sought to throw stones down on them. But his hands would not move. They were smiling at him, waving bared swords in the dust-cloud under the wall and — passing through the gate. Mingan was wearing an imperial robe, with the dragon curled on his breast, heavy with yellow gold.

It was the robe worn by members of his dynasty when death's hour was at hand. Scarcely had he perceived this than the sun dropped out of sight and darkness came on the world.

Again Mingan looked out at a camp-fire over which a caldron boiled merrily, and near which crouched an old woman, shredding roots and herbs in her hands. The

shadow of the woman was thrown against a great rock, and Mingan fancied that she was a witch brewing eternal torment for him over the red fire.

He cried out and perceived Burta standing by him. The girl's hand, cool as a leaf of the forest was on his forehead, as against his lips she pressed a bowl of something warm and astringent. Mingan coughed and swallowed a little. And presently the welcome darkness came again.



VII

JAMUKA IS AMUSED

A barbed arrow through the lung is one of the worst possible wounds, and only Burta, and the Gipsies who came to serve her in a rock-lined gully of the desert, knew how hard had been the struggle to bring Mingan back to life. When the fever left him, Mingan lay on his side for days before strength came to him and he could talk.

Meanwhile he saw that he was hidden near a well, below the level of the surrounding plain, around which, like inanimate figures, stood pinnacles of red and gray sandstone. That it was mid-Winter he knew by the cold of the nights, and the stars that circled over his head.

"You are like a man of bones," observed Burta critically, "and not a hero at all, except that you have a fine beard."

There were hollows in her cheeks and shadows under her fine eyes. As she talked she stroked the head of a gerfalcon chained to its perch near the well. Beside her, on her sleeping furs, was stretched a brown dog with a sharp muzzle and inquisitive eyes.

"When my people dare not come to the well," she explained, "Chepe Noyon and Mukuli hunt with me, and we do not lack for hares or wild geese. This is Chepe Noyon — " she nodded at the hawk — "I call him that because he is so quick and bad tempered. Mukuli is the dog — he growls just like the old Khan and likes to lie near the fire."

Mingan smiled.

"Why do you stay here, daughter of Podu? I am whole and well."

"You are not. Half a moon will pass before you walk about, and another moon before you ride a horse. But I am glad you can talk. Mukuli is wise, but he agrees to everything I say."

"Being wise," nodded Mingan.

"Hum. Temujin never does what I say and he is wiser than any one — "

"Except the man in the bear's head."

Burta frowned a little and stood up to look out of their shelter.

"Then you have seen him, too, Mingan? My people gather news for me as squirrels gather acorns, and they say the chief with the bear skin has been seen in the desert near here. They say the omens have been many; vultures have been seen in the sky at dawn, and a raven has made a nest in a dead pine. The tribesmen have wintered close to their *ordus,* their chief's camps; rumors are many that blood will run freely in the Gobi and the bones of men whiten on the battlefield."

She sighed and bit her lip.

"I hate Temujin," she added fiercely. "He has been away for so long, and no message has come from him."

"Yet you abide here, as he ordered, to await his coming."

"Kai!" She poked at the sables resentfully. "You were too ill to be moved."

Mingan noticed, however, that Burta continued to make her home at the well, although dark-skinned men, adorned more often than not with the spoil of the desert caravans, rode up from time to time to urge her to seek a place of greater safety.

One day she returned from a hunt with the falcon and her eyes were shining. She had met, it seemed, the old woman who had helped her nurse Mingan and had news in plenty. The Mongols had not been idle during the Winter. They had been joined by several regiments of the reindeer people, brought by Subotai, and Temujin had won over the famous spearmen, the Merkets, to his standard. Then, during a blizzard, he had marched against the Tatars and surrounded Mukuli in his *ordu.*

There had been a brief fight when Temujin went to the old khan and asked him to give in to his power. Mukuli had growled, and then fell to laughing aloud.

" 'My word is not smoke, O Khan,' he said, 'and aforetime I swore that I would join you when you proved yourself good metal. Verily, no man has taken Mukuli unaware before now,' he swore, 'and I will be your man in all things.' "

Burta pondered smilingly.

"I think Mukuli yearned toward Temujin at the feast in my father's camp when he overthrew the Turk."

She patted the muzzle of the brown dog, who was the self-appointed watchman of their covert.

So, at the end of that Winter the northern half of the Horde — the Mongols, Tatars, Tungusi and Merkets — was divided from the southern half, the Keraits and the Jelairs of Jemuka. The Master of Plotting, although Temujin's cousin, had proclaimed that he was sworn to fellowship with Prester John, and must side with the Christians.

Temujin sent messengers to Prester John to say that no quarrel was between them, nor should they take up the sword against each other — who had been allies in the past. But the messengers were slain on the way, and the Mongol outposts brought back word of the Kerait's preparations for war. So Temujin held a council to muster his full power.

"He gave Mukuli back the gold tablet of an *orkhon*, and entreated him kindly," Burta added, "and then — "

"Temujin did well — "

"Nay, there is no Temujin, no Man of Iron now. *Ai*, he who raced horses and snared hawks with me when I was a child — is no more."

Mingan started.

"What mean you?"

"His khans at the council gave him a new name because now he has truly earned the leadership of the Horde. They named him the Great Khan, Genghis Khan."

Wrapped in his thoughts, Mingan did not hear the slight sound of a footstep near by; nor did he notice the sudden uprising of the brown dog who sniffed the air and whined. Temujin had grown at his side from boy to man and from man to master. Probably this was what had

earned him the hatred of Prester John, of the Christians.

In Cathay there was a proverb that there could not be two suns in the sky, nor two emperors in the land. Prester John had sought to slay Temujin, or, as Mingan must think of him now, Genghis Khan; failing that the Christians had declared war on him —

Mingan sighed. He should have rejoiced at the good fortune that cut the Horde in twain and started a great feud in the Gobi, because the Horde was the enemy of his dynasty — of Cathay itself. Had not Mingan come into the desert with Genghis Khan to study the weakness of this enemy, and profit by it? But it was hard for the Cathayan prince to think of Genghis Khan as aught but Temujin, who had befriended him. He found himself wishing for the Tiger and the Buffalo. He wanted to talk things over with them.

The brown dog barked once, angrily, and looked over his shoulder at his mistress.

"Be quiet, Mukuli — I will not play with you." Burta frowned at the sable furs on which she sat, chin on hand, her brown eyes brooding. "Now that Temujin has become Genghis Khan, he takes no thought of the daughter of Podu. For five moons I have awaited his coming as he bade me at this place, and — I hate Genghis Khan."

She struck at the rich furs contemptuously.

"*Kai*, I will await him no longer, and I will take my people to the Christians, so that he will learn the Gipsies are not to be despised — "

She sprang to her feet, hands on her breast, eyes wide with swift alarm. Thus encouraged, the brown dog raced forward, barking.

A man, walking quietly, had entered the gully and stood between two rocks, smiling at her words. It was Jamuka. Mingan noticed that he wore new, silvered, chain-mail and a velvet kaftan, and that a few yards away a dozen of his Jelair tribesmen had come into view, fully armed with javelins and bows.

"So, little vixen," observed Jamuka, much amused, "this is where you have run to earth! My men espied you against the sky-line an hour ago, when we were following the trail of some of your Gipsies that circled around this well. May Allah cast me down but I was hoping for a sight of you before we don helmets and mount for battle – "

He broke off, eying Mingan thoughtfully.

"Ah, my Cathayan – meseems you have shrunk somewhat, like a dried-up waterskin. It is the fortune of a spy, sometimes, not to eat from gold dishes, nor to ride the horses of a king."

He swept the well and the gully with an appraising glance and spat at the dog who stood, short legs planted wide, menacingly before his mistress. Jamuka's thin, handsome face and down-curving nose revealed more strongly than ever the Turkish blood in him.

"So, Burta, you hate Temujin, or, I should say Genghis?"

Color flooded into the girl's face and she did not respond.

"And you will lead your Gipsies to Prester John? Good. He will have gold for your men and pastures for your horses, within Tangut. You have never seen Tangut, little Burta; it is green and pleasant while the desert is brown and bare. The castle is a pearl set in splendors –

gardens and lakes, wherein every kind of beast and bird is to be found. He has a hundred snow-white peregrine falcons, and as many hunting leopards — "

He glanced half-scornfully at the small brown ger-falcon on the perch by the girl.

"Does the chief hero of Prester John wear a bear's head upon his own?" she asked thoughtfully.

"Why, so he does," Jamuka smiled. "When he goes forth from his castle, so that all his men will know him from afar and his enemies will not see his face."

"Then is he my foe!" Burta tossed her head and her white teeth gleamed between parted lips. "It was a man in a bear's mask that slew Podu, my father and the guard at his tent. Another Gipsy, too, was surprized and struck down, but lived to tell me the truth afterward."

Jamuka frowned and tapped the jewel-studded hilt of his sword.

"And, if so? You can not bring life to Podu again, and you must think of yourself. Prester John is wiser than other men; his acts are stones that pave the way to success. You may not stand alone — a woman served by a handful of wanderers."

"And so, Jamuka, must I choose between Prester John and Genghis Khan — aye, choosing the first, you will honor me with your protection and love. Is not that what you would say?"

For the second time in as many minutes the quick-thinking chief was surprized.

"By Allah, you have the right of it! It was for that I sought you out, even though an army waits without a

leader in my absence. Prester John has named me his ally – "

"You, the cousin of Genghis Khan!"

Not often was Jamuka put upon the defensive in this manner, and it ruffled him.

"Aye, but your Great Khan and I can not sleep on the same side of the fire. He is a warrior, true, but a luster after blood. I – though this you may not know – am master of the caravan trade from India to Cathay, and must needs keep open the caravan routes so that the silks, spices, tea and cotton – aye, the goods of the world – can pass – "

"Under your hand that doubtless keeps much within its grasp. Oh, I have heard many things from my – wanderers – Jamuka. Tales of your wealth and the women of many lands that you have bought. You will never win me to your hand, for your master is Podu's murderer."

She stamped furiously and brushed the hair back from her forehead. Jamuka considered her with glowing eyes, and seemed not ill-pleased at her anger.

"Genghis Khan is a scourge – a man-slayer. Burta, your Gipsies have enriched their tents and increased their herds by taking toll of my caravans. This is ordained, perhaps, and I have no quarrel with you; but Genghis would turn every camel and pony, aye, and cameleer of the caravans into a beast of war, or a warrior. By trade Cathay rose to greatness, aye, and the empire of the Turks, my fathers, in the mountains that are called the Roof of the World; and by trade I would make the empire of the Horde equal to Cathay, while Genghis would make of it a field of white bones."

She held her brown head high, although her chin came only to the shoulder of the tall Turk.

"White bones, you say, Jamuka — ah, tell me what else has Wang Khan made of my father? Is trade a god that demands human life for sacrifice? Nay, you can not paint a wrong to make it shine like a righteous act, nor ask me to tread softly and speak not of vengeance when I am wronged. Go, Master of Plotting, I abide here until the coming of Genghis Khan who will listen to my plea."

Jamuka's dark eyes glistened with admiration.

"*B'illah*, little daughter of fury, you will do no such thing. Why do you think I sought you out, at some pains, while your Khan tarried?"

He knew when to make an end of words in dealing with a woman. Calling to his men to bring up their horses, he strode toward Burta, who glanced around swiftly, seeking some means of escape. The Jelairs ringed her in. Mingan started up from his seat, but was stayed by two spearmen, while Jamuka took the reins of a pony and caught Burta's arm.

When he did so the brown dog sprang at the chief. Jamuka kicked it aside, and one of his men launched a javelin at it, knocking Burta's four-legged guardian whimpering to the sand. Meanwhile, the chieftain, not without a deal of trouble, had lifted the girl into the saddle and tied her ankles to the stirrups.

"You have less honor than that dog," said Mingan angrily.

"But more wit," smiled Jamuka. "By the ninety and nine holy names, what is that?"

The hawk, aroused by the scuffle, was screaming and

beating its wing, its claws gripping the perch and its hooded head bristling.

"Slay me that squawker," ordered the chief, "or it may break loose and be seen in the air by some of Burta's bands. So!"

An arrow struck the falcon from its stand, whereupon Jamuka was pleased to order his men to dig a grave at one side of the gully, near the rocks, with their swords and axes. The sand yielded to their efforts easily, but they kept on, at a nod from their leader, until they had worked down into the clay bottom, and completed a hole a yard wide and as deep and a little longer.

"You have more wit than the dog, Mingan," observed the chief, frowning. "Too much, I think. I can not decide whether you are faithful to Genghis Khan or merely a spy sent by the Cathayans. That being the case I shall leave the issue to destiny, and put you in your grave alive instead of slaying you."

Whereupon the two spearmen seized Mingan and led him to the hole. The Cathayan stifled the compelling impulse to struggle, to throw off the hands that held him. In his weakened condition resistance would have been useless, and he had been trained to submit to ordeals without showing fear. He forced himself to walk to the edge of the hole without compulsion and to look down into it.

Jamuka seemed disappointed in his tranquility, but Burta cried out indignantly that he was a prince of the dynasty of Cathay, and should be treated as a prisoner of rank.

No attention was paid her and the warriors tied

Mingan's feet together with stout leather thongs; then his knees were bound in similar fashion; lastly his wrists were secured together behind his back. The two men at a sign from Jamuka lifted him and sat him down in the hole, placing his legs, stiffened with the bonds, out in front of him. His back was now against one end of the excavation, the soles of his feet against the other and his wide shoulders pressed upon the sides.

So placed, his chin was on a level with the ground, and he saw that it was not the purpose of the tribesmen to bury him. Instead they began to cast back the clay, sand and stones, first over his legs, then about his waist. Jamuka reined his horse close, to lean down from the saddle and watch his prisoner's face.

"O Cathayan, if it is true that you are a prince," he whispered so that Burta could not hear, "it is not fitting that you suffer the fate of a slave. Nay, by the prophet's beard! Tell me then the plans of Genghis Khan and what he knows of Prester John, and you shall be sent back to the wall with the first caravan that departs from Tangut after we have overthrown the Mongol scourge."

Mingan shook his head gravely.

"*Yah Allah.* As you have chosen your bed you shall lie in it."

Jamuka left him, and the men finished filling in the hole, so that the earth came to Mingan's chin. After stamping it down firmly with a covert kick or two at the helpless face, they went to seek out their horses, well contented with the day's work.

One last thing remained to be done, to complete the ceremony of the burial alive, and Jamuka did it, wheeling

his horse in front of Mingan and then driving in his heels so that the pony started directly at the filled-in grave and the man's head, and passed over with a thudding of uneasy hoofs in the soft earth. No horse will tread on a man if he can help it — but this knowledge did not save the Cathayan the agony of sitting tense and powerless while beast and rider passed over him.

Left alone, Mingan's first feeling was one of relief, as he listened to the dwindling sounds of creaking saddles and jangling bits. Forthwith he began to strain upward with his knees, only to discover that his legs, stretched out flat, had no power to push into the three feet of earth. If he could bend them — but he could not.

Then he tried working his body back and forth, and this succeeded a little better. He could press the dirt forward an inch or two. His bound arms he could not move at all, nor was he able to loosen the thongs at his wrists.

In five minutes Mingan, who was a philosophic thinker, was convinced of what the Jelairs who planted him in the earth would have assured him gratis — that he was absolutely helpless. The hard-packed clay at his back and at the soles of his feet wedged him in. The sun, now at its zenith, poured down into the gully on his bare head, and sweat stung his eyes. His legs began to cramp him, then his arms.

An ant crawled up behind his ears and refused to drop off when he shook his head savagely.

The heat from the upper crust of sand and the rocks behind him pierced the skin of his skull, and his throat became dry, even while his eyes sought the cool stones that surrounded the well. From the level of the earth itself,

Mingan became aware of many things that lived and moved on its surface. A lizard ran out from between two stones and turned back hastily when he moved his head; from the skins near by a scorpion crawled toward him slowly. Mingan felt grateful when it altered its course and turned toward the ruffled body of the dead hawk to investigate.

Before an hour passed he had lost control of himself, shouting and struggling to throw off the weight that pressed down his legs, raging aloud at the ants that came more thickly now.

It was the dog that restored his spirits a little. The cut over its head and shoulder had knocked it senseless for a moment, but an animal seldom loses consciousness for long. Mukuli had half-crawled, half-limped after his mistress when the horsemen rode away, but now returned from its fruitless effort, and sighted Mingan. It made no difference to the dog that only the man's head was perceptible. He whined and licked the perspiration from Mingan's cheek, and aroused the man's frantic hopes by digging weakly with his forepaws in the soft earth under his nose.

But when Mukuli had hollowed out enough space to curl himself up in, he slumped down and fell to licking his gashed shoulder, whimpering. When Mingan spoke, Mukuli thumped his tail a little, as evidence of appreciation. Digging had passed out of his canine brain for the time being.

When the sun was half-way down to the horizon Mukuli went to the well and drank thirstily, growling at a jackal that drifted in among the rocks and snatched up the

dead hawk savagely, making off with its prey.

Presently the jackal came back and sat down on its haunches. Mukuli retreated to the neighborhood of the man and lay down, too weak to stand on his legs for long. At once the jackal started up, but veered off when Mingan shouted hoarsely. Puzzled, but still hungry, the lean little beast circled the man's head and the snarling dog, darting away, only to draw back a step at a time, until it took up a position for observation and reflection at the spring.

Mukuli looked at Mingan anxiously as if wondering why the man did not get up out of the earth and drive the jackal away. Presently the dog whined and drew closer.

The sun passed behind the rocks, stripping the gully of all color and heat in a moment. But overhead the sky was a brilliant blue, cloudless and clear as space itself. Mingan took a little comfort from the fact that the jackal was no nearer. He had ceased to think of the sky, of Jamuka or anything except the animal ten paces away.

And then his teeth clicked together spasmodically and the blood roared in his ears. Mukuli lifted his muzzle inquiringly, and the jackal retreated, shadow-like among the rocks, never to be seen again.

Near the well a man was singing and the sound of it was drawing nearer.

"The courtier snores behind locked doors,
Where I keep watch and ward.
The falcon is fed, the slave put to bed,
But I am the palace guard.
So let it be — 'tis heaven's decree,
What can I say, a poor fellow like me?"

Two camels loomed over the edge of the gully, and, having made one of the pair kneel, the singer climbed down to the well. He was alone, for the other beast bore only a light pack. Against the shimmering sky of twilight Mingan made out a slender warrior wearing a bronze Mongol helmet, the nosepiece and the leather drop all but hiding his face.

It was the Tiger; but, beholding the scattered sleeping furs, the dark stains and many footprints in the sand and the empty perch of the falcon, his mirth vanished. He picked up and examined some articles left behind by the Gipsy girl and groaned.

"Burta — Mingan!"

"Here, Chepe Noyon!"

The Tiger wheeled and peered into the shadows under the rocks, uncertainly, for Mingan's voice was little more than a hoarse croak. All that was visible was the dog Mukuli standing in front of what seemed to be a round stone. Chepe Noyon took a swift step — backward.

"Abide where you are, devil! Come no nearer but relate to me if indeed you have a human voice what has become of the girl Burta and the hero Mingan."

Mukuli, uncertain whether this were friend or foe, wagged his tail tentatively and sat down, whining. Mingan rasped impatiently —

"I am here, buried alive by Jamuka who carried Burta off."

Chepe Noyon's jaw dropped, and, fumbling in the throat opening of his armor, drew out a small ebony cross, holding it high in front of him.

"In hoc signo vinces! — By this sign conquer! Now, devil, take flight; or if dog you be, show me where my comrade Mingan lies."

Perceiving the friendlier note in the man's voice, the dog barked and crawled to one side, scratching at the earth by the prsioner's chin. Chepe Noyon advanced slowly and peered anxiously into the haggard and distorted features.

"If you are verily Mingan's head — aye, so you are — tell me where lies the rest of you."

"In the sand under your foot — dig me out."

Not until food and drink and the warmth of a fire restored Mingan to something resembling a living being did Chepe Noyon feel fully satisfied that the man at his side was in truth his friend.

"There is evil afoot," he grumbled, relating what had passed in the Three Rivers country.

The failure of the envoys he had sent to Prester John to return had decided Genghis Khan that war with the Keraits was unavoidable, and the master of the Horde, once his mind was made up, had moved at once toward Tangut, following the northern edge of the sandy desert where his horses would find grazing. Genghis Khan had sent Chepe Noyon to the well to find Burta and bring the Gipsy girl to him.

"He trusts me," said the Tiger moodily, "although I am a Kerait, but it is not fitting that I should command a *tuman* in the coming battle between Prester John and Genghis Khan. I do not understand why my people have taken up the sword. How did the messengers from the

Three Rivers perish? Why did Jamuka take his stand beside Prester John?"

Mingan pondered a while.

"I can see a little both of treachery and trickery. But if Genghis Khan is on the march there is little time to learn the truth. Since you came nearly due south to the well, the Mongols must be as near to Tangut as we. If you are faithful to Temujin, you should ride to Tangut at once – "

"Aye, on Jamuka's trail. I was sent to find Burta and bring her off safely, and that I will do."

"Nay, you would fail. One way is open to us, to seek out the daughter of Podu and at the same time to seek behind the mask of our enemy, who goes about in the skin of a bear – "

"It was not Prester John who raided our tents and who was overthrown by my horse."

"Who wears the mask of a bear," went on Mingan calmly. "And that way leads us to Prester John himself."

Burta had saved Mingan's life, and he knew now that the wayward girl loved Genghis Khan. To venture in the camp of Jamuka's army after her would be to search for one grain of sand in the desert. Their only recourse was to seek an audience with Prester John of the Christians, in the castle of Tangut, and to put their case before him, since he alone had power to over-rule Jamuka.

He explained this to Chepe Noyon who was only half-convinced.

"Yet, in the time of my father, Mingan, and his father, no one of our village has seen the face of Prester John. He has lived for twelve times a hundred years; he is a magician."

Mingan was quite ready to believe this.

"So will he aid us the more."

He was in no condition to set out that evening, so he slept through the night, which was more than the Tiger did. In the morning they made up their packs, gave the camels a drink and were about to climb into the cloths that served for saddles when the brown dog came lurching after Mingan, whining anxiously, sensing that they were going to abandon him. Mingan had not the heart to leave Mukuli behind, and placed him on the rump of his camel after bandaging his hurts.

He thought little of it at the time, save that Chepe Noyon grumbled, but thereafter he had reason to be thankful for Mukuli's presence.

For a week they traveled due west.

A sandstorm, sweeping down on the Gobi out of a black sky, and heralded by a devastating wind, obliterated the tracks left by Jamuka and his men before the two palladins had journeyed westward for three days. Chepe Noyon, as the storm cleared away, crawled out from beside his camel and pointed to a series of whirling columns which rose from the earth to the clouds hanging low overhead.

"Yonder are the first of the guardians of Tangut, and it is well for us that *they* passed us by."

Mingan watched the moving pillars of sand circle and vanish into the murk of the tempest, and nodded understandingly. He had become accustomed to the changing moods of the desert and knew that the sand pillars were caused by the suction of the wind. If Chepe Noyon who was reckless enough, dreaded the approach to the man called

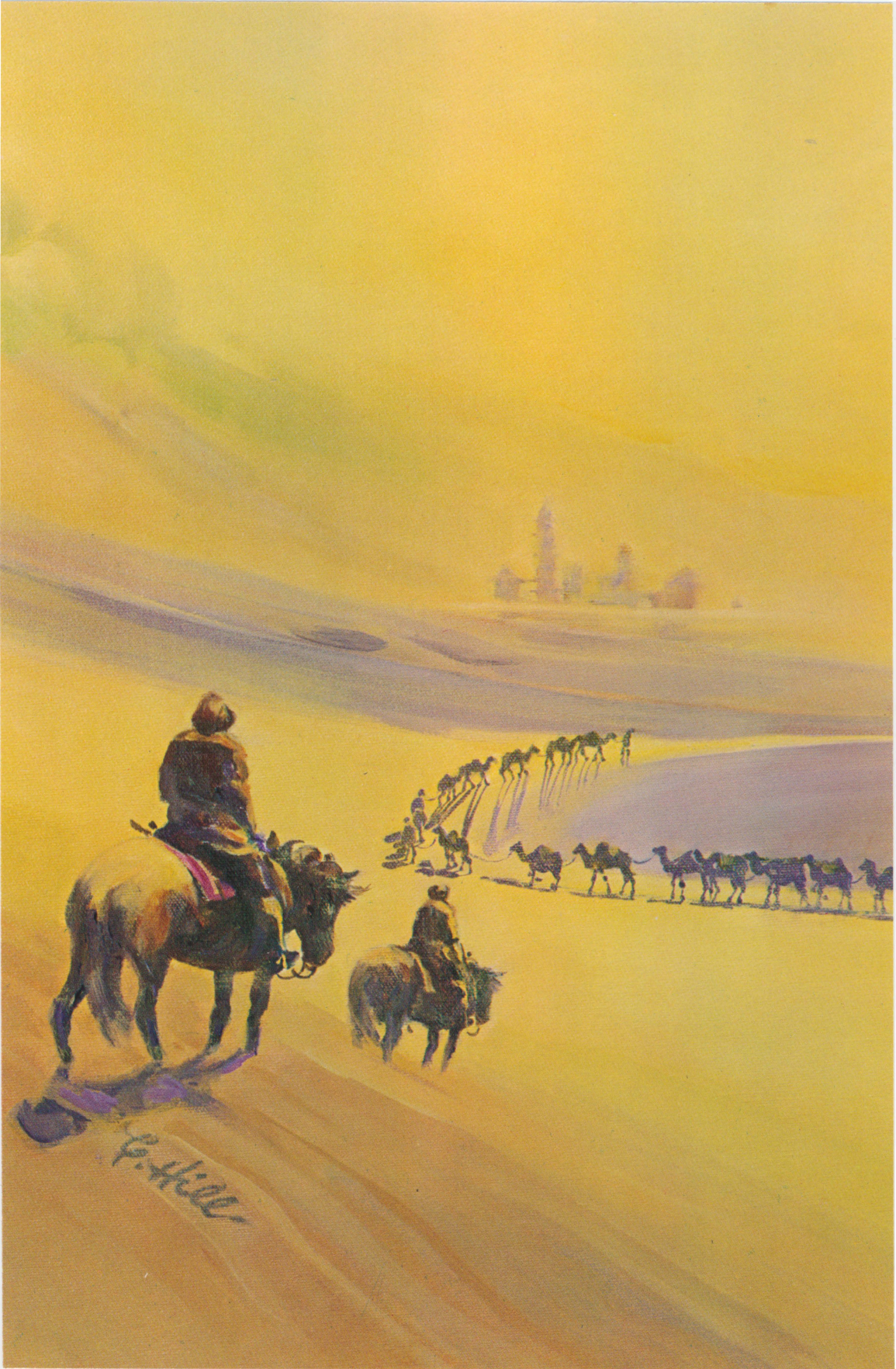
Prester John, there must be greater danger than this to be faced.

In fact, coming to one of the last camps of Gipsies on the caravan track they were following, the Tiger halted long enough to trade his camels for two shaggy ponies, a lute and a suit of beggar's weeds. His own armor and cloak, with his sword, he gave to the head-man of the camp with instructions to take them to Genghis Khan and receive goodly guerdon for so doing.

He learned from the Gipsies that Jamuka's cavalcade had passed the day before, and was careful to make sure of the nomad's fidelity by describing the capture of Burta. With the weapon and armor as tokens, the man was to inform the Mongol khan that Mingan and Chepe Noyon would press on to Tangut and search for the girl. He told the Gipsy where to find the Horde — about a week's ride to the north and west. This done, he arrayed himself in the long smock and high-crowned hat of woven reeds and slung the lute over his shoulder.

"We will shave off your beard," he observed, scanning Mingan. "The rest of you looks rarely like a hungry scavenger of the caravan tracks. Lo, I am a minstrel, a singer of songs — you a teller of tales. Whine when you speak and call all men 'Good Sir' and bow when you are kicked. Then no one will know that you are one of the Mongol Horde."

They kept, however, the gold tablets showing their rank in the Horde concealed in their wallets. Other weapons, in their new guise of wandering entertainers, Chepe Noyon said they were better without.


C. Hill

It was after daybreak when the air was clear that he sighted the towers and walls of a city.
(See page 162.)

From the Gipsy camp they hurried on through rising ground to a barren waste of rocky plain where Jamuka's trail was lost again, but where Mingan made a discovery. It was after daybreak when the air was clear that he sighted in the plain before them the towers and walls of a city, surrounded by groves of trees rising to majestic height.

"It must be Tangut," he cried.

The Tiger smiled.

"Ride on and enter the gate, if you can."

Sure of what he saw, Mingan hastened forward, yet came no nearer to the city. By afternoon, when he thought to reach the nearest trees, it fell apart while he watched, and vanished, leaving the desert bare and shelterless. With an exclamation, he turned to Chepe Noyon who was much amused at his discomfiture.

" 'Tis part of the magic of Prester John," the Tiger explained. "Those who seek out Tangut see on every hand these cities in the air, and, pursuing them, are completely lost."

He spoke with satisfaction, for he had witnessed the miracle of the skies more than once, but in Mingan there was a quick stirring of the blood. He had thought he knew the desert, yet now he looked upon the manifestation of forces beyond his knowledge or control. Misgivings crowded upon him, but he set his teeth and took up the reins of his horse again.

As if the vision of the city had been a warning, they suffered much from cold and hunger in a land where the mists crowded in on them, and snow lay in the pockets of the rocks. By the thin air Mingan knew that they must be at

the summit of a lofty elevation. Chepe Noyon admitted that he had lost his way, and they fared badly until the dog Mukuli scented out a passing caravan in the mists, and the two warriors joined company with some Arab traders who were hastening on to Tangut, to work south from there out of the Gobi before war should overtake them and their burden of silk, spice and tea.

From the cold heights they descended into a broad valley where the sun warmed them. Here Chepe Noyon got his bearings and led the way past bands of warriors riding north, and herds of horses, cattle and sheep driven south. At night they made their quarters in the village *serais* where by virtue of the lute and the many tales of Mingan, coupled with the tricks he had taught Mukuli, they received food and a sleeping place of sorts.

They were now in the Jelair country, and learned that the army of the Turkish tribesmen and the Keraits was assembling within a day's march, toward the setting sun. Jamuka had joined his host, but Chepe Noyon discovered that the men who had been with the khan of the Jelairs had ridden on to the city of Tangut, taking with them a strange woman. Evidently Jamuka had feared to take Burta into the tumult of a mobilization camp.

Nothing had been seen or heard of the Horde which was believed to be still in the Three Rivers country. But Chepe Noyon suspected that it was nearer than that.

Three days more of riding and they reached a fairer land, where the camps of the nomads ceased and villages appeared, where fields of grain, newly-sown, lined the highways, and white-kerchiefed women greeted them

pleasantly, inquiring news of the armies. To the south and west a line of forested mountains arose, (the range now called the *Thian Shan* — a spur of the Himalayas) and this time Mingan found that they remained in view. Chepe Noyon smiled as they drew in among the foot-hills, skirting groves of fruit-trees in blossom.

"You are within ten arrow flights of Tangut, the chief city of Prester John. Can you tell me where it lies?"

Mingan searched the mountain peaks that rose overhead and shook his head.

"Verily," he admitted, "there is magic in this place for I see naught save some hamlets of shepherds and many roads that twine and twist about."

By way of answer, Chepe Noyon turned aside, to follow a brisk stream that led them to a bridge. Crossing this, the Tiger swerved again into a great white road, wide as any in Cathay. Mingan saw that the road ran into a long, narrow valley almost concealed by two shoulders of the hills — a valley whose middle was a canal from which the stream ran and whose sides were row upon row of clay houses.

Mirrored in the canal, or lake was the upper end of the gorge, and here were no dwellings, but a steep slope of the mountain, heavily wooded. At the summit of this height were the black walls of a castle. It was quite unlike the pavilions and pagodas of Cathay, for the high walls shut in a space over which showed the tops of the trees, barely visible at that distance, and in the center reared up a single tower.

At the head of the lake was an open plaza from which

steps of black granite began, disappearing in the forested slope, through which zig-zagged a roadway up to the castle, judging from the gaps in the trees.

"There is the abode of Prester John," said Chepe Noyon.

"Where we must go," nodded Mingan.

But evening was at hand, and Chepe Noyon said that now a guard of Jelair bowmen was drawn across the plaza at the head of the lake where the granite stairway began. Orders had been issued that not even the bringers of food were to be admitted to the stair after dark.

"Besides," added the Tiger thoughtfully, "if we go not up by the stair, we must climb the forested height to the wall, where the guardians are not men but beasts of the wilds. If we must face the four-footed sentinels, it were best we did not do so at night."

Mingan finished his scrutiny of the castle approaches and pointed to a pigeon that circled over the valley on the northern side, descending to the houses.

"Aye, now is the hour of rest."

They led their tired ponies back to one of the *serais* at the entrance of the valley, placed there for the Moslem merchants and the caravans that passed through Tangut. That night, however, they were the only occupants of the place who claimed meat and fruit for themselves, and grass for their ponies, from the attendants who ministered to the wants of travelers. Although they dined well and the shelter offered them was clean and comfortable, they were able to sleep little.

Above them the streets of the city buzzed with talk and

movement; horses clattered in and out the roadways, and the Tiger, venturing out to inquire the meaning of the commotion, came back with gleaming eyes.

"The merchants who left the city made no mistake. Ho, the rats are running from the tents when the smoke of fire comes down the wind. A carrier-pigeon has come in from the camp of the Keraits and Jelairs in the north. The Mongols have reached Jamuka already and have struck their blow. So the word of the pigeon said."

Mingan smiled.

"Yesukai, who came to this place, said that the birds of Tangut talked, but has a pigeon a tongue? Not three days have gone by since we passed the camp of Jamuka, and none have overtaken us on the road."

"These are carrier-pigeons — taken from their home to a distance. A message is written and tied to their claw and, released, they fly between sunrise and sunset the space that a horse covers in thrice that time."

Chepe Noyon sighed and shook his head. "The Horde, to the number of a hundred times a thousand, fell upon Jamuka's array before the main forces of the Keraits came up from the cities yonder in the mountains. All the wiles of the Master of Plotting could not serve to overcome the advantage of the sudden attack. That is always the way of Genghis Khan."

Later messages admitted that Jamuka was retreating rapidly on Tangut.

Knowing the tactics of Genghis Khan, Mingan felt that the Mongols would press the pursuit, hoping to overtake the leaders of the enemy and break up resistance

in the city before it could come to a head. The battle had been fought and won by dawn of that day, and before the second sunrise the victors or the vanquished would be within the foot-hills of the mountains.

What was Prester John doing? No one outside the castle knew.

"One other thing have I learned," said the Tiger. "This morning a woman captive was led through Tangut under escort of some officers of Jamuka's guard, passing through the sentries and into the castle. Those who saw her relate that she is dark of skin and beautiful as twilight itself or the stars at evening, but that she railed at her guards, and maneuvered her horse so that one, a fat Turk, fell into the lake from the plaza."

Mingan smiled, the description fitting Burta well. But for once the gay Chepe Noyon had no mind for mirth. On his knees near the wall of the *serai* he prayed, the palms of his hands pressed together, the ebony cross placed on a stone before his eyes — prayed to his God, Jehovah, to deliver the girl Burta safe from harm, and his people from the sword of the Mongols.

Aware of the Tiger's loyalty to Genghis Khan, Mingan wondered how Chepe Noyon could hope to see all of his wishes fulfilled. But then, Mingan reflected, they were in the domain of a magician.

VIII

THE MAGI

"Who are ye to attempt the forbidden? Nay, by Allah, stand back! It was said to us that this should not be, and on our heads is the care of the black stair! Dogs! *Caphars* — unbelievers, children of evil impulses — stand back!"

The company of Jelairs had been forced to line up on the lowest steps of the granite stairway leading up to the castle, because as soon as dawn lightened the sky the women and children of Tangut thronged to the plaza at the head of the lake as if by a common impulse. They pressed against the archers, pleading with outstretched hands for word to be sent up to Prester John in the castle, of the peril that was closing in on them.

"King John!" they cried. "Let the annointed of God comfort us! Let us see his face that has been hidden from us for years — let us see his armor and his sword that we may be comforted."

The archers drew their short falchions and thrust back the people vigorously, using the hilt at first, then the flat of the blades. A Kerait captain remonstrated with the Jelairs

when more than one of their blows drew blood from the women, asking if word of the latest tidings had been sent up to the castle, and offering to go himself to see that this were done.

"Is not Jamuka Khan the leader of your army?" retorted the archers. "Does he not wear the bear's head? It was his command that no one be admitted to the stair until he came. Stand back!"

Mingan, standing near the edge of the lake within earshot of the plaza, caught Chepe Noyon by the arm.

"Did I not say there was treachery and trickery to be dealt with?" he whispered. "We must lose no time in gaining the castle. If you make known your name, would the Keraits support you in an attempt to overthrow these Jelairs?"

By way of answer Chepe Noyon shook his head and pointed to the throngs in the streets facing the plaza. Most of the armed men were Turkish tribesmen; the Christians of Tangut had been sent out to meet Jamuka. The older citizens were without arms; in fact they seemed to be a peaceable folk. When all efforts to penetrate the line of archers failed, they drew back and fell to gazing up at the castle and talking among themselves.

The Christians were taller than the average of the desert tribesmen, and lighter of skin.

Mingan looked up at the tiers of white houses set in green gardens — a fair city, mistress of sunshine and fertile fields. The water of the blue lake was fresh and clear. The sky overhead was smiling — white flecks of clouds passing over the forested summits of the hills. But

on either hand the heights fell away when they reached the end of the valley, so that the hill of the castle was in reality a separate mountain and the only feasible ascent was by the stair.

"Then will we play a trick," observed the Cathayan. "Come!"

He turned back to the *serai*, the Tiger following, and led out the ponies without saddling them. Making sure that no one from the streets of the city was watching, he crossed the road and sought the stream by the bridge. There he urged his pony into the water until the animal was dripping from head to tail; Chepe Noyon did likewise. Once out of the water the ponies were permitted to roll in the dust by the road, whereupon Mingan sprang to the back of his animal and forced it into a gallop. The Tiger followed, and the dog Mukuli brought up the rear, barking.

They swept past the *serai* and up into the streets where Mingan continued to flog his horse with the whip.

"Way for the messengers from the north!" he cried as he encountered the throng by the lake.

People turned to look, and a lane was opened to the steps of the plaza. Here the two riders dismounted and hurried to the line of archers where the captain of the company barred their way insolently.

"What tidings bring you?" he demanded.

"Our word is for the castle," said Mingan curtly. "Will you halt a courier from Jamuka Khan, and taste the bastinado?"

The leader of the archers scowled, glanced at the wet

and dusty ponies, at the bedraggled attire of the two strangers, and fingering his beard, said:

"Scant time have you had to ride to Tangut from battle. I am in command of the Jelairs in the city. Speak therefore to me, but softly, so that these dogs shall not hear."

Chepe Noyon thrust forward, having heard one or two of the watchers in the throng saying dubiously that the two riders had been seen about the *serais* the last evening. But the Turk had no ears for the townspeople after the Tiger spoke a few words.

"Fool and son of a fool! We come from Jamuka, not from the army." He took his cue from Mingan and lowered his voice. "We have orders for those who guard Jamuka's woman within the castle — she who was taken from the Gipsy camp and brought hither for the khan himself."

The captain's face changed. He had heard of Burta and knew that this was a matter where meddling might lose him his head.

"A token?" he grumbled. "Surely you were given a token, minstrel."

Chepe Noyon nodded and drew from his wallet the gold tablet given him by Genghis Khan. The Turk made a pretense of reading the Mongol script that was strange to his eyes, but the sheen and heft of the gold spoke volumes. He returned it with a bow and ordered his men to make passage for the messengers.

"But, good sir," he added thoughtfully, "take heed of the watchers at the gate of the castle, for they are not as polite as I."

He turned to beat back some young girls who would have run to the steps after Mingan and Chepe Noyon.

The dog Mukuli, however, writhed and scampered through the array of the archers' legs and made after his master. Thousands of eyes watched the two strangers ascend the stair to the first turn where they were lost to sight behind the screen of the forest.

For a thousand feet the granite steps led up, zig-zagging across the face of the hill where the ascent was steep, so that the two *orkhons* were unable to glimpse the castle even when they had climbed to the level of the sides of the valley. But presently they came to a landing of black marble, guarded on either hand by a jade lion, one clutching a shepherd's crook, the other a cross.

From here the stair ran up almost sheer, and Mingan saw at its summit the dark line of the castle wall. Against the wall a figure moved and the sun glinted upon an object that darted down, whistling past his head. A javelin, hurled from above, splintered to fragments on the marble.

Chepe Noyon held up his hand with a warning cry.

"A truce. We are — "

He leaped aside just in time to escape being impaled by a second dart and threw himself over the railing of the stair into the brush. Mingan followed him. Another missile hurtled through the growth over their heads, and they crawled, perforce, into the shelter of the nearest fig-trees that screened them effectively.

"Now, by the horses of — — — " swore the Tiger, "that was a wanton act!"

Manifestly, they could not ascend the last, almost

vertical flight of the black stair in the face of such opposition. Nor would it be feasible to descend for help to the archers of the plaza. By now the men-at-arms would have had time to talk things over with the townspeople who had seen them the evening before, and would know that they had not arrived in Tangut that evening as they claimed.

"We will climb through the forest growth," decided Mingan, "and have a look at these custodians of the gate."

It was not easy. The hillside here was almost a precipice and often they were obliged to help each other up over rock ridges and to crawl upon masses of boulders beset by thorns. The earth mold under the stunted trees that clung to the slope was treacherous, and more than once they slid back, starting a miniature avalanche of stones down the heights. Thereafter they circled such danger spots and braced themselves against the boles of the trees.

By necessity, they gave the watchers at the gate a good inkling of what they were about, and when — Mukuli being ordered to sit passive behind them — they crawled into the network of juniper and flowering jasmine at the summit, they beheld two men armed each with a sheaf of javelins standing at the gate of the wall that opened out upon a small landing at the stairhead. And all thought of overtures vanished.

The two guards were negroes, massive of build, wearing the broad turbans of the southern Turks. Moreover, after watching for a while, Mingan was satisfied that they were mutes. Although he and the Tiger lay passive until they ached, the guards did not cease to peer in their

direction. Signing to his companion, he crawled back cautiously to where the dog awaited them, out of sight of the gate.

"They are Jamuka's men," snarled Chepe Noyon, little pleased with the part he was compelled to play. "Has Jamuka made a captive of the king of the Keraits? If we had between us a weapon — "

"We have not," Mingan pointed out.

"If we may not enter the gate, we must climb the wall if we are to have an audience with this king."

With a nod of assent the Tiger led the way to the base of the wall and began to circle it, heading away from the entrance. Here there were no tall trees, and passage through the brush was difficult. The wall was some fifteen feet, and at no place did they come upon an opening or postern door. So at length the Tiger halted, to rub at the scars left on his face and hands by the brambles, and to stare up hopelessly at a clump of slender birches. Spanning the space to the wall, although growing within a dozen feet of it, they offered no convenient limb to the pair.

"This is a river I can not cross," he muttered. "See, the sun is near its zenith and we are no closer to the castle. Nay, stare not at that wand of a tree. We have no ax to fell it, to make it serve as a ladder."

"Nevertheless, it will serve us."

Mingan surveyed the clump of birches and selected one of the largest — one that tapered up some thirty feet and leaned a little toward the wall.

"But it will not help us back, once we are over. If you are not afraid — "

"Act," grunted Chepe Noyon.

So Mingan began to climb, pulling himself up the bole, rather than trust to the slender branches of the white birch. For some distance the tree was large enough to support his weight without bending. As he worked higher it commenced to teeter. Mingan paused, gathered himself together, and went swiftly up the tapering stem — clutched it as high as he could reach, and, as it bent, swung his feet clear.

The tip of the birch swung down with a rush, bearing Mingan with it, and as it leaned toward the wall, descended in that direction. There was a rustle of leaves, a crackling of wood, and Chepe Noyon watched him disappear over the wall, releasing his hold as he did so.

The birch whipped back, although now it leaned more toward the wall. Chepe Noyon lost no time in following his companion's example; but he took Mukuli under one arm, and, encumbered by the dog, descended heavily on the wall, let go the birch-tip and rolled off. Mingan, standing in the soft earth underneath, held out his arms instinctively, and the two men, the dog and the lute thumped on the ground in a heap.

Mukuli began to growl at once, and Chepe Noyon rolled off Mingan, propped himself up on an elbow, gulped air back into his lungs and froze into immobility. Mingan started to rise, and thought better of it.

A spear's length away crouched a full-grown leopard, its tawny eyes malevolent, its tail twitching.

Mukuli, between the two men, bristled defiance, and the more the dog growled the louder the leopard snarled.


E. Hill

As he ran to enter the portal there confronted him the tall form of Prester John.
(See page 196.)

Slowly Chepe Noyon reached out and took up the lute, the only available weapon, and more slowly he rose to his feet. The leopard ceased to breathe defiance at the dog and centered its attention on the man.

"A wise man," observed Mingan, "will strike the strings of a lute before he hits out with the butt."

Chepe Noyon considered the crouching animal and decided that it was more startled than angry. They could not, however, go forward without arriving at a better understanding with this four-footed guardian of the wall. Smiling skeptically, he placed the cord of the hand-violin over his neck and ran his fingers over the strings. Whereat the leopard gave a hideous snarl.

"He likes not the instrument, perhaps the voice is more pleasing," commented Mingan judiciously.

And the Tiger began to sing in his pleasant, guttural voice, an ode of the land of the Tang. They saw that now the great cat had relaxed its muscles. It stood up, drawing its claws back into sheaths. And then out from the cypresses that hemmed them in walked a small bear, limping with one leg.

The bear considered them awhile, sniffed at Mukuli, and began to nose about indifferently in the lush grass. Chepe Noyon went on singing and along a path through the brush trotted a powerful mastiff with a scar running from jowls to belly.

"A potent minstrel, you," remarked Mingan, picking up Mukuli who was trembling with excitement, "for here are three surly beasts who yet offer us no harm. Sing on, but let us go forward to the castle."

The path led to their right to a pond where among water-lilies swans floated about a stone island and a wooden kiosk. A bridge ran to the islet, but they could see no one moving in the garden-house, so turned to the left. Mingan noticed that the mastiff and the bear fell in behind them, while the leopard was to be seen flitting among the cypresses, first on one side, then on the other.

They passed through the wood to a series of grassy terraces where a flock of sheep grazed, and flower beds set with iris and thyme ringed round the black bulk of the castle. Suddenly Mingan looked up.

"Strangers! Who are ye? Whence come ye? What do ye seek?"

It was a shrill cry from directly over their heads. Brilliant in the clear sunshine of the mountain top, a bird with green and blue and red feathers fluttered.

Chepe Noyon stayed his song.

"We are two wanderers from the desert with tidings, O Winged Talker. In peace we seek Prester John."

"Who are ye? Whence come ye?"

The bird circled their heads and there was no doubt that it uttered the words. Then, rising, it flew toward the tower of the castle, and its cry became fainter —

"Strangers — in the garden of Prester John."

The two warriors looked at each other in silence. They had not the least doubt that they were in the abode of a magician. Birds that talked — wild beasts as tame as fireside cats — doubtless the castle sheltered greater wonders. They went over the sheep meadows more slowly, and looked back. Mingan saw that the bear passed the flock

with only a casual glance and, more remarkable, the sheep took no heed of the bear.

Chepe Noyon had said that in the place of Prester John was peace, and here, surely, was evidence of it — among the animals. There was something in the garden that was not to be found in all Cathay and the Gobi, so Mingan reasoned. What of Burta? No human being was visible, even the mutes at the gate being hidden by the line of cypresses that stretched from the castle to the wall.

"Come," said the Tiger, shouldering his lute.

The hall of the castle was empty, although two candles burned at the table set below the dais at the upper end. From the walls hung tapestries wherein were worked stories unfamiliar to Mingan — an army on the march, and one that puzzled him, a stable over which a rayed star pictured above a woman with a child who sat in the midst of cattle and sheep.

On the table between the candles were gold vessels bearing food and covers for three.

As the two warriors entered the hall, Mingan fancied that a figure slipped out of sight at one side of the dais. Here a curtain of heavy silk stained with age covered the wall at the end of the hall, and near the curtain a door led them into a side corridor from which stairs ran up the castle tower.

They climbed the steps, seeing dusty armor and spears here and there by embrasures, but no sign of the man who had vanished from their sight. On the tower summit they were able to overlook all the gardens of Tangut, the wall, and the valley of the city. They saw the two mutes standing

in the open gate at the head of the stair and the tiny forms of the bear and the leopard moving about on the terrace.

But no other living object. While Chepe Noyon gazed at the dust wreaths on the plain that were horsemen moving in toward the city, Mingan was intent on the panorama of mountain peaks rising to the west, to far snow summits.

"The Roof of the World," (the Himalayas) explained the Tiger, "whence it is said that Prester John came to this land. See yonder, in the east, riders draw in to Tangut — messengers from the armies, or perhaps the first of the fleeing. Our time is short; before nightfall must we find the daughter of Podu and speak with the master of the castle. Tangut will be ringed in iron and flame."

Chepe Noyon spoke under his breath. True, he could see no sign of the lord of the castle. Yet the table was set and — a magician who could talk through birds might well be invisible to mortal eyes.

"O minstrels, Prester John of Asia gives you greeting and would welcome you at his table."

The warriors beheld a boy at the head of the stairs, who bowed and motioned for them to follow him. Chepe Noyon's teeth clinked spasmodically, but Mingan who seldom lost his presence of mind, followed the page down to the corridor and into the hall.

A glance showed him that incense was burning now in front of the curtain. At the table, attended by another youth, and by the great mastiff, sat a tall man who did not look up at their coming. He lifted a hand in greeting and Chepe Noyon knelt, while Mingan, harking back to his

days at the court of Cathay, made the triple obeisance of respect.

Respect, assuredly, was due the alert brown face, the white beard of the aged king, who wore instead of a crown a cap of cloth-of-gold peaked in the front and the back, and a wide-sleeved robe with a red cape across the shoulders. A shepherd's crook stood beside his chair.

On one shoulder perched the parrot which straightway began its warning —

"Strangers in the garden — "

"Peace, chatterer — " Prester John signed to two chairs at the table — "it is long since men have come to my hall with tidings of the valley and the plain. This is the day the Star will be over Tangut. So doubly welcome are ye who come from the desert. Eat, therefore, and rest."

He nodded to the attendants, who brought basins and towels and washed the hands of the wanderers, thereafter setting food before them.

"Few abide in the castle," went on the king, "for those who served me aforetime have been called down into the city, and the warders at the wall are men-at-arms unknown to me." He stretched out a hand and placed it on the broad head of the mastiff. "Yet have I warders three who sleep not, and leave me not. My pages say that you wear the garb of minstrels, O my guests. How come you into the castle?"

Chepe Noyon for once was silent, so Mingan related how they climbed the wall and appeased the leopard. He studied the thin face of the old man, who never looked up or moved in his seat. Prester John's words were those of one who was accustomed to command, and despite his

courtesy he seemed troubled. Now however he smiled a little and lifted his eyes.

"Well did you, minstrel, when you turned your hand to music, not to a blow. The leopard is restless, and is pleased with my harp and voice when I beguile him so. The bear and this warrior — " he touched the dog again — "are gentle. Aforetime I healed a wound in his chest made by a boar's tusk, and made whole the broken leg of the bear that was caught in a trap near the castle. They have grown up under my hand."

Mingan knew now what he had suspected at first, that Prester John was blind.

He finished a light meal in silence, sharing the suspense that held Chepe Noyon voiceless. The king ate a little fruit and drank some wine, feeding the while pieces of bread to the mastiff.

"Where is the maiden who sought sanctuary in the castle yesterday?" he asked one of the youths.

"O sire, it is not known to us."

A frown crossed the forehead of the blind man.

"In the night I heard her voice at a distance. By old usage she should have shelter in the castle, for that was the law of the first Presbyter — sanctuary, even to the beasts of the field. Of late, however, my people have not come up from the city that I should sit in judgment." He turned to the warriors. "Some men of Jamuka, who is absent on the border, brought into the gate yesterday a woman from the desert who awaits the return of Jamuka near the castle. Have you seen her?"

"Nay," said Chepe Noyon, uneasily.

"She was brought hither against her will," added Mingan quietly. "A captive."

Prester John turned sightless eyes on the Cathayan, as if to probe into the truth of his words.

"The maiden herself can tell us her case, O minstrel."

Signing to one of the boys, he ordered them to search for Burta, the Gipsy, and bring her to him.

"Until then I would hear a song, or a tale. Yet first I would know the names of my guests."

"O my king," said the Tiger, "I am Chepe Noyon, of Tangut."

"Who wandered from our land seeking adventure." Prester John smiled a little. "Did you find it, O youthful Tiger?"

"Aye," put in Mingan steadily, "in the camp of Genghis Khan, the master of the desert. And I, too, am a companion of the khan — Mingan, once prince of Liao-tung in Cathay. Now, sire, a wanderer, seeking justice for — a maid. I have the gift of reading men's faces and I know that here at your hand will I find justice for Burta, and the unveiling of treachery."

The Christian king lifted his hand.

"You speak boldly, O prince of Cathay. What treachery?"

"Among my people it is said that a crooked trumpet will not make harmony, and a lie rings falsely in the ear. There is time — " he glanced up at the sunbeams that came in through the embrasures high overhead — "for naught but truth between us, and our lives — mine and the Tiger's — are pledges of this truth. I will tell you a tale, as you in

your bounty, gave permission. Then will it be for you to judge what the treachery is."

Prester John considered.

"Begin, and omit naught, my guest."

So it happened that Mingan related to the king of the Christians how he had joined the Horde of the desert, and how Genghis Khan had made himself master of the Horde, and had come to war with Jamuka. He told of the death of Podu and the capture of Burta. Earnestly and swiftly he spoke, ending his tale with the arrival in the city, and sparing mention of the battle.

When he had done, Chepe Noyon, encouraged by the silence of the blind man, added excitedly:

"O sire, deal with me as you will, but know that you have enemies in Tangut. Turks guard the stair leading to the castle, and others the gate. Tidings are kept from your ears — the messengers from Genghis Khan to you were slain. The people call to you from below and are struck down by Jamuka's men — "

Mingan laid a hand on his arm, but the young warrior shook him off.

"O my king, it is said in Tangut that you are able to cast a spell on your foes. Arise, don the armor that in the time of my father's father you were wont to wear among your people, the Christians of Asia! Slay, with your art of magic, the false Turks who hold your gate, and go down to those who cry to you for aid — "

"My son," Prester John stood up and the two warriors rose, "I am blind, and so was I born."

"But you have lived for twelve times a hundred years!"

The old king shook his head.

"My son, you have lived afar from the castle and have listened to idle tales. I have no more than three score years and ten, nor am I a worker of magic, save that beasts are gentle under my hand, and that I seek to serve the Cross."

With the assured step of one who knows his surroundings, he moved to the curtain and drew it aside disclosing an altar of white marble, where on a spotless cloth, stood a gold cross.

Letting fall the curtain, the blind man knelt a moment on the step of the dais in prayer. When he rose it was with new decision.

"By the voices of men, O Cathayan, I know the speakers of truth, as you read their faces. Harken, therefore, ye two, to the tale of glory of the first of my line, and the shame that is mine.

"Twelve hundred years ago, the king of a tribe in the Roof of the World sought a secret adventure to the south. In early Winter, near the city of Damascus, he was attracted by a strange star of surpassing brilliancy. He followed this sign and fell in with two other monarchs of men who had also seen the star.

"It led them to the land of Judea, of the king Herod, where a king was born. The three, out of their wisdom, were called Magi by those who watched them tender gifts and then return to their own lands.

"The one who went back into the mountains of Asia ruled with a strong hand and did not forget. In time, he took on himself a new faith and assumed a new name, John. By some he was called Presbyter or priest, as were the

eldest sons of his line — my sires," concluded Prester John. "Aye, they lived their allotted time rejoicing, for they were strong men and very palladins; they feared not the sword of any man, but guarded their people with the sword. Yet I, the last of the line am otherwise, for I am blind and may not put on the shining armor or take up the brand. That is my shame.

"Since the time of my grandsire, tales have come to us through the Moslem caravans that Christian palladins of the west have conquered Jerusalem, but their armies have not come beyond the Euphrates, and the missives I have sent to them have had no answer."*

So Prester John spoke, and when he ceased one of the pages who had returned to the hall cried out —

"Sire, there is no woman within the wall of the garden, but out on the plain a myriad horsemen draw in toward the city."

"Come with me to the tower," said the king, "and serve me with your eyes."

Without guidance from the warriors the blind man felt his way up to the summit of the tower. A brisk wind whipped at his long locks, and the level light of the hour before sunset struck through the garden, revealing black

*The first crusade reached Jerusalem in 1099, and in the time of the last Prester John, Richard of England, called the Lion Heart, had failed through no fault of his own in his long conflict with Saladin, the Turkish sultan. The letters of Prester John were forwarded to the Pope, and resulted in the journey of various priests into Cathay, but by then Prester John and his kingdom of Tangut was no more than a legend in the Mongol empire.

specks on the brown plain entering the wooded districts about the river among the foothills. Mingan's keen sight identified the first comers as Jelairs and Keraits, several thousand of them, and behind, in a wide arc, the dark blotches of pursuing cavalry.

"The Horde!" cried Chepe Noyon. "At Jamuka's heels."

Swiftly he told Prester John of Jamuka's attempt to withstand Genghis Khan, his defeat, and flight to the city.

The lines in the blind man's face deepened, but his voice was unhurried as ever as he explained how Jamuka had come to Tangut, professing to be a convert to Christianity; how — in the king's inability to leave the castle — he had allowed Jamuka first to guard his frontier, then to wear the bear's head that was the token of the leader of the Tangut horsemen; how Jamuka had warned him of the arrogance and hostility of Genghis Khan, whom he called the man-slayer.

At first Prester John had waited for the son of Yesukai, who had been his friend, to come to the castle. But Genghis Khan did not appear, and the tale was spread in Tangut that the Mongol had slain old Podu, the Gipsy chief, and had threatened the death of Prester John. Then the Horde had come.

"The Master of Plotting," responded Mingan promptly, "is also a master of lies. Pretending to be the friend of Genghis Khan, he planned to make himself master of the Horde. Aye, King of the Keraits, he misused the power you gave him, seeking to use the Keraits against the Mongols. Jamuka is a Moslem, and his was the treach-

ery of which I spoke. He is the real gainer from the caravan trade — "

"Yet he trusted me with the maiden whom he will make his wife — "

"See you not," Mingan said fiercely, "his trickery? He has taken away your men from the castle, placing here his own instead — his cavalry patrols control the city, until his coming. He will hold Tangut, at the river, until the full power of the Keraits can join him, coming through the mountain passes to the castle. The daughter of Podu is to be the bride of Genghis Khan, and Jamuka, aware of her worth as a hostage, has hidden her somewhere within the wall, knowing that none will come to seek her here."

As he spoke the sun left the valley and passed from the great plain, so that the oncoming horsemen and their pursuers were blotted out in the shadow of the mountain. And, plainly to be heard, the bells of the city sounded the alarm, while from the lower valley came the faint fanfare of trumpets.

Prester John faced the city as if striving to behold the truth of what was happening with his blind eyes. Mingan and the Kerait warrior were no more than two voices to him, and their words were the knell of his hopes. Yet his hand did not tremble and his lean, brown face was impassive.

"My people are in danger. I will go down to them."

To go down into the city, a blind man in the center of pandemonium, would be to reveal his affliction to the multitude. His world was, in very truth, falling about his ears. There was stern stuff in the old king, and briefly he explained what must be done.

With Chepe Noyon he would descend the stair and summon Jamuka to him, to judge whether the Master of Plotting had deceived him. If so, Prester John would take over the command of the warriors in Tangut and hold the defenses at the Turkish end of the city by the river long enough to arrange a truce with Genghis Khan. The war must be stopped and the slaying of the Keraits ended before the city fell and was given up to sack by the Horde.

To Mingan, who knew that Jamuka must keep the Keraits in the fight to save his own skin — and who had seen the remorseless anger of Genghis Khan when aroused — this seemed impossible.

"Who are you, to question the ways of God?" responded the king sternly. "He who divided in twain a river and brought forth water from a rock can quiet the quarrels of men, aye, though my blind eyes can not see the road before us."

"And yet," pointed out the Cathayan, "there be two armed men — three for the captain of archers has come up the stair — at the gate, and my companion and I are weaponless."

"Come with me."

Prester John issued an order to one of the boys who ran ahead of them, and in the hall brought to the king a cuirass of steel bands sewn upon a leather tunic, a helmet, brightly polished, bearing for crest the steel image of a crouching lion. The other page hastened up with a cloak of red velvet and a long sword of iron with edges of keen steel.

Over these objects Prester John passed his hand with a quick sigh and ordered his retainers to arm Chepe Noyon.

"This is the armor and the sword of the king, my sire," he explained, "and it is known to my people. My son, if your words against Jamuka have been false, you will not live to take off this armor."

To Mingan it seemed that, though Chepe Noyon had told the truth, there was not much hope for the Tiger. But Chepe Noyon's teeth flashed under his mustache and he whirled the long brand above his head.

"Meanwhile," ordered the blind man, "do you, Cathayan, seek out the captive. Guard her from harm and bring her to my side."

Mingan watched the strange array go down the path from the castle door to the gate — the tall form of the blind man followed by the glittering figure of the Tiger, the two retainers and the mastiff bringing up the rear — and shook his head. Then, as he turned aside with Mukuli to the terraces, he caught his breath.

It was the brief space of full sunset and in the flames of the western sky there stood out a single star. Before now Mingan had watched the evening star appear, yet he fancied it had never been so brilliant as now when it gleamed into the shadows of the garden of Prester John.

IX

THE FIGHT ON THE STAIR

In the half-light of sunset it startled the captain of the Turks more than a little to behold the approach of the blind man and his companion in strange armor. Peering at them, he took his stand in the path inside the closed portal of the wall, the two negroes on either side of him.

"Stand and advance not," he challenged.

But Prester John went forward until he reached the bar of the gate and felt that the door was closed.

"Open!" he commanded sternly. "I am the king."

The Turk shook his head.

"What king? Jamuka commands in the city, and by his order none shall leave the castle, nor shall the gate be opened until he comes." He thrust the blind man's hand from the bar. "Harken to yonder outcry below, graybeard, and flee to your hall. The Mongol dogs are crossing the river, and Jamuka will abandon the city streets, drawing hither his men to defend the stair. Nay, the angel of death walks below us — listen to his voice!"

Faintly below them a rush of sound came up from the valley — a buzzing that grew into a roaring burst of men's

voices, clashing weapons and screaming of horses. The Turk put his ear to the gate.

"Jamuka will be here in the space of an arrow flight—"

"And will find your body if you open not the gate," Chepe Noyon's voice menaced him as he turned angrily.

"Ho, this should be the minstrel! With a goodly array of children and dogs and prating graybeards — "

The Turk leered and, as he spoke, drew his simitar and cut at the warrior. Chepe Noyon parried with his sword and sprang aside to strike down one of the mutes who rushed at him with javelin upraised. Before he could face the other warder the captain of archers was on him, slashing at throat and legs.

The Tiger knocked the simitar aside and thrust with his heavy blade, through the beard of his adversary over the coat of mail, and, wrenching free his weapon, was aware of the other foeman who circled, dagger in hand, to strike him. Then Prester John loosed the mastiff that he held by the collar with a swift word of command.

The great dog rose from the ground, leaping against the chest of the mute and knocking him from his feet. Chepe Noyon stunned the fallen man with a blow of his sword, caught at the bar, and drew open the gate.

Over his head came a flutter of wings and a shrill voice that cried out of the air:

"Prester John goes forth — pray, ye who are faithful — Prester John goes forth!"

It was the parrot, attracted by the clash and gleam of steel, crying one of the phrases that it had learned from the servants of the castle.

Chepe Noyon strode out to the edge of the steps with

the king and halted with an exclamation. By the caravanserai fires were springing up, revealing masses of horsemen moving through the streets of Tangut toward the upper end of the valley. On each side of the lake barriers were being erected across the side-alleys by throngs of Kerait warriors. Fighting was in progress in the plaza. Half-way up the stair, with a score of warriors at his heels, a man who wore the skin and head of a bear was climbing toward them.

"Jamuka is on the steps, O king," he explained quickly, "and his men with him. We can not go down — unless even now you have trust in the scheming dog."

Prester John bent his head.

"God's will be done. Nay, the guard at the gate was proof that Jamuka tricked me, who am unworthy of my high place. Let us defend the stair against him, for one of us must live to reach the Mongols and make peace."

"Go back, then, O king, into the castle!"

"Not so. This is my place."

Prester John leaned a moment on the shepherd's crook that he carried for a staff, his lips moving in prayer. The two boys collected the javelins and took their stand beside the warrior who watched Jamuka win to the last flight of steps and start up the steep ascent, his men panting after him. Then Chepe Noyon lifted his head and smiled. He took off the heavy helmet and flung it clanging down the steps, among the Turks.

"Tear off your mask, Jamuka," he called. "This time you can not hide your face."

Mingan's actions on leaving the castle hall were

peculiar to say the least. He whistled up Mukuli and began to run with the brown dog around the buildings in widening circles, urging his four-footed ally to seek out something. If the king had heard Burta's voice last night, the Gipsy must have been within ear-shot of the castle.

Near the flock of sheep the dog stopped, nosed around and set off barking into the wood. Mingan followed, running hard to keep up, but using his eyes nevertheless in the failing light.

Burta would be guarded by some of Jamuka's men, and the Cathayan was not the one to fall into an ambush blindly. It was impossible, however, to silence Mukuli. Now, as he went, his long legs carrying him swiftly, Mingan was aware of a ponderous shadow that lumbered after him, and of a spotted form that slipped through the brush at his side.

The dog's barking had brought the bear and the leopard on the same quest. A chill chased up the man's spine, for he had not even a stick in his hand. It was nearly dark among the trees, and the Cathayan had no great faith in the gentleness of Prester John's pets.

He emerged into a lighter clearing and approached the pond where the kiosk stood. Mukuli headed directly toward the bridge, but half-across stopped with a growl. From the garden house came a man tall as he was broad — a burly, turbaned servant with a drawn dagger. As Mingan set foot on the narrow bridge, the Turk walked toward him rapidly, angrily motioning him away.

For a moment the two faced each other. Then, as Mingan did not give ground, the Turk lifted his knife and

took a step forward. Experience had taught Mingan the danger of moving backward over uneven ground, and he poised on his toes, ready to grapple with his heavier opponent. He felt certain that Burta was in the kiosk, and he owed his life to the Gipsy.

Suddenly, watching his adversary's face, he saw the protruding eyes widen, heard the whistle of indrawn breath. He was aware of two eyes on one side that glowed green, and on the other side a shuffling form that rose up on its hind legs with a snort. Mingan knew that the leopard and the bear were looking on, but the Turk was startled. For an instant his attention wavered, and Mingan sprang at him, thrusting low, and striking the man's knees with his shoulder. The big slave was knocked back against the low parapet of the bridge, lost his balance and fell into the pond, splashing through the water lilies and losing his dagger as he did so.

When he gained his feet — the pond was shallow — he beheld the green eyes blazing down at him from the bridge, and the long tail of the leopard twitching excitedly down from the other side. The slave quailed and turned toward the shore. But there in the last of the twilight, he was confronted by what seemed a fat man watching him closely. When the man-shape dropped to four feet and growled, the slave yelled aloud and went splashing back, to flee from the far side of the pond.

Meanwhile, Mingan had found Burta lying in the kiosk. He picked her up, carrying her easily in his arms back over the bridge and along the path that led to the castle gate. She was in a heavy sleep, induced by opium or

hasheesh, probably administered by the hand of the guard following her cry of the night before.

As he neared the entrance to the wall, Mingan heard the clashing of weapons and the low voices of men. In the open gate stood the blind king, arms outstretched. In front of him the Tiger was fighting desperately, giving back when he was hurt, ringing himself with the slashes of the long sword. Several men-at-arms engaged him while others held torches. On the blood-stained landing were the bodies of the two boys and the mastiff. And from the open muzzle of a bear's head peered the face of Jamuka, wet with sweat and twisted with rage and impatience.

Mingan stooped to lay Burta on the ground and ran to the side of his companion. But from the stair below the struggling men came a shout of triumph:

"Hai, aho-ho! Mongku-hai, Mongku-ho!"

Mingan knew that voice.

The Turks redoubled their efforts; a pole ax smote Chepe Noyon on his mailed chest. The Tiger fell heavily, lying where he had fallen.

"Through the gate! Close it!" cried Jamuka thrusting forward.

As he ran to enter the portal there confronted him the tall form of Prester John, hands uplifted, the shepherd's crook barring the way. With a snarl of rage, the Master of Plotting whipped out his simitar and passed it into the body of the blind man. In a frenzy, Jamuka hacked again and again at the falling form of the king until Mingan turned his eyes away.

He heard the men-at-arms tumbling through the

portal into the safety of the wall. Mingan looked and saw them trampling over the two bodies in the path, and heard the gate creak as Jamuka sought to close it after them.

Then a figure in rusted and blood-stained armor rose above the steps and leaped into the gap between door and gate post. A torch thrust into the eyes of the nearest Turks, and a great ax swung wide at them. It was a figure topped by flaming red hair, grimed and slashed almost beyond knowing, but nevertheless Subotai, the Buffalo, the sword-bearer of Genghis Khan. Behind the giant climbed into view other warriors, panting and grinning with triumph.

"Ho, foxes," laughed the Buffalo. "We have run you to earth."

The man-at-arms who held the pole ax that had struck down Chepe Noyon lifted his weapon and stepped toward Subotai, who did not raise his ax. Instead, the right arm of the Buffalo snapped forward with a flick of the wrist. His broad-ax flew forward, striking the Jelair in the face and cracking open his forehead.

By now the oncoming Mongols were crowding through the door. Jamuka turned as if for flight, thought better of it, and cast down his sword. He motioned his score of men to do the same. The Master of Plotting actually smiled and took his stand over the dead Prester John. Bewildered by the calm of his foe, Subotai scowled and motioned back his men. He peered into the surrounding shadows distrustfully. Behind him voices called out:

"*Temou,* 'Way for Genghis Khan!"

The ranks of the Mongols opened and the chieftain came through the gate.

He was helmetless, and his black eyes gleamed in the torchlight; his gaunt cheeks showed that for days he had not left the saddle. Mingan saw that, although now leader of a hundred thousand riders, he wore the same stained armor of rude iron plates, hacked to pieces in many places. He looked around unhurriedly — he could move quickly enough when necessary as those watching him knew. For that reason a silence fell on the men at the gate of Prester John.

So quiet were they that the roar of conflict welled up distinctly from the town beneath. It was quite dark now, and Mingan, a stone's throw from the group under the torches, was invisible. Chepe Noyon, in his strange armor, lay face down among other dead.

"Have you seen aught of the Tiger and Mingan?" Genghis Khan asked Jamuka. "The two Palladins rode hither seeking Burta, and here they should be."

Out of the corner of his eye the Master of Plotting glanced at the body of Chepe Noyon that lay without semblance of life. Mingan, he believed, was long since dead of hunger and madness in the Gobi sand.

"Nay, my cousin," he made answer, trying to read the face of the Mongol. "Your heroes have not crossed my path."

Jamuka's life hung by a hair, and before any one else could speak, he made a last attempt at trickery. It was as bold as it was clever. With his foot he turned over the body of the blind king so that Genghis Khan could look down at the hacked breast and bloodied features.

"Here, O my khan, have I slain your greatest enemy,

Prester John the Christian. It was he who plotted against you without cessation, who hunted you from place to place like a ferret. Of his skull I will fashion you a drinking cup set with diamonds and covered with gold.

"I yield myself captive to you."

Stooping, he plucked some blades of grass and set them between his teeth in token of submission.

"By Allah," Jamuka continued, "I fought against you, obeying the command of this king. But when he took the maiden Burta, to hold as hostage, my heart turned from him, and forcing my way into his walls I slew him. At your feet I place my life. I have spoken."

"And falsely."

Mingan appeared, walking toward them out of the darkness, the Gipsy girl in his arms. In a few words he related how he had found Burta under guard of one of Jamuka's slaves. As he held the girl, her head fell back from his elbow and her tresses hung to the earth; she seemed without life. Mingan himself did not know whether she breathed or not, so heavily had she been drugged.

For a second the deep-set eyes of Genghis Khan searched the face of the woman, and the fingers of his right hand closed into a knotted ball. He looked inquiringly at Jamuka who had started back in dismay.

The Turk was too wise to deny Mingan's charge.

"All this is true," he admitted. "At the command of Prester John was it done. To him the blame, to me the fault that I obeyed him. Now I would serve you."

On the ground near his feet a man stirred. Iron armor clinked, and Chepe Noyon raised himself on an elbow

arduously. The first thing that became clear to the Tiger's hazy sight was the thin face of Jamuka. The next was the body of Prester John.

"Ha, Jamuka! Brave Jamuka — Podu in his sleep, and now a blind man slain by your hand! Dogs could not have sired you — dogs are faithful, and you betrayed the blind who trusted you! A sword — give me a sword. Ho, Mingan, are you near me? Help me to go up against this snake — "

The eyes of Genghis Khan glowed, and he held back the wounded man who was struggling to rise. Peering up, Chepe Noyon recognized him and sank back.

"A boon, O my khan. Never have I asked a boon until this time. Let me finish my quarrel with Jamuka, but first do you cry a truce that the lives of the Keraits in the city below be spared. They were deceived by this Thing that walked out of a dunghill. They are no foes of yours. O my khan, this that was Prester John is slain, and I ask of you what he came forth to beg — "

"The Keraits withstand me with weapons in their hands. Let them die so!"

The mask of anger did not fall from the grim countenance of the master of the Horde. Motioning the half-frantic Tiger to silence, he strode among the Jelairs to confront Jamuka.

To do this it was necessary for him to step over the blind man, and Mingan saw him glance downward a single time, a little contemptuously. A weakling, this, the glance related plainly, as so many words — was this graybeard who could not save even his own life the Prester John of Asia? In this way, Genghis Khan greeted and said farewell

to the friend of his father, for thereafter he thought no more of him, save to consent to Chepe Noyon's request that the body be buried under the altar of the cross in the castle.

"Jamuka, my cousin," his deep voice proclaimed, "you are like the partridge that hides in the brush — like the horned owl that strikes at night. From afar my falcons have looked down upon your work of blood. I am not blind. I followed the tracks of the riders who raided the Mongol *ordu* during the snow season, and I saw that after a long time they led back to the Jelair lands. I looked for the branding marks on the ponies that rushed into my camp at Podu's feast, and they were Jelair marks. The Turkish wrestler who would have slain me with a dagger was your servant — as I knew when I advanced to meet him."

He put his right hand on the Turk's shoulder, gravely.

"You would have slain me. When you failed, you won over the Keraits by deceit so that you could overcome me and sit in my place. You have been faithless to one master; how could you be faithful to me?"

"I — " began Jamuka and said no more.

He stooped for the sword he had dropped and felt the hand of the Mongol slip under his chin. He was lifted from his feet, thrust higher, until the small of his back was on the shoulder of Genghis Khan, and legs, head and arms dangled helplessly.

Once more the throng of men divided as the Mongol, walking heavily, moved through them to the head of the steep, granite stair. The arms of the chief tightened around Jamuka's head. A quick tensing of muscles, a heave of the powerful body and Jamuka flew out into the air, seen for a

second in the torchlight before he dropped a hundred feet upon the stone steps, his neck broken before the hands of Genghis Khan released him.

The master of the Horde stood quietly on the landing, his broad figure outlined against the glow that was rising from the town beneath where thatched roofs were beginning to flare up. The followers of the slain Jamuka quivered as if a cold wind had struck them. Then all at once they caught up their discarded weapons and turned to run despairingly into the darkness, whither Subotai and his warriors pursued them.

Genghis Khan however returned to where Burta lay, and put his hand over her heart. He started, feeling that she lived. Brushing back the tangle of hair from her eyes, he saw that she was conscious and that she knew him.

The mask-like immobility of the man softened a little, and for the first time Mingan saw his eyes shining with exultant happiness. Burta saw it too — indeed she had been watching, fearfully, for just that.

"Temujin," she whispered, "you have come and you have not altered. You are Temujin, even though they call you conqueror and Great Khan."

Genghis Khan remained silent, only signing to his followers to carry the girl down to the ranks of his men. Out of sheer despair the Tiger gave utterance to his plea once again, seeing that the anger of the chief had lessened. Genghis Khan looked at his two palladins with something like satisfaction.

"Aye, Chepe Noyon, you have done well. Go down to my *tumans* and command that their swords be sheathed

and their bow-strings loosed. If the Keraits will submit to my rule and aid me with horses and men, I will number them among mine."

So the Tiger departed down the steps, and in time the tumult died. Then Genghis Khan gave order to Subotai and Mingan to bear the body of the dead king into the castle and see that it was honored.

The wasted form of the blind man was placed gently on the table before the altar. New candles were lit in the candelabra, and the living took up places in nearby chairs. They talked together, soft-voiced for the reason of the emptiness of the great hall and the whispering of the wind against the hangings, until the Tiger rejoined them. He moved wearily, but the knowledge that the truce had been struck fired him with satisfaction.

As the three palladins greeted one the other, Chepe Noyon held up his hand, calling for silence. From the high windows of the hall came, above the rustle of the night wind, the flutter of wings and a crying voice that grew fainter until it passed from their hearing:

"Prester John goes forth — pray ye who are faithful — Prester John goes forth from the castle."

X

MINGAN'S RIDE

"No song of birds is heard in the vines on the walls; only the wind whistles through the long night, where ghosts of the dead wander in the gloom.

"The fading moon twinkles on the falling snow; the fosses of the wall are frozen with blood and bodies with beards stiffened by ice.

"Each arrow is spent, every bowstring broken — the strength of the war-horse is lost.

"Thus is the city of Cathay."

Song of a Chinese minstrel.

The whisper began in the east, at the Wall of Cathay, and crept out across the Mongolian steppe. Spring came early, that momentous year the tenth of the twelfth century of Our Lord. And, traveling with the harbingers of Spring, mounted couriers rode west and south with the message that began at the Great Wall.

The riders went to the tundras at the edge of the frozen regions where snow hemmed in the dark camps in wet ravines; sleds drawn by reindeer moved out upon the

snow to the settlements of Subotai's people, and other riders passed swiftly south over wet, wind-whipped prairies, stopping only for a change of horses at the *ordus* of the tribes.

And wherever the pony-couriers had passed there sounded the clang of hammers in the huts of the smiths, the murmur of subdued talk in the Winter-tents of the warriors, the shrill outcry of herd boys sent to round up horses.

Like a giant awaking from a long sleep, the steppe threw off its inertia of the Winter and became a living thing. For the first time in its history the Mongolian steppe was under the rule of one man, and there was peace throughout it — except at the Wall.

So, too, when the pony-couriers — the messengers arranged by Genghis Khan for just such an event as this — had left the post-stations in the Gobi, long caravans of camels forged into motion over the high prairies and the sandy bottoms. They were going east.

Spring had come and with it the message of war.

Around their fires the nomad Gipsies and the desertmen nodded wisely. They had known the tidings before the couriers of the khan rode past. How? Well, that was their affair. They laughed and gambled with open hand, fighting among themselves, counting the horses, the gold and jade they would bring back as spoil from Cathay. How would they overcome the Wall, the barrier that had not been broken down since it was built hundreds of years before? Well, that was Genghis Khan's affair.

Beyond the Gobi the couriers rode. They covered a

hundred and fifty miles a day through the fertile valleys of the west. They clattered into Tangut, still drowsy under its mantle of Winter, its castle — uninhabited except by birds and an aged bear that limped out of its retreat to sniff the mild air — looming black against the blue sky, massive and forbidding as the tomb that it was.

Over more valleys, through populous settlements of hunters and herders of the streams that were now freshets racing down from the mountains, the couriers followed their course until they came to the Roof of the World. Here, by order of the conqueror, broad roads had been opened up to the vicinity of the Horde itself. It lay encamped by a lake that reflected the mighty buttresses of mountains, where messages were delivered to the palace tent of Genghis Khan.

Chung-hi was now the Dragon Emperor. He had sent an army out from the Wall of Cathay to the land of the Three Rivers, hoping to strike a blow at the home of Genghis Khan while the Horde and its master was absent.

Mukuli was in Winter camp, and the old Tatar — left in command of some fifty thousand riders — had not been caught napping. He had drawn the invaders out into the open plain, had defeated them, and pressed the pursuit until he now held the districts of Cathay as far as the river Hoang-ho and the Wall. Aware that the gage of battle had been flung down between the Dragon and Genghis Khan, the Manchus, kindred of the Tatars, had marched with their bowmen around the gulf of Liao-tung to join Mukuli. The old warrior, pleased by the mistake of Chung-hi, was now at the head of more than a hundred thousand men. He

plundered the towns on the far side of the Wall, seizing arms, captives and supplies, asking only that Genghis Khan come with the Horde and break down the Wall for him. Mukuli was too wise to try that himself.

"The Dragon has stretched a claw over the Wall and has had it nipped," laughed Chepe Noyon. "Chung-hi must be a fool. *Ohai!* The Buffalo has been given the gold tablet of an *orkhon* and sent out of Tangut with the center of the Horde. Genghis Khan is making ready the rest of the Horde at Tangut and sends for me to take the standard of the Keraits. A hundred and twenty times a thousand riders will follow me. And what will you do?"

"I am summoned to the palace tent, to the Khan," replied Mingan.

"The Cathayans are your people," mused the Tiger, who seldom waxed thoughtful. "What will you do?"

"I do not know."

"Well, you must go with me, and we may not stop to drink by the wayside. These times are good times. Ten years ago we were youths and mock heroes — appointed to rank when Genghis had no more than his shadow to his name and needed palladins to make a showing at Podu's tents. Now, elder chiefs dismount to hold our horses. We have cup-bearers a score and slaves a hundred to rise up when we clap our hands. Women — "

"Talk less than you. Come, if we must!"

"These times are good times, but dull," assented the Tiger, who was attired in the choicest silks of India. He was heavier in his tread, but restless as ever — more arrogant

with the power that had come to him, yet devoted to his first friends, Mingan and Subotai. "I have never seen the courts of Cathay, Mingan. Have they really palaces high as hills and chairs of pure gold, and women with eyes like black opals?"

Mingan stroked his beard, frowning.

"Be not so sure that you will see the courts of Cathay that lie beyond the Wall. First you must win through the Wall, and that no army has done."

The summons had reached them a week late for the two palladins had been hunting in the mountain passes.

Mingan had been well content these last years. He had gone with the Horde when Genghis Khan led his power — strengthened by the Keraits — against the peoples of the Roof of the World, as far as the bleak mountains that offered only rock-strewn sides that vanished up among the clouds, and as far to the west as the fortified cities of the Turks. Mingan liked the experiences of new lands, listening to the talk of philosophers and astrologers.

The fellowship of the three palladins had continued unbroken, although now, with their duties as commanders, they were seldom together. As they assembled their followers and rode down the passes toward Tangut, Mingan was thoughtful.

"The successes of Genghis," he observed, "are due to two things. His campaigns have been on level land where horsemen can maneuver readily, and he is the finest leader of men in Asia. Lesser chiefs have attached themselves to him for their own advantage. Yet the horsemen of the Horde can not out-maneuver the walled cities of

Cathay, and Chung-hi's forces have machines to throw stones and fire and great javelins. As against the three hundred thousand of the Horde, Chung-hi has a million."

"You are middle-aged and foolish," scoffed the Tiger. "Mountains are as bad for horses as walls, yet Genghis built bridges of chains and tree-trunks across these gorges and roads around the steep slopes. I will wager with you a hundred milk-white Arab barbs against gold to the weight of a man that I ride my horse through the Wall."

"You will not do that. Ah, it is in my mind to turn the heart of Genghis from this war."

"As well try to stem one of yonder freshets. But do you take my wager?"

"Very well."

It was a clear, star-lit night when Mingan answered for himself to the mounted patrols outside Tangut, entering the familiar lines of the camp across the river from the city. He picked his way through the horse herds, sniffing the warm odors of the felt tents, the taint of dung-smoke in the air, and the smell of leather and the reek of the camels that muttered dismally somewhere out of sight.

There were miles of tents, and standards that Mingan had never seen before, as well as black, shapeless masses standing in line. Carts, they were, loaded with supplies. Beside these were innumerable oxen, their muzzles thrust placidly into dried grass and barley on the ground.

All at once, as if he saw the Horde with new eyes, Mingan became aware of its power. And now — it faced Cathay.

Horses thudded softly past him, turning into the tent lanes, as he made out the yak-tail standard planted in front of the largest pavilion. As Mingan dismounted to enter the palace tent, he raised his eyes and beheld against the horizon glow the castle of Prester John.

It was now, he thought, the tomb of the blind king who had kept faith with his God. What if Prester John had not withstood Jamuka. He might be alive, and Mingan dead at the hands of the Turks. He wondered if there was a destiny that shaped men's fortunes, and if the stars foretold destiny.

The hour was late, but lights still burned in the palace tent. Genghis Khan was laying on the summit of a mighty dais; his women were seated on the step, tending the candles and giving food and drink to the assembled officers. Burta, her head against the knee of the chieftain, looked at him and smiled.

"Mende sun tabe tiniger buis ta? Are you quite hail and well, my companion?" Genghis Khan greeted his friend. "Talk to me, O teller of tales. I would sleep until the dawn hour."

Chepe Noyon and the higher officers made their adieus, to seek their commands before the Horde should move eastward at daybreak. Some of the candles guttered out, while the guards of the pavilion leaned on their spears to take rest as they might. The captains, sword-bearers, the masters of the herds, and others who remained under the dais put their heads on their arms and slept at once, while Mingan's voice repeated the familiar tales of hunting and

the far-off places of Cathay that Genghis Khan liked to hear of.

Once when a gust of air stirred the banners overhead, brushing the tresses of Burta who also listened to Mingan, chin on hand, the Khan started up.

"Did the soul of Yesukai, my father, speak? Surely then there came a messenger from the sky world of the elder heroes while I slept. I will follow the path of vengeance, for that Yesukai died of Cathayan poison."

"O my lord," Burta's soft voice made response, "it was Mingan."

She watched the eyes of the chieftain close. On the morrow Genghis Khan would leave her and only the gods knew when he would return. She loosed the gold chaplet from her forehead so that her dark hair fell around her face and Mingan could not see that she was sorrowful.

The teller of tales ceased his recital. The clink and thud of a mailed regiment passed the pavilion, answering the hoarse shout of the captain of the guard. Genghis Khan stirred and slept again. But his mouth was set in a hard line, furrows in his sloping forehead. Mingan, searching his face, knew that Temujin, the boy of the horse herd was long dead, and Genghis Khan had replaced him, a leader and a slayer of men.

The Horde did not sleep. And Genghis Khan was master of the Horde; he had made it. Mingan started up as if out of a long slumber, a drowsiness of fifteen years. He touched Burta's knee and put into her hand the gold tablet of *palladin* that he took from his girdle.

"O mother of princes, to you I say farewell. When the Khan wakens give this tablet to him, saying that Mingan, the friend of Temujin, is no longer at his side; but Ye Liu Chutsai Mingan of Liao-tung rides to join his people and share their fortunes."

His lips barely moved in a low whisper.

"My sword and sword-belt are without the palace tent. I will leave them there. To Chepe Noyon and Subotai give greetings and my farewell. If ever I have served you, remember it for two hours, until the Horde arises for the march. Two hours must I have to win clear. Then forget the name of Mingan. *Kai* — be it so."

Not daring to remonstrate or answer, she nodded reluctantly. Over their heads the shoulders of the chief stirred as he raised himself on his hands, his eyes alert. He was wide awake and he had heard the message of the *orkhon.*

Mingan stood up.

"I can not ride against my people. I must range myself with them, now that the Khan wars with Cathay."

He slipped down the dais steps and out the door, scarcely noticing the salute of the captain of the guard. Genghis Khan reached down and touched Burta's shoulder:

"Give it to me — the tablet!"

Stifling a scream, her fingers pressing her lips, the queen handed him the square of gold, and his throat snarled as he felt of it. Quietly, so as not to awaken the sleepers, he made his way to the tent entrance. The officer

on guard strode toward him watchfully; then, seeing who it was, he fell on his knees.

"Gur-khan," the chief ordered brusquely, "seek out Mingan's brand from the pile. Take it, follow the hero to his tents, and be as his shadow until he quits the last line of our patrols and then — " his voice sank to whispered gutturals. "Fear not for your post; I will take command of the guard."

When the man had left to carry out his errand, the chief remained standing by the tent, looking up at the stars incuriously. He did not bother his head about portents or the working of destiny. He had his own way of dealing with men. Mingan had faltered, had become like a lame horse that must be loosed from harness.

Only Genghis Khan was sad.

Mingan handed his helmet and mail to his cup-bearer, and divested himself of his long mantle. He glanced around his tent at the bronze astronomical instruments, the carved ivory objects, the neatly piled manuscripts that he had collected in the last years. Then with a sigh he took down a hunting spear from the tent wall, a sheepskin cloak and saddle-bags filled with food from the hand of another servant, and made his way to the picket-line of his horses.

Selecting the gray stallion, now a little aged and stiff of limb, and a long-striding mare, Mingan ordered a saddle for the gray. He tested girths and breast-strap before mounting, and then lead the mare by her halter.

An hour later he passed out of the tent lines, a little

uneasy, for it seemed to him that another rider followed. If he should be halted and questioned, the danger would be grave. He was leaving the Horde in time of war without permission and soon Burta would deliver her message, he assured himself.

If there was a man on earth that Mingan hated, it was Chung-hi, the new emperor. Yet no man more than the prince of Liao-tung knew the menace that now confronted Cathay. Inbred in him was the sense of loyalty to the reigning dynasty. He had sworn to the dead emperor that he would be faithful to that dynasty, as had his fathers for countless generations. Mingan could not go to them with a clear face if he did not keep his oath.

To do so, he must first try to reach the Wall before Mukuli and Subotai should attack it. Then he must present himself at the Dragon Throne and abide by what followed. What? Mingan looked up at the stars searchingly, for the first time in his life wondering whether the planets were truly the messengers of destiny —

"Draw rein and stand. What is this led horse? Where do you come from and by whose order?"

Unseen by him, several horsemen had been waiting in the deep shadow under some willows by the river road. Mingan was confronted by a suspicious lieutenant, the commander of a patrol who did not know him by sight. From force of habit he felt his girdle for the gold tablet, then realized that he no longer had an insignia of rank.

While he pondered, a horse trotted up behind him and an authoritive voice spoke:

"I am gur-khan of the imperial guard. This man goes forth by permission of the Khan."

The newcomer exhibited the baton of a captain in the half-light of approaching dawn. The patrol was satisfied. Then, without ado, the gur-khan handed Mingan his own sword, belting it into place. Gathering up his reins, he lifted his hand.

"May the way be open before you." He gave the customary salutation at parting. "Keep your distance from the path of the Horde, *orkhon.*"

"May it be well with you," Mingan answered mechanically.

Urging his horse forward, he struck into a trot. He was on the first leg of a seventeen hundred mile ride to the Gobi and across the heart of the desert — to the Wall.

XI

Distance proves the horse's strength and time the heart of man.
Chinese proverb.

The gong in the tower over the Taitung or Western Gate of the Great Wall of Cathay struck the first hour of the day with an echoing clang. The commander of a thousand opened his almond eyes, yawned, spat and stood up, pretending not to look to see if the nearest commander of ten had noticed that he had been asleep. Satisfied, the officer who had charge of the gate put on his wide-brimmed and tasseled hat, straightened the quilted-coat on his broad belly, and tightened the belt from which hung the heavy, two-handed sword that dragged on the ground. After first pouring a sparing libation to Kwan-ti, god of war, he drank eagerly from a goblet of elderberry wine.

It was hot under the tower roof. Sweat, even at this hour of sunrise, trickled down the plump back of the commander of a thousand, and the wide, dusty road that wound into the plain of the west was whitish-yellow as the well-kept hands of the stout officer. For this was the month of the feast of *Hao*, when the sun was like a red ball in the mid-summer sky.

Yet this month, Chung-hi, the Son of the Dragon, was not coming to hunt in the western plain. Instead, herds of cattle, horses and men were pressing into the gates of the Wall to escape the Mongols who, in the estimation of the worthy officer, were uncouth barbarians.

He saw that the forces guarding the towers had been doubled. On the summit of the wall, eight paces wide and as high, blue-smocked soldiers were chattering over the morning rice pots.

A double line of spearmen was forming at the road inside the ponderous gates. A score of crossbow-men had laid down their weapons in readiness to lift down the three iron bars that had held shut the gate during the night. The officer yawned and almost forgot the customary morning kow-tow toward the Great Court. He blinked and scanned the sky — no smoke rising above the trees by the highway to the west; no hostile cavalry in sight. Only the herds of cattle, somewhat larger than usual, the tattered herders, and a dust-stained beggar with a long beard who limped forward, leaning on a staff, trying to push his way through the crowded cattle.

All was quiet. He gave the order to open the gate.

One after the other, the three bars came down. The lock was turned with a lever, and the weaponless archers laid hold of handles on the twin doors. Slowly, with a reluctant creak, the portals swung open.

The sun rose.

Dust eddied up as the cattle started into motion. The foremost steers passed under him, lowering their horns and grunting. The dust thickened, and the outcries of the

drivers grew louder. The commander of a thousand leaned against the framework of a catapult and fanned himself pleasantly.

"Worthy officer," observed a calm voice at his elbow, "it were well to close the gate. There are Mongols between the foot-hills of the Kinghan and here. In the night I heard the passing of their horses."

The fat man was disturbed to learn that the beggar with the beard had climbed the steps to the tower summit without being heard. So he became angry.

"Ignorant and worthless!" he reproved. "You do not know that there are watch-pillars every two *li* between here and the hills. By day a warning smoke would be in the sky if the enemies of the Dragon were near — and a flare by night. I see nothing. Get you gone — I have no rice or water — "

So he said, observing the browned and cracked skin of the wanderer, the bloodshot eyes that glared with the glare of the dead. To show his superiority he quoted a proverb:

"The blind man sees a ghost at night."

Somewhat to his surprize the tattered stranger responded with a proverb, speaking with the cultured inflection of a courtier.

"If you never climb a tree you will never see beyond the horizon. You, commander, can see the sky for five *li*. The Mongols can ride fifteen *li* between sunset and sunrise, and, surrounding one of your watch-towers, they can keep the summit clear of defenders with their arrows while they batter in the gate. Look to yourself!"

"Who are you, uncle?" said the officer a little uncertainly.

"I am Ye Lui Kutsai Mingan, prince of the district of Liao-tung."

"The prince of Liao-tung was carried off by devils in the reign of the late emperor. You are a crazy man. It is true that the crazy man hopes the heavens will fall; the poor man hopes for a riot."

With an effort Mingan restrained his impatience. He was suffering. The gray stallion had died under him before he reached the sands on his long ride. He had bartered the mare and his sword for a camel, had crossed the desert, exchanged his worn-out bactrian for a swift-footed pony, and had foundered the animal three days ago. Thereafter, begging food of evenings, he had limped along the highway, fearing that the van of Subotai's army had caught up with him, although he had seen nothing of them. But in the last day no Chinese market carts had passed him.

Still, he was at the Wall in time — if only the officer in charge would close the gate! There were men enough on the broad summit to hold it indefinitely — a hundred every arrow-shot along the parapet — squatting over their morning rice. Mingan did not like the looks of the rusty spears, or the chickens kept for dinner by some of the men-at-arms, or the cotton sun-shelters erected on spears, or the women camp-followers who strolled from group to group.

His tongue was swollen in his throat from thirst, and his fingers quivered with weariness. His glance went from

the Wall to the highway, and he uttered a soft exclamation.

From around the nearest turn, two miles distant, a tiny puff of dust appeared, rolling toward the wall as if blown by the wind. Mingan's eyes narrowed and he thought that black specks showed through the yellow dust.

"Look!" he cried.

The commander of a thousand looked, and his peace of mind was disturbed. He peered at the sky. No trace of warning smoke against the sheer blue. The dust was travelling too swiftly for carts or horse-sedans.

Clang! He struck the heavy gong with the bronze hammer three times — the signal to close and bar the Western Gate and take stations on the wall.

The dust was spreading out, fan-wise, on either side of the highway, as if a river in flood were surging around the turn in the road. It was little more than a mile away and already the black dots that were riders could be seen on the horses. Mongols they must be to maintain such a furious pace. But it was the sheerest folly for a sea of horsemen to dash against the rock barrier of the wall.

And then something happened below them.

As if taking alarm at the sight behind them, the cattle herders began to drive their beasts forward furiously, shouting, waving their high straw hats, beating the steers on the outer fringe of the herds. A solid mass of horned cattle was driving through the gate. The soldiers who were shoving at the massive doors of teak and iron found that the pressure of the cattle made it impossible to budge the opened gates.

They tried to turn back the stream of frantic beasts,

but the herds followed the leaders blindly. Mingan, studying the herders, became convinced that they were Mongols in disguise, and the cattle were captured herds, sent to the gate purposely.

"Shoot down the beasts from the wall," he cried to the officer, who had begun to quiver in anxiety.

By the time archers lined the wall and began to direct their shafts into the bellowing masses, the Mongol attack was within a quarter of a mile. The first few riders carried smoking torches, and when these encountered the rearmost of the cattle, the beasts scattered to the sides of the road, away from the fire and smoke.

A regiment of cross-bowmen had taken station on or near the tower, and their quarrels whizzed down at the oncoming horsemen. Meanwhile, the rush of beasts through the gate had thinned out sufficiently for the laboring soldiers to move the doors forward slightly. Seeing this, one of the Mongol herders ran forward and cast himself in the path of the swinging mass of wood and iron. His body was caught and wedged between the lower edge and the earth. A dull snapping of bones was heard, and the gate ceased to move.

Mingan saw a rider, the first of the Horde, dash through the portal. He was struck from his saddle by a cross-bow bolt. Another suffered the same fate. Two companies of Chinese spearmen ran forward to form inside the gate, but their ranks were broken by the rush of horses which jammed through the opening, forced forward by the weight of the column behind.

The cross-bowmen on the tower had barely loaded

and wound their weapons a second time. For a mile on the western side of the Wall, groups of mounted Mongols wheeled, discharging a cloud of arrows at the summit. Shaft after shaft was released without pause, keeping the defenders engaged at a distance from the gate-tower, while the stream of horsemen passed through along the highway, wedging back the half-shut portals.

"I, unworthy," quietly spoke the officer at Mingan's side, "must now face my ancestors."

His limbs no longer trembled as, ordering the nearest commander of a hundred to hold the tower as long as possible, he turned and went down the steps with a firm tread. Pressing through the disorganized spearmen, he swung up his sword and cast himself among the ponies of the Mongols, disappearing from view almost at once.

The war shout of the Mongols rose over the clamor on the wall. A chief in resplendent attire came into view. He looked up curiously at the overhanging bulk of the arch that was no longer a barrier, and ordered the mailed swordsmen that followed him to dismount and storm the tower steps from the rear.

Mingan, already down from the wall and out of the fighting, recognized Chepe Noyon and reflected that he owed the Tiger a wager of a hundred weight of gold. He wondered, as he caught a riderless horse and threw himself into its saddle, if he were not dreaming — as in the past.

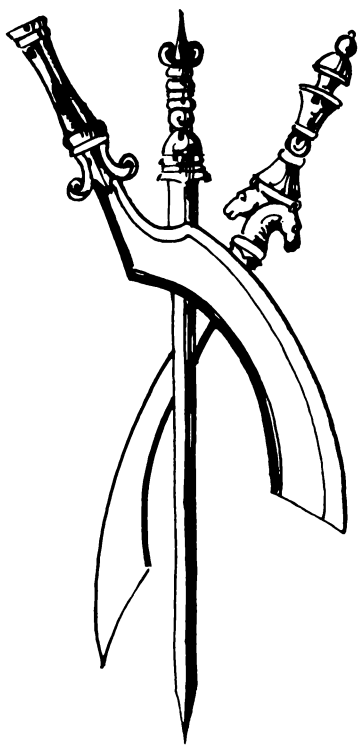
No one molested the ragged, weaponless creature, and soon he was free of the throngs of fugitive soldiers and coolies. Looking back, Mingan saw that the dragon standard had been cast down from the tower, while horsemen

were riding up the steps, forming a column at the summit to clear the top of defenders.

The battle of the Taitung gate had only begun, but Mingan had seen enough to know.

The Great Wall of China had fallen.

He urged his pony into a trot and faced toward the city of Taitung to complete the last stages of his journey. He would carry the news of the disaster to the emperor.



XII

THE PROPHECY OF THE STARS

The court, however, had kept away from the western border. It was, in that never-to-be-forgotten feast of *Hao,* at the capitol, Yen-king, which in time would come to be called Pekin. And, with the court, the Emperor Chung-hi was shut up in the palace grounds.

On the day that Mingan rode into the streets of Yen-king and crossed the bridge to the palace sector of the city, he was told that Chung-hi and his officials were listening to a new play in the garden of Delightful Hours.

Mingan stabled his horse — he had exchanged the tired animal at a village on the highway for another beast — in one of the alleys of the fortune-tellers' quarter, under the rising ground on which the palace stood.

Mingan climbed the steps toward the main entrance and looked down when he reached the gate. Yen-king, vast as a kingdom within walls, was intent on the festival. Streamers adorned the barges and junks on the gray river; processions wound through the main thoroughfares; the smoke of incense sprinkled alleys and pagoda alike.

He won past the sentries at the entrance, saying only

that he was a fortune teller. His beard and tattered garments bore out his pretense. Astrologers and trainers of canaries and dogs often came up to pray for attention from the nobles, and — this was a feast day.

"Good sirs," he bowed to the idle soldiers, "I read the stars. Let me within, to prophesy!"

His experience with the keeper of the Western Gate had taught him the uselessness of proclaiming his name and rank. As quickly as possible, without attracting attention, he moved through the walks where he had played as a boy. The sun was very hot, and few people were about. But beyond the dwellings of the queen and the imperial concubines, he found a group of slaves dressed in purple silk. They were loitering in front of the arch that gave entrance to the garden of Delightful Hours — a new pleasure spot, an artificial hill, built as Mingan learned later, so that the emperor could take his ease where the Summer breeze could be felt.

"I have tidings from the western wall," he announced eagerly. "The barbarians have passed the wall. Let me in to the Presence."

The leader of the slaves looked up from his task of feeding a peacock. He wrinkled his nose.

"The Son of Heaven may not be disturbed. Until evening he sits before the stage of the actors."

"Dolt!" Mingan's teeth gritted behind his beard. "I have ridden from Taitung, and before that from beyond the sandy desert itself."

"Perhaps you have come also from the ten courts of purgatory," gibed the feeder of peacocks.

He extended his hand suddenly to finger Mingan's pouch and girdle for coins, fruitlessly.

"Assuredly you will be shortened by a head if you cry out like this in the hearing of the court."

The others laughed and fell to jostling the stranger. Mingan planted his feet and smiled at them.

"Honorable keepers of an exalted post, if you will not admit me, send word within that the Wall has fallen."

Laughter greeted his remark, and, with a new inspiration, the prince joined in:

"You are merry, good sirs, and I would like to abide with you. But I am one of the actors in the play, and the time for my appearance on the stage is almost at hand. I must seek my companions and paint my face."

The leader of the slaves grimaced cunningly.

"A blind cat can smell a dead rat! The players are all within — aye, even the one that takes the part of a barbarian Tatar, a most evil person whom you somewhat resemble."

Surveying Mingan's remnants of Mongol dress, however, he pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Are you another — "

"Tatar," nodded Mingan. "And if the emperor is kept waiting you will all sleep this night in the city of old age — the burial ground. Ha — do you misdoubt me? Did I not take the part of a rider from the steppe, with news? Aye, mark you well — now I am a courtier of Liao-tung."

He stood erect with folded arms and spoke a few words in the dialect of the educated classes. Observing the effect on the attendants, he changed swiftly to Mongol gutturals.

The slaves were convinced. No one, they thought, but

an actor of merit could assume such varied roles. Mingan passed up the steps to the highest terrace of the garden.

It was of vast extent. Here and there among the rose-beds groups of palace handmaidens sat, and guards rested in the shade. In the center, under a circle of canopies, the emperor and his courtiers listened to the declamation of the players on a bare stage in front of a clump of cypresses. Mingan surveyed the scene, frowning.

He could not penetrate the ranks of nobility, nor, if he did so, would he be permitted to speak to Chung-hi. He must devise some way to catch the emperor's attention.

Suddenly he smiled to himself and, circling the groups of people, sought out the clump of trees that stood at the edge of the terrace. Behind them was a drop of a dozen feet. On a lawn below sat a half-dozen actors — jugglers, flame-swallowers, and the like. Mingan judged that the players of the piece were all on stage, to which a bamboo ladder gave access from the lawn below. It led through the cypresses to the back of the stage.

Mingan descended hastily to the idle performers and, paying no attention to their stares, appropriated a pair of the shoes customarily worn by actors. When he had done this, he daubed his cheeks and forehead with red and gilt paint.

"What is this?" one of the mountebanks spoke up. "The Tatar of the play is already on the stage — "

"But I am not," smiled Mingan. He took advantage of the other's hesitation to step to the ladder and climb the rungs. The tinkle of the orchestra became clearer, in tune with the drone of some one's voice.

Pushing aside the branches of the screening trees,

Mingan strode out on the stage. Only one actor was within view of the audience — a man, dressed as a woman of the court, who was reciting some verses that were apparently of an amusing nature. The rest of the company, hidden behind branches of the cypresses that served as wings to the stage, hissed at Mingan angrily. The "woman," surprized, ceased speaking.

Mingan stepped to the front center. The music — a wailing of reed-pipes, fiddles and drums — went on because, according to custom, the orchestra was made up of blind men. Schooled in the manners of the stage, it was easy for the prince to invent a verse in accord with the music —

"Out of the sandy steppes I have come — like a wild goose flying before the storm."

Then came his introduction, as usage prescribed.

"I am a poor prince of Cathay, taken prisoner by the barbarians in my youth and forced to leave my beloved books for the pursuits of a warrior on the plain. From the ward of the barbarians I have learned many things not written in the books of the sages, and now in the hour of my empire's danger, I have come hither in the hope that I may take my place in the ranks of Cathay."

The other actor was staring at him in blank dismay, and the watchers under the canopies stirred with curiosity. Mingan's appearance had broken up the play most effectively, but he had the interest of the court and that was what he wanted. The music changed to a harsher note, and the prince followed it out. Stamping one high-booted foot,

he looked around as if searching for something he did not see.

"Unhappily, I find the Lord of Ten Thousand Years — " he looked directly at Chung-hi who was seated in a chair raised above the others — "intent on other things than war. Where are the forty banners of the provinces with their mailed hosts? Where are the standards of the sun, and the wind, and *lui kung,* the thunder? Alas, I do not see them. Is it possible that the emperor has not been informed by his servants of the danger that confronts him?"

He leaped down among the musicians who, finally aware that something was amiss, ceased playing as Mingan advanced across the intervening space to the chair of Chung-hi, where he made the triple obeisance.

Chung-hi, grosser of body, more arrogant of face, gripped the carved arms of his throne-chair, frowning. Mingan, abandoning the false tones of an actor, added gravely —

"The Mongols have broken through the wall and are besieging Taitung."

"What mockery is this?" demanded the emperor wrathfully.

After fifteen years he did not recognize in the sun-burned and bearded plainsman the prince of Liao-tung.

"Sire, it is truth." He pointed out over the flower hedges of the garden. "From the stage I saw the warning smoke of distant watch-towers, and, thereafter, your mailed cavalry of Liao-tung bannermen forming in front of its barracks under the palace hill."

Here and there officials rose; some whispered to attendants who moved out to the edge of the Garden of Delightful Hours, to look down on the city. Returning, their startled faces confirmed Mingan's tidings.

"By the first Dragon of the sky," cried Chung-hi, "what man are you?"

It crossed Mingan's mind that fifteen years before this same Chung-hi had sought to slay him by stealth, fearing the omen of the stars that the dynasty of Cathay was nearing its end, while that of the prince of Liao-tung was ascendant. If he took a false name and claimed merit for his warning, Mingan might be rewarded well. Certainly, the men who stared at him now believed him dead. But his pride!

"I am Ye Lui Kutsai Mingan, last prince of the north, of Liao-tung. The tale that I repeated on the stage was true; by that device only was I able, sire, to gain a hearing."

Superstitious dread seized on the emperor. Mingan's sudden return to Cathay — his miraculous advent on the stage, in spite of the cordons of guards about the palace — his knowledge of what was still unknown in the city, Chung-hi feared that this was a spirit sent back by the demons that had carried Mingan off. And, Chung-hi, had driven the prince into exile.

"A lie!"

He peered at the tall figure in front of him.

Now there came to the emperor's side a massive form in white, with age-wrinkled brow. It was the Servant of Mercy, the executioner of the court, who had once failed in

the task of ridding Chung-hi of Mingan. The Servant of Mercy had a good memory, and seldom had he failed so signally.

And Mingan, recognizing him, drew back a pace, then smiled.

"Have you forgotten, Son of the Dragon, the night that you sought to slay me and I fled from the palace in my hunting-chariot? Then here is one who can vouch for me."

The man in white looked long into the face of the prince, and his eyes gleamed. Stooping, he whispered into the ear of Chung-hi, and withdrew, moving quietly as an animal. What he had said was:

"This man is the one that was to be strangled fifteen years ago."

Whatever Chung-hi's faults, stupidity was not one of them. Assured that Mingan had come to him from the Horde, he was suspicious on the instant. Pretending incredulity, he shook his head.

"You are no more than a clever soothsayer, seeking our attention in this manner. What else do you seek?"

"To serve with my regiments of Liao-tung, O Lord of Limitless Life! To use my poor wisdom in the service of Cathay."

This was Mingan's right as a prince of the royal line, and if Chung-hi admitted his identity it could not be denied him. But Chung-hi realized that to give Mingan command of the strongest branch of the army would be to raise him to popularity — and power. He had a vivid recollection of how the prince had made him lose face

before his father, and — he shook his head again.

"As I thought. Either you are a hob-goblin out of the steppe or you are a lying mountebank. Your tale is false as the voice of the grave bird crying at night among the tombs."

Chung-hi shivered a little, thinking of those others he had slain to clear his path of strong men. He signed to a group of spearmen.

"Take this presumptuous one under ward and place him in the dungeon of offenders against the Throne, under the palace."

Mingan bent his head. The voice was that of Chung-hi, his cousin and his enemy, but the gilt-chair and the dragon-robe were those of the emperor of Cathay. It was possible for him to prove his identity, but even so, a command from the Son of the Dragon would make it necessary for him to commit suicide or be beheaded. To disobey a command from the Throne was impossible for one of his upbringing. And yet — only after an inward conflict was he able to submit to his fate.

Later, when he had his hearing before the Board of Justice, he would have an opening for speech and liberty.

"Yet, sire," he cried, "heed me in one thing; for if I am a soothsayer, I am a true prophet. The Mongols are stronger than you think. *Do not divide your armies or send them against the Horde in open country.* Muster your strength in Yen-king and keep behind the great walls until losses compel Genghis Khan to withdraw."

He glanced eagerly at the perturbed general of Yen-king, a stout eunuch brave in the finery of his rank, and at

the aged scholar who was president of the Board of Imperial Strategy.

"Now," a quizzical smile lighted his dark face, "my role is ended – "

Chung-hi hastily shook his sleeve by way of dismissal to the prisoner. At the same time he confided in the nearest officials that the fortune-teller must be a little mad – or a Mongol spy. Had not he, Chung-hi, a million awaiting his command in the warrior levies? Had he not been thinking of war with the Mongols? It would be a new diversion, better than the play – that was all.

"True – true," echoed the courtiers. "*Wan sui* – live for ten thousand years!"

"Perhaps in this feast of *Hao,* the guests on high, the dead heroes of Cathay grieved, knowing all things of the past and future, even to the portents of the stars – for in that summer Cathay the unchanging, changed.

Their altars – the tablets of the ancestors – were neglected during the next months, although the shrines of Kwan-ti, god of war, lacked not for worshippers, and the very rivers were red with blood.

Chung-hi had intended to summon Mingan to question him in private, but events in the kingdom kept his mind occupied with other things. So it was months before the door of the dark cell opened for Mingan to come out. In that time the prince – being a political prisoner – heard little of what passed in the world above, save a word or two – that Genghis Khan had been wounded by an arrow at Taitung, that the imperial armies had been

divided into four commands of two hundred thousand each — three to advance beyond the Hoang-ho to drive back the Horde, and one to hold the capital.

There was wondering and unrest among the northern regiments when they heard of the return of one who called himself their prince; then in the tumult of war he was forgotten by all except his warriors of Liao-tung and one who never forgot.

The corridors of the underground prison had been deserted for at least a day when Mingan, lying on the damp stones, heard steps in the semi-darkness. His door was unlocked, and a man's hands fumbled with his fetters. Presently these fell off, and Mingan saw that his visitor was tall and clad altogether in white silk.

"Servant of Mercy," he said calmly, "if you have come, then my hour is at hand."

The executioner helped him to his feet, took the end of his girdle in one hand and led him into the corridor, up winding steps to a hall where the air was sweeter. Flickering candles stung Mingan's eyes, long accustomed to the gloom. Waiting until his prisoner could endure the light, the Servant of Mercy conducted him out a postern door, across a small court, up other steps into the anterooms of the audience hall of the emperor.

Mingan was aware of two things: It was night, the stars were glittering in the cool air of early Autumn, and the approaches of the palace were deserted. He wondered if Chung-hi wished his coming kept a secret.

Then he heard the measured intonation of temple

gongs in the city beneath. Some important event was taking place.

The white-haired executioner folded his arms, his eyes closed. This bearing of a servant did not hide an impulse of strong feeling in the man.

"Your hour, Prince of Liao-tung, is at hand. If you harken to the voices of your ancestors — and I think you will — you will sit for the first time in the seat of honor. I, unworthy servant of the Dynasty, will choose the knife."

Mingan remembered the first visit of the strangler when he was still a youth. He had slipped out of his bed and laughed at the man. But he was hearing the voice of the executioner as a human being for the first time, and the message puzzled him.

"Was that why you brought me from the cell? At whose command? Speak openly. After five thousand hours of looking into darkness and silence I am old and am not disturbed."

In fact, Mingan's face was filled with tiny new lines, and his eyes, slow moving, were those of a man indifferent to all things.

"No one commanded your release, my lord. I came because it was not fitting that one of noble lineage should starve like a kite in a cage, and because there was no one else to sit in state in this palace. And this night some one must sit in the hall of audience."

"Chung-hi."

"Chung-hi and his courtiers are fled out of the kingdom to the south. There is no one in the palace save you and I and some old slaves and boys."

Mingan started.

"What of the garrison?"

"Chung-hi has taken it to guard his person."

In few words the executioner explained that of the three armies sent against the Mongols one had gained a doubtful success, at the same time that the two others were overwhelmingly defeated by two portions of the Horde under Mukuli and Genghis Khan. Then the Horde had united, scattered the remaining command of the Cathayans, passed the Hoang-ho, and had entered the outer walls of the city, which were weakly manned by levies of citizens. The inner wall had opened its gates to the conquerors, who were now seeking for the palace.

"But the palace itself could be defended!"

"Alas, sir, the slaves have plundered it and, having hidden their spoil safely, have turned their coats — so that they shall not be known for attendants of the Dragon — and sought safety."

Now, looking out into the corridors, Mingan was aware of stealthy shapes that flitted from shadow to shadow, snatching where gold or silver glittered in the light of candles that still burned in their places. He questioned the executioner further — surely some one must be in command here.

The Servant of Mercy shook his head. The Master of Slaves, left in charge of the palace, had carried off the handmaidens, to offer them as slaves to the Mongols. In this way he hoped to insure his safety.

Mingan reflected, and when he looked up again, it was with a purpose formed.

"Conduct me to the dressing-rooms where court-garments are kept. It is not fitting that the palace should be found empty by the conquerors — like a thieves' nest."

Within the imperial wardrobes he allowed the Servant of Mercy to cleanse his face and hands and comb his beard. Then he dismissed the man and himself found and put on the dragon-robe of ceremony, the plush cap with the peacock-feather of rank, and, folding his arms, made his way slowly down to the audience hall which was now quite empty.

Empty, that is, except for the figure that lay extended on the step leading to the chair of the governor of the city. The Servant of Mercy had taken advantage of the interval to cut his throat here, as if to suggest to Mingan what seat he should occupy.

With a gesture of acknowledgment, the prince stepped over the body of the faithful servant and sat down in the lacquered chair, leaning his head back against the silk tapestry that covered the wall. His eyes travelled down the vast extent of the tiled floor, empty as a tomb, and he mused upon the fate that had humbled Cathay.

Presently, bethinking himself of the farewell message custom prescribed, he took from his girdle the writing implements that were a part of the dress and traced on the lapel of the garment these words —

"Striving always to keep faith, I have labored against fate."

A patter of slippered feet, a panting and moaning, and into the hall ran a whining thing that, seeing Mingan

sitting in state, cast itself at his feet, clutching with trembling fingers the hem of his robe. It was the master of the palace slaves, his fine purple coat turned inside out so that the gray lining might be unnoticed in the shadows of the corridors — all the bland composure with which he had once barred Mingan from the imperial gardens quite vanished.

"Excellency — majesty," he panted. "Exalted governor, guard me from the sharp-fanged dog that follows. I am a loyal servant, none more so — "

But with the words he shivered and from his wide sleeve fell strings of pearls, shimmering in the candlelight, and loose rubies and sapphires wrenched from their settings, plundered from the chambers of Chung-hi. What stifled his plea, however, was recognition of Mingan — not the governor of Yen-king, but the wandering actor whom the slave had struck.

Seeing the grave eyes that looked at him reprovingly from the thinned face, the master of the slaves scrambled to his feet, caught up some of the jewels and fled away up the hall, seeking a door by which he might leave it. A burly figure in deer-skins entered by the door through which the slave had come, a Mongol *gur*-khan armed with a heavy spear.

Sighting the fugitive slipping along the wall, the warrior grunted with satisfaction, planted his feet and cast the spear. It passed through the master of the slaves, pinning him against the tapestry. Then, noticing Mingan, the Mongol called over his shoulder —

"Lord, here is one in authority who has not fled but awaits you."

Genghis Khan entered, cast a glance about the hall, and walked over to the chair where Mingan sat. His clumsy walk — he was better accustomed to a saddle than his feet — and uncouth fur garments made him as out of place as a bear in the dwelling of a man.

Resting the end of his scabbard on the step where the executioner lay, he leaned on the wide hand-guard and studied the man in the chair until his brows drew down and he growled —

"Mingan!"

"Aye." The Cathayan prince stood up. "I am in command of the palace and city that you have conquered."

The opinion, evidently, that the conqueror entertained of the manner in which the city had been defended was too contemptuous for words. He spat toward the south.

"Thither went your dog of an emperor. Mingan, you are chief of the northern people. Why do you serve the dynasty of Cathay? Are you Chung-hi's man?"

"Aye, Genghis Khan. My fathers have been faithful to the dynasty, and I am not otherwise. To the utmost I strove to hinder your victory. Know that and do with me as you will."

The eyes of the chieftain gleamed with sudden feeling, and, strangely enough, with satisfaction rather than anger.

"One who served another so will serve me well," he exclaimed.

Mingan pondered and shook his head a little.

"You have conquered an empire in the saddle; you can not govern it so. You know naught of Cathay save to trample it under the hoofs of your horse; I can not stand by and see such a thing."

Saying this, he fully expected the Khan to draw his sword, but the conqueror still leaned on it thoughtfully. Presently he nodded in agreement.

"*Kai* — I am a wild boar of the steppe. They call me the man-slayer, and it is a good name. Certain things I can not do, and must, at a time like this, call upon a wise man, a *magus* such as Prester John. He, being dead, can no longer aid me."

Whereupon, having spoken many words — a thing most unusual in him — the conqueror signed to the *gur*-khan, gave him some orders in a low tone, and beckoned to Mingan.

"Go with this man to the place whither he will lead you. There await my command and, when it comes, decide what you will do. Take this, as a token to protect you, in your Cathayan dress."

He held out the gold tablet, token of a Mongol hero, and raised his hand, dismissing Mingan.

When the two had left the audience hall, Genghis Khan turned over with his foot the jewels scattered on the step. He glanced casually at the dying slave who, propped upright against the wall, gripped the shaft of the spear with both hands. He remembered now that the work of the past months was ended and, to his satisfaction, that he was hungry. So he felt in his pockets and drew out some shreds of meat and dried milk-curds and began to munch.

Presently, catching sight of the official's chair vacated by Mingan, his lips widened in a smile and he chuckled noiselessly.

Meanwhile, Mingan and his guide passed out of the

city through the cordon of Mongol guards. Amid lines of sleeping camels, a pavilion tent glowed with light. About it slumbering warriors, seated on the ground with the reins of their ponies in hand, looked up at their approach, but seeing the *gur*-khan, slept again. Stooping under the entrance flap, Mingan found Chepe Noyon and the Buffalo busily engaged in refreshing themselves at a well-laden table — at least Subotai was stuffing himself. The Tiger sipped the rare white wine of Yen-king and picked at the strings of a gold lute taken from some Cathayan palace.

The two palladins started up at sight of their friend, and Mingan waited to learn how they would receive him.

"Mingan!" cried Chepe Noyon, the first to recognize him in his state dress. "What mummer's garb do you wear now? *Hai* — your coming has saved us a mighty labor. We were ordered by the Khan to search Yen-king and find you within a day and night if we had to turn up the earth of the graves or the mud of the river."

For the first time he noticed the white streaks in the hair of his friend and the lines about Mingan's eyes. "Ah, they say Chung-hi bedded you down in darkness. The swine! A captive we took at the river, a captain of the Liao-tung regiment told us that his prince had appeared in Cathay and had been quartered in a dungeon. His comrades of the north were disgruntled at this treatment of you, and they soon left Chung-hi for their homes, therefore. But enough of this — here are the three palladins united, and our goblets are dry."

Subotai, his mild eyes shining with pleasure patted Mingan on the head and shoulders and quaffed a beaker of

wine with an open throat. In Mingan's heart was a glow that came not from the wine. He was glad to be with the palladins, to stand in a wind-swept tent, listening to the sounds of the camp.

"Truly," he said gravely, "I am no longer your equal; Subotai is commander of a division and you are chief of the Keraits."

Subotai merely grunted, but Chepe Noyon laughed.

"Is it not honor enough, Mingan, that we used your trick to overcome the Cathayans who were numerous as fleas on a nation of dogs?"

"My trick?"

"Aye, so. But I forgot you were in gyves and fetters at the time. Why, the trick of the horse race. Genghis Khan gave to the Buffalo and me barely two *tumans*. Then he sent us against the strongest of the Cathayan armies, so that we were beaten and forced to flee with naught but our shadows. So, he matched his weakest division against the strongest of the emperor, willing to lose that while he and old Mukuli with the main power of the Horde bit into the weaker armies of Cathay like camels chewing a nose-cord. Thus it was that you matched ponies against the Gipsies and won."

Now Subotai folded his arms and stretched his mighty legs in front of him.

"A thought has come to me, O my friends." He paused to gather together words to express his idea. "Genghis Khan has tried each of us in turn. The Tiger he raised to a high place in the world. He knew that Mingan's heart was

divided like a broken goblet when the Horde turned against Cathay. He was aware of the hero's flight, but stayed it not, wishing to test him — knowing that the Cathayans would meet him with dishonor. And now — what has the Khan in store for Mingan?"

A guard entered, conducting one of the councilors of the Mongols and a tall Cathayan in quilted armor, weaponless, with the emblem of Liao-tung sewn on his shoulder, and a helmet bearing a captain's crest. At sight of Mingan, the northerner threw himself on his knees, pressed his head against the ground and joyfully craved permission to speak.

"Live for a hundred years, lord of the hills and forests. I, an unworthy captive, serving as interpreter, bear tidings from Yen-king that the grandees of Cathay, the nobles and councilors are assembling at the palace to salute the new governor chosen by Genghis Khan. Attend, O Bright One, prince of our race, for the northern provinces have need of your wisdom."

At this the Mongol stepped forward and confronted Mingan.

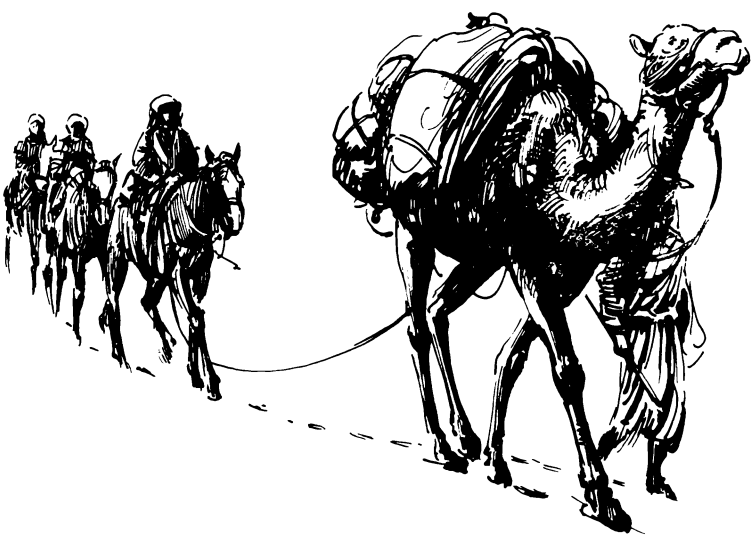
"By order of Genghis Khan — chief of chiefs, lord of the men of the earth — you, Ye Lui Kutsai Mingan, are appointed governor of Cathay under the Khan. Do you accept or refuse?"

Mingan started. He looked down at his countryman of Liao-tung. Then his voice failed him, and he could only nod assent. Chepe Noyon gave a delighted shout and announced that he would compose a new verse for his

"Lament of the Doleful Officer"; Subotai threw his goblet crashing on the ground, seized the bowl of wine, and set it down empty.

As Mingan, followed by the two who had come to seek him, went forth from the tent, he heard the voice of the Tiger raised in song:

"From the gate in the north he sallied forth,
Riding with loosened rein,
To weal or wo, where the four winds blow.
Now he is home again.
What could he do? — 'T'was Heaven's whim!
What could he say, a poor fellow like him?"



THE THREE PALLADINS
by Harold Lamb
Illustrated by Cathy Hill

First published in this form, 1977, in an edition of 2,000 copies. This book was set in 12 point Baskerville in our facility on the AlphaComp, a direct input typesetter, and printed and bound by Haddon Craftsmen, Scranton, Pennsylvania. Text paper is 70# Brokaw Opaque, shade Cafe Au Lait, manufactured for us by the Wausau Paper Mills, Brokaw, Wisconsin.

$15.00

BLACK GOD'S SHADOW

by C. L. MOORE

BLACK GOD'S SHADOW contains five novelettes of C. L. Moore's red-haired and fiery warrior-woman, Jirel of Joiry. Dating back to the 1930's where they were first printed in the heyday of *Weird Tales* magazine, they are a remarkable series of magnificent word pictures — strange fantasies set in a fortressed land close to magic.

"Black God's Kiss," which introduced Jirel to *Weird Tales* readers in 1934, is a powerful weird adventure in which the warrior-woman ventures into a nightmare land that lies far below the vaults of her castle. Close by the shore of a black lake, Joiry's lady comes upon a forbidding temple which yields to her the monstrous weapon that she seeks. Jirel returns to the nightmare land in "Black God's Shadow," seeking to undo the bizarre evil that had resulted from her first visit.

The haunted castle, "Hellsgarde," ringed by mists and wilderness, is beset by those who seek the undead. The result is a classic — one of the most fanciful and effective weird tales ever written. In "Jirel Meets Magic," a wizard is pursued into a land of magic where a dying dryad provides Jirel with a talisman. And, in a startling fantasy concept, Pav of "The Dark Land" is a world in himself.

BLACK GOD'S SHADOW is a book of magic in time-haunted worlds that are alien to earth. Here are worlds filled with beauty and much sadness, where love and hate are sometimes indistinguishable.

Illustrated in remarkable color by Alicia Austin.

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WEST KINGSTON, RHODE ISLAND