Riders of the Steppes

THE COMPLETE COSSACK ADVENTURES
VOLUME THREE

HAROLD LAMB

BISON
BOOKS

Riders *of the* Steppes

The Complete Cossack Adventures
Volume Three

Harold Lamb

Edited by Howard Andrew Jones
Introduction by E. E. Knight

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Foreword

By 1920 Harold Lamb had written fifteen adventures of Khlit the Cossack and had seemingly concluded the series with the climactic novel "The Curved Sword." More than two years were to pass before another of his Cossack stories were published ("Sangar," a stand-alone that appears in volume 4 of this series), but Lamb was hardly idle. He had turned to writing of Crusaders and other historic adventurers.

In 1923 Lamb revisited the Steppes with a new series, beginning with a short piece introducing readers to Ayub, a Cossack of great bravery and Herculean strength. A few months later Ayub was joined by Demid, a lean, hawk-faced Cossack from the Don. Demid has all the guile we might expect to see in a young Khlit, had Lamb ever drafted tales of his youth, and an eye for the ladies as well. In other words, Demid is a leading man, Cossack style, and over the course of his adventures with Ayub he rises from the position of newcomer to Koshevoi Ataman, leader of all the Cossacks.

After four adventures as Demid's sidekick, Ayub meets up one day with a youthful *bandura* player accompanied by a shrewd, aged Cossack with long gray mustaches. The oldster is, of course, Khlit, and the youngster is his grandson Kirdy, whom Khlit wishes to see installed into the ranks of the Cossacks. First, though, Khlit wishes Kirdy to learn a few more lessons about the nature of men—and women—and battle. Fortunately those sorts of lessons seem never hard to find when you're a Cossack on the Steppes. Eventually Kirdy, Khlit, and Ayub join forces with Demid in another novel-length adventure that is one of the high points of the entire series, the rare "White Falcon."

It was during these final years of Lamb's Cossack saga that Robert E. Howard was regularly reading *Adventure*. In a letter to H. P. Lovecraft,

Howard named Lamb as one of his favorite writers, adding later that he had both respect and keen admiration for him. Patrice Louinet's excellent introduction to *Lord of Samarcand* already noted the similarity in tone and theme between Lamb and Howard, and in that collection Patrice introduced Howard's outline of Lamb's story "The Wolf Chaser."

Patrice kindly shared another unpublished Howard document with me, rightly suspecting it was somehow connected to Lamb. It consisted of a long list of names and terms, mostly Cossack and Mongolian. A search through Lamb texts showed us that Howard had apparently gone through a stack of Lamb stories, writing down foreign terms and phrases in the same order that they appeared in Lamb's fiction, probably planning to use them in his own historicals. "Bogatyr," in this volume, is one of those Howard studied. If, then, you find yourself enjoying "Bogatyr" and others collected here, consider yourself in good company.

Unless you happen to be a collector of pulp magazines or were alive in Howard's day, this volume is stuffed with hard-to-find treats. Three stories in this book *have* seen hardcovers, but two have been missing from bookstore shelves since the 1960s, and "White Falcon" has been out of print since the 1920s. The rest have languished in obscurity since their appearance in *Adventure*, circa 1923 to 1925.

As a result, most of you will be coming upon Ayub, and Demid, and the lovely witch of Aleppo for the very first time. I envy you. And for those Khlit fans out there who have never had the chance to read "White Falcon," well, I envy you that experience as well. Treachery, daring raids, races against death, skillful swordplay, loyal comrades, exotic and deadly cities and landscapes, dashing heroes and leading ladies—it's all here.

As with the previous volumes, *Riders of the Steppes* features an appendix that reprints the essays Lamb sometimes wrote in issues of *Adventure* in which his stories appeared. They often provide a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at the truth behind the fiction. Sometimes, as with "White Falcon," the events in Lamb's stories are solidly based in historical fact, fantastic as they may seem..

Volume Four prints the last adventure of Kirdy and Khlit, a never-before-reprinted novel of Ayub's final adventure, a short series starring another Cossack duo, and a grab bag of exciting stand-alone Cossack stories.

For now, though, sit back with this volume of grand adventures and enjoy!

Editor's Note

A big part of preparing manuscripts for these four volumes was the finding of them, for they were scattered through dozens of rare magazines and the longer stories were sometimes divided in parts over multiple issues.

To our good fortune, Robert E. Howard scholars like Rusty Burke and Patrice Louinet had access to many original manuscripts. In Lamb's case nearly all of his originals have been lost, leaving only the stories as they appeared in the magazines. (There is no "master list" of Lamb stories, either, except an unofficial one compiled by Lamb devotees, and previously unknown Lamb stories can still turn up in obscure old magazines.)

One can only make guesses, then, if the spelling of a word like "scimitar" or "Circassian" changes from story to story. Likewise, if an out of place comma or dash appears, was it Lamb's preference or the magazine editor's or a typesetting error?

From the start I was determined to edit with a light hand. Spellings of certain terms were standardized. Sometimes a comma or a dash was added or deleted, though only when it seemed absolutely necessary to improve clarity. I believe it the duty of an editor to present a work in the best possible light, not just to slavishly reprint a work as it first appeared, as though every punctuation mark is holy writ. Things might have been different had original manuscripts been found against which to compare the magazine texts.

Only twice in the entire four-volume collection was it necessary to make significant changes to clauses in the text. One of the changes could not be helped: a typesetting error in the original magazine printing of "The Post in the Steppe" wherein several lines in the story's left column were duplicated on the story's right column, obliterating the end of a sentence. Lamb's original text is long since dust, so there was nothing to do

but edit the duplication out and insert what seemed a logical end to the interrupted phrase.

Correcting the second error is more complicated. While preparing these stories for this collection I came again to a minor chronological inconsistency that had troubled me since I'd first read the Ayub and Demid stories. Lamb had earlier established that Khlit was adventuring near the end of the sixteenth century. He set the adventures of Ayub and Demid more precisely, in 1611, so that Khlit is quite logically older when Ayub meets him. All fine and well, except that Boris Godunov, whom Ayub meets in 1611, died in 1605. When writing historical fiction it is perfectly acceptable to have people live a little later or earlier than they did in real life—Lamb certainly wasn't the first author to change history's timeline to better tell a story. This wasn't the issue. The problem was the mention of Boris Godunov being dead in the earlier story "Men from Below" and then being quite obviously alive, a little later, in "White Falcon."

Lamb probably never envisioned these stories being collected, and magazine readers would be unlikely to notice the discrepancy between stories that were printed many months apart. Lamb likely came upon the historical events that inspired "White Falcon" after he'd written the other tales, saw their fine potential as a story, and determined to accurately portray them with the right ruler of Russia. He also saw how to incorporate them into his saga, which would require twisting the timeline he'd established to fit his characters into the tale.

As the editor of the work of a man long dead I had three options: leave the text as it was, alter a number of dates in several stories so everything synced up and trim the portions of some paragraphs that mentioned Godunov's death, or simply delete the troublesome sentences that declared Godunov deceased.

I chose to address the situation with the smallest amount of text tampering possible by deleting part of some sentences. Casual students of history would be unlikely to know that Boris Godunov was dead by 1611 and would be untroubled by his living presence in that year. However, if I had left the text as it was, some readers may have wondered why a corpse in one story was ruling from a throne several stories later.I present the paragraph in its original form here. It is the ninth paragraph from the start of "Men from Below." The deleted portion begins immediately after the semicolon with the phrase "when Boris Godunov" and ends with the question mark: "Why not? When Dutch and English emissaries at the court of the

Grand Turk gave him placating gifts of money and arms, seasoned with apologies? And why not, when up behind the frontier the Poles made war on the Muscovites, and the Muscovites made war on each other, *boyar* fighting peasant; when Boris Godunov, who had been tsar in the *koshevoi's* best days, was dead, and the nobles were clawing the flesh from the bones of the serfs? The whole Christian world, as far as the chief of the Cossacks reeked of it, was burning up powder and shouting for more." There you have it, a lengthy and likely dry look behind the scenes at the editorial process.

The second paragraph occurs in chapter III of "Men from Below" and originally appeared as: "Whereas the first men of Khor had been sole masters of an estate the size of a small kingdom, and of all the souls upon it, times had changed. The empire had stretched its bounds to the Dnieper, and the old owners were taxed on their possessions. Now that the emperor, Boris Godunov, was dead, conditions were no better because the new boyars increased taxes and demanded levies of men for wars."

Finally, in the same story, the Koshevoi Ataman refers to the tsar, Boris Godunov; in the original text, he said "the *last* tsar."

I can only hope that all the wrangling and deliberation that took place—sometimes over simple commas—has helped create something like what Harold Lamb would have wanted to see had he been alive to champion this collection.

As noted, the editors at Bison Books and I have chosen to leave the stories themselves as originally presented, with the exception of minor adjustments for editorial consistency. Certain attitudes expressed by the characters or used by the author remain just as they were printed in the early twentieth century. It should go without saying that what is privately and even publicly acceptable in one century may make for uncomfortable reading in the next. Some of Lamb's character portrayals would today be considered anti-Semitic, sexist, or prejudiced against certain ethnic groups. Though Lamb may have been trying to capture the biased attitudes of his characters, or reflect those of his society, he seems to have been uncomfortable with some of these portrayals later in his life, for he left stories with the most offensive of these elements out of the only collection prepared for re-publication before his death.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Bill Prather of Thacher School for his continued support, encouragement, enthusiasm, and friendship. I also would like to express my appreciation for the tireless efforts of Victor Dreger, who pored over acres of old maps to compile a map of the locations that appear in the final version printed within this book. Thank yous also are due to the tireless Bruce Nordstrom, Dr. Victor H. Jones, and Jan Van Heiningen for aid in manuscript acquisition, as well as S. C. Bryce, who kindly provided a timely and time-consuming last-minute check of some key issues of *Adventure*, and Dr. James Pfundstein and Doug Ellis for similar aid. A great deal of time was saved because of the manuscript preservation efforts of the late Dr. John Drury Clark. I'm grateful to the staff at the University of Nebraska Press, for their support of the project and for efficiently shepherding the manuscript through the publication process. I'm likewise appreciative and delighted by the hard work of cover artist and map artist Darrel Stevens. Thank you all for your hard work and dedication—you have helped bring Khlit the Cossack and his world to life.

Introduction

E. E. Knight

Don't have a hundred rubles: have a hundred friends.

Russian proverb

If Robert E. Howard is justly named the king of "Sword and Sorcery" thanks to Conan, and my hometown icon, Edgar Rice Burroughs, is justly named the warlord of "Sword and Planet" due to John Carter's exploits on Mars, then it is only fair to crown Harold Lamb the tsar of "Sword and History" thanks to his Cossack stories.

Before he settled into writing history and biography, Lamb was best known for his Cossacks (literally "wanderers" or "vagabonds," masterless men—or *ronin*, if you will) though he devoted the same attention to historical accuracy that he later would to his nonfiction. The Khlit tales thunder off the pages, so much so that the reader, traveling between campfire and battlefield, seldom notices just how much he has learned by the time the last page is turned.

Lamb's worlds are rife with detail placed stealthily along the roadside rather than dropped into the median for the reader to plow through. Nor are his worlds ever in stasis; new powers are constantly rising as the old fade or change, far more dramatically than would be guessed at given the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century setting, when life supposedly moved slowly and change came to backwaters like the Russian Steppe and the Forest Castle of Tor in increments, if at all.

And they are distinct worlds. The smoky, mud-littered *kremyl* of Moscow where the tsar sits under a howdah next to an ivory elephant is utterly different from the vampire-haunted banks of the Volga where pony droppings warm the camp and corn brandy inflames the Cossacks, which is

again different from the princely kingdoms of India or a Turkish harem. We, in our age of iconographic traffic signs, cellular towers, and the worldwide corporation, can hardly imagine how alien cultures divided by geography and religion can become. In this time survival of one's *narod* (people), at home and abroad, often depended on the ability to fight.

Lamb never forgets this, and as a mark of his skill he is able to work effectively in multiple cultural viewpoints in a single story. Van Elfsburg's thoughts upon seeing the Don Cossacks on the march in "White Falcon" picks out details that strike the Swedish professional soldier as strange, as strange as the sherbets and sweetmeats of Aleppo are to the Cossacks. It is a world where displaying the wrong color, as Khlit's grandson Kirdy does in "Bogatyr" by wearing green pantaloons, might lead to a lingering and painful death at the hands of one's outraged enemies.

For all his skill at world-building, Lamb's real strength is in his plotting. His stories have a tendency to fly off in any direction the compass may point, like a prowling falcon spotting a rising duck. The strange alliances and enmities that convincingly rise out of "Bogatyr" might startle anyone not used to Lamb's turns. Lamb makes new story lines appear with the facility of a three-card-monte dealer turning up and then hiding the red card.

Because of his skill in these two areas Lamb's readers offered the highest compliment that may be paid to a writer: they demanded more of his work. But Khlit could only travel so far before his sword arm weakened as he aged—another of Lamb's strengths was his faithful recreation of the epochs of a man's life, and age brought its blessings and curses even to Khlit—though his essential Br'er Rabbit wiliness remained intact. Not every graying hero is vouchsafed a Wagnerian end in the manner of Tolkien's Theoden or Kipling's grey wolf Akela from the *Jungle Book*. Yet how does one keep supplying the readers with the thunder of Tartar hooves and the dissonant clamor of swordplay when their hero is too old to fight? Who would stand at the forefront of Lamb's cannon-cracking battles? He decided to give Khlit blood relations and allies.

This volume largely deals with the adventures of Khlit's *druzyak* (friends, or pals). Kirdy, Khlit's grandson and deviser of stratagems that rival those of the grandsire; Ayub, the gigantic bearer of an ancient great sword; and Demid, the Falcon, leader of the Don Cossacks, came to the Lamb fan's rescue.

Not that Khlit disappears from these stories. Khlit in his twilight years is all the more wonderful, for now that he can no longer win through on the strength of his arm and the courage of his horse he has to rely on the wit that has always been his real weapon. Whether bargaining for the lives of the Don Cossacks with the brooding Tsar Boris Godunov or for a handful of captured peasants with his ancient enemy of the Steppes, Gerai Khan, in this volume we see Khlit as resourceful as he ever was, even if his tactics must change.

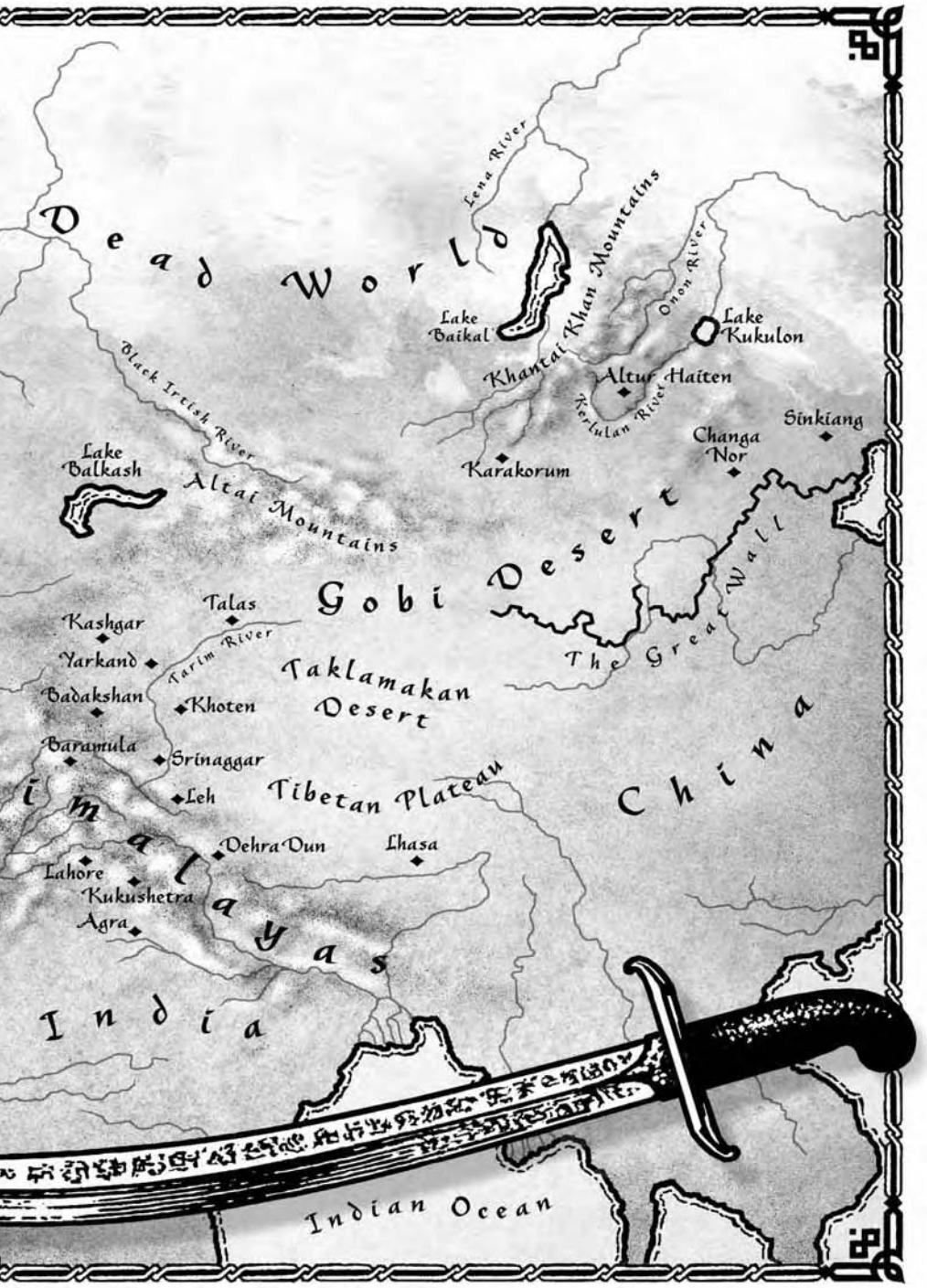
The three new Cossacks travel by shaggy pony and captured galley across half the width of Asia in these adventures, fearless and fearsome as Khlit in his prime. Quick to drink, quick to fight, quick to brag and sing, brimming with the zest for life tinged with melancholy that seems intrinsically Russian, the stories involving our three new Cossacks have all the vigor of their famously acrobatic dances, carried along by Lamb's energetic prose.

These new *druzyak* are well worth knowing.

Cossacks in the mold of Ayub and Demid still survive on the Don and Kuban rivers; according to my Russian friends their drinking and dancing, singing and stories have lost none of their legendary heart. I should like to see them in person someday and learn more. In the absence of a trip into the heart of Mother Russia, and numerous visits to museums and libraries, this volume of Harold Lamb will do quite nicely for now.

Riders of the Steppes

WOLF'S WORLD
Moskva
Kiev
Dnieper River
Donetz River
Don River
Volga River
Jaick River
Kazan
Ural Mountains
The
Sietch
Rusk
Sirog
Sea of Azov
Kamyshin
Astrakhan
Steppes
Roum
Charnomar
Blue Sea
Sea of Khozar
Kizil Kum Desert
Urgench
Bokhara
Samarkand
Roof of the World
Aleppo
Damascus
Tabriz
Alamut
Jerusalem
Balkh
Herat
Hindu Kush
Persian Desert
Isphahan
Karadak
Bandar Abbasi
Indus River
Arabia
Red Sea
Gulf of Arabia


Dead World
Lena River
Khan Mountains
Onon River
Lake Baikal
Lake Kukulon
Khantai
Altur Haiten
Kerlulan River
Sinkiang
Changa Nor
Black Irtish River
Lake Balkash
Karakorum
Altai Mountains
Gobi Desert
The Great Wall
Talas
Kashgar
Yarkand
Tarim River
Taklamakan Desert
Badakshan
Khoten
Baramula
Srinaggar
Leh
Tibetan Plateau
China
Himalayas
Dehra Dun
Lhasa
Lahore
Kukushetra
Agra
India
Indian Ocean

An Edge to a Sword

Old Goloto, my uncle, has made many swords. Even sometimes for the gentry that lie a night or so at our hamlet of Rusk when they are journeying along the highway. And my uncle has a saying that every sword he makes grows to resemble its owner.

I do not know. But upon our rare visits to the manor house, where the boyar Sayanski—the nobleman, our landowner—has a collection of rarities, my uncle has taken up various weapons and said—

"This belonged to an out-at-heels adventurer who served the devil more than God." Or, "This was cared for, once, by a khan of the Turks."

Why specks of rust along the blade, and a gilded handguard should make him say the first, or the glint of blue in a scimitar's steel, and the faint lines of chasing that once had been inlaid with gold should hint to him the second, is hard to say. But, whether or no, old Goloto's words often proved true.

Certainly, he was a plain smith, a God-fearing man, who held no intercourse with the evil spirits. He alone of the good men of Rusk knows the truth of the bewitched sword of Ayub.

But of this weapon and what befell at the manor house on that Winter night in the year 1610 of Our Lord he has not spoken, save to me.

What my eyes beheld and what Old Goloto told me I shall set down in few words, being no clerk or even *bandura* player, like Blind Foma, who was Ayub's friend.

We were taking our ease on the bench in front of the tavern—that is, Sayanski, the landowner, sat at one end and my uncle and Foma at the other, while I—the lad Gregory—teased the innkeeper's wolfhound.

It was the quiet hour before sunset, a warm day in early Summer. The drone of the locusts out on the steppe and the rustle of the reeds along the Dnieper's bank were louder than the low voices of the men. By the whipping post across the highway the girls were giggling and Ima, my young cousin, was the worst of them.

But I heard the boyar Sayanski say that he only sat at the tavern to watch for the coming of his relative, who was an officer in the Moscow guards. He had said the same thing for a month; still, he always drank a good deal of the tavern's best mead. He wore a soiled neckcloth, and his eyes were never still; some said he kept his hands in his pockets so much because his sleeves had no lace, others argued that his fingers were counting over his monies.

I was wondering whether he really looked for his relative, the officer, or whether he liked the smack of the mead, when my uncle spoke up.

"Might that be him?"

Old Goloto never called Sayanski "my lord" like Foma and the rest. We all looked up and saw a rider entering the *sloboda* with a led horse.

Now those were uncertain times, and Rusk is in the open steppe country on the highway that runs from Moscow south, along the Dnieper to the Black Sea. We were on the frontier kept by the armies of the Empire, and in our time we saw many an affray between river pirates and the barges of Greek and Armenian merchants, and many a raid by the Tatars from the steppe. So we looked twice at every stranger.

This one, however, was not the landowner's relative, because he approached from the south. He was a man big around the barrel as a wine keg, with his long sheepskin coat thrown back, for the heat, and his high, black sheepskin hat on the back of his head. So, we saw that the front part of his head was bald and sunburned.

"That's a good horse," said my uncle.

The stranger rode a black stallion, massive in the chest, but with good length of limb and a fine head. Well that it was so, for the rider must have weighed more than two hundred pounds.

"Pig of an innkeeper!" he roared, when he reined in. "Don't you know when a Cossack is thirsty?"

At this summons the tavern-keeper came out, promptly enough, with a mug of corn brandy, but he hung back when he noticed that the stranger had no coins ready. Nor did he have sword or purse hanging from his broad leather girdle.

"Dog of the ——!" growled the Cossack, his black eyes seeking us out. "Good sirs, did you ever see the like? Here a Christian knight who has smoked his pipe in the mosques of Constantinople must go with a dry gullet at the pleasure of this midwife!"

At this Blind Foma smiled down one side of his greasy face. From eye to chin on the other side his cheek had been ripped up by a wild boar's tusk: this eye had been torn out, and the other was feeble. The children were afraid of him, and I always crossed my fingers when I met him o' nights near the Witches' Wood on the river bank.

The tavern-keeper rubbed his chin and stood first on one foot, then on the other. Sometimes the Cossacks heaped good coins upon him, and spoil taken from the Turks and Tatars. At other times they gutted his cellar and whipped him to square the reckoning.

They were a wild folk from the southern steppe, who were always riding to a war, or from one. My uncle did a deal of work for them, sharpening their swords, or mending their cuirasses or shoeing their beasts with good leather. He never complained when he lacked of pay, because he said that if it were not for the knights of Kazakdom the Turks and Tatars would come over the steppe and burn our villages.

Ima, Goloto's devilkin of a daughter, always liked to see the Cossacks come along the highway, for at such times there would be dancing and music. Just now she was standing at the stallion's head, twisting her toes in the dust and shaking back her long, black locks as she did when she wanted to be noticed.

Ayub, as the Cossack was called, reached into the pack of the led horse and pulled out a silver goblet, throwing it at the tavern-keeper by way of paying his score for the mead. After the innkeeper had examined the goblet he fell to rubbing his hands and called Ayub a noble knight. But the Cossack grunted and asked Ima to fetch him the mead. She looked at my uncle.

"Give the Cossack his drink," said Goloto in his slow fashion, and she did so.

Ayub chuckled and took one of her locks in his big paw admiringly but without trying to kiss her as most men did.

"Have you any more trinkets like that, Cossack?" Sayanski, the boyar, spoke up, pointing at the goblet, although his eyes were studying the big stallion.

When Ayub emptied his sack in the road and a fine Moslem helmet rolled out, with a pearl-studded girdle and a dagger shaped like one of our sickles, Sayanski went over and picked them up and said he would give Ayub two gold sequins for the lot and then he would have money for whatever he wanted.

"As you like," responded the Cossack, dismounting—for our mead was famous.

And the tavern-keeper muttered under his breath as Sayanski paid over the coins. The sequins did not amount to a fourth the value of the things, and if the landowner had let Ayub alone the tavern would have been the gainer.

"I see that you have borne yourself like a *bogatyr*—a hero—in the wars, my fine fellow," went on Sayanski and this time his eyes dwelt on the stallion. "How is it that you lack a sword?"

Ayub, who was taking the saddle off the black made no response.

"Doubtless," said Sayanski again, raising his voice, "you broke your sword on the thigh bone of a Moslem. Why should a knight like you trouble to care for two horses? I will give you a fine sword and a score of bright *byzants* for the stallion. Come, will you sell him?"

"Not for a piece of the true Cross," answered the Cossack.

"For thirty *byzants*?"

For the first time Ayub looked at Sayanski carefully, and for some reason my uncle took his clay pipe from his lips and leaned forward, although he is not at all hard of hearing and the landowner had spoken in a high, clear voice.

But the Cossack only said that he was hungry, and that the innkeeper should roast the quarter of a sheep and bring him a cask of corn brandy. After feeding and bedding down the stallion and the led horse himself in the stable, he came back and swore that things were dull in our village. He sat down on his saddle and smoked a pipe of my uncle's tobacco, and shouted for the *bandura* players to strike up a measure and the girls to dance.

Ah, it was a fine feast we had that evening when Ayub spent his two sequins and even the dogs were fat. Blind Foma played, but he could never play fast enough for the Cossack, who jumped in among the villagers and began to leap and shout, striking his silver heels on the earth in the wild dance of the South.

"Eh—eh! That is how it should be done, you sluggards! —— take you; what dolts you are!"

It made my blood throb. And Ima began to show off, as usual, spinning around in the dance like a sprite whirling up a chimney's smoke. When she danced that night her eyes were dark and her cheeks paled. The moon had come up over the osiers behind the inn, at the river bank, and the people looked like shadows. Ayub had eyes only for my cousin, when she danced, and thereafter he cherished her in his heart, although I did not know this until the time came when he first used the bewitched sword.

It was long, long ago. Who can forget a night like that? The warm breath of the hay fields was about us, but even when the good people were merriest the chill breath of the river came up, through the Witches' Wood, and Blind Foma lifted his head and shivered as if someone had touched him on the cheek.

The next morning after I had watched Ima drive off the two cows to the fields, I ran around to the inn, keeping out of sight of Goloto's forge, because I wanted to see what Ayub was up to.

He was not in the tavern. In the middle of the road he lay, his booted feet stretched wide, his scalp lock stretched out above his head in the dust, snoring louder than a dozen wolfhounds. So I waited until the sun should stir him up from his sleep. And presently Sayanski came along, riding his brown mare on business of his own. Seeing Ayub, the boyar tickled his bald forehead none too gently with a whip, and the Cossack sat up snorting.

"I hear, Ayub, that you have squandered all your money in carousing. Tck! Tck! Well, a man like you must have his fling, I suppose. You'll want some money to go on with, of course."

As Ayub did nothing but yawn and spit, Sayanski continued.

"What do you say to twenty-five gold *byzants* for that stallion?"

A man who has looked long on the pot is a dour fellow to prod out of his sleep, as I have come to know when Old Goloto was wakened on the morn after a Christian feast day.

Ayub looked up, his heavy brows drawn down.

"Have you really twenty-five gold pieces?"

Sayanski actually laughed and began to count them out, quickly enough, from his pouch. To make sure he counted them back again into his other fist.

"There my fine fellow, you can see them."

"Aye, you have them. Well, if you were to offer me twenty-five thousand *byzants* and a talisman that would make Satan himself turn tail you couldn't have my stallion."

And then Ayub stretched himself out again with his arm across his eyes to keep out the sun and began to snore. Sayanski thrust the coins back into his pouch as if they were hot, and his thin face grew red. He raised his whip to beat the Cossack, but seeing that I was watching from the hedge, he rode off saying under his breath that Ayub was a ditch-born dolt.

But before he went he spoke to the tavern-keeper, saying that the Cossack should have neither bed nor board without paying down for it, and the tavern-keeper promised because he feared the landowner. In the village of Rusk were many who feared Sayanski's visits, and the reckoning of his interest books. Still, my uncle said, who ever heard of a village without an owner, or a serf without a master?

So that morning the Cossack took his beasts out of the stable and went off toward the river. We thought he had crossed Father Dnieper and gone off on the Tatar side of the river, perhaps to steal horses.

That night, however, Blind Foma said Ayub had cleared a patch of land not far from the village, at the edge of the wood.

He built himself a hut of osiers, woven together, and plastered it over with wet clay that hardened when it dried. Then he made a low, flat stove of stones, covered with the clay, for a bed when the frost came.

Foma went to live with him, as the *bandura* player was accustomed to do when his company was welcomed and there was food to be shared. Together they made nets for bird snares and other woven nets for fish. Ayub added a wattle shed to the open end of the hut, for his horses, so that they could be near the stove in Winter, and worked hard for a while with one of my uncle's scythes cutting hay which he stacked behind the hut.

In the evenings, when they were most apt to be awake at the same time, I went often to the hut by the river, to listen to their stories.

Ayub, when I brought some of my uncle's tobacco, would tell me how the Cossacks of the siech—the war encampments—made great skiffs to row down the river to the Black Sea and tackle the sultan's fine craft. And how the comrades of his *kuren* had died, one by one—some nailed to a cross by the Poles, some burnt alive by the Moslems; others drowned in a tempest on the water, others with their brains scattered by their foes' pistolettes. Fine tales they were.

Best of them, however, was the account of how Ayub had chased a Tatar over the steppe through the tall grass as high as the riders' heads, until the black stallion gained on the Tatar horse, and their hoofs struck fire so mightily that the whole steppe was soon in flames, whereupon the Tatar's horse began to fly through the air with its tail aflame, going higher and higher until it was galloping around the stars like a streak of red fire. Ayub asked me if I had never seen a star shooting down to earth with a flaming tail. To be sure, such things were!

But Ayub was very anxious to know if I ever saw such an event near Rusk, because he wanted very much to mount the black stallion and rush to where the Tatar landed on earth again and put an end to him.

"Eh—eh!" Ayub would chuckle when he had finished this tale. "You are a good lad, Gregory, and some day you will have a horse like mine, and chase a Tatar all the way to Cathay. —— take me if you won't!"

When harvest time came he went into the fields with our people and for a few days did the work of three men. He was stronger, even than Old Goloto in his prime, when my uncle could thrash any two men in the district.

After that he and Foma had a grand carouse at the inn, and when the first snow came down on the steppe, instead of riding south to the wars, Ayub took to sitting in my uncle's smithy, helping him at times mending saddles, or with the bellows when Old Goloto had a tough piece of work in hand. So he managed to be at the forge when the girl Ima came in at noon with our barley cakes and cheese and *varenukha*—corn brandy.

Then Ayub would follow her with his eyes, and chuckle when she teased him. When she sat in the doorway combing her hair or trying on a new cap, he said sometimes that she would make a pretty handful for a husband.

"Well," Ima would say, tossing her head, "I won't marry you, anyway, Ayub. Why, you would take your black horse and go off somewhere or other and then the Tatars would send back your head in a basket!"

"True, as God is my witness," Ayub would answer. And he never laughed when he said that.

"I hear," Goloto would put in, "that the Moslems are tearing the robes off the holy *batkos*, the good Christian priests in the South. Why don't you mount and ride across the border and teach them a thing or two, Ayub? You could break the sultan across your knee—*crack*, like that!"

"The —— take the sultan and all the Moslems, too!" And the Cossack, chin on fist, would sit and look at my cousin.

At such times, however, Ayub was moody. His eyes would grow heavy and he would sit without moving. Then he would be restless as a fish out of water, and take out the big black horse, to ride him down the highway and back, the stallion tearing over the hard-packed snow with arched neck and flying mane. Horse and rider would be steaming like mad when they came back. I thought perhaps Ayub was looking for his enemy, up among the stars, to come down to earth near Rusk.

Whenever he passed Sayanski, who was always about his business on the brown mare, the landowner would rein in and gaze after the stallion as if Ayub owed him rent monies that Sayanski would one day collect.

But when Christmas drew near, his Excellency's temper changed for the better. At least he gave Ayub the sword that was bewitched.

Sayanski said it was a pity that Ayub should lack a sword, while he had so many in his collection. The weapon he bestowed on the Cossack was a heavy one with a long hilt and a splendid scabbard of leather in which was an inscription inlaid in gilt. Sayanski said this inscription was a charm.

Whoever wielded the sword could cut through the body of an enemy as easily as through a tallow candle. An iron shield or a shirt of Turkish mail would fall apart at the touch of the heavy brand.

Now Sayanski knew this for two reasons. He had the weapon from a wandering Gypsy in the Astrakahn market place, and the Gypsy had stolen it from the tomb of a Turkish khan, where splendid things were kept, among them the magic sword that the Moslems feared to handle after the death of its owner. We, along the border, had heard the tale.

Also, Foma, who recked a little of Moslem script, said that the writing on the scabbard was the legend

> *Steel will not turn aside the edge of this sword when the right hand wields it.*

Only, Sayanski warned Ayub that he must not tamper with the weapon, or take it from scabbard to hew wood or quarter a sheep, or the edge would be dulled. Ayub tended it carefully, too, because once I saw him studying the blade and tapping it with his great fingers as if he feared it might break in his hands.

Truly, a fine gift. And Sayanski asked not a kopeck in return. The people of Rusk stared mightily when Ayub appeared among them with the sword slung from his girdle, but the Cossack was pleased.

"Eh—eh! This sword will match the magic of the Tatar who is chasing around among the stars. Gregory, my lad, when he comes down we'll soon finish him off!"

I thought perhaps on Christmas eve when the spirits, as everyone knows, are up and about, Ayub's enemy might ride down into Rusk in flames. God willed otherwise, as I shall relate.

The man who came to Rusk several days before Christmas was not the Tatar, but a splendid nobleman, Varslan. A sledge drew up at the smithy one day when Ima had just brought our noon bite, and Ayub was in his hut sleeping on his stove.

A runner of the sledge was broken and Varslan ordered my uncle to mend it. He was a tall man, wrapped up in a sable coat that came to the tops of his polished boots. A *heyduke* waited on him—a fine officer's servant in a red *kaftan.*

"Is this the *sloboda* of Rusk, fellow?" The gentleman asked of my uncle. "Then direct me to the estate of the landowner, and be quick about it!"

When Old Goloto had pointed out the roof of the manor house near the edge of the wood, the nobleman swore that he'd be roasted in a brazen ox if he would lie here in such a sheep's trough a night after the sledge was mended. He tapped his snuff box and flicked the lace at his throat, scowling until his glance fell on Ima, who had drawn herself off into a corner, instead of hanging around as usual. Then the boyar saluted her politely and asked her name. When he would have taken her hand she slipped away.

"Go to the manor house," he ordered his *heyduke*, "and inform the worthy Sayanski that the Cornet Varslan, his cousin, is arrived. I will follow at once."

After he had given some more directions about the sledge, he looked around for Ima, but she had vanished. He took out his painted snuff box again, and walked off. His long saber, hung upon a low baldric, slapping against his boots—a tall man, quick moving, a fine weapon at his side.

So the officer, Sayanski's cousin, came to Rusk.

And that very evening he visited the tavern of the landowner, although Sayanski had not been there for a month. They sat down at the table next to Ayub and Blind Foma, where I was—for already the excitement of the coming festival was upon us children, and I wanted to see all that was going on.

We all bowed when the two nobles came in, but Sayanski took no notice of us, as he was whispering to his cousin. The Cornet ordered wine and cursed the innkeeper because it was not better. He sat back on his stool as if it had been a lord's chair, and drank half a bottle, pulling at his mustache in silence the while, his sable coat thrown back, showing the lace and fine blue cloth of his uniform. No one presumed to speak aloud, except Ayub, who was trying to persuade Foma to play a piece.

So it happened that everyone was sitting looking at them, and Sayanski was fingering his neckcloth restlessly, when the officer leaned back too far and lost his balance. He fell against Ayub, and got to his feet without assistance.

"A pox on you, for a clumsy lout! Can't you keep from bumping into a man like me!" The gray eyes of the Cornet were cold.

"Health to you, Excellency. Indeed I didn't move from my seat," answered Ayub, without growing angry.

We all thought that the officer was provoked at his own clumsiness and wanted to make out that Ayub had jostled him.

"I say that you did! A fine *ataman*, by all the saints, to sit guzzling in a village!"

Not until then had we known that Ayub was captain of a *kuren* of Cossacks. Perhaps the Cornet Varslan had noticed some mark of his rank, or had heard of him. I do not know. Anyway, the officer was working himself into a magnificent rage.

Ayub merely chuckled and looked around as if it were a good joke.

"Mother of God!" cried Varslan. "Do you laugh at me?"

"Why should I? When a fellow has a bottle of wine inside his skin like you, he feels like joking sure enough."

"Ah, you call me fellow—you, a lick-spittle ruffian!"

Varslan laid his hand on the hilt of his saber and aimed a kick at the stool on which Ayub sat. The big Cossack, however, rose to his feet so quickly that the stool spun away from under him. As he moved his fingers touched the handguard of the weapon Sayanski had given him, and he shook his head from side to side like a bear confronted by one of the wolfhounds.

We all sat very quiet, and the landowner went over to a corner of the narrow room as if his boots would make too much noise. I was wondering if the Cossack would cut Varslan in two pieces with his magic sword,

but Ayub drank the rest of the mead that was in his tankard and wiped his mustache lazily.

"Eh, Cornet," he muttered, "this tavern is very small. Still it is much better than a box of a room six feet by two by three—the kind a fellow lives in after he is dead."

Varslan frowned, as if puzzled by this, and Ayub took Foma by the arm and moved to the door, stopping to pay his score and bid us good night. It seemed to me that the officer was more angry than before, for some reason or other. Before long he went out, leaving the reckoning to Sayanski, who tramped along at his heels. I waited a moment and followed, pulling up my coat, for the night was bitter without.

The two men from the manor house were standing in the highway, talking, and, after pretending to walk around the tavern, I tiptoed up to the hedge, glad that the moon was behind clouds just then.

Varslan was saying that the Cossack was a coward, and he could not make him stand his ground—whatever he meant by that. Then Sayanski pulled at his sleeve and said—

"Hush!"

But as they moved off I heard Varslan answer.

"It will be simpler, you confounded dog, to take the horse another way. You will gain nothing from the sword, after all. Without doubt my dear cousin—I'll find amusement enough to pass the time."

Then they released their horses and rode away. I wasted no time in circling the village in running to my uncle's cottage, because it looked as if the two gentlemen had meant to quarrel with Ayub, so that Sayanski could get his hand on the black stallion, in some way or other. The thought troubled me, the more so that I found my uncle and Ayub together in the smithy, although it was then late at night.

Old Goloto would listen to no words from me, but thrust me out of the door, shutting it tight and barring it from within. I lingered outside, shivering, because Ayub ought to know what I had heard.

The two talked within a long time, and when the bellows began to hiss and my uncle's hammer to strike on the anvil, I knew that they would not come out for a long time. Enough of their speech had reached me to show that Ayub had come to my uncle to have an edge put on his sword—the bewitched weapon that Sayanski had given him.

So I crossed over to our cottage and warmed myself by the stove where Ima was busy sewing the last silver threads on a kind of tinsel cap. She put

it on and looked at me saucily, saying that she would get more cakes and pennies thrown to her tomorrow night—Christmas eve—than I would, when we went to the manor house to sing carols.

"I am too old to go around with the children," I answered proudly. "Ayub says that soon I will have a horse and ride off to the wars."

"Pah! Ayub is too lazy to move off his stove."

Still, she kissed me good night without pinching me, and I heard her singing by the stove.

Christmas eve was cold. Ice had formed along the banks of Father Dnieper—solid, snow-coated ice at the shore, thin, gray ice farther out. Only in mid-river did the black current run past us without a coating.

When the full moon came up over the bare branches of the Witches' Wood, by the river bank, we children gathered together and went from cottage to cottage, singing carols and scrambling for the tidbits thrown to us by the good people.

The Witches' Wood we shunned, perhaps because the chill breath of the river was to be felt under the skeletons of trees, perhaps because it was the night that the river spirits were apt to climb ashore and snatch away goats or babies. Especially the folk of Rusk maintained that a *data-baba*, a woman hob-gob, lived in the wood. Many people had seen the hob-gob o' nights, so she was surely there.

You may be sure we skirted the trees when we went to sing at Ayub's hut. The Cossack chuckled at us and gave us a fine mess of warm sausages that we ate as we tramped away toward the manor house, on the other side of the wood. I could see Ayub looking after us, his eyes following Ima like a dog's. It struck me then what a pretty thing she was, in her silver cap, like a fine princess. Perhaps because she had not teased me the night before—

At the manor house, which was splendidly lighted with real candles, we sang "Come, Holy Spirit," and Varslan came to one of the doors and joined in with a strong, mellow voice. Then he scattered kopecks with both hands, as if he had been drinking, and we were soon shouting, over having money—actual money—in our fists. Going back to the village, someone dared us to go around by the river, through the Witches' Wood.

We began by taking hands and running as hard as we could, skipping and shouting. But before long the uneven ground and the thickets separated us, and I heard some of the girls crying. I shivered—it was so quiet

under the tall trees where little clods of snow and bits of ice fall down on the snow crust with a strange rattling, and the shadows of the thickets all looked like old women waiting to jump out on us. A girl screamed aloud behind me and I started to go back out of the wood.

It was a frightful, whimpering cry, as if one of the children had seen the evil hob-gob.

I heard it again, nearer as I went through the last fringe of bushes and saw the river in front of me. Then I stopped, surprised.

None of the other children were around, except Ima—I knew her silver cap in the bright moonlight, and her flying black hair. She was running away from two men, and they were the Cornet Varslan, and his *heyduke*. And she was passing out from the bank to the snow-coated ice.

It was a strange, new game, I thought, as I watched them. The men overtook Ima, who struggled in their hands like a wild pony of the steppe caught for the first time. It was when she cried out again that I understood she was afraid.

For she broke away from them and ran, as if the Evil One were after her, her shining black boots flying over the thin, gray ice out from shore. I heard Varslan laugh as he tried to catch her; then he stopped and called out angrily. She looked over her shoulder, just as the ice at the current's edge gave way and she dropped into the black water.

Ah, that is a thing my mind's eye can see even now—the rush of the dark water, Ima's glittering cap floating downstream, and the two men standing looking out from where the ice was still safe. I must have been running then, toward them, for presently I was shouting at Varslan and weeping at the same time.

"Go, and bring her back, Excellency. See, there she is! Hurry, hurry and swim after her."

I was tugging at his sleeve the while, but the two stared out at the current and looked at each other. The *heyduke* shrugged his broad shoulders and shook his head. Varslan was repeating under his breath:

"Mother of God—how cold it must be! What a fool—what a fool!"

Then he noticed me and drew his arm away with a frown.

"Excellency," said the *heyduke*, "it's that brat of the smith's."

"Gregory," Varslan spoke evenly now as if nothing had happened at all. "Your sister, or cousin, or whatever she was, slipped on the ice, and it broke under her. Hm, yes. We were playing a game, d'ye understand?"

But I could not take my eyes from the black water, where Ima's cap was no longer to be seen.

"D'ye understand? We could not aid her—it was not safe."

My knees were trembling and my throat seemed to be stuffed with something. By the time I reached the men Ima was beyond any help of mine. They spoke together in a low tone and moved off toward the manor house. By and by I felt that my hands were numb and the tears frozen on my checks. I hated Varslan, yet could not understand why.

Reaching the shore I looked back, just on the point of calling to Ima to come after me. Then for the first time I realized that she was dead and began to run through the wood.

In front of me a dark figure stepped from a shadow, but I was not frightened. It was Blind Foma, the moonlight gleaming on the scar on his cheek. He said he had heard Ima scream.

When I told him what had happened at the river his lips drew back from his teeth on the side of his face away from the scar, and he started to feel his way through the trees toward Ayub's hut. I ran on, thinking of nothing but of finding Old Goloto.

My uncle never moved hand or eye while he listened to my tale. Then I heard him muttering and saw that both his hands were gripped in his beard. He did not take his hands away nor did his lips stop moving. Once he looked up and asked if Blind Foma had surely said that it was Ima's voice. Then his brown face grew pale and he reached up one hand toward the sword he kept over the mantle.

"Will you go to the manor house and punish Varslan?" I cried. "I hate him! It was an evil game that he played, and Ima was frightened."

Old Goloto looked at his hand, in the firelight, and commenced shaking his head from side to side.

"*Ai—a*! They are the boyars—gentlefolk. Nay, nay, Gregory—"

Never before or since have I heard my uncle curse a man. His eyes were set and his hands shook. Then he stumbled out of the cottage, without cap or coat; yet he did not take his sword and he went toward the river.

I could not abide in the cottage, nor would my thoughts turn from Varslan and his *heyduke*. I walked over the snow, following the beaten paths until I came to the manor house, which was still glowing with candles. Below the house the chimes in the church were sounding the mid-

night carol. The door stood open, and I entered the long hall, going into the dining chamber.

Here a fine fire was crackling away on the hearth, and Varslan and Sayanski were sitting near it with steaming glasses of *varenukha*. The officer heard my step, but, seeing that I was alone sat back in his chair, holding the long saber over his knees.

"Give him some money," said Sayanski after a while.

Now I remembered that, all the time, I had held some of Varslan's kopecks clutched in my fist. I threw them down at his feet, and he looked at me curiously.

"The ——!" said Sayanski. "We can't have any doings like that. Come, imp, haven't you told your uncle that Ima was drowned—" he coughed—"an accident, mind you? Well, it's high time you were about it—"

He stopped and both of the men rose. A board creaked behind me, and I saw that Ayub stood in the door of the dining room. Just then the *heyduke* entered with a tray and a pitcher of the smoking brandy, and he set the things down with a clatter when he saw the Cossack smiling at him.

Ayub did not seem to be restless or moody this night. He took off his high, sheepskin hat and bowed, his scalp lock wiggling on his shaven head.

"Health to you, good sirs," he said in his slow voice. "I am the *ataman* Ayub of the Ural encampment, whom you called hard names at the tavern a while ago. I hope, by the saints, you haven't forgotten! Nay, finish your glass, Cornet Varslan."

He strode toward the table, the loose boards squeaking under his weight, and clanked his new sword, scabbard and all, down beside the tray so that the pitcher and the *heyduke*, too, jumped.

"Dog," he growled at the attendant, "don't you know when a Cossack is thirsty?"

The *heyduke* grinned under his mustache and backed away, looking at his master, so Ayub filled himself a glass and emptied it down his throat, and then told me to run along to my uncle. But I did not go further than the door, because Varslan spoke up, staring the while at Ayub as if he were a stranger.

"——ed if I wasn't drunk at the inn. You spoke of it yourself, *ataman*, at the time, I think. Will you take another glass with me?"

For some reason the officer had changed. He did not seem to want to quarrel with Ayub now.

The Cossack shook his head. "Nay, Cornet Varslan, you will not drink another mug of this brandy."

The officer frowned, pulling at his mustache as he watched Ayub. I saw that Sayanski was rubbing his hands together, looking from one to the other as if well satisfied.

"You were pleased to try to kill me, Cornet," smiled Ayub, "to have the black stallion for your cousin. That is a small matter. But now, by the Cross, you have the blood of a young girl on your hands. So if you don't take up your saber I'll have to clip your mustachios and mark you for a murderer—"

In a trice the Cossack's brows drew down and his teeth gleamed. Varslan had whipped out his sword and stepped toward him. Ayub had his weapon clear of the scabbard Sayanski had given him, and parried as the officer slashed wide. The two blades struck fire with a great clash. Ayub warded the saber by simply stiffening his massive right arm, although Varslan had put all his height and weight into the blow.

Then Varslan stepped back, biting his lip. And Sayanski's eyes seemed to pop out of his head of a sudden, and he swore as if greatly puzzled by what had happened. But the Cossack advanced eagerly, cutting and thrusting, crying—

"To one of us life: to the other death!"

I wondered why, if Ayub's sword was bewitched, he had not slashed the saber in two, and ended Varslan right there.

But the air was humming with the vibrating steel and the two fighters were ringed in flashes of light, where the candle glow caught the steel of the blades.

Clash-cling: clang-clang! It was a brave sight!

Ayub stepped aside suddenly and cut down, but not at his foe. The *heyduke* had been stealing toward him, thrusting a chair at his legs. A drawn saber was in the man's hand, yet it did not serve in the least to check the Cossack's stroke that shore through coat and flesh severing the *heyduke*'s body in two—save for the spine.

Groaning, the man fell on his knees, clutching at his entrails that were slipping out of the great gash. Then the two swordsmen were at it again, *cling—clang—cling!*

Sayanski went white, and felt with one hand along the mantel against which he stood. I saw a long pistol gleam in the firelight, and cried a warning to Ayub.

"'Ware of Sayanski!"

To this day I know not if it was an accident or not, but the flying tip of Ayub's blade caught the face of the landowner, under the nose. Sayanski cried out and dropped the pistol. Most of his upper lip and some of his teeth had been cut out by the sweep of the heavy blade. Pressing both hands to his mouth, he commenced to walk up and down, staggering against the chairs.

Varslan was not a coward. His mouth set and his eyes gleamed under beads of sweat. He was a match for Ayub in skill, but he had seen the Cossack's sword slice through flesh and bone and gristle as if through the tallow of a candle, and he gave ground continually, biding his time to strike inside the swinging blade of Ayub.

It so happened that he backed against the hearth, and felt the pistol strike against his foot. After a swift thrust, he reached down with his left hand and raised the weapon. His hand held it out in front of him for the time that a man could count five slowly. Then Varslan's body toppled over on the hearth.

His head had been slashed from his shoulders.

In our village of Rusk the good people tell wayfarers of the bewitched sword of Ayub, and how the servants of Sayanski, coming up from church after the midnight mass, found two men dead in the dining chamber, one with his body cut in twain, the other with no head to his body, and Sayanski voiceless.

Surely, our people will say, the sword was enchanted that did this. And they look at me askance, sometimes, because I ride the pony of Ayub—the one he had used for a pack animal—that the Cossack gave me when he rode away to the wars that same night.

Sayanski himself never uttered a word concerning what happened at the manor house, because he left Rusk to live in Moscow—going off in a closed carriage. And it is true that our village is the gainer by his leaving.

Only once did my uncle speak of the sword. This was one noon, when we were sitting on the stools that had been Ayub's and Ima's, in the days when the Cossack was one of us and the girl had brought us all a bite at midday.

"Gregory," he said, "the sword that Sayanski gave to Ayub was not bewitched. But it was accursed of an evil mind. The stem of the blade, the

part that fitted into the long hilt, had been filed almost through where the flaw could not be seen. A blow would have broken it off."

I thought of the dismay of the three men who had watched the fight in the manor house, when Varslan's first stroke failed to take effect: yet I thought, too, of the great cuts that had killed two of the men.

"The ways of Providence are past finding out," my uncle went on meditatively. "Ayub was angered, and he was one of the strongest of men. As for the weapon he used—he suspected that the sword given him was not right, and brought it to me the night before the fight. I discovered the flaw, and fitted a new blade upon the old hilt—a blade tempered and edged to the taste of a Christian warrior."

The Baiting of the Warriors

Ayub was angered. Aye, though at his side hung a sword made for him by the master smith at Rusk, and between his knees was the black stallion that had not its match on the frontier—two things to make a Cossack well content with life in the troublous years of the seventeenth century of Our Lord.

Even though it was a fair, fresh morning on the great steppe, Ayub's brow was dark. His horse, moving smoothly in a long stride, was following the faint path that ran north along the river Dnieper. The ends of the high grass on either side the trail flicked against the body of the Cossack, bare to the waist.

On his right hand glinted the surface of the river—Father Dnieper, the Cossacks called it—the river that was the frontier of the Ukraine. Across the Dnieper were the tribes of Asia, the nomads, and especially the Tatars, the hereditary foes of the Cossacks.

But Ayub rode without thought for Tatars that might have crossed the river, and had no joy of the ride that, on another day, would have set the blood leaping in the veins of a warrior. He was disgusted because he had no comrade at his side. His *kuren*—his company of Cossacks—had gone from the war encampment of the Zaporogian* Siech, leaving him behind.

Worse, his comrades had departed three days ago in quest of Gerai Khan, a noted Tatar raider on the far side of the Dnieper. Gerai Khan had been plundering the settlements north of the war encampment, letting loose the red cock-fire—and the devil generally whenever he struck a Christian hamlet.

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*Literally, "Men from below the rapids"; five Cossacks of proved skill who were admitted to the war encampment south of the Dnieper Cataracts.

Worse still, Ayub alone had been left behind, for a good reason. He was suffering from chills and fever, and his captain had pointed out that if Ayub should go with the company, the Tatars would hear him at night a day's ride away. His teeth were chattering like the silver heels of the warriors beating out the *hopak* and *trepak* of the dance.

So his captain advised him to mount his horse and ride as if a vampire were sitting behind him, until he was exhausted and sweated out. Then he should open a vein in his horse, drink some blood, and sleep until the attack had passed.

"We also ride north, on the far bank," the veteran Zaporogian had added thoughtfully. "So do you gather up a hundred ponies from the settlements. Await us at the hamlet of Nitek. We'll cross over there, and change to the fresh ponies, for Satan himself couldn't catch Gerai Khan on a tired horse. You must not fail us with the fresh ponies. If you do," he had promised grimly, "we'll put a bit between your teeth and issue you rations of hay!"

Hay! To him, Ayub, who had a bear's strength in his arm, and could break the sword of any warrior in the *kuren* with a stroke of his heavy blade! Ayub was angered.

Doubly so because he had failed to get a single pony from the villages behind him. The brief harvest season of the Ukraine was ending and with it the favorite time for Tatars to raid across the river was passing. The settlers were thrifty folk, almost as suspicious of the Cossacks as they were of the dreaded Tatar tribesmen; they did not want to lend any horses to be ridden on a wild goose chase on the Asian side of the river and on one pretext or another they put Ayub off.

Ayub's broad head, shaven except for the scalp lock that whipped behind him in the wind, had room only for one idea at a time. His comrades would need fresh horses to run Gerai Khan to earth. Only a single village remained to be visited, but this was Nitek itself, the largest on the southern Dnieper, and the richest.

At Nitek Ayub must get all of his hundred ponies.

Then, from a clump of willows by the river's edge, a horseman appeared, holding up his hand as a warning to Ayub to stop.

A glance showed Ayub that the newcomer was a young Cossack, but not one of his comrades, the Zaporogians. Indeed the stranger resembled no Cossack that Ayub had seen on the Dnieper. The high *kalpak*, the hat of the Cossack warriors, was white ermine; his black scalp lock hung down on the shoulders of a shirt of fine Turkish mail.

Like Ayub, he carried no weapon except a sword—a long scimitar girdled high on his left side.

"Stop," he said, as Ayub drove past.

"Can't stop, comrade—can't possibly do it!" bellowed the Zaporogian. "If I draw rein now I'll be standing before Saint Peter at the heavenly gates in a flash. *U-ha-Hai-ah!* Speed, you son of perdition!"—this last to the flying stallion.

The stranger, evidently unversed in the method that Ayub was using to cure chills and fever, cast a searching glance at the high grass from which the black horse had emerged. Seeing no signs of immediate pursuit, he spurred after Ayub.

It was no easy matter to overtake the stallion, but the stranger's pony, a sturdy sorrel, was fresh. After a few moments Ayub heard the thudding of hoofs close behind, and a quiet voice observed in his ear.

"Have the Tatars taken away your clothes and beaten you with their slippers that you sweat in fear of them?"

Now matters had gone wrong with Ayub for two days, and his mood was black indeed. He had not stopped because he did not wish to contract another chill before he could lie down for his long sleep at the end of the ride. The stranger's remark would make any Zaporogian crawl out of an open grave.

Ayub threw all his weight on the reins, gripped the stallion with his knees, and jerked to a halt. Dismounting, he faced the other Cossack who had slipped from the saddle of the galloping sorrel.

"I'll hew off your head, mud-puppy," Ayub growled, "for that benediction. Draw your pagan scimitar and dress your Moslem shield. So—"

The long saber slithered out of its scabbard, but before Ayub struck the young Cossack tossed aside the round, bull's hide target that he carried. His scimitar flashed out, clanged against Ayub's heavy blade. Then the stranger bent his knees swiftly.

Had he not done so his skull would have been shattered by the second stroke of the long saber. As it was, his tall ermine cap flew from his head, cut half through. His eyes narrowed and he shifted ground as Ayub rushed.

The steel blades grated together, parted, and swung about the bare heads of the two swordsmen. They glittered in the sun, quivering when they struck like the heads of angered snakes.

Try as he would, Ayub could gain no other opening for a cut. The slender scimitar clung to his blade near the hilt, and never released touch. The stranger, too, stood close in, smiling a little.

Fever flared up in Ayub's veins and he lashed out with all the strength of his massive shoulders. But the scimitar met his blade at a tangent and turned it off. Before he could recover the stranger struck in—with the hilt of his weapon. Three tiny red marks appeared on the Zaporogian's broad chest where the jewels of the inlaid pommel had pierced his skin.

With a bellow of rage, Ayub rushed in again, hewing and cutting until all power left his weakened frame. Then he stood swaying on his feet, sweat streaming down into his eyes, helpless.

The stranger, breathing a little quickly, flourished the scimitar in a brief salute and sheathed it.

"Hide of the ——!" panted Ayub. "What man are you?"

"Demid."

"Where from? What doing, you young jackal?"

"The Don," answered Demid laconically. "On watch."

Ayub sheathed his saber with some difficulty and wiped his brow. He was an experienced swordsman, one of the best in the siech, the war encampment of the Dnieper Cossacks. He was ill, of course, and weak, but he knew that the younger warrior was more than his match.

"Come along with me, Demid, to Nitek. I'm Ayub, from the siech, a hundred versts below here. In my time I've smoked my pipe in the mosques across the Black Sea where the Turks are thicker than ants on a dunghill; I've dressed the holy images in our church of the siech in silk and cloth-of-gold garments taken from the palaces of Constantinople. I've stolen horses from the tribal herd of Gerai Khan himself, the steppe fox across the Dnieper. —— take me if I haven't!"

Here Ayub flung back his shoulders with something of his natural swagger. The clear, gray eyes of the young Cossack glowed, as if from an inward fire, at this recital. Although more slender, he was nearly as tall as Ayub who topped six feet six. His skin was dark as saddle leather, and a black beard was curling on his long chin. Now that his hat was gone—Ayub watched him kick the ruined *kalpak* aside as he picked up his shield—his shaven skull gleamed, save where the scalp lock fell, like a plume, from the ridge of his head.

"A swordsman!" Ayub muttered to himself. "Good spread of shoulders. Fire in his heart, I'll warrant. And yet—"

He turned toward his horse.

"So you're a village dog, Demid!"

The young Cossack whirled, his lips drawing back from his teeth. But Ayub was tightening the girth on the black stallion. After all, Demid was, in the eyes of the free Cossacks of the siech, a village dog. At least he was enlisted in the Watch and Post Service.

This was a river patrol, formed by the boyars, the nobles who owned most of the land in the villages along the Dnieper. Cossacks who had not yet joined the siech or who had been rejected by the veteran warriors of the war encampment were hired to watch the river. Especially during the harvest season when Tatars frequently raided across.

Ayub could not understand why Demid was a village dog. The stranger was from the river Don, where the Cossacks were wild folk living hard lives in the forests beyond the frontier. They were kin to the Gypsies and Tatars; it was said that the blood of princes ran in their veins. Certainly Demid, in wandering to the Dnieper, seemed to have gathered unto himself rare spoil from the tribes—a good sword, and Turkish mail.

"Have you heard the name of Gerai Khan?" Ayub asked thoughtfully.

"Aye, he vowed to give me a pair of red boots."

"Why?"

Demid, who never used two words when one would do, or spoke at all when a sign would answer, pointed to his trophies, the scimitar and shield.

"His brother's."

Ayub pulled at his mustache and grunted with pleasure. To be given a pair of red boots by the Tatars meant that a Christian prisoner would have the soles of his feet cut off. Then he would be left to walk home, dying, in all odds, on the way. The threat showed that Demid was feared by the tribesmen.

"Look here, Demid. Why do you squat here like an old woman making barley cakes? I'll take you to my comrades, and we'll make you a free knight of the siech."

Again the eyes of the youth flashed. But, after a moment's thought, he shook his head.

"Well then," the Zaporogian growled, "come with me to Nitek. When I've sweated out this demon of sickness and slept it off, I'll cross swords

with you again. By the Father and Son—I can't let a village dog overmaster me with a sword!"

Enlightenment came to Demid. He knew now the reason for Ayub's haste—his shaking hands and flushed face.

"Sleep here," he advised briefly, indicating the deerskin coat strapped to his saddle. "This will cover you."

Ayub explained that it was necessary for him to go to the village to requisition a hundred ponies, to be held in readiness, as remounts for his company which had gone across the border.

Leaning against his horse, Demid took out a long clay pipe and a pouch of Turkish tobacco. Then he produced flint and steel and tinder. Striking a spark, he ignited the tinder in the tobacco.

"Nitek won't give you any horses, Ayub."

"How—not give me any."

Between puffs of smoke, Demid explained.

"Last month some Cossack bandits stripped a traders' caravan near Nitek—nailed a sow's ear on the trader's skull—made off with a lot of goods convoyed to Nitek—and the villagers have sworn vengeance against Cossacks—warm your hide for you, if you go."

Nothing that Demid could have said would have made Ayub climb into his saddle and start off to Nitek as swiftly as this.

Demid, smiling a little at the haste of the Zaporogian, spurred the sorrel pony after him. The two riders disappeared into the tall grass, leaving a broad swathe behind them.

For a moment the level sea of green and gold—the breast of the vast steppe afire with the glory of Midsummer—was without sign of life, although life was never absent from it. A marmot raced out of the path of a wandering boar; the clamor of swans rose from the reeds of the river. Overhead, almost motionless, hovered a trio of hawks.

Death, too, was present.

From the thicket that Demid had left emerged a head, round and black and expressionless. Out trotted a small, shaggy pony, its squat rider stooping below the crests of the high grass until he came to where the two Cossacks had fought. In one hand he gripped a bow, ready strung. Another was slung over his deerskin tunic.

The restless eyes of the Tatar scanned the tracks in the soft earth-sighted the ruined *kalpak*. Bending down, he picked it up. His thin lips drew back from his pointed teeth, and he grunted as if pleased at his find.

Then, silently as he had come, he trotted back into the willows, down by the river. Again the clamor of waterfowl broke out.

The hawks circled lower.

Nitek was a village of some five hundred souls, serfs and freemen. The serfs and the land of the village were all the property of one boyar—one person of gentle blood who had come out with gold from Moscow not three Summers ago. The fertile soil had yielded fine crops, ripening and falling to the reaper's hook almost in a day, so swiftly did the Summer pass on the steppe.

That day was the first of a week's feasting. The harvest was in. The grain was in the ricks; tall stacks of hay stood up from the bare fields around the hamlet like watchtowers.

Although the sun was not yet high, the peasants were gathering in the square in front of the church and tavern. Wandering hucksters had set up stalls under the platform whereon stood the wooden stocks that served as a gaol. A troupe of ragged Gypsies had quartered their wagon on the river trail that led to the bank of the Dnieper, some two miles away.

On the bench in front of the tavern a captain of German musketeers caressed the first tankard of the day. From within the dram-shop came a preliminary thrumming of a balalaika.

The village priest, warming himself in the sun, was reflecting pleasantly that his prayers had averted raids of the tribesmen for three seasons. While the peasants had been scattered through the fields, then had been the danger time. Now they were all within the mud wall of the hamlet, and the priest crossed himself in sudden alarm.

With a shout Ayub and Demid leaped their horses over the low wall and reined them in, in the square. Sight of the sweat-darkened horses and the naked giant from the war encampment sent an impulse of alarm through all the watchers. The Gypsies, swift to scent danger, came scampering in.

But the tidings that Ayub was after horses for the Zaporogians and had seen no Tatars sent the villagers about their affairs, very briskly, in fact. The village assessor explained to the Cossack that most of their horses had been selected for sale. Anyway, they had few, very few—barely two hundred.

"Five hundred, you liar," growled Ayub, pointing out at the pastures.

"Not at all, good sir. And see how lean they are!"

"Fat as squirrels in Autumn, you son of a pig. Where is this boyar of yours?"

He was fast losing patience. Instead of the noble, the mayor of Nitek emerged from the tavern—a red-faced Russian in a soiled neck-cloth. He stared at Demid, frowned at Ayub and fingered his belt, pursing his lips.

"How much will you pay, for a hundred ponies?" He asked.

"Pay? Are the Zaporogians Jews—merchants and traffickers with fat wallets?" Ayub snorted. "Hearken, Bottle Face! When my comrades ride into Nitek they will leave their horses with you and take the fresh ones. Such is the custom along the border."

"Not our custom. What profit would we have in your foundered ponies, galled with arrows, belike? Eh?"

The mayor came closer, pushing aside a slender Gypsy girl who was holding Ayub's rein with evident pride.

"A fair, good stallion, this of yours, Cossack," he whispered. "Make him over to me and I'll use every effort to get the hundred remount ponies from the boyar, as God is my witness. A man of my word, am I—ugh!"

Ayub's stirrup rose in a short arc that ended at the middle button of the mayor's surcoat. The stout Russian stumbled back, gasping for breath. A shout went up.

"'Way for the owner of Nitek! Make way for the *baryshina*!"

Ayub looked up, prepared to face a new adversary, and grunted in surprise. The owner of Nitek was a woman. And not a peasant wench, but a noblewoman—a *baryshina*. So much was clear to Ayub, even though the mistress of Nitek wore a man's boots, with high, red heels, and a long cloak. The horse she rode was a fine mare, and she sat astride in the Cossack fashion. Yet she was no woman of the steppe.

"Hail to you, wolfhound," she said in a voice that carried to the loungers at the tavern. "You will make off with no horse of mine, be sure of that!"

Her chin curled up, from the lace at her throat; her brow was white and the eyes that took stock of the Cossack giant were disdainful. To Ayub, all women were troublemakers; otherwise they served to cultivate the fields, and prepare food for the men. Well, and good! This one might be mistress of two hundred souls, and a thousand head of cattle—aye, and be a black-haired beauty into the bargain. But she was a woman, and so a breeder of strife among men.

"What is your name?" he asked bluntly.

Just a little her eyes widened, and they were fine eyes—a fact altogether lost upon Ayub.

"I am the *baryshina*, Yaris Lementof."

"Lady—Miss Yaris," responded the Cossack, with rare patience, as he thought, "you would fetch five hundred gold sequins in the slave market on the Black Sea if Gerai Khan ever turned his horse's head toward Nitek."

"How—"

"The Tatars would carry you off, along with your horse herds and cattle and sell you for a slave, Lady-Miss. Perhaps you would bring six hundred gold pieces. I don't know. At any rate it would be better to give my brother knights the horses they need to hunt down the Tatars."

The mistress of Nitek looked not at Ayub but at Demid who was smoking his pipe near at hand. As Demid said nothing to this, she bit her lip and gripped the whip she carried as if to strike Ayub.

"Go," she said quickly, "out of Nitek at once. Your brother knights—" her eyes flashed—"were the thieves that fell upon one of my caravans like jackals. If you are not out of the village when the sun is midway in the sky, you will be punished."

Here the worthy mayor edged forward, carrying himself as if in great pain, and made complaint that Ayub had struck him. But the *baryshina* looked only at Demid, who came forward and gripped Ayub's arm. Fierce anger was fast overmastering the big Zaporogian.

Taking the silence of the Cossacks for submission, Yaris shortened the reins in her hand and the brown mare pranced.

"We need no vagabonds to defend Nitek," she cried. "We have good men and weapons of our own. Now begone!"

She whirled away, scattering the watching villagers. A tall man in a white coat who accompanied her paused to speak briefly to the captain of musketeers, pointing at the Cossacks the while. Everywhere that Ayub looked he met black scowls and muttered threats. Demid glanced at him inquiringly.

"—— take me if I stir from here," Ayub vouchsafed moodily. "An order's an order. My *ataman* promised to stuff me with hay, if the horses were not ready."

"Sleep, then," advised the man from the Don.

After watering and feeding their horses, Ayub sprawled out in the straw of the tavern yard. He began to snore almost at once. Demid surveyed him thoughtfully, placed his long deerskin coat over the sick man, and heaped

straw over that. Then, putting away pipe and tobacco in his saddlebags, he tightened his belt and swaggered out of the stable yard, around to the front of the inn.

There the musketeer was throwing dice, one hand against the other. Seeing Demid, he called out in broken Russian.

"You go out *sloboda*, to your post on the river, by the Cross! So the *excellencies* command."

Demid squinted up at the sky where the hawks, now reinforced by several vultures, hovered—black specks over the river.

"Send one of your armored women," he jerked his thumb at a pair of the Brandenburgers, sturdy mercenaries, who in gala attire of stiff ruffles, polished breastplates and colored sashes, were wandering toward the tavern. "Nay, it would avail more to send one of the Gypsies to watch the river in my place."

The captain of musketeers pulled at his mustache, not sure whether he had been insulted. But presently he shrugged and fell to his dice. Demid passed on, by the wooden church, to the gate that gave entrance to the manor house—a low, rambling affair of heavy beams. With its outbuildings and stables it was surrounded by a breast-high mud wall.

At the threshold of the house one of the Brandenburgers stood guard with a pike. At mention of the name of Yaris, he admitted Demid to the hall and pointed toward a door from which came the sound of talk and clattering dishes. Demid strode into the dining room.

Several months ago, on the highway, the man from the Don had first seen Yaris. The Lady-Miss of Nitek had been close on the heels of a wild boar that broke through the grass of the roadside. Demid had watched her spear the beast, and had helped her haul off the hunting dogs that drove in at the dying boar.

As with Ayub, the young Cossack had never beheld such a woman as Yaris. He said nothing to her, but thereafter he desired Yaris as he had not longed for the rarest weapon of the Turks, or the finest horse of the Nomads.

He took the Nitek station in the Watch and Post Service. Sometimes he saw Yaris in her swift carriage, passing through the village. Always she had a smile and a wave of the hand for the Cossack. Again, he met her near the river, when Father Dnieper was in flood, and the willows were bending in the swirling water.

Yaris laughed at the sight, gleefully eyeing the tossing crests of the tide-rips, sniffing the damp wind. She questioned Demid about the lives of the folk beyond the frontier, listening silently thereafter to his tales of hunting and of death in the wilderness.

"I have never come upon a man like you," she said. "You are from the beyond—" nodding across the gray, brown flood.

In her eyes was a longing, and a restless thoughtfulness.

She seemed to have no fear of the tribesmen who raided close to Nitek. Yet she managed her estates well, although she was harsh to the serfs. Nitek prospered under her hand, for she had the gift of making men obey her.

Demid was troubled by the beauty of the woman. At times there rose within him the craving to carry her off, to the northern forests where there was no Nitek and no manor house.

True, the house was guarded well enough. Count Ivan, a cousin, had brought as a gift to Yaris the services of the dozen German musketeers that he had hired in Moscow. Yet Demid, watching the lights of the dwelling of nights, on his rounds, took no though of that. Rather, he wondered what lay behind her words;

"You are from beyond the border."

So, before this, he had not entered the manor house.

Now he was going to Yaris because his comrade, Ayub, had need of a hundred horses. Demid meant to ask for them.

He found the *baryshina* seated at table with Count Ivan. At the other end of the dining room, below them, the lesser dignitaries of Nitek were ranged on benches—the mayor, the assessor, the overseer of the estates—all doing justice to a side of beef and a flagon of mead.

Demid, however, strode past the frowns of these worthies and pulled a stool up to the table of the boyars, resting his elbows on the table and gazing admiringly at the silver dishes of fish and sweetbreads and the long glasses filled with red wine.

Count Ivan, a lean man with a sparse beard and watery eyes, glared at the Cossack, and raised his eyebrows at Yaris.

"*Mort de ma vie!*" said he in bad French. "Death of my life!"

Yaris stiffened in her high-backed chair that was like a throne. She had the whim to attire herself in a silk *beshmet*, a kind of Tatar smock, and a cloth-of-silver cap from which her long hair fell to her shoulders like a peasant girl's. She was angry with Demid because he had not taken her

side in the argument with Ayub that morning. Now, she supposed, the young Cossack had come to make amends. But his manners!

"What do you want? Why didn't you send the soldier with a message?"

The man from the Don looked at her with frank admiration, his gray eyes gleaming from the dark skin of his face.

"What soldier, *baryshina*? The dolt with the pike? Ah, he is not a warrior. The tribesmen from across the river would shoot his life out with arrows—*zick*—like that!"

At this Count Ivan prepared to fall into a rage. That is, he pushed back his chair and took snuff ominously. He owned five hundred souls—serfs—and he had once been to Paris and the court of the Grand Monarch. What an indignity, to be forced to sit at meat with a boor of the steppe!

No one, however, offered Demid so much as a glass of the wine.

"There are hawks in the sky over the river, *baryshina*," he observed thoughtfully. "It may be that men are moving on the steppe yonder. Perhaps the Zaporogian Cossacks."

"Do you presume to threaten me?"

Demid, who knew little of the moods of women, shook his head.

"Nay. But you would do well to give Ayub his hundred horses for remounts. The Zaporogians are the only fellows who will rid you of Gerai Khan, who is a fiend. It must be that he has heard of you, so why should he not seek you?"

"Ha!" Count Ivan snorted. "I see very well—curse me if I don't—that you, Cossack, are afraid of this Tatar khan."

He tapped his snuff box shut triumphantly.

"Most men are, boyar. Still, my fear is for the *baryshina*."

Stretching out his heavy forearm toward the woman, he upset one of the slender wine glasses. Yaris made up her mind to teach the young warrior a lesson.

"Go to the other table, Demid," she said coldly. "There my wolfhounds are fed."

The Cossack looked at her in sheer amazement. Then, as her meaning became clear, he sprang up, flushing. The count chose this instant to laugh.

"Vastly well put, cousin—roast me if it wasn't well said—"

A glance at Demid's face sobered him, especially as the Cossack touched the hilt of his sword on the side away from the woman's eyes. Then, bowing to Yaris, the intruder strode not to the lower board but out the door.

After reflecting hastily, Count Ivan, who knew the temper of the men from the Cossack camps, hurried after him. Yaris, listening, heard low voices in the hall. Thereafter she caught the creak of the door, a scuffle of feet, and the impact of a blow. A heavy body fell to the floor, and for once the loud voices and clink of cups at the mayor's table were quieted.

It was midafternoon before Ayub wakened. Men were moving in the stable yard near the horses of the Cossacks, and the big Zaporogian tossed off the straw that covered him. The brief sleep had almost rid him of fever; but his knees were weak.

Startled by his sudden appearance, the mayor and the assessor moved away hastily from the vicinity of the black stallion. Ayub looked after them thoughtfully, and satisfied himself that the horse had not been mishandled.

He was hungry, and the sight of Demid's coat reminded him that he had a score to settle with the man from the Don. And, emerging from the tavern yard, he saw Demid at once.

The young Cossack was standing on the platform in the center of the village square, in the stocks. His head and arms were locked in the openings of the wooden beams. His face was muddied and blood had dried on his scalp. A dozen of the Nitek men were amusing themselves casting clods of earth and bits of refuse at him.

Ayub rubbed his eyes and promptly forgot his intention to cross swords with Demid.

"*U-ha!*" he bellowed, running forward. "Rescue for a Cossack!"

His sword slithered out and those in front of him gave way as if before a maddened bull. The only one who stood his ground was the captain of the mercenaries. Him Ayub smote heartily on the breastplate, denting the iron. The next sweep of the giant Cossack's sword disarmed the slow moving musketeer.

But then Ayub was gripped from behind. Fists pummeled his eyes and hands caught at his ankles. He smashed in the teeth of one of his foes with the hilt of his sword, knocked down another, and was rolled in the dust himself.

"It's my cursed knees, Demid," he shouted. "They're weak as a priest's wine—or I'd thresh these sons of pigs!" Five minutes more and Ayub, overcome by numbers, was lifted to the platform and forcibly locked in the second section of the stocks, beside Demid. Then came the mayor, to

lean on the edge of the platform and stare up at Ayub, and finger the key of the stocks meaningly.

"High time vagabonds like you were taught a lesson! Thieves! Masterless men! Runagates! Brawlers! You, of the Watch and Post, would insult our gracious *baryshina*, eh? Well, we haven't really begun on you, yet."

An angry murmur from the villagers interrupted him and he turned his attention to Ayub.

"You heard the command of our lady, eh? But you went and hid yourself in the straw, to be sure. Then you tried to cut down half a dozen of our young fellows."

He drew closer, and whispered: "Next time you'll deal fairer with an honest man and come off easier. But there won't be any next time for you, old dog. I've a mind to your horse, and when my lads are through with you, after they've licked up a few more measures of mead—"

Grimacing, he swung away, calling to the villagers who were beginning to cast rocks at the Cossacks, to come to the tavern for a dram.

"Nay—nay, lads, the sun is overwarm for our sport. Let the thick skulls of the Cossacks sizzle a while in the sun, until the cool of the evening. Then we'll teach them a thing or two."

He led the way to the tavern, followed by the more belligerent of the Nitek men.

Clusters of serfs and women came out to stare at the Cossacks, and the Gypsy girl drew close to finger the two swords and the coat that had been cast at the foot of the stocks.

Demid spoke to the lass in a low tone, using a dialect that was strange to the ears of the listeners. The Gypsy started as if she had been struck, and pattered off, her bare feet stirring up the dust of the square until she was lost to sight.

Ayub was suffering a good deal from the sun. But he reflected that the evening would bring his tormentors swarming out again, and he had little hope of escaping from the stocks without being crippled for life. His throat ached when he caught the clinking of tankards in the tavern. Presently, however, his mustache bristled in a grin, as he surveyed, sidewise, the swelling on Demid's head.

"Did one of the Nitek women slipper you on the sconce, comrade?"

He remembered Demid's greeting to him.

"Nay."

Demid's eyes smoldered.

"It was a pike staff laid me down—by order of Count Ivan. They struck me from behind as I was leaving the manor house."

The sun sank lower in front of them, until the shadow of the tavern stretched to the foot of the stocks. Meanwhile crowds gathered, to witness the promised baiting of the warriors, and men began to straggle from the inn, none too steadily. But at this moment Yaris and Count Ivan appeared in the square.

The woman, upon the arm of the Russian, walked past the Cossacks. When her glance fell upon Demid's face she started. Seeing this, Ivan bent his head and spoke smilingly. Ayub caught a phrase or two.

"Only for a short time—necessary to show your authority—no real harm will come to the vagabonds."

With a shrug, she was about to pass on, when a clamor of dogs started up in one of the streets. From the river side the wagon of the Gypsies came careening through the square, followed by several women on ponies, and men driving before them a handful of cattle. Behind these, in a cloud of dust ran children and dogs, mixed in together.

The cavalcade charged past the houses, toward the open steppe. Only one swarthy lad halted and raised his arm, shouting in a high voice that carried to the square.

"Fly, Gentiles; gird yourselves and fly! Tatar raiders have crossed the river near you!"

As the shadow of a hawk's wing quiets a bevy of quail on the ground underneath, the news that Tatars had crossed the river hushed the merriment of Nitek. Then clamor and confusion broke out. Men cursed under their breath as they ran about; women fled to the houses, or gathered together to lament, high-voiced.

Doors were barred and unbarred. Presently peasants began to arrive from the outlying farms, driving cattle and horses before them. Dust rose and hung in the still air. Count Ivan bellowed for his musketeers and his horse. The mayor was all for following the Gypsies, but some farmers, who had had experience of border warfare, pointed out that those who fled into the steppe, now, would be seen and cut down by the Tatars.

The blight of the Dnieper had fallen upon Nitek. And, among the villagers, was no one who could lead a defense. It was a farmer who thought of the Cossacks, and, snatching the key of the stocks from the mayor, released Demid and Ayub.

And Ayub it was who stretched his long limbs, girded on his sword and, glancing about from the elevation of the platform, let out his voice in a shout:

"Arm yourselves, dolts! Get horses! Meanwhile send your leaders to me."

Partly because his bull voice carried to every corner of the square, drowning the arguments of the villagers, partly because they saw Yaris standing near him, the men of Nitek hastened to carry out his instructions. The mayor, that is, and the oldest of the farmers, came to the platform. Count Ivan and Peter were rounding up the soldiers from the dram shop and manor house.

"Hearken, you sons of dogs," continued the big Zaporogian without any ill-feeling. "The devils from over the river won't attack until evening. They'll pass around the village, sending out scouts at the same time to watch you. After they are in back of you, hidden in the grass, they'll charge the village, driving the herds toward the river. If you stand, like cattle, in the square, here, they'll send your souls flying up to heaven like sparks from a dry brush fire."

In the presence of his hereditary foes, the Tatars, Ayub promptly forgot the baiting of the past hours. Nor did he think of escaping, as Demid and he might have done easily enough, on their fast horses.

"Have you weapons? Good! Well you'll learn a thing or two about fighting if Gerai Khan is nosing you out! Send a dozen of your young bloods on good horses, to scout the outer pastures, and learn on which side the Tatars are circling us. Let every man of you get him a horse and follow me. If you have pistols, save your powder until you are sure of a hit, and then say a prayer to the Father and Son. Many of you won't pray again. Now, cross yourselves, and make sure that your swords are loosened in the scabbards."

But the men of Nitek looked at each other, and at the wall of brown bush toward the river, beyond the haystacks and the outer pastures. Somewhere, in the sea of green grass the warriors of Gerai Khan were moving then, unseen—keeping to the hollows.

The men of Nitek muttered that they could not leave their families; besides, they were not used to fighting on horses—and the soldiers of Count Ivan were, even then, preparing to defend the manor house. They would not go, said the men of Nitek, from the village and its wall and the musketeers.

In vain Ayub pointed out that if they tried to defend the mud wall, the tribesmen would ride them down; if they took to the houses, the Tatars covered by the darkness would fire the thatched roofs and drive them out.

Led by the mayor, they were scattering to gather in their cattle near the cabins, and to erect flimsy barricades about the doors, when a new voice spoke up, halting them.

Demid stepped to the edge of the platform and held up his hand. He had known that the settlers would not follow Ayub's advice.

"Then one thing must be done, and swiftly," he said. "The Tatars are wary as ravens—they look well before they strike. 'Tis like the raiding party numbers no more than a hundred. Give to Ayub and to me a hundred ponies, saddled. We have still a good hour of light. We will take the horses and bear ourselves as if we were guarding the herd—going to a high place in the outer grass, and moving toward the rear of the village, whither the Tatars are headed."

He looked squarely at Yaris. "The Tatars will think that we are following a hundred Cossacks, moving before us on foot in the grass. They will not strike the village until they have searched for foes, and in the darkness they will not know for certain that a Zaporogian *kuren* does not confront them."

Hearing this, the settlers gave an approving murmur. They knew the healthy respect the tribesmen entertained for the Cossacks, and that Gerai Khan must be aware that a Zaporogian *kuren* was out after him.

"The demons from over the river," went on Demid with a smile, "may not flee like wolves, but 'tis odds they will content themselves with driving off some scattered herds, and leave your dwellings unmolested."

The listeners nodded assent. Demid's plan was worth trying. The level glow of the sunset was still strong on the knolls in the pastures. The Tatars would see the two warriors. That was sure. Of course the two Cossacks would be in peril; but they were accustomed to such things.

Then was heard the clear voice of Yaris, the black-haired beauty: "Fools! Clowns! *Mujiks*! Do you not see the trick the Cossacks would play on you?"

She stamped a slender foot angrily.

"I see it now. *There are no Tatars near us!* Demid bespoke the Gypsy brat, so that she and her people feigned fright. Now he would make off with a hundred horses and saddles."

Demid still smiled and this made Yaris angrier.

"Lies!" she cried, her voice rising, with the tensing of her nerves. "What man of mine has seen so much as the head of a tribesman? In my house this Cossack tried to make me afraid. It was part of his trick."

As one man, the assemblage turned to gaze frowningly at the distant fields, the outlying huts, and the surface of the steppe.

Here and there a ripple of wind stirred the tall grass; there was no other movement.

Overhead the hawks floated on lazy wings.

Yaris's mind was quick and clear. She did not intend to let Demid outwit her. And, perceiving her confidence, the men of Nitek who governed their lives by her command were a little reassured. Scouts were sent out toward the river and returned—very quickly—to report nothing amiss.

Meanwhile Ayub's temper had undergone a change. He went among the settlers, explaining patiently, warning them earnestly. Some listened to him, others sneered. Finally he stood before Yaris, and bowed.

"*Baryshina*, is your mind as it was? Is your word unchanged?"

"Aye, Cossack—I am mistress of Nitek."

The long twilight of the steppe drew to its end. The pastures became a blur; a scent of warm hay was in the air, already growing chill. Three hours had passed since the first alarm. Men who had been barricading houses came forth, and women who—meaninglessly—had been tying up household treasures in sacks, sat down on the bundles. Cattle and horses trampled about in the alleys, while their owners wrangled. Count Ivan rode over from the manor house to report the house-servants and soldiers posted for defense, and to urge Yaris to go to her rooms.

Demid had brought up the black stallion and the sorrel, ready saddled, and now sat on the platform of the stocks, smoking beside Ayub. The Cossacks listened to the nearby groups arguing as to whether torches should be lighted or not. Some called for lights, others cried them down.

"Dog of the ——," observed Ayub suddenly, "that's one thing we can do. Give me your pipe and I'll touch off the haystacks. That will be a fine torch, comrade. It will be seen for fifty versts—a token that raiders are about."

Demid surrendered his pipe without comment. He hardly noticed the sudden flaring up of the stacks, one by one, out in the fields. The towering piles of hay roared into flame, swirling high into the air. And excitement grew in the village. No one could see Ayub at his work, because he had

ignited the stacks on the side away from Nitek, and had raced his horse off before the fire gained strength.

The young Cossack had eyes only for Yaris, who was standing over alanthorn, watching what went on in the square. She was fair, he thought, as the twilight on the river. A woman fit for a warrior to carry to his homeland. And yet—it was as if he stood on the far bank of the Dnieper, whence he would never cross to her.

Gerai Khan and his horde struck the village of Nitek as the last of the sunset died out. By the glare from the burning stacks the dark masses of driven cattle were seen moving toward the river on the far sides of the fields. Behind the village a dog barked. Then came a soft thudding of hoofs. A woman screamed.

The score of men still standing by the mud wall in the rear of Nitek went down under the hoofs of the steppe ponies that leaped the wall. A few shots bellowed, and the soft whistle of arrows was like the wind in the reeds of the river bank.

Count Ivan shouted hoarsely and tried to pull Yaris up to his horse. But between them was the tall figure of Demid. The Cossack caught up the woman in his arms.

"To the manor house!" cried the Russian. "Ah, what a plight!"

Waiting for no more, and fearing to be cut off from his men, he put spurs to his horse. Demid, pinning the arms of the slender *baryshina*, looked about for Ayub. Failing to see him, he made toward his horse. But the sorrel had cantered off with some other beasts.

Demid walked to the platform whereon stood the stocks. He climbed the steps, and permitted Yaris to stand on her feet. Then, thrusting her head and arms through the holes in the stocks, he pushed into place the upper half of the wooden yoke, and picking up the key locked her in.

This done, he threw away the key, and felt about for his long coat. With it he covered the body of the startled woman.

"Dog!" she cried. "Unfaithful—"

"Lady-Miss," said Demid slowly, "if you would not be sold as a slave beyond the border, still your tongue."

Pulling out his neck-cloth, he placed it over her disheveled locks, tying the ends under her chin.

Then he jumped down to the ground in front of the stocks and drew his sword, picking up his small shield at the same time. The ground around

him was deserted. Most of the villagers had fled to the houses; some were visible in the red glare, standing in the alleys.

On every hand squat Tatars darted, rounding up on their nimble ponies, the scattered beasts of the settlers. Torches flickered past. Demid heard a sudden discharge of matchlocks, from the direction of the manor. Moving a little, he could see Tatars leaping their horses over the low wall of the courtyard of Yaris's dwelling.

No need for him to see the striking down of the soldiery with arrows. Once the arquebuses had been fired, they were not loaded again. As for the pikes—the scimitars of the Tatars would slice them down.

In fact he saw fur-clad forms run into the manor—saw the glint of flames within.

"They are combing out your nest," he said to the face that peered down from the shadows.

Horror had whitened the ruddy cheeks of the woman and she was voiceless.

"They work fast," went on Demid thoughtfully, "so they must be uneasy. Ha—your village of Nitek is gay with light and sound this eventide, Lady-Miss. Behold—"

A pistol flashed from a group of Russians who were edging into the tavern. A raider swerved in his course, shouted shrilly and flung his torch upon the thatched roof of the tavern. He passed on, driving a cow before him. One of his comrades appeared out of an alley, running down a child. Stooping in the saddle the raider caught up the boy, and thrust him into a pannier attached to his saddle.

Demid's eyes were alight, and his long arm swung back and forth by his knees restlessly.

"Aye, 'tis Gerai Khan, Lady Yaris," he whispered, pointing to where a small cavalcade emerged from the street of the manor. "This sword I carry I took from his brother, after I slew him. The khan is a rare fighter—"

The affray had broken Demid's habitual silence. But now, seeing the leader of the band glance toward them, he whispered urgently to Yaris to keep silence. For a long moment the Tatars halted, sitting their quivering ponies like small, uneasy animals. Their broad heads all turned toward the single Cossack, who stood before the cloaked figure in the stocks.

Demid made no move, and Gerai Khan had gathered up his reins in readiness to pass on when the suspense proved too great for Yaris. She screamed.

At once the khan headed toward them, with half a dozen followers. Demid leaped back on the platform, his sword clashing against the scimitars that struck at him. Covering his knees with his shield he held his ground. The Tatars did not want to dismount. Gerai Khan, a lean man with long hair and mere slits for eyes, grunted suddenly.

"*Kai!* It is the warrior who rode from the Don."

Recognizing the sword in Demid's hand, he snarled.

"Arrows—strike him down."

Seeing the outermost riders reach toward their quivers, Demid flung himself down at Gerai Khan, striking the chieftain full in the chest.

Again Yaris screamed as the two men rolled off the plunging pony. One of the Tatars climbed to the platform and whisked the cloth from her head. The others circled their horses about the two swordsmen, who were now intent only on their struggle for life.

His back to the stocks, Demid warded off the furious onset of the Tatar chief. Then, sensing peril behind him, he changed ground, cutting at Gerai khan as he did so. A pony's shoulder struck him in the back, but his blade kept touch with his foe's.

For a moment the watching tribesmen hung back, so swiftly did the two adversaries shift ground—fearing to injure the khan. For a moment the scimitars flashed up and down, and parted. Then Demid's blade thudded against flesh and bone.

Gerai Khan's eyes opened wide. He took a step toward his horse, and slumped down on the earth. His followers caught him up, shouting with rage as they saw his chest cut open through the lungs. Thrusting him into the saddle of his horse, they were turning on Demid when a great voice shouted.

"*U-ha!* A Cossack fights!"

Ayub had not been idle during the fight in the village. He had come into contact with the Tatars in the hayfields, and had quartered back toward the manor. Remembering that the Brandenburgers were drawn up at the front gate, and not desiring to draw a discharge from the arquebuses in the semidarkness, he circled the wall to the stables. Entering the rear of the house unmolested, he searched in vain for Demid and Yaris.

Seeing the rout of the hired soldiery, he made for his horse, only to run into Count Ivan, who was fleeing the building with more agility than his long and languid body seemed to possess. The mayor, too, was there, but being slower in pace, what with his fatness, his back and thighs were

carrying along several short arrows. From the Count Ayub learned that Demid had been seen last near the stocks.

Not without using his sword did the big Cossack gain the open space in the village. Shouting encouragement to Demid, whom he saw struggling with a tribesman on the platform of the stocks, Ayub gained the wooden stand. He saw his comrade cut down the Tatar and take his place in front of the figure in the stocks.

"*Eh-eh*," he muttered, climbing on the platform, sword in hand, "what a fellow! Doesn't he know the Tatars will fill him full of arrows if he stands there?"

Nevertheless, Ayub stepped beside Demid panting and grumbling at the weakness that gripped him after the fever. The Tatars squinted up, fingering their weapons, waiting for a chance to use their bows.

Then was heard, from the direction of the river, the long-drawn cry of a waterfowl. To the ears of the Cossacks, it was the cry of a human voice, and evidently a signal; for the remaining Tatars picked up their reins, loosed their bows hastily at their foes and galloped off, holding the body that had been Gerai Khan on the saddle of the chieftain's horse.

Few souls, indeed, had been slain that first evening of the harvest festival in Nitek; but the villagers mourned the loss of most of their cattle and horses—a grievous loss in a border settlement. They continued to lament until they observed that by degrees their beasts were wandering back.

The ponies came first, and they were wet to their backs. Then lines of cattle appeared, grazing along the pastures. But the men of Nitek had no desire to go down to the river to investigate the riddle of the beasts released by the Tatars, who were accustomed to keep what they won.

The thing explained itself when a dust covered Cossack *ataman* rode into the village square on an exhausted horse, followed by half a dozen warriors. He called for Ayub, who, interrupted in the act of pulling a barbed arrow out of his thigh, limped forward.

"We saw the beacons burning," said the old Cossack briefly, "when we were on the trail of Gerai Khan. We pushed our horses and met the tribesmen crossing back over the ford. They got away, of course, but the cattle they were driving down escaped them."

He had one good eye, the *ataman*, and it roved over the village.

"What in the devil's name were the signals you burned? Where are the hundred horses?"

But Ayub's mustache bristled.

"Hay," he said. "Hay it was, Father. And not for my eating, by all the saints! As to the ponies, send your men to gather them together."

He glanced questioningly at Yaris, who, attended by Ivan, stood near, listening.

The mistress of Nitek made no sign of assent or refusal. Since her release from the stocks, her mind had dwelt not upon the loss of the herds. She had felt fear for the first time in her life.

Pointing to Demid, who had just come up with his pony for which he had been searching, she spoke to the Cossacks.

"Captain, this youth slew Gerai Khan, among his followers. He fought him with his sword and killed him."

She shivered. "Do not think of following the tribesmen, good sir, but rest your men in Nitek, where mead and fine corn brandy awaits you."

"Hide of the ——!"

The *ataman* considered Demid in surprise, and Ayub chuckled.

"So he cut down Gerai Khan? Well, the rest of the pack must not escape." He rubbed his chin reflectively. "Young sir, if you have heart for a ride this night with the Zaporogians, come with us."

But while the Cossacks were cutting out enough horses to mount the *kuren* that waited by the river, Yaris went to Demid and touched his stirrup. She handed back the coat that she still wore.

"I dealt harshly with you Demid," the *baryshina* whispered. "What did you say to the Gypsy girl?"

"What I said to you, Lady-Miss—that hawks were in the air over the river."

Her face, shadowed by the long black locks, drew closer to him, and her eyelids quivered.

"Demid—I could love you. Aye, Nitek needs a master such as you. Do not leave me."

The young Cossack looked down at her gravely.

"I am going beyond the border, Lady-Miss."

The slim hand of Yaris closed over his wrist with a kind of frantic strength, and she shook her head, finding, for once, no words to say what was in her heart.

"Demid—nay, Demid—"

"I could not sit at your table, in the manor house." Demid glanced at the old *ataman* and Ayub impatiently awaiting him. "Health to you, *baryshina*."

He tightened his reins and put spurs to the pony. The old Cossacks divided to let him come between them, and the three trotted off into the darkness.

With a sigh of relief Count Ivan took snuff, and sniffed, as he observed Yaris. It was like a woman to cry, he reflected, when everything was ended.

The King Dies

The roar of the cataracts drowned all other sounds. It was a mighty voice, that of Father Dnieper—the river that ran through the vast steppe of the Cossacks to the shores of the Black Sea, the borderland of the Turk.

Here and there where rocks thrust up in the gray flood, a veil of mist hung over the cataracts—mist foam—flecked, and colored by shifting rainbows.

It was late afternoon, in the Autumn of the year 1611 of our Lord. The only human being visible in the calm water below the cataracts was a thing of skin and huddled bones covered only partially by rags, a fisherman. He sat in a skiff at the edge of the reeds that lined the bank, holding a line of twisted gut.

Then he shaded his eyes and pulled in his line hurriedly. Out of the mist that drifted over the lower cataracts a man emerged in a canoe. Kneeling Tatar fashion and using the short, broad oar as a paddle, he swept around a nest of rocks and plunged over one of the rapids.

For a moment, while the fisherman gazed from narrowed eyes, the paddler lost control of his craft. It turned broadside to the current, and swept down upon the last of the rocks.

Without hurrying, the man in the narrow skiff shifted his paddle to the other side, checked the rush of his boat, and reversed ends in time to fly past the glistening black stones. Unharmed, he glided out on the calmer current of the basin and directed his course toward the bank where the boat of the fisherman was anchored.

By now the watcher perceived that the man who had shot the cataracts was long and bony of figure, that his sunburned head was shaven except for the scalp lock that hung from the ridge of his skull, like a

cock's comb. This meant that he was not a Tatar but a masterless man*—a Cossack.

So the fisherman, instead of pushing his boat to the shore and running away, laid some wet rushes and weeds over his catch of sturgeon. The Cossacks, he knew, were the defenders of the border against the all-powerful Turks and the Tatar tribesmen; but Cossacks had a way of being hungry and of taking whatever food came to hand when they were.

"Health to you, uncle!" The stranger checked his craft within speaking distance. "Can you tell me where the siech is?"

At this the fisherman dropped his line in fright, and glanced from the corners of his eyes down the broad river. Here, where the Dnieper widened were hundreds of islands, fringed by reeds and willows. On one of these islands was the siech, or war encampment of the Zaporogian Cossacks.*

In the siech gathered adventurers, wanderers, restless Cossacks—all who were sworn enemies of the Turk. Sometimes the Zaporogians numbered thousands, sometimes hundreds; usually they were at war with the Moslems or the Polish nobility that claimed them—fruitlessly—as serfs by feudal right. The situation of this farthest outpost of the Christian swords was kept a secret. The camp might be on any one of the multitude of islands, all looking alike from the channels.

Only the Zaporogians themselves, a few of the river-men, and the peddlers and minstrels who dogged the heels of the warriors knew the secret of its place. And the secret was well kept because those who clung to the fringe of Cossack power knew that their bodies would be torn apart by the warriors if they betrayed the war encampment.

A month ago a flotilla of the sultan's boats had come up from the Black Sea with several thousand janissaries, armed and equipped to wipe out the nest of Cossacks. They had landed on the island where the barrack huts of the frontiersmen stood. But the warriors of the siech had moved the day before to another island, on a whim which they afterward attributed to the intervention of good Saint Nicholas himself.

"You are not one of the Zaporogians," the fisherman muttered from toothless gums. The stranger wore a leather *svitza* flung over his high shoulders; his lean arms were bare, his wide pantaloons were of the rich-

*"Rover," or "masterless man," the true meaning of the word "Kazak" or "Cossack."

*Literally, "Men from below the rapids."

est green nankeen. His sword was a Tatar scimitar, and his beard, instead of falling over his chest, was trimmed to a point. And his brown eyes slanted slightly, suggesting Asiatic blood.

The fisherman did not wish to be tied in a sack and put to rest forever in Father Dnieper by the Cossacks for giving information to a spy of the Turks. Not he! The Dnieper banks were alive with enemies who would pay a round sum in gold sequins to learn the position of the siech.

"Nay, old fellow." The stranger's teeth flashed under his drooping mustache. "I am Demid, and I have come from the river Don in the northeast. I seek a friend in the camp."

He waited a moment patiently.

"If you don't speak up I'll take one of those fish you've hidden and ram it down your gullet," he added without a trace of anger.

"Eh—eh!" The river man chuckled. "Now I know that you must be a Cossack knight. It is the way of the noble sirs to address a chap like that—only they threaten in the first breath, and kick a fellow with the second and throw him a silver piece with the third. They are splendid folk, but then, alas, they always scatter wealth as soon as they get it, on anything that comes to hand."

He sighed. "Not for long are the same Cossack faces seen about here. Their noble limbs soon adorn the torture racks of the Poles, or fester under the mud of the Black Sea!"

Having completed his scrutiny of the newcomer, the old man now pointed down river. Two hours' paddling would bring Demid, he said, to some large islands. If he would look then on the left hand, toward the Tatar bank, he would see one with three oaks standing on a knoll at its head. The siech was on the island below this.

"But if you are really going to the camp," continued the fisher, "you must swim to the island, or find a horse and jump him over the mud wall, or get a Tatar's head, somehow, and tie it to your belt. Every Zaporogian must perform some feat, to distinguish him, or the noble knights and their leaders will not drink with him."

Demid nodded, and tossed the other a gold coin that flashed in the sunlight. The river-man caught it eagerly and scrambled to his feet to bow like a marionette.

"By the Father and the Son, you are verily a noble knight. I will pray every saint's day for your soul, after you have been slain by the Moslem swords. A true Cossack, as God is my witness!"

A half smile touched Demid's thin lips as he moved away. Still, the fisher, intoxicated by the glint of gold, called after him.

"May you earn endless glory in the steppe, good sir! May you slice off the head of a hero of the sultan himself. May the children speak your name, and the gray haired *bandura* players sing of your Cossack glory when the high grass grows over your bones. And until then may you find gold and jewels—fine horses and silk garments—the fairest women of the infidels—the richest wine to warm your veins—"

The roar of the cataracts drowned his words.

Shortly before sunset Demid sighted the island of the three oaks and, steering to the left, passed slowly along a body of land bordered by rushes as tall as spears.

Although the young Cossack had lived in a wilderness and had hunted from the time when he was able to loose an arrow from a bow—although he studied the bank of the island carefully and analyzed every sound—he perceived nothing that indicated the presence of men, unless it were a haze in the air that might be smoke. When, however, some waterfowl flapped up from the shore—growth some distance ahead of him, he turned inshore and stood up in his canoe.

Whereupon the rushes were parted in front of him and a bearded face peered out over the muzzle of an arquebus.

"Halt and speak your name and rank! What the —— do you want?"

He submitted to inspection, and after a moment an arm reached forth and pulled in his canoe, and another voice muttered a warning not to break the rushes. Poling his boat through the forest of giant reeds, he touched the mud and sprang out to pull it up on the shore, with the help of the Cossack patrol that had challenged him. Several other skiffs were visible, and a stack of oars. Two of the guards took him along a faint path through willow clumps, up over a grassy ridge to a wide plain.

Here in a bowl-like depression fires glimmered in front of him, and he passed lines of stalls where Jews and Armenians were selling brandy, food and garments to a smattering of Cossacks. On the other side of the path forges, sunk in the earth, were clanging and clattering as sturdy smiths labored at mending swords or beating out dented armor.

Entering a wall of dried mud, Demid for the first time saw the thatched roofs of the Zaporogian *kurens*—the barracks. Between these were wide squares where groups of men sat at ease with their pipes, or ate their supper

of kasha and barley cakes. In other groups where corn brandy was flowing he saw warriors leaping about in the wild dance of the steppe, their silver heels thudding on the hard-packed earth, the firelight mingling with the red glow of sunset to crimson their sweating faces. A shout of approval at some feat of the dancers broke through the muttered voices that accompanied the strumming of the *banduras*.

Some of the warriors called a greeting to the two who escorted him, and looked at Demid carelessly.

"—— take you Vladimir, and you, too, Ostab—what have you got there?"

"A Tatar, good sirs."

A roar of laughter greeted this. "Ostab has caught a Tatar—must have set out a bowl of milk for him to lap!"

Demid had passed the last years in the river-watch on the upper Dnieper, where he rode patrol alone, and—although he had his share of fighting—he had never entered a gathering of warriors before. These were tall men, almost invariably, and all bore scars of some kind.

"No, no!" shouted a pock-marked giant, looking up from a throw of dice, "Look at his beard! Hide of Satan! It was trimmed by a Polish wench. Don't you see he's a Pole—fell off his horse, by my faith, and couldn't get up again. So Ostab caught him."

Demid did not see Ayub, the stout knight of the Urals who had befriended him not long since on the Dnieper. He forebore asking for his acquaintance, until he had been examined and passed by the Koshevoi Ataman, the chief of the Cossacks.

At the entrance of a small hut in the center of the camp several warriors were at dice, while others were chuckling over a Turkish chessboard on which two of their number were rolling about the gold and silver chessmen, heedless of the rules of the game, which they could not play. The thin faces of vagabonds were pressed over the shoulders of wandering boyars, noblemen who had gambled or warred away fortunes and had come to the siech for the last throw of fortune that could end only in death.

A man with a black beard and a priceless ermine coat spotted with tar rose at their coming. Demid squared his shoulders, sniffing the air heavy with smoke, with the scent of dried grass and sweating sheepskins. The Koshevoi Ataman glanced at him keenly, listened to the report of the guards, and asked briefly if Demid believed in God, and Christ.

"Well, then, Cossack, cross yourself and join whichever *kuren* you prefer."

"Ayub is my brother-in-arms. I will go to his *kuren*."

The brows of the Zaporogian chief knitted together, and he looked at Demid long and searchingly.

"In what manner did this fellow come to the camp?" he demanded at length of the guards.

"Like a fisherman, sitting in a canoe," grunted the one named Vladimir scornfully. "A woman's feat, that!"

Demid recalled the warning of the river-man, that each recruit to the ranks of the siech must perform some feat, to be welcomed by the gathering on the island.

"Take him to Ayub, if he wants to go!"

The chief turned back to his hut, and Demid was escorted, not to the line of barracks, but to the central square where a torch burned beside the great drum that served to muster the men of the camp in an emergency.

Here he beheld a long spear stuck into the ground. Bound to the spear by cords that held his arms above his head was Ayub.

Demid's solitary friend in the siech glanced up, and hung his head. He lacked both sword and cap.

"He is a thief," said Vladimir bluntly. "One of the bravest of our ranks, a thief! This dawn was he strung up as you see, to abide here for three days. If, at the end of three days the four hundred gold sequins that he stole—or an equal value—are not restored to their owner, he will be cut to pieces by Cossack swords."

The sentry shifted his arquebus to the other shoulder, and added in a lower tone:

"Do you wish some fine mead, Ayub? Or some gruel and bread? A man must die, you know—that always happens—still, by my faith, a comrade need not starve."

Ayub shook his head.

"Leave me Vladimir and you, too, Demid. I am a thief."

The guard went away, but Demid sat down on the drummer's bench nearby and took out his pipe and tobacco sack. Lighting his pipe at the torch, he studied the burly form of Ayub thoughtfully.

"Tell me why you are a thief."

It was no easy matter to get the veteran to talk about his crime. The *bandura* players, he said mournfully, would not mention his name, here-

after; children would point at him; his old comrades of the siech—and Ayub had many—would forget him.

To steal, in the camp, was one of the greatest of crimes. The night before Ayub had been drinking, in the stalls of the camp followers. He had run out of money and had gone back to his barracks to sleep. In the dark, he had thrown himself down in another man's sheepskins. But that often happened.

In the morning, the *ataman*, the captain of the barracks, had discovered that a sum of money he had hidden in the earth under his sleeping-robes was missing. Four hundred sequins had disappeared during the night. Ayub had been seen by several of the warriors to go into the shed and fumble around among the sheepskins. The Koshevoi Ataman was called to investigate, Ayub was searched, and a half dozen of the gold coins were found in one of his coat pockets.

"—— take me," muttered the Cossack, "if I laid hand on one of Boron's coins! I went to sleep, right off, in the barracks, and did not move until dawn."

"Who is Boron?"

"A *bogatyr*, a hero—he's my captain." Ayub considered. "That's the worst of it. Last evening, in a Jew's dram-shop I said that he was the only Cossack in the camp who was rich—who didn't spend all he had on his comrades, like the rest of us. The Jew repeated what I said."

Two things had weighed against Ayub in the minds of the Cossacks. First, he had slighted Boron, who was one of the most reckless among men who admired daring in any form. Only on their last expedition to the Black Sea, Boron had led the boats of his *kuren* to the strait of the Imperial City* itself, and burned down the Pharos, the lighthouse. Half of the *kuren* had been wiped out and Boron had fought his way through the ranks of the Moslems single-handed and escaped with his life by swimming. In the last year he had taken a cartload of spoil from the Moslems.

Second, Ayub had claimed to be penniless when he left the drinking-place. But in the morning some gold pieces had been found in his pocket.

"Why did you say that against Boron?" asked Demid after a while.

"Because I had been drinking corn brandy."

The veteran shook his head sadly.

*Constantinople.

"Besides, it's true. Up the Dnieper, where you came from, the captain has a tower, guarded by serfs, that glitters like a princess's arm with gold and such things."

Demid nodded. He remembered the tower. He puffed at his clay pipe for a long while. The bustle of the camp disturbed him—who had come from the east where the tribesmen tended horses, and lacked for human companionship. He was troubled. He liked Ayub very much—the stout Cossack had befriended him, and that was a debt that must be paid. But how?

"Four hundred sequins," he reflected aloud. "I have eighty, taken from a Greek merchant, up the river. Will your comrades add more to it?"

Again Ayub shook his head. Many of his cronies of the *kuren* had died at the Pharos; the others were stripped of gold and gear by now—the raid on the sultan's towns had been two moons ago, and Cossacks never kept their spoil for long.

Demid gazed up at the canopy of stars beyond the spluttering torch. His comrade could not have been so drunk that he took Boron's coins without knowing it—Ayub had a hard head, when it came to mead or brandy. It was curious that he should have overlooked the gold pieces in his pocket. But then the true thief might have placed them there when he dug up the captain's treasury.

"Of course Boron has wealth enough," muttered Ayub, "but the hero is angered at me. Besides, why should I ask him? See, there he is by the *koshevoi*'s hut, playing at chess."

He was surprised when he saw that Demid had left his side without making a sound.

In fact the man from the Don had sauntered over to the group by the chief's fire. The hero Boron reclined on a sable robe, taking up the Turkish chessmen and explaining to a group of listeners the powers of the various pieces and cracking a jest about each.

Boron had wide shoulders and muscular hands—a hawk's nose, and keen, attentive eyes. A bold man, and hard, Demid thought. No man could say that Boron had a loud tongue and a quiet sword. Apparently the bystanders lacked skill to engage him in a game of chess.

"Good sir," said Demid, "will you play with me?"

"Or with Satan himself!" Boron's teeth flashed under a black mustache. "If you have a wager to put up, on victory. What man are you?"

"It is Ayub's new brother-in-arms," answered someone, and the *bogatyr* surveyed the young Cossack with a quizzical smile.

"Have you skill at this game, comrade of Ayub, the thief?"

"Some little have I learned from the friendly Tatars of the Don," responded Demid promptly, and the onlookers nudged each other, whispering that the new recruit looked like a Tatar.

But Boron waved them aside when Demid poured out the gold pieces from his pouch to the ground beside the board. "Here are eighty sequins, noble sir, and with them will I wager my leather coat and silk girdle, set with blue stones-against a hundred gold pieces."

The amount caused the watchers to stare, but Boron immediately counted out that number of coins and shoved them out with his foot. The two men set up the pieces and Boron began the play, moving his miniature warriors out carelessly and talking with his friends the while. Soon, however, he frowned and began to devote all his attention to the game.

Demid had put forward a skirmish line of pawns that broke up the older man's attack and cost him a piece. Boron tried to sweep away his adversary's defense, and exchanged knights and rooks readily but found himself the loser by another piece at the end of the maneuvering.

"The ——!"

He swept all the men off the board.

"I yield you this game and the hundred sequins. Come, double stakes the next time—two hundred gold coins each of us will wager. My word is good for the amount, is it not?"

He glanced up at the watching Cossacks.

"It is, *bogatyr*—indeed, what ant out of a dunghill would question your word?"

Demid, setting up the men anew, nodded. It was what he wished, for now the value of four hundred sequins lay on the issue of the second game. Word of the large wager spread through the camp and warriors strolled over to watch the progress of the miniature armies on their wooden battlefield. Little did the men of the siech know about the game, but the meaning of a piece lifted from the board and tossed aside was clear to them. That knight or that bishop had been slain.

Boron played as swiftly as before, but in silence now, his lean face impassive, his eyes glittering. When he picked one of Demid's valuable castles from the board the watchers drew their pipes from their lips and nodded to each other.

"Hey, this fellow Boron knows what he's about, hide of the ——. He can match a king with a knight—he has a head like a prince!"

Quietly, the man from the Don met the *ataman*'s attack with all his skill. The gold pieces that lay beside his knee would ransom Ayub, if he could win the game. And he was holding his own, although he knew now that Boron was the better player, and that the first game had been lost through carelessness.

Under cover of Boron's main attack, the *ataman* had advanced a pawn to Demid's last line of squares, where, by the rules of the game, it became a queen. Eagerly the Zaporogian made a move, and cried:

"*Shah ma'at***!* Your king dies!"

Demid looked up quickly, and presently he smiled.

"The king dies."

The game was over; he had lost, and he handed over his coat and girdle to Boron, who swept up the gold pieces. But so gravely had he spoken the three words that the bystanders and Boron stared at him searchingly.

"Well, you won't ransom your comrade, Ayub, after all," remarked the *ataman*. "Unless you can bring up your Tatar allies who taught you chess and set the siech at war. Then the drum would be beaten, and Ayub would be freed and given a sword, to fight like a Christian instead of dying like a dog."

And, rolling himself in his sables on the ground, he went to sleep. But Demid remained sitting by the embers of the fire until dawn showed him the scattered chessmen—the kings and warriors lying helpless beside the stage where they had moved in pomp and ceremony a few hours since.

Then Demid stood up, his scimitar under his arm, and went over to where Ayub half lay, half hung against the stout spear. The prisoner turned a drawn face toward his friend and blinked wearily. Presently, as he noticed that Demid lacked coat and girdle and purse, his beard bristled in a smile.

"Eh, I see that Boron left you your pantaloons. The good knights who passed by on their way to the barracks spoke of your game."

"He plays well."

Demid glanced back at the prone figure under the sables. No one was watching them. He could cut Ayub down and they might escape from the siech, but Ayub would not do this. To flee out of the camp like a stoned dog, and live thereafter in some distant village—no, Ayub would not do that.

**Shah ma'at—sheikh ma'at*: "checkmate."

"Hearken, Ayub," said the man from the Don, "I am going from the siech. You have two days more of grace. Before sunrise of the second day I will be back. Look for me then."

"Nay, Demid, what the —— are you about? Just hear the lad—hasn't been in the siech for breakfast yet, and has done nothing but make an ass of himself at chess! To slink out of sight! That won't help you make friends among the fine knights, at all—"

But Demid had disappeared already into the thin, morning mist.

The gray curtain of mist was heavier over the river, and he was able to take out his canoe and thrust it through the reeds without being observed by anyone except a sleepy sentry. Answering the challenge of the guard, he explained that he was setting forth on a hunt.

As soon as he was clear of the rushes, he headed north. Coming that noon to the cataracts, he left his boat in the keeping of the old fisherman who had wished him luck, and struck inland, through the dense oak forest that lined the western bank of the Dnieper.

It was toward the end of the third watch, in the second night of Demid's absence, that Ayub was roused from a doze by a sound near at hand.

The limbs of the big Cossack were stiff, and utter weariness held down his eyelids. He thought at first that day was come, and the cooks of the *kurens* were starting up the fires. But the stars were still brilliant overhead and no lights showed by the black bulk of the barracks. Even the late revelers had stumbled into their sheepskins.

Ayub knew that the siech slept, but not the full, deep sleep of a man who has eaten well and drunk his share of wine. The Cossacks had been quarreling; they were restless, under the long spell of idleness; most of the men were in debt to the Jews and Armenians; money was a forgotten thing.

That day a Cossack had killed another man, and had been buried alive under the coffin of his victim. What would you? The Zaporogians loved not idleness.

The sound caught Ayub's attention again, and he made out the form of a man stooping to enter the hut where the drummer slept near the great drum of the camp. For a while he listened, hearing only a distant, heavy breathing. Probably the drummer was going to sleep, he thought.

Before long he saw the form of the man again. This time it went away from the hut, still stooping. Ayub nodded drowsily, and half heard some-

thing sliding over the hard earth behind the nocturnal visitor. It seemed to him to be a sack of meal or corn. The man and his burden vanished in the darkness, going toward the stables.

Ayub gritted his teeth against the cramping pain in his limbs and looked toward the east. By the feel of the air he knew that dawn was not far away.

Boom-boom!

Almost at Ayub's ear the drum—a bull's hide stretched over a wooden frame—resounded to powerful blows.

Ayub twisted around in his bonds and stared vainly into the shadows. The drum roared on. He wondered why the drummer was without a light and why the Koshevoi Ataman had not been aroused before the alarm was sounded.

Lights flickered in the windows of the barracks. Boots thudded on the ground, but no longer in the *hopak* and *trepak* of the dance. The fire by the chief's hut blazed up and Ayub saw the *koshevoi* stride out, buckling on his belt, his baton in hand. Around Ayub masses of Cossacks gathered, and in the cleared space by the drum the leader and the captains of the *kurens* assembled.

A voice cursed sleepily.

"Who beats the muster at this hour?"

Demid was standing by the drum, pounding it with the flat of his drawn sword.

Torches and lanthorns were brought and the chief looked at the young Cossack inquiringly.

"Where is the drummer with his sticks? What does this mean?"

Still keeping his sword in hand, Demid bowed to the chief of the Cossacks and glanced around the ring of faces that peered at him angrily.

"It is time, good sir, that the council of the siech was assembled."

He pointed at Ayub.

"Too long has that man been strung up like a drawn ox."

The clamor of astonishment and fury that started up in the growing masses of Cossacks at hearing that a young warrior had ventured to call together a general council was stifled when Demid poured out on the drum, from a cloak that he carried under his left arm, a collection of glittering objects—gold goblets, jeweled buckles, strings of pearls and inlaid incense boxes.

"Here," he said, "is the value of more than four hundred sequins and the limit of time for payment of Ayub's debt is not yet passed."

A mutter, as of wind stirring dried leaves on the earth, drifted in from the outskirts of the gathering. The Cossacks who could not hear or see what was going on were asking their comrades who stood nearer what it was all about. The mutter dissolved into impatient shouts.

"What dog has called the council to see a debt paid? Demid—who the —— is Demid? Put a halter around him—string him up by the heels. Where are the cooks with their kasha? To purgatory with the cooks, we'll raid the dram-shops!"

This proposal drew forth a roar of approval. The warriors were hungry, their tempers frayed by the revelry of a few hours ago. Their hands sought their weapons, as several of the nearest strode toward Demid.

But when Boron, the *bogatyr*, stepped to the drum and began examining the spoil laid down by Ayub's comrade, the Cossacks paused respectfully.

"By all the saints," shouted Boron, flushing, "these things are mine! The vagabond from the Don has gone to my tower and stolen them."

Again the mutter as of wind brushing through the forests—men whispered to those far out in the crowd what had been said. Then silence.

"Aye, they were yours," said Demid.

Thrusting his left hand into the long pocket of his breeches he pulled forth shimmering strings of pearls, necklaces and bracelets, and finally a double handful of stones torn from their settings—rubies and emeralds that flashed as they bounced around on the drumhead. An emperor's ransom lay before the men of the siech. No one had dreamed that Boron had so great a store of riches.

Looking closely at Demid they saw now that a cut ran across the back of one hand, that his shirt was torn open, that his forehead was bruised. When he forced his way into the tower of Boron, he had found it well guarded by slaves, and among the slaves had been fair women of Cherkessia. Remembering this, he delved into the other pocket, using his left hand again. Upon the drum rolled anklets of inlaid ivory, tiny veils, sewn with pearls, pendants scented with musk, and toe-rings afire with diamonds. The head of the great drum was almost covered.

"Were these taken from your tower?" he asked gravely.

"As God is my witness," responded Boron incredulously, "they were, and—"

"This?"

Demid held out in the palm of his hand a signet ring, wherein glowed a single topaz, inlaid with the crest of one of the high officers of the Imperial City.

"Aye, and that. 'Twas taken from the hand of a Turkish vizier who fell to my sword at our last sally along the Black Sea."

"Aye, *bogatyr*, when half the men of your regiment laid down their Cossack lives."

Demid handed the signet ring to the *koshevoi*.

"Father," he said quickly to the chief, "I say that Boron lied when he accused Ayub. See, here, before you, is his wealth. He is not of the masterless ones, for he serves a master. And that is greed."

Hereat, the leader of the Cossacks stepped between the two men, looking first at Boron, then at Demid.

"Hard words! Demid, say all that is in your mind. *Ataman*, stay your hand until he has done. The time for the shedding of blood will come soon enough."

Boron, quivering with rage, dropped his hands to his sides and glanced at the sky in the east where the first streaks of dull red were showing.

"Ayub," said Demid slowly, "also spoke hard words against Boron. They were true words, as you see. Boron revenged himself by saying falsely that Ayub took his gold. While the old Cossack slept, the *bogatyr* put the six sequins in his pocket. The rest he carried around himself—for he lacked not of gold pieces when he played at chess with me. So it is clear to me that Boron, having this"—he pointed to the drumhead—"sought the life of Ayub not because of a few sequins, but in revenge."

"And I say," added Boron calmly, "that one of us will sprinkle his blood in the earth before the day is here."

"Aye," assented Demid, "I claim the right of trial by combat."

He turned to the watching throng.

"Is it not fair, good sirs, that our swords should decide which of us is in the right?"

He had judged the temper of the Cossacks correctly. A shout of assent went up from the crowd: the *koshevoi*, who never had real authority except in time of war when his word was law, stepped back into the gathering, and a circle was cleared around the two swordsmen.

Ayub, forgetting his aches, tried to pull himself up higher on the spear to see the better, until his neighbors good-naturedly seized him and hoisted him to their shoulders.

For a moment after casting off the long leather coat that he had won from Demid, the *bogatyr* stood silent, the point of his scimitar resting on the ground by his foot. It seemed as if he were listening for some sound other than the heavy breathing of men. At the end of the interval, he raised his weapon, saluted, and repeated quietly the customary phrase—

"To one of us life, to the other, death."

The violence of his anger had fallen from Boron; his eyes were bright and steady, the shadow of a smile on his lips. Demid had taken upon himself Ayub's quarrel; if the man from the Don should be cut down in the duel, Ayub's guilt would stand as before. Should Demid, by some chance, be the victor, his comrade would be free of all blame.

Such was the trial by combat in the siech. Boron saw now how the stranger had planned for this, and in his salute there was a fleeting tribute to the courage of the man from the Don.

They stepped toward each other, and Boron began to attack at once, cutting swiftly at Demid's waist. He parried his adversary's answering stroke with a bare turn of his blade, forcing Demid to give ground.

The scimitars clashed and parted, the fine steel humming in the air; the boots of the swordsmen hardly made a sound, so swiftly did they shift position, wheeling around each other and darting in—two men who knew their weapons. They fought in the reckless style of the Moslems—both attacking at once, and leaping apart. Once their curved blades struck against flesh and bone, one or the other would be maimed. And yet Boron could not resist a *tour d'esprit*, to show off his brilliancy.

He sprang forward with a shout, locked his hilt against Demid's, and forced the right arm of the young Cossack high into the air. For a second the two stood, rigid until Boron disengaged and stepped back swiftly, smiling as he did so. Demid's teeth gleamed under his mustache.

"Well done, *bogatyr*!" he cried, in acknowledgment.

Ayub noticed that after this Demid no longer gave ground. Pressing Boron back, until the scimitars flashed in the torchlight too swiftly for the eyes of the watchers to follow, he tried for the other's throat with his point. But Boron got home beneath Demid's sword.

And Ayub groaned, seeing that Demid was down on one knee, the muscles on the front of his right thigh severed by the sliding edge of the Zaporogian's weapon.

"Boron! Well struck, Boron!"

The Cossacks in the throng shouted and tossed up their caps, and some glanced regretfully at Ayub, whose life hung on the *bogatyr*'s next stroke. Demid was crippled.

Boron was not the man to forego an advantage. With a shout of triumph he sprang in, slashing with a full swing of the arm. But in the same instant Demid staggered erect, on his good leg. His scimitar darted forward and Boron never struck the blow he aimed, because his right shoulder was slashed half through the bone.

Stifling a groan, the tall Zaporogian recovered his weapon with his left hand and set his teeth. Blood soaked the sleeve of his injured arm and splashed the earth. Demid, poised on one foot, waited for his next move. "Come, *bogatyr*—I cannot advance on you."

There was no middle course. The fight was to a finish and Boron, weighing the chances, saw that his best move was to knock Demid off his balance. For the last time, he feinted and rushed against his foe. Demid went down.

But before he fell the young Cossack had got home with his point, and his scimitar was thrust through the heart of his adversary. The eyes of the *bogatyr* opened very wide and his hands fumbled at the hilt that projected from his ribs. His feet, planted firmly, still upheld his body.

Now the *koshevoi* stepped forward, saying that the fight was at an end, and, putting his arm about Boron, laid the dying man on the ground.

"Hai, sir brother," he observed, "your days with us are over; may your Cossack soul find the glory that you earned on earth. Surely the *bandura* players will sing your name!"

A little sadly he handed Demid the scimitar that he drew from the body of the first swordsman and most reckless warrior of the camp. A commotion that had been going on for some time attracted his attention. Into the ring from between the legs of the warriors crawled a thin Cossack, his wrists bound together, and his knees tightly secured by a sash. Two long sticks were thrust in the belt of the newcomer, who was gagged as well as bound.

Absorbed in the sword play, the Cossacks in the crowd had paid him little heed.

"The drummer!"

Someone in the crowd began to laugh, and others, who were nearest him looked at Demid curiously.

"Hide of the ——! Demid has bound him with his jeweled girdle, so that he could use the drum himself."

But the *koshevoi* frowned and took one of the torches in his hand to examine the trussed Cossack.

"Demid did not do this!"

"How not, Father?"

"Boron won this girdle from him three nights ago and has worn it since."

He ripped the gag from between the man's teeth.

"Who tied you up, you son of a pig?"

"Boron it was, Father. He fell on me in my sleep and lugged me to the stable. I have been an hour crawling here."

While the warriors stared, puzzled, the *koshevoi* turned the body of Boron over with his foot, looking from the drawn face of the dead man to the signet ring that he still held in his hand, and from that to the disgruntled drummer. Then he glanced at the sunrise, flooding the sky behind the trees. He held up his baton for silence, and listened, as Boron had done, for a sound other than the breathing of men.

A shrewd man the *koshevoi* and no stranger to the wiles of his enemies. Only a month ago, good fortune alone had saved the camp from being surprised by the Turks. This was the hour in which an attack might well be made on the siech, and in this hour the drummer whose duty it was to beat the alarm had been made helpless by the man who owned a signet ring of the Turks.

It was the habit of the *koshevoi* to act promptly. He put on his hat and drew himself up, and his shout was heard over the square.

"Form the regiments under the colonels! See that each man has powder in his flask, and that his pistols are loaded! Send patrols out toward the river on every side."

The muttering of the lines of bearded faces ceased as if by magic. The Father, their chieftain, had put on his *kalpak* and lifted his baton, as if the siech were at war. Yet war had not been declared, nor were any foes within sight.

Crashing forth in the semidarkness of the morning, the summons of the drum dispelled their doubts. The drummer, at a sign from the *koshevoi*, was beating the alarm with his sticks on the bull's hide, to arouse those who still slept. While men from each squad ran to the barracks for weapons that had been left behind—while the captains formed their com-

panies and the colonels gathered around the chief, the veteran Cossack ordered that Ayub should be cut free of his bonds. This done, he turned to Demid thoughtfully.

"Young sir, you have ransomed Ayub with your sword. But surely you had hatred for Boron to accuse the famous knight in that fashion."

Taking off his cap—for the *koshevoi* now spoke not as the commander of a camp at peace but as a leader in war—Demid made answer:

"Father, when his blood was hot, when he waged the battle of the chessboard, he let fall a phrase used only by the Turks. Instead of 'checkmate' he cried '*shah ma'at*,' the king dies."

"So, it must be that he played the game with the Turks."

The chief raised his head and the doubt passed from his eyes as a warrior spurred a pony between the company lines and reined in sharply—Vladimir, of the river-watch. He was smiling and his eyes were bright.

"Father," he said quickly, "we have seen boats drawing in to the reeds, and in the boats are the white turbans of the sultan's *janissaries*. Well for the good Cossacks that they are armed and ready. There are many boats, coming to test the hearts of Cossackdom—"

"Colonels," the chief addressed those nearest him, "take your companies in column to the west side of the island. Hold the higher ground, above the rushes."

For the last time he looked at the ring in his hand, and cast it from him.

"It is an evil thing," he remarked quietly to Demid, "when a man sells himself to a master. My eyes are open now. Boron betrayed the position of the siech the last time; in our raid upon the Black Sea he departed from us, going in among the Turks. He pointed out to them the new camp, and, by binding the drummer, he strove to delay our muster. *Hai*—he played with princes. But now the *bandura* players will be silent when his name is spoken."

His face lighted as he surveyed the two warriors standing helpless—Ayub too stiff and cramped to walk, and Demid on one leg—before him.

"You have done enough, Zaporogians. We may not carry you with us to the combat. Abide here and lick your hurts, while we deal with the Moslems—thus!"

And he mounted a pony and wheeled away; willfully heedless of Ayub's prayers to be taken along.

Demid looked at his friend.

"Do you bind up my cut, while I rub your joints."

Full day dawned on the almost deserted barracks. And the camp followers, the Jews, the Armenians and the wine-merchants, standing on the mud wall beyond which they never came, listened to the discharge of musketry on the distant bank of the river, hearkening to the far-off shouting. Pleasure and excitement ran high among them, for the savage temper of the Zaporogians was at an end. The warriors were fighting again, which meant that they would be good-humored again by night, and, if fortune decreed it so, owners of rich spoil.

So said the camp followers. But, in the interval, they were staring at something unwonted. On the top of the drum glittered a mass of gold and jewels—apparent to the keen eyes of the hucksters. Beside the drum lay outstretched the body of one of the finest lords of the camp.

Moreover, and this puzzled the onlookers, two Cossacks, one tall and fat and the other young, were limping slowly out of the camp toward the river. While one moved with painful stiffness, the other hobbled beside him on a stick.

The warriors had their swords in their hands, and they were cursing their legs as they headed toward the sound of firing.

Men from Below

The *koshevoi*, the chief of all the Cossacks, was troubled. Even though it was a fair, bright day in Autumn of that eventful year 1611, his spirit was heavy within him. He sat in the threshold of his hut in the siech—the war-encampment of the Cossacks on the river Dnieper—and moodily applied cobwebs to a half-healed gash in his shoulder.

The muscles of his arm were lean, his drooping mustache that hung to his bare chest was gray. Old was the *koshevoi*. His one good eye gleamed, as if it beheld not the log barracks and dusty figures of the camp, but the tossing deck of a war galley.

In fact the eye of the *koshevoi* saw not the brown grass of the steppe, but the waste of the Black Sea, the gleaming palaces of the sultan. Aye, the *koshevoi* was old, and the old have their dreams.

His hand closed around the goblet at his knee, and he tossed off the brandy and gunpowder, mixed as a remedy for his wound.

In all his days he had known no day like this.

In the siech there was not powder enough to fill a pair of riding boots. That was his trouble. He was chief of the Cossacks from the Urals to Poland, keeper of the frontier, along the river Dnieper.

Yet the Cossacks had no more powder than would suffice for a single discharge of their carriage-guns, firelocks and hand-guns.

If the sultan should come to know this, the Moslems would rejoice in their hearts. They would carry fire and devastation across the border. Already they held the shores of the Black Sea, and the saltpeter fields necessary for the making of powder. The tide of white-capped Janissaries was rising toward the cities of Europe, upon which the Grand Siegnieur was looking with covetous eyes.

Why not? When Dutch and English emissaries at the court of the Grand Turk gave him placating gifts of money and arms, seasoned with apologies? And why not, when up behind the frontier the Poles made war on the Muscovites, and the Muscovites made war on each other, boyar fighting peasant? The whole Christian world, as far as the chief of the Cossacks reeked of it, was burning up powder and shouting for more.

So it happened that not a grain of it was to be had down below, on the frontier. Even the Jews would not sell it on the steppe because they could not get it.

Two months ago the Cossack commander had bought a shipload of powder from a merchant in Kiev, and paid for it out of the treasury of the siech. It had been loaded on a bark and sent down the Dnieper. River pirates had boarded the bark and gutted it.

Word of the loss of this shipment had just come in, and the *koshevoi* pondered the matter grimly. More than anything else in the world, he wanted that powder. The first thing he did was to send out detachments of young warriors to the steppe where outposts of the Turks could see them. He had ordered the Cossacks to shoot off their firelocks at flying geese, at marks on the prairie, into the air—to waste powder as if it were of no value to them.

But he could not throw dust in the eyes of the Turks much longer. The score to be settled between them was too heavy. Especially now, when the Cossacks stood on the Christian side of the frontier, the Moslems would strike them as a hawk pounces upon a pigeon.

The *koshevoi* pulled a scarlet *svitza* over his bare shoulders and rose, stepping from his hut.

On the hard-packed clay between the barracks the warriors of the siech diced and drank, and smoked and slept. Long-limbed and sun-scorched they were, armed for the most part with Turkish scimitars, and Damascus maces, spoil taken from the Moslems. The commander noticed that they had discarded the pistols from their belts and not an arquebus was to be seen.

His men did not worry over the lack of powder as long as they had steel ready to hand. But the *koshevoi* knew that if they went up against the firelocks of the sultan's infantry with swords, they would be food for the kites, and the jackals would fatten from their bodies. What then of Cossack glory? What of the Cossack souls, his children?

They were licking their wounds after the last battle, and the high boots of soft leather were stained and ripped, and the long coats bore dark brown spots. A colonel who had lost an arm was dancing the *hopak* and *trepak* to the sound of the guitars, to show how little he esteemed his hurts.

They were men who had left families and villages to join the siech, wanderers and masterless men from all the corners of the great steppe. Entering the siech, they thought no more of women, and even dropped their names for the nicknames given by their *kunaks*, their comrades. Except that each Cossack looked forward to the inevitable rendezvous with that dark mistress of theirs whose name was Death.

The eye of the *koshevoi* ran over the groups of the various regiments. He could not spare a regiment to comb the upper river for his powder—

A shout of laughter went up from several who had been listening to the tales of a stout warrior seated on an empty wine keg.

"The forehead* to you, Ayub! With the forehead, I say! Prince of liars and father of falsehoods!"

Ayub stood up, a full six foot six, and two hundred and fifty pounds in his boots; yet the gold armlet on his biceps pressed hard sinew, and his broad, good-natured face was muscular. He had been into and out of more scrapes than the *koshevoi* himself, and was a general favorite. It was said in the camp that Ayub would never be killed, because the good Saint Peter would then be obliged to tear down the golden gates to pass his bulky body through.

"On your faces, dog-brothers," he grinned. "You are looking at a man. I tell you such deeds are a small matter in my life. Ekh! When I was born my mother salted me down. As I live, sir brothers, it was so. How many of you have smoked your Cossack pipes in the mosques across the Black Sea? Not many. The minstrels of the steppe say that after my raids on the palace of the Grand Siegnieur at Bagche Serai (Pigs' Camp) the women of the sultan's seraglio looked at me twice, I assure you. But as to that—"

A roar of laughter interrupted him.

"The colonels say we lack powder," cried a warrior, waving the tarred stump of an arm, "very well. We can grind Ayub up between the millstones. We will have sulfur and brimstone enough out of him to supply all the siech with powder."

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*The Moslem salaam brought the hands to the forehead.

"To the —— with sulfur and brimstone," retorted Ayub. "The *koshevoi* will get us powder in time."

Hearing this, the commander stared at the big warrior reflectively.

"Ayub!" His voice carried across the square, and silence fell on the noisy groups. "Where is your comrade, Demid?"

"Here, Father."

Ayub pointed without looking around, to the nearest armorer's shed. Against the wall in the sun was seated a young Cossack half a head shorter than Ayub. With a piece of tallow he was stroking the blade of a long scimitar across his knee. Wrapped high around his thighs was a green silk scarf, worn in despite of Moslems.* At his side lay a light shirt of Damascus mail, carefully polished.

Demid's eyes, slanting a little, and his dark skin marked him among the other Cossacks. Thin, distended nostrils, and firmly set lips bespoke moodiness and temper, the heritage of the hot-blooded Ukraine. Demid was from the Don country, beyond the frontier, where the men did not take kindly to discipline. He had already earned the title of *bogatyr*—hero. The other Cossacks, remembering that he had slain the first swordsmen of the camp when he came to the siech, let him go his own way, which seemed to suit him.

"To my hut!" ordered the *koshevoi*. "I have work for you, both."

Seating himself on a bearskin and laying aside his red topped hat—a sign that he spoke not as the chieftain, but as an elder Cossack—the commander related to the two warriors the loss of the powder.

"The Jews say that the shipment went past Kudak in an Armenian bark. It anchored the first night after that about sixty versts down the river. Two hundred kegs of powder were in the hold, marked with the mark of the merchant who sold to us. In the morning the bark was seen drifting down the Dnieper in flames. The thieves had made away with the crew and our kegs."

"How, made away?" demanded Ayub.

"The crew of the bark were not seen again. The powder was taken out because there was no explosion. Demid, you came to the siech from the river patrol. What have you learned of these pirates of the Dnieper?"

Demid considered, and explained slowly. He was not a talkative man.

*Green, being the color worn by the hadjis, was forbidden to other Moslems, and on an infidel was always a provocation to attack.

The river-thieves had grown in numbers and boldness since the wars in the upper country began. Now that the only law in the land was the whim of a boyar, outlaw bands were many on the steppe. Possibly some nobles, turned renegade, took this means to recover lost fortunes.

The Dnieper, from the Cossack camp up to Kiev, was bordered by almost unbroken forests or the wilderness of the steppe. The pirates had hiding places, which they changed constantly. If pursued, they retired into the waste lands. One band, the largest, had been driven over the border, where the thieves—plundering soldiers, vassals, criminals escaped from dungeons in the Russian cities—had turned Mohammedan, and had been protected by the Turks. This had not ended the raids, however.

Of late the river-bands had been sallying out in their long skiffs at night, when the trading-craft were forced to anchor. If the crew defended themselves, they were cut down without exception. The *burlaks*, the Russian watermen, feared the pirates wholeheartedly, and saved their lives by throwing themselves on their faces when an attack was made, to avoid recognizing any of the assailants. So the identity of the leaders remained hidden.

The thieves had rich pickings, because much of the overland trade from Persia and Arabia to northern Europe came up the Dnieper.

The *koshevoi* nodded and spat thoughtfully.

"Do you know who the leaders are?"

Demid shook his head.

"Well, they are dogs, that is certain," meditated the chieftain. "They have not crossed our path until now. Our need is great. We must seek out these bands, and set our feet in the trail of our powder. If I send a company of Cossacks, it would only frighten off the men we seek. So I will send two."

"It is a cold trail," responded Demid. "We will go, Father."

"If you need aid, send word. I will give you a bag of gold. One thing will aid you. Your best plan is to ride to Kudak. The *starosta*, the governor, is known to be a foe of the pirates, and he is a man with a heavy hand. I have prepared a passport, to take you to him, claiming protection on your mission and warning him of the danger from the Turks. Use your ears and your brains and keep a rein on your temper, Demid. The Muscovites will pick quarrels with you if given the chance."

Demid took the paper his chief gave him and bowed.

"In two weeks," added the *koshevoi* moodily, "ice will close the upper Dnieper to navigation. Your time is short. Choose good horses, and beware of the vampires that call to travelers in the steppe, especially such as take the form of women. If you see a werewolf, raise the hilt of your sword, like a cross, and he will howl and flee. Go with God!"

II

What Was Seen on the River

For several days Demid and Ayub made their way north along the river. They did not take a boat for two good reasons. Being Cossacks, they did not like to leave their saddles; being experienced in border warfare, they knew that they would see more from the ridges that ran beside the Dnieper than from the water.

Somewhere in the two hundred–odd miles that separated the camp they had left from the frontier fortress of Kudak the river pirates had their retreats. Perhaps in a wooded inlet, perhaps in a rock-bound arm of the river, perhaps in the wide expanses of great reeds.

This stretch of the river was in the heart of the Ukraine. For miles the two riders passed under the dark canopy of oaks, already shedding their leaves. Sometimes they pushed on at night, where a clear stretch of prairie was ahead, listening to the clamor of waterfowl on the banks, and watching for the glimmer of fires.

But the only habitations were deserted posts of the Cossacks, and frontier hamlets. Close to the few thatched roofs pressed the vast level of grass, the Cossack steppe.

Such was the country called by the townspeople of Muscovy the Wilderness.

Ayub, well-pleased to be mounted again, with a mission in hand, still was irritated by their lack of success. The only rivercraft they saw were fishing-smacks, and flyboats with leather sails, or—rarely—the oared galleys of the Armenians, and the tub-like barks of the Muscovites bearing the loads of caravans from China or Isphahan.

"The *burlaks*, the dogs of watermen," he grumbled, "swear by their heads that they reck not of thieves. The fishermen look the other way and say that pirates may be elsewhere on the Dnieper but not here or at Kudak."

He felt moodily in his saddlebags for barley cakes. The Cossacks only halted to cook one meal, and then at evening, after they had brought down

some game. Handing one of the hard cakes to his comrade, Ayub broke the other over his heel and, after breathing a prayer, fell to munching it.

"They lie, the sons of Turkish bath-tenders!"

Demid hooked one leg over his saddle peak, and smiled.

"A comet is in the sky, *kunak*. It means that death will walk over the steppe. Aye, so."

"True," nodded the big warrior seriously, "the river-folk tell of many omens. Was not a fiery cross seen in the sky over Kudak in the last moon? Then, too, they heard bells tolling under the water, at night."

Quickly Demid looked up.

"Many times or few?"

"The cross was beheld once, and the next day a galley, bound for the Black Sea was taken by the pirates. The bell sounds when the wind blows—often. It bodes no good to Christian folk."

Cheering himself with this remark, Ayub spurred ahead, for he liked not a hard pace. Demid followed, watching the dark line of reeds at the edge of the gray water. They were passing over rolling grassland, and except for a handful of huts abreast them, no sign of human life met his eye. Above a clump of willows by the huts several hawks and vultures were circling lazily.

Ayub would have passed by the shacks, but the Don Cossack called his attention to the hovering birds and headed down the slope toward the bank. The huts, on closer view, seemed without inhabitants. From the willows, however, came a penetrating odor that made the ponies uneasy.

"Carrion," grunted Ayub.

"And men," added Demid, "or the kites would not stay aloof."

Rounding the willows they rode along the shore and drew rein simultaneously.

"Well," observed Ayub between his teeth, "here are our pirates."

A half dozen tattered fishermen were working with long poles to push off a raft that had grounded abreast their hamlet. The raft was made of stout planks and beams; in its center was a wooden pillar; from the summit of this projected a nest of cross-pieces. And from each of these, as if from a gallows, hung the body of a man.

The bodies dangled on ropes, turning slowly in the light wind. Hooks inserted under the ribs held them up. The hands of the victims were bound behind their backs. Flies and gnats clouded the flesh of the men, most of whom were dead. Two still moved their limbs.

The fishermen abandoned their poles and stepped back in fear as the Cossacks rode closer. As they did so a faint sound came from the pillar and Demid saw that a small bronze bell was hung over the cross-pieces. Under this was a parchment bearing writing, stuck to the post by a dagger.

"What says the missal?" be asked.

At this a strange figure that had been lurking in the background pushed forward. It was a man no larger than a dwarf, wrapped in a black cloak, yet bearing on his curled locks a high black cap, like a sugar loaf. The toes of his limp shoes were long as his arms. On his back was a light pack.

"Worthy Cossack," he responded, "the parchment bears the seal of the exalted *starosta*, John of Kudak, lord and governor of the lower Dnieper. Over the seal is written, 'River-thieves, done to death by my command for their crimes.'"

"Who," asked Ayub curiously, "in the name of all the —— are you?"

The olive face of the man in black broadened in a smile, and his puckered eyes glimmered shrewdly.

"O sir, I am Hermaphron, the Greek. In my pack are multitudinous blessed relics. Whatever your sins—and, since you are a Cossack, they must be many—two zecchins will buy you salvation in the form of a toenail of the holy Saint Stephen. Or, I will sell you a bit of iron from the brazier that did to death Saint Lawrence. Or—for a paltry three golden sequins of full weight—you may have a fragment of the stone that was cast at—"

Hermaphron broke off in alarm when Demid urged his horse into the water to gaze up closely at the twisted and distorted faces that were barely to be recognized as human. Above the fly-infested bodies the bell clanked, once, mournfully. A pair of red eyes glared down at the young Cossack.

"Water! In the name of the Father and Son—water!"

Kneeling on his saddle, and steadying his horse with a word, Demid climbed to the float and cut down the naked form from which the voice had come. It was a youth, with long yellow hair; dying, Demid judged. The barb of the hook had penetrated his vitals.

"Have a care, Cossack!" Hermaphron cried. "It is the law of the *starosta* that no aid be given the thieves. These are some of the band that sank the Venetian galley in the last moon. Whenever the float drifts ashore it is to be pushed off—so!"

To this the Dnieper men nodded agreement. Seeing that Demid would pay no attention to their warning, they whispered together and disappeared toward the huts. Not for gold itself would they be seen standing

near when one of the doomed thieves was brought ashore, against the command of the governor.

After placing the dying man under a tree, Demid went to the river and filled his sheepskin cap with water. The sufferer gulped it eagerly, never ceasing the while to moan. When he had his fill Demid dipped his neck cloth in the water and washed the boy's face, and the swollen flesh around the wound.

Hermaphron, meanwhile, capered around, voicing his fear, until the Cossack looked up at him squarely.

"Relic-seller, have you in your pack a talisman that will stop the flow of blood and heal this hurt?"

"Aye, noble sir, that I have. An icon, blessed by the thrice-holy—"

"Then give it this lad."

The Greek stared and fingered his beard.

"Ah, handsome warrior, you jest. By Krivonos, that is it! What could this miscreant pay? Besides, that would be against the command of my lord, the *starosta*. But surely—" the keen eye of the relic-seller took in the fine mail and the red leather boots of the Cossack—"you, noble knight, must be in need of a talisman. A piece of silk, taken from the robe of a statue in the Moscow church—protection against vampires. An Egyptian powder, made by magicians—put it into a cup of the girl you wish to love you. Eh, eh! Which shall it be—"

Demid, watching the face of the condemned man, held up his hand. The youth, in the grip of fever, was raving.

"To sword, you dogs—Man the side wall—Nay, I call them accursed traitors!"

His eyes opened wide, and even Hermaphron was silent.

"Water, I say water! Feodor, Ivan! Where are the servants?"

For a moment he stared into the dark eyes of the moody Cossack.

"A stranger—a man from afar. What do you, sir, on this threshold of ——? Stay, bear word from me." His hand gripped Demid's wrist. "To Ileana, I say. Bid her avenge me—"

"What is your name?" asked Demid quickly.

The voice of the sufferer fell into a mumble, and presently the Cossack saw that he was dead. Hermaphron touched his shoulder.

"Look to yourself, Cossack. Yonder on the highway come some men of the *starosta*. Aye, one of the dogs of fishers is with them, and no doubt has told them of your crime."

The river road that led to Kudak was within arrow shot and a tall man in the livery of the governor spurred his horse down the bank. Two men-at-arms followed, scowling at the Cossacks. The leader peered down at the body of the boy and then examined the raft. Noticing that one of the victims still lived he ordered a soldier to end his life, and watched while the man went out to the float and cut the throat of the last survivor.

"Two days, and still alive!" the officer grumbled. "Satan himself must be in their hides. Well, they won't be taken down by their mates, now. What are you doing, Cossack, so near to Kudak? What do you mean by breaking the command of his serene Excellency, the *starosta*?"

As Demid occupied himself with filling and lighting his pipe, and Ayub merely grunted, the governor's man went on:

"I am Lieutenant Varan. Stand up, you dogs, and answer for yourselves—"

"In good time, serene, mighty lieutenant," rumbled Ayub, who had held the rank of colonel in the Cossack camps. "Is that sword stuck on your back to frighten away ghosts, or do you use it on your horse?"

Already Demid had noticed that the officer was armed with one of the great German broadswords, hung in a scabbard over his shoulder. From point to pommel it measured a full five feet. The long hilt ended in a silver knob as large as a man's knotted fist; the two-edged blade was straight and the whole must have weighed fifty pounds—a two-handed weapon of the northern soldiery.

The lieutenant straightened in the saddle abruptly. His cheeks went red.

"On your face, jackal! Down on your face! What words, to an officer of the *starosta*!"

Ayub's brows drew together and he began to snort.

"Ekh—ekh! An end to words! Stand down from your horse and pluck out your skewer."

The man Varan moved quickly. He was out of his saddle and swinging around his head the five-foot blade before one of his men could catch the reins of his horse. At sight of him, Ayub fell into a cold anger; his teeth gritted together and he made his heavy saber sing in the air.

"Cut, slash!" he barked.

He gathered himself together for a spring when he was halted by Demid who had made a trip to the river and back. The young Cossack had filled his cap anew and emptied it over the head of his companion.

"Cease howling, wolf," he said briefly, thrusting Ayub back. "The *koshevoi* warned us to keep clear of quarrels and now you would let out the life of the first Muscovite you meet."

Glancing at Ayub critically, he saw that the big warrior was too enraged to hold back from a fight. Turning to Varan, he said:

"With the flat of the blade—the flat of the blade! We bear letters to the *starosta* and blood must not fall here."

But Ayub was not satisfied with this. He had been watching the play of the northern broadsword enviously.

"Nay, brother, I will slice his liver for those words. But if you will let me keep his sword, I will not harm him."

The lieutenant stared at the Cossacks curiously. He had all a townsman's distrust of the Cossacks, who were seldom seen in Kudak. He knew their hot temper—the recklessness with which they fought. With the edge of the saber Ayub would be formidable; but with the flat of the blade he would have the advantage. A blow of his two-handed weapon would dislocate his adversary's skull or crush in his ribs.

Moreover, Varan, who matched Ayub in height, was bent on maintaining his reputation before his men. On the river, he was known to be a hard customer. It would be a feather in his cap, to take the sword of an *ataman* from the Cossack war camp.

"If you disarm me," he said disdainfully, "the broadsword is yours. But I'll strip you of your saber and give it to the girls of Kudak—"

"So be it," nodded Demid. "Begin."

He stepped back and Ayub sprang forward, taking the full sweep of the heavy sword on his saber. For all the Cossack's great strength, the impact of the two-handed weapon crushed down his blade and whirled him aside with a bruised shoulder.

Instead of drawing out the soldier, the Cossack gathered himself together and leaped in again. Varan's teeth gleamed, for this was to his liking. Stepping back a pace, he swung hastily.

But before he could put the full swing of his shoulders into the blow, Ayub, judging distance and speed instinctively, parried the stroke, his long saber clashing full against the straight sword. Varan had to spring back to escape his answering cut.

Demid smiled, and then fell serious. His comrade, rushing in, was met by the massive pommel of the lieutenant's weapon. Varan had thrust his hilt at Ayub's forehead with all his strength. It might well have brained

the Cossack, but Ayub's head rolled aside and the end of the handguard merely raked the side of his skull, drawing blood.

The watching soldiers shouted, and Varan, seeing his chance, spat full into Ayub's eye, and leaped clear. As he did so, he swung down on the outthrust hilt. The long blade rose from behind his shoulders in a wide arc.

Standing close, and half stunned by the blow on his head, Ayub had no chance to step back beyond the sweep of the two-handed weapon. Nor could he parry a down blow with his lighter blade.

He dropped his saber, and his next movement was so quick that only Demid followed it. Ayub turned about, thrusting his shoulders against Varan's chest, gripping as he did so the silver ball of the other's sword hilt in his right hand. The impetus of Varan's full stroke was too great to check, and Ayub pulled down, arching his back as he did so.

Only one result could follow, unless Varan released his grip on his sword. But he held fast, and was sent flying through the air, over Ayub's back. A wrench of the Cossack's forearm and shoulder, and the great blade was twisted from the lieutenant's grasp.

Varan struck earth on his head and shoulder four paces away. When he could sit up and look around, the Cossack was bending over him. Ayub had strapped the two-handed weapon to his back and was holding out his old saber.

"Here is a good blade, Muscovite," he said grimly. "Use it fairly, instead of spitting like a cat."

By way of answer Varan caught the saber and whirled it far into the river. Then without a word he went to his horse and made off, going north along the trail, followed by his men. Demid watched them out of sight. It was too bad that Ayub had lost his temper and made an enemy of one of the officers of the *starosta*. Varan would undoubtedly go to John of Kudak with his version of the quarrel, and the *starosta* would take the word of his men against the Cossacks, especially after Demid's defiance of the order against cutting down the condemned pirates.

Demid had no mind to reprove his companion. Instead he went to inspect the body of the criminal. Frowning, he noticed that the hand of death had smoothed away the harsh lines of suffering. Weak and dissipated the face of the boy was, but there was in it something of pride and beauty. The boy had babbled of servants; he had been born of noble parents.

"Cover the body from the kites and wolves," Demid commanded the fisher-folk who had drawn near again to watch the fight. "Hermaphron,

show us the shortest path to the gate of Kudak. It is time to go, for those who have the road before them."

"That will I, noble sir," promised the Greek, "for a silver ducat."

The Cossacks noticed that the relic-seller had an excellent horse—a black-and-white Arab—at hand in the bushes. They were off at a round pace, for Demid wished to be heard by the *starosta* at the same time that Varan told his tale. Meanwhile, he ordered Hermaphron to reveal what he knew of the last exploit of the pirates.

No sooner were the three out of sight than the fishermen left the body of the youth, and began to wade into the water, seeking the sword that had been cast away. Once or twice they looked up in fear, for, down the river, the bell on the float sounded its mournful dirge with each puff of the rising wind.

A storm, in fact, was rising over the Dnieper. White crests appeared where the wind countered the current. The lines of rushes bent under the breath of chill air, and the sky darkened behind the riders. Hermaphron's tale was jolted out of him, so swift was the pace set by Ayub, but Demid listened to each word.

Ten days ago the Venetian galley had passed Kudak, after paying the usual toll at the fortress. Like the vessel that had carried the powder of the Cossacks, it made a day's run down the river and moored for the night at an island Hermaphron pointed out.

The river-thieves had put out from the bank and had gained the island unseen by the crew of the galley.

The Venetian captain had been shorthanded, what with the troubles in Kiev, and had been assailed from shore and water.

The pirates had killed him, and most of his men; several survivors had tried to win to the mainland by swimming. They had not been heard from again. But the noise of the affray had reached a courier boat of the *starosta* that was patrolling down from Kudak.

The soldiers of the governor had drifted quietly on the current until within pistol shot. Torches in the hands of the river-thieves, to light the plundering, had shown them what was going on. After firing a volley they boarded the merchant galley, drove the pirates to the island, and slew several, taking prisoner the half dozen who had just been executed.

"Then the leader of the band was not taken?" Demid asked.

Hermaphron fingered his beard and glanced warily to right and left before answering.

"Nay, young sir, 'tis said along the river that the many bands have but one leader. He was not among the prisoners."

"Who is he?"

"Ah, why would you know that? He is a werewolf, a howler in the wilderness. He changes shape when pursued. His eyes can see in the dark, and 'tis said he rides to the witches' sabbath."

Hereat Ayub pricked up his ears and slowed the pace of his horse noticeably.

"That is an evil thing," he muttered, crossing himself.

"John of Kudak," said Demid slowly, "has a heavy hand. He must have tortured the captives. Aye, there were scars and lashes on the boy's body. What did they confess?"

"True," smiled the Greek. "The dogs rode the wooden mule, and caressed the thumb-screw and the iron jacket. They said this of their leader: He keeps apart from their lairs, which they change after each venture. When spoil has been taken the thieves scatter and bear it to a place named by their chief. In exchange they receive each one, justly, a sum in gold or jewels. When a venture is toward, the word is passed down the river and they are met by this monarch of darkness, who takes the tiller of the craft they are in. When the fight is over, he stands guard with the best armed on the shore until the others have gone inland with the plunder. Then he joins them at the appointed place and pays them, as I have said."

"What manner of man is he? What name bears he among the bands?"

Hermaphron grimaced and touched his pack as if for protection against evil.

"By Krivonos, much have I heard in the kitchens of the castle of Kudak, but not that. One says one thing, another the contrary. They call him the Lord of the River. Some swear that he is a renegade noble: others that he has sold himself to the Turks, or the ——, which is the same thing."

Demid leaned over and tapped the bundle that Hermaphron cherished.

"An end to these wives' tales, Greek, or I cast your goods into the Dnieper. What was confessed concerning the fate of the Armenian bark a month ago?"

"As God is my witness, I know not, sir knight."

Hermaphron started again as a mighty hand gripped his off shoulder and Ayub snarled at him.

"Tell what you have heard of the powder that was meant for Cossack hands, or you will fly after your bundle, and Satan will open the door under the river for you, because he loves a Greek."

The eyes of the relic-seller blinked shrewdly, even while he groaned.

"*O dies irae*—O day of doom! What misery besets an honest man! Worthy champion of the Christians, I heard that the Lord of the River himself took over the bark, because the powder was too weighty to carry afoot. He went down the river."

III

Concerning Vampires

They pushed their horses hard, but it was after the hour of sunset when they drew up before the river gate of the fortress of Kudak.

Twice, in the gathering darkness the Greek had wandered off the narrow trail. Over their heads the wind from the steppe howled and twisted, and lashing rain beat down on the high bell tower, the sheer stone wall of the fortress and the clusters of peasants' huts outside.

A sentry at the postern answered their hail with a curt warning to be off and about their business.

"Ah, sir knights," said the Greek dolefully, "'tis an hour after the time of the closing of the gate. By order of the *starosta*, John of Kudak, no man may enter or leave the fortress between sundown and sunrise. Not he himself may have the gate opened."

The Cossacks, accustomed to the open steppe, were turning aside indifferently to seek shelter under the nearest trees, when Hermaphron checked them. The rain was soaking under his cloak and his teeth were chattering with cold.

"Let us go to the manor house of the princess. Wayfarers barred from the gate are wont to find shelter there."

"What princess?" asked Ayub distrustfully.

"Ileana of Khor. Aye, one or two versts back, the way we came, then inland, on an arm of the Dnieper a couple of pistol shots. The Khor family were once masters of all the lands of this province. The men of the family followed the wars, and made many debts. Aye, they were wild folk. They drank up the Khor lands, district by district. Yet, keeping to the ancient custom, they garnish their table well, and all who ask bread and salt in

the name of Christ are welcome. To the house servants I have sold many tokens, most efficacious—"

"Lead the way!"

The arm of the river proved to be a small inlet with a fishing village at its head. Some smacks and a light galley were moored here, and following the path that ran up from the jetty beside the galley they came to a low wooden palisade at the edge of the forest.

"Who comes?" a challenge greeted them at the horse gate.

"Hermaphron," responded the Greek, "and two Cossacks, turned off from Kudak."

Demid and Ayub heard a man moving in the darkness beside them, and then on the path up which they had come. Evidently the guards of the wall did not rely too much on the word of the Greek, and were investigating for themselves. It was all done too quickly and quietly for Russians and the gate swung open silently.

They were led to the stables at one side the enclosure by an archer, who turned over their horses to a serf to be rubbed down and fed. The manor house itself was joined to the outbuildings—a rambling structure of rough boards with many wings. Within the palisade was the odor of wet hay, of cattle.

Hastening into the hall, the Greek led them into a long room where two stone fireplaces crackled and blazed. The Cossacks uncovered and bowed low.

An old Tatar servant advanced toward them, glancing from the visitors to the woman who sat in the high seat by one of the fires. Demid saw that three archers stood in the entrance behind them, awaiting what word the Princess Ileana should be pleased to give as to the treatment of her guests.

"O most worthy princess," chattered Hermaphron, "my companions are not of my choosing. As I live, they settled themselves on me like flies. They would have thrown me in the river if I had not shown them the way here. Truly they are men from below the rapids—brigands and steppe riders, spillers of blood—"

"Now, by ——."

The insult began to take effect on Ayub, when Demid gripped his shoulder with a swift warning.

In the upper country, far from the frontier, where they were now, the Cossacks were received warily. Being masterless men, the lords of the land

looked on them as little better than rebels, while the villagers dreaded their forays for horses and food when supplies failed in the camps along the Dnieper.

So, in the hall of the high-born, it would have needed only the word of Ileana to have the Cossacks turned off with a beating. If Ayub had started a quarrel, the two of them might well have been set upon and bound, to be torn apart by wild horses. Doubtless, before this happened, they would have reddened the floor of the manor house with the blood of the retainers, but Demid judged that two score armed men were within the palisade, and even Ayub's great sword could not prevail against arrows.

Glancing swiftly at Hermaphron, he saw the round face of the Greek screwed up in relish of some jest.

Still gripping the muttering Ayub, he turned to Ileana, cap in hand, and he did not speak.

In fact he would not have known what to say to the princess. Her head came no higher than his chin, but, withal, she stood straight as a slender cedar on the step of the high seat. Instead of the bulky dress of the Russian women she wore a sleeveless Turkish *khalat* of shimmering silk, and no cap adorned her black hair, that fell in two tresses to her knees.

Ileana had the clear gray eyes of the northern folk, slanting slightly upward. Seeing the whiteness of her throat and hands, Demid thought of the wax images of the saints that stood in the churches of the Ukraine. So grave was she, and so delicate her face.

"Name me these men from below," she said to Hermaphron. She spoke as one accustomed to the silence of others in her presence.

"The warrior with the great sword is Ayub. The other, your excellence, is the young *bogatyr*, the hero Demid. They are from the siech below the rapids."

"And they were barred from Kudak?" the low voice of the princess went on.

"Aye, so, Khorovna, my lady of Khor."

The eyes of the girl—for she was barely a woman in years—dwelt on Demid.

"All who are turned from the gate of the fortress are welcome to the manor house," she said, the shadow of a smile on her lips.

Then, extending her hands, Cossack fashion, she repeated the greeting of the Ukraine—

"We bid you to our bread and salt."

The Cossacks flushed with pleasure at the familiar phrase. Ayub, not quite sure of his ground when dealing with a princess, ducked his head several times, then fell to stroking his mustache. This reminded him that he had had nothing to drink except water for several days. "*Hai*, most worthy young lady, surely there will be rare good mead on the table where the welcome of the Cossack land is upon the lips."

Ileana considered him unhurriedly, and did not take offense.

"My grandsire, Rurik of Khor was a Cossack."

"Rurik the Fair?" Ayub roared his approval. "The captain of the falconship that passed through the Dardanelles! The *bogatyr* who broke with his ax the chain the Turks stretched across the entrance! Eh, he could drink. My word for it! Such a hero as he was. He always swore the Moslems would never make him prisoner. When they overcame his falconship after a spy had betrayed it to the Turks he caught up a keg of spirits and jumped into the waters. When they dropped nets for his body and hauled it up—" Ayub shook his head admiringly—"when they hauled up the hero Rurik he still had the keg, but it was empty. Such a man!"

Ileana was looking into the fire.

"You shall have your mead, *ataman*, if you will tell me how you gained the sword of Varan, the governor's aid."

Nothing could have pleased Ayub more. The princess, in her seat by the fire, sipped a goblet of wine while the Cossacks, having rid themselves of their water-soaked *svitzas*, sat in their shirt sleeves over mutton and bread and mead. The Greek, meanwhile, had vanished.

While Ayub talked, Demid took in his surroundings. The walls were hung with richly woven tapestries, stirred fitfully by the breath of the storm outside. The table was the finest Venetian ebony, but the stools were of plain oak. Around the icons were hung sets of rare Moslem scimitars and casting spears, yataghans, and helmets of inlaid steel. Carpets from Bokhara were underfoot. Under a long iron shield, bearing a device obscured by age and hard knocks, hung a crusader's lance, of a size to match Ayub's new sword.

Wealth and spoil the Khormen must have had, the young Cossack thought, yet the things were old, and gaps showed where some had been taken down, perhaps to be sold. The parents of Ileana were dead; she was not married, as the dress of her hair made clear. Yet several gyrfalcons resting sleepily on their perches and hunting gear hung in the outer corridor indicated that a man was master of the manor house. The house

serfs were few, Tatars, for the most part, like the majordomo who never left the hall.

"What is the news upon the river?" Ileana asked, when Ayub had ended his tale.

"The pirates," Demid answered, "sacked a Venetian galley, and were set upon and slain for the most part by the river guard of the governor."

The mistress of Khor bent down to pat a lean wolfhound at her knee.

"Aye, that. But no new boat from Kiev has reached Kudak?"

He shook his head.

"I think not."

Studying her face in the firelight he knew that he had seen one like it not long since. The arched brows, the down-curved lips—Demid frowned, fingering his glass.

"You have brothers, princess?" It was beyond belief that in these evil times a child like Ileana could hold intact even so small a place as Khor.

"Aye, Cossack, one. Prince Michael journeys to Kudak from the university at Kiev." She smiled, a glint of pleasure in her eyes. "He was tired of books and comes back to his horses."

"By the river?"

"Aye. He is overlong on the way."

She looked, from an impulse of habit at the tall gilt clock that marked off seasons and changes in the heavens as well as the hours.

"But Michael is ever minded to wander." This, as if reassuring herself.

"Has the prince your brother fair hair?"

"Indeed, he is fair as I am dark. Yet his eyes are like mine."

Demid nodded.

"Pardon, young mistress—I think I have met him, although his name was not known to me. Had he with him two servants Feodor and Ivan?"

"Ivan is his body-servant, who always accompanies Michael. This Tatar—" she indicated the old majordomo—"we christened Feodor. How could you meet him, on the river, when you came from below, and only as far as this?"

Demid glanced around the room, made sure that Hermaphron was not visible, and reached for the tankard of mead. Taking time to weigh his words, he was aware that Feodor, under pretense of making up the fire, was studying his face with shrewd old eyes.

"My news of your brother," he answered, "is that he passed Kudak, on some venture. He is bound down the river."

"Without word to me?" Ileana drew herself up. "Cossack, you presume on your welcome. Why would Prince Michael go down the river without at least sending Ivan to announce his arrival?"

Demid remained imperturbable.

"Lady, if you would tell me what business the prince, your brother, was engaged in, then I could say why he passed Kudak secretly."

For a moment her fine eyes challenged him. Then she sighed and turned back to the wolfhound.

"You are from afar and know not my brother. It is true that he does not confide his plans to me, for he says that I am mistress within the four walls of Khor, and he is master of the fields and river without."

She bent nearer the fire as if chilled by little breaths of wind that passed through the great hall.

"*Ai-a*, would he were here! Feodor says that the omens on the river have been bad. We of Khor have no secrets, Cossack."

Demid bent his head.

"It must have been a hunting venture that took Michael past his home. His last letter bade me under-feed his falcons, so that they should be ready for the field. Nay, after all—" she forced a smile—"your word is good, for it means that Michael was not on the trading-galley that was pulled down by the pirates."

Now Ayub had been listening with increasing interest.

"True, young mistress," he boomed suddenly, "the craft that bore your brother was not at all like a galley. It was—"

Beneath the table Demid's boot struck his ankle forcibly.

"It was a barge, young mistress."

To Ayub he whispered:

"Dolt! We have crossed a lofty threshold. Drink as much as you want but keep your mouth shut!"

The old Tatar regarded them distrustfully, and when Demid began to quaff from the tankard, Ileana of Khor spoke to him no more. Ayub was flushed; his head rolled on his high shoulders. The young Cossack swayed in his seat, and hummed snatches of song under his breath.

After all, they were only two Cossacks, who were getting themselves drunk, as the men from below were wont to do. She summoned Feodor, bade him fetch another tankard for the guests, and leave them to their

own devices. This done, she resumed her watching of the gilt clock, waiting for Prince Michael, who would never stride over the threshold of Khor again.

Ayub was afire with curiosity and a new interest. So he began to whisper to Demid, and since the *ataman* had learned to talk under his breath during the hours of sitting beside the lair of a stag, gun in hand, or with his men, under the walls of a hostile camp at night, no one else heard him.

"By the Swineherd of Mecca, do you not see that the prince was the man on the governor's hook? He it was you pulled ashore from the raft of the dead. His face was twin to this queenlet."

"I am not blind."

Demid's dark face was moody and his eyes, half-closed, moved restlessly.

"God have mercy on his sinful soul. He was a pirate, a leader of river-thieves."

"But not the leader of the bands."

"Why do you hide it from the girl?"

Demid shook his head, keeping time to his almost voiceless chant.

"Hearken, Demid!" The big warrior leaned closer. "This brat is other than she seems. As sure as the —— wears hoofs. How else is she left alone, mistress of a wide estate? Eh, the nobles of the countryside must fear her. Then she is a witch. That is certain. So she has put a spell on you, brother. I never saw you drink like a fish before and your eyes are like coals."

From behind crossed fingers and thumb, he surveyed the silent Ileana.

"Ekh, why else was she so pleasant of tongue to two *kunaks*? All Russian women paint their faces, and hide them from strangers. She is white as a hungry vampire, a demon woman. If you don't watch carefully she will let out your blood. Then her cheeks will be red enough."

Wine always made Ayub moody. In his eyes women were more dangerous than a whole company of spear-bearing Turks, or a *chambul* of Tatars. Everyone knew what a Moslem was after. But who could tell what was in a woman's mind? Moreover this one had a score of bowmen at her call. What had become of Hermaphron? He heard the outer door open and close, and voices in the corridor. Feodor advanced to the entrance, but fell back with a quick salaam.

"The serene, mighty *starosta*!" the majordomo announced, adding to the house serfs—

"On your faces, dogs!"

Demid looked up at John of Kudak with interest. The governor stripped off a soaked fur-coat, tossed it to Feodor, and advanced toward Ileana and the fire. A few paces from her he bowed—a broad-shouldered man, bearded to the eyes, in the Russian fashion. He had plump, red cheeks, and a good-natured smile. His long inner coat was of heavy silk, embroidered in gold, its stiff collar pearl-sewn.

"Health to you, princess!" his deep voice rolled forth pleasantly. "I am belated at my own gate, and so may not enter it."

Ileana inclined her head.

"Is any threshold strong enough to bar the lord of Kudak?"

The governor laughed.

"A good leader does not break his own rules. We were driving a stag far down the river on the Tatar bank, and the storm delayed our return. So—will Khor receive me as a guest?"

"We bid you, my lord, to our bread and salt."

She motioned to Feodor to bring bread and meat and wine for the governor. This being placed on the table near the Cossacks, John of Kudak stared at them fleetingly.

"Two men from below. Ah, the tall one is he who tossed Varan and took his sword." The governor seated himself and began to attack the well-stocked wooden platters with a vim. "Your name? Well, Ayub, watch your skin. Varan will rub you out if he gets the chance. He is an ill man to anger."

He filled a pewter goblet with wine and stood up, bowing to Ileana.

"Your health, and Prince Michael's. May he soon join us with his falcons, before snow ends the hunting. You—" he turned to Demid—"have letters for me. Where are they? A candle, Feodor. Princess, I am a poor clerk. Will you read them to me?"

As Ileana, in her low voice, repeated the message of the commander of the Cossacks, that the governor do no harm to the two riders sent into his territory, and that aid be given them to search for the vanished powder of the Cossacks—John of Kudak listened carefully, and was silent a moment.

"One moon has passed over us," he said at length, "since the river-thieves stripped the Armenian bark, and their chief bore off your powder.

The forty kegs of powder are worth their weight in silver now. By now he will have sold them to the armies fighting in the north or to the Turks."

He took the letters from Ileana, tore them across and cast the pieces into the fire.

"You do not know by which road the powder has been sent from the wilderness, my Cossacks. Nor can you find the Lord of the River. With all my harrying of the pirate, no men of mine have laid eyes on him. He may be Beelzebub. My advice to you is to draw your reins toward the siech, from which you came, while you are still alive."

The *starosta* was a man of plain words. He was fair-minded enough to overlook Ayub's quarrel with his lieutenant, and he did not lack courage. Otherwise, he would not have left his retinue and come, armed only with a hunting-knife, among strangers. Understanding this, Demid weighed his words.

"Your Excellency, have you no thought as to where the Lord of the River may be found?"

"I have not. When his men make their strike on the river near Kudak I try to strike back, before they vanish into the waste lands. But to lead my soldiers into the wilderness would be like sending dogs after birds. Vain. My orders are to hold Kudak for the Russians."

He struck the table with a powerful fist.

Demid pulled at his mustache thoughtfully. "I thank you for your words, Excellency! *starosta*, the frontier is bare of powder. No more will come down from Kiev. While the kinglets and the lordlings are shooting each other to pieces above us, the Turks are creeping up on the frontier. Unless the Cossack camps have powder before the Dnieper freezes over, the Moslems will be masters of the border posts. Then, when Spring sets in, and the Wilderness ceases to be a swamp, they will overrun Kudak and Kiev and the other cities."

"You have been making love to Mother Vodka! Drunken tongues have wagged on the frontier. Why do you annoy me with old wives' tales?"

"Because, if our powder should be lost, we will buy half of yours at your price."

The governor pulled down a clay pipe from the wall, took tobacco from his girdle and called Feodor to bring the candle. Blowing a puff of smoke into Ayub's face, he smiled.

"No. What is mine is mine. The fortress must keep its magazine full." He was not ill-pleased that the Cossacks should lack powder. Given suf-

ficient provocation, the men from below were as apt to raid the Muscovites as the Turks.

The Cossacks were silent. Born and bred in the Wilderness, they were ill at ease behind walls. They could follow the trail of a stag for days, but to find scent of the game they sought in the crowded alleys of the fortress would be a hard matter.

"Nay then," responded Demid, "we will draw our reins to the steppe. There must be signs of the river-thieves along the bank."

Ayub glanced at his comrade in owlish surprise. Had not they decided that nothing was to be seen along the river?

"Well, I have warned you. Do not blame me if you are taken by the river-thieves and hung up on hooks, in reprisal for my punishment of the pirates."

A little thickly, Ayub spoke.

"Nay, Excellency. Whoever rubs us out will have short shrift and no priest. Our comrades of the siech will come to ask what has been done to us; then ten thousand Cossack sabers will be bared, and blood will be shed for blood. This youngling, Demid, is a *bogatyr*. If harm comes to him the siech will roar, and the *kunaks* will tumble into their saddles."

Under lowered brows the governor studied the warrior.

"Dog of the ——! You are men to my liking. Enter my service and I will give to each the rank of captain. You'll have a rare frolic then."

Demid shook his head.

"We were sent on a mission. Our thanks to you, Excellency, but we are men of the siech."

It was seldom that adventurers refused an offer of service with the most powerful noble on the lower Dnieper. John of Kudak shrugged and left the table, when Demid began to drink again. In a moment the candlestick that he had left behind crashed over, and, glancing back, he saw Ayub asleep, his head pillowed on his arms and Demid swaying back and forth in the shadows.

"Fools!" he muttered. "They could have gone far with me. And now, princess, we are done with your dainty guests. Our reckoning is at hand."

For some time the manor of Khor had been in arrears in the tithes due the governor of the province, John of Kudak. The civil war in the north had loosed bands of lawless men on the steppe, and cattle were missing from the farm. Moreover her brother at the university had called upon Ileana for considerable sums to pay debts. The harvest had been good, but

men had been lacking to gather it in, and early rains had rotted a good deal of the grain. So the impost due the *starosta*, unpaid in the last year, had doubled itself, with interest. There was the head-tax, the horn-tax, and the fire-tax.

Whereas the first men of Khor had been sole masters of an estate the size of a small kingdom, and of all the souls upon it, times had changed. The empire had stretched its bounds to the Dnieper, and the old owners were taxed on their possessions.

"Why do you come to me with your hand held out?" Ileana stood in her nook by the other fire, on the step of the high seat, so that her eyes were on a level with the *starosta*'s. "You know we have no money laid by in Khor. What we could spare of grain and honey and grapes I have sent up into Kudak."

"But not enough to pay a fraction of your debts, princess."

"We could have paid more, if you had not bought off the best of my peasants before the harvest was in. Aye, and the half of my carts."

John of Kudak studied the woman before him, frowning a little.

"Your men were free to go or stay; they were needed in the upper districts. If Khor cannot keep its serfs, you cannot live—"

"Nevertheless, Excellency, we manage to keep life in our bodies." Ileana smiled uncertainly. "My fishermen and the Tatar hunters see to that."

"If you choose to live with dogs!" The governor shrugged, and his bearded chin thrust forward. "You would do better to give up your holdings, and live in the fortress on what you will gain thereby."

He held up a finger as if explaining matters to a child.

"Princess, the lands of Khor are fertile. Large crops can be raised here next Summer. But the soil must be worked with skill. You know naught of such things. So your men seek masters elsewhere, save for the hunters and fishers and house servants, who are your slaves because they love you. Most men do."

Ileana pressed her lips together as if hurt. The *starosta* glanced casually at the Cossacks, but failed to notice that Demid, leaning on the table, chin in hand, was quietly attentive. The two by the fire were speaking in low tones, yet the wind had died down and in the silence of the room he heard what was said.

"But I, Ileana," added the governor, "am not under your spell. Your dainty hands cannot hold Khor together. Your brother is a drunken fool—"

"That you would not say if he were here!" The girl's eyes flashed. "He wears a sword, and he is the grandson of a warrior."

"By the saints! You will learn the truth of your brother in good time. I am no tale-bearer."

"Michael," said Ileana quietly, "promised me that when he came to Khor he would have money to pay most of the tithes. He has borrowed from his companions in Kiev. He will be here on the morrow, for that was his word to me."

John of Kudak nodded thoughtfully.

"So be it. I will await the morrow."

"I thank your Excellency." Ileana's bright smile mocked him, in the flickering firelight. "Feodor will lead you to your room. In other days it was the chamber of my grandfather, Rurik."

"Rurik the Fair met a bad death, princess. Such, it seems is the curse of your family. If Michael should leave you, as did your grandsire, would you give up Khor? It is a yoke on your shoulders."

"Nay, my lord." She shook her head slowly. "You do not understand. The place is like our blood—a part of us. The first men of Khor sailed down the river from here to the crusades."

Her glance went to the long spear, and she clapped her hands for the old Tatar.

After ushering the governor to a distant wing of the manor house and lighting his mistress to her sleeping chamber, Feodor returned to the hall to scrutinize the Cossacks doubtfully. Years of faithful service had earned him the trust of the masters of Khor, first of the grandfather, then of the princess. He was, in fact, as much a watchdog as the scarred wolfhound that dozed by the fire. Feodor was surprised to find the young Cossack striding up and down the carpet, wide awake and none the worse for drink.

Demid signed to him to approach. Again the Tatar was startled, although his dried-up, wrinkled face did not show it, when he was addressed in his own tongue.

"Wolf of the steppe, are you one in heart with the masters of Khor?"

"Allah gives! It is so."

"Allah gives wisdom. Did you know that the prince had joined the river-thieves, to get the gold that is needed in Khor?"

The old servant blinked, and shook his head slowly.

"Captain of swords and leader of many, it is not so. Prince Michael follows his own road, and no gold would lead him to join the fellowship of thieves."

This he said without anger, as one stating a known truth, and Demid thought it over for several moments. Feodor waited patiently.

"You have said what was in my mind," agreed the young Cossack at length. "Prince Michael will not ride into Khor tomorrow. He was slain in the attack on the trading-galley. I saw his body and covered it. To me he gave a message, bidding Ileana avenge his death."

The lips of the Tatar lifted at the corners, and the grunt in his throat was like a snarl.

"Allah send that it be so!" he answered. "The signs of evil were about the river."

His claw-like hands clutched at his hair, and he moaned his sorrow.

"The evil is not ended," continued Demid. "Your mistress must know that the prince is dead."

"How? How did it happen?"

Demid rubbed his sword-hilt moodily.

"That is dark. The fight on the galley was at night; your master was not slow to draw sword. He was wounded by the pirates, and stripped of his outer garments. When the soldiers came, they put him with the pirates, not knowing his face. Say that to your lady."

Feodor's black eyes glimmered with distrust. Plainly, he doubted this explanation.

"Fool!" repeated the Cossack under his breath, "your lady is as a dove, a thrush, and hawks are in the air. She will seek vengeance. The pirates slew your master. Then let her raise her hand against them. Thus she will strike against the doom that is coming upon her. I have spoken truly. Go!"

The Tatar bent his head, and looked up suddenly. "What road do you follow, Cossack?"

"My path lies with that of your lady, in this thing."

The two measured each other silently, and understanding came into the intent eyes of the servant. They were men from the steppe, the warrior and the voluntary slave of the boyars. Few words were needed to show what each had in mind. Feodor left the hall.

You are going to war, my lad,
You are going to war!
Your hide will be scratched,
And your throat will be dry,
When you are at war, my lad!

Ayub had awakened, full of song. He was drawing breath for the second verse of the chant, when he stopped abruptly. The silence of the outer darkness after the storm was broken by howling. Moreover it was not the howl of a wolf, but the strident cry of a human being in mortal terror.

Staggering to his feet, Ayub reached for the broadsword and held up the long hilt.

"The sign! Make the sign, brother. The cross frightens away werewolves."

Footsteps pounded in the outer yard, and the outcry ceased. Presently the door was flung open and Hermaphron rushed in, followed by one of the Tatar archers. The Greek was panting and foam appeared under his oiled mustache; his hat was gone and his pack awry on his back.

"I have seen him!" he moaned. "*Deus accipe me*! His eye—Oh, his eye—it looked at me, and he said naught. Where is the princess?"

"In her room," responded Demid curiously. "Have you seen a witch?"

"Worse, oh terrible indeed!" Hermaphron peered into the shadows of the hall fearfully. "He called my name after me when I ran. Oh fool that I was, to venture forth on such a night—"

"How, terrible?" demanded Ayub, who shivered a little, seeing the stark fright of the dwarf.

"Is not the ghost of Rurik the Fair terrible? I saw it, walking in the wood near the camp of the *starosta*'s retinue. Prince Rurik it was, for I knew him in life. How his eye glared! It could see in the darkness. And he called after me."

"What did it say?" Ayub asked with great interest. Human foes were part of existence, but spirits were another matter, and the big warrior had his share of superstition. Not so Demid.

"It said, Hermaphron, son of many dogs."

Ayub nodded.

"So the *bogatyr* might have spoken. It was he. Why did you not hold up one of the blessed icons in your pack—"

For once the fear of the relic-seller outran his tongue.

"Ah, my relics are common things made by an artificer in Kudak. I sell them to the low-born."

"Why," inquired Demid, frowning, "did you fear Rurik, the prince?"

Hermaphron blinked and clasped his quivering fingers together.

"Alas, noble sir, do not make me say what is best left unsaid. I was on my way to the camp of the *starosta*'s men to make some further sales, before their revelry ended. On the path where the pastures end and the forest begins, the ghost stepped out of the shadow and confronted me. The moon was over the trees and I saw his face. His eye glared at me, like a fiend's. Nay, it is in my mind that Rurik the Fair is leader of the thieves. He is Lord of the River."

Ayub swore feelingly and stared at the open door, while the Greek's voice rambled on.

"Noble sirs, I spoke to you this day of what should be left unsaid. So the Lord of the River sought me out to punish me. Let me in to the princess. If I can touch her dress I shall be safe from harm at the hand of the ghost."

He began to crawl toward the closed door that led to the rooms of Ileana. But Feodor appeared in the entrance and warned him away curtly. In spite of this, Hermaphron knelt as close to the door as possible, moaning to himself the while, of sins and ancient misdeeds.

Ayub did not sing again.

IV

A Sword in the Scales

Before sunrise the two Cossacks saddled their horses and left the manor house. They passed the guards at the palisade gate and struck through the wet fields to a trail that led south along the river. Demid went at a hand pace, surveying the lay of the land carefully in the early light. Ayub followed docilely, quite sober, after hearing of the apparition of the night.

Once in the shadows of the forest, Demid turned off from the trail in a rock-strewn ravine where their horses left few tracks. After a while he struck back toward Khor, and reached the edge of the forest where a hillock rose above the tops of the old oaks. Tethering his pony in a clump of birches, he signed for Ayub to do the same, and crawled on hands and knees to the crest of the knoll. Here he could look out over the pastures and the brown stubble fields of the farm to the palisade, half a mile away. Protected by rocks and a growth of holly, the Cossacks, lying prone, were invisible from below.

The sun, rising over the river, warmed their chilled limbs. Ayub took barley cakes and a water jug from one of his saddlebags that he had lugged to their hiding place, and they began to eat.

And then a shadow fell across the level earth of the hillock, although no clouds stood in the sky. It was a long shadow, and they made out the head and shoulders of a man—a man broad of shoulder, wearing a high cap.

Demid turned where he sat, but his eyes looked full into the rising sun. An arrow's flight away was a rocky knoll. Upon this the man must have stood, for the shadow had vanished as he turned. No one was to be seen, nor did he hear booted feet clambering back over stones.

"Do not disturb yourself, my brother," observed Ayub calmly. "It was the ghost, or fiend, or whatever he is. Doubtless he sank through the earth, to his quarters in purgatory. Now that the sun is high, he cannot harm us. He was a tall devil."

Demid frowned. He had not wanted any one to know that they had remained within sight of the manor house. The trail they had taken away from Khor led through the Wilderness, along the barren shore of the river, where the *starosta* supposed them to be headed.

"Vain to go into the Wilderness," he explained, lighting his short clay pipe. "Snow may fall any day—river will be frozen over. A fox does not hunt the same trails in Winter as in Summer—'tis in my mind that the leaders of the river-bands have come to Kudak or near it."

"The whole thing, little brother, is clear in my mind."

Demid looked up inquiringly.

"This Lord of the River," Ayub vouchsafed, "is a ghost. Vampires of the steppe can climb up behind wayfarers and kill them by biting behind the ear. Certainly, there are ghosts on the river. That is why no one has been able to run down the Lord of the River; that is why he can see in the dark."

"Is this ghost Rurik the Fair?"

"Hermaphron says it, and with the forehead, too. A Greek is the sire of lies, but this Greek was frightened to his soul. He spoke the truth. Moreover Rurik was captain of the falcon-ship that ranged many rivers and unknown seas."

Demid half rose to glance out at the farm. Seeing all quiet, he set back by Ayub.

"Would the spirit of Rurik slay his grandson, Prince Michael?"

"A ghost is a ghost. When he was taken, the tale runs that Rurik was tortured by the Turks. No one knows how he died, and probably his body was never covered. So his spirit is abroad. Besides, the hero followed the wars like a fleet hound; he took no thought for Khor and its girl, or the

stripling of a boy. When Mother Death took Michael, he had been tortured enough. Aye, his soul must have cried out, 'Here I am, grandsire, let us frolic and work havoc along the waters!'"

"And the princess?"

"The girl Ileana, having a ghost for a grandsire, and another for a brother, must needs be a witch. Nay," Ayub pondered seriously, "she is a basilisk. Her gray eyes are overbright. She casts spells with them. The Tatars and the fishermen are her slaves. The *starosta* has a light conscience and a heavy head. But she has laid her spell on him, and he can think of naught but her."

The big warrior sighed. "I saw her eyes fasten on you. They glowed like witches' fires. Can you ride away from Khor? You cannot. Your brain goes around like a waterwheel. You do not think of the powder our Cossack brethren need, nor of slaying pirates, but only of Ileana—"

Demid yawned and emptied his pipe, asking his companion to watch while he slept. Almost at once his eyes closed.

Studying the splendid head of the young Cossack, the fine lips half smiling in sleep, Ayub shook his head sadly.

"Drowsiness is a sure sign. He has looked into the eyes of a basilisk. Heavy his Cossack soul—vanished the thought of Cossack glory. That is what a woman does." So he muttered to himself. "After all, the young ones are close kin to witches. They smile at men, first. Then they cry that they are in trouble, and set fever in the veins of the hero Cossacks. Swords are drawn, men die, and when all is said and done, the witches go about their affairs, having fed on a soul, while the hero turns up his toes. The —— take Ileana!"

By noon, however, Ayub became interested in the manor house. A cavalcade of riders appeared from the far side of the farm. A bugle sounded, and a company of footsoldiers, halberdiers, marched into view. They were followed by a score of servants and slaves, garbed in rich clothes but barefooted, bearing luggage of various kinds.

Several dignitaries—judging by their long fur cloaks and the armor on which the sun glittered—advanced to the gate of the palisade. With these Ayub made out—for his eyes were keen, and the air clear—a motley crowd of buffoons, dwarfs—men and women, entertainers of the nobility. He thought he recognized Hermaphron among them. Some of the slaves began to pitch silk tents beyond pistol shot from the wall. The riders dis-

mounted, while the men-at-arms formed in groups between the palisade and the river, and began preparing the noonday meal.

"The *starosta*," observed Demid, who had wakened at the sound of the bugle, "has come, as I looked for."

"With armed men and attendants," nodded Ayub. "He has posted them well. He was not born yesterday. That is the proper way to approach a basilisk."

The leaders of the party had been admitted to the palisade after a brief delay. They did not come out again, but several Tatars entered the Cossacks' field of vision, slipping through the outbuildings, and the haystacks, past the sentries. Once clear of the *starosta*'s lines, the fugitives began to run toward the wood, near the knoll.

"They must be driven by fear, or Tatars would never go an arrow flight without a horse—"

"Or the stables are under guard."

With that Demid made his way down from the height, and, followed by the big warrior, intercepted the hunters.

"What has come upon you," the young Cossack asked in Tatar, "that you flee from Khor?"

The natives pulled up and looked at him fearfully.

"Allah preserve your honor," said one, "evil has come upon Khor."

"What evil, dog-brothers?"

"It is not known to us—all of it. The thrice dignified khan of the *karaul*—the chief of the city—has brought up his horde. He has spoken loud words in the *kurultai*, the council in the hall. He says that money shall be paid him. Our lady has no gold. The chief of the city then said that he will proclaim her a debtor and gather spoil together to pay the debt. All things are ordained, and this also, by Allah. We fled before the slaying should begin."

"Without horses?"

"The soldiers are posted at the stables."

Demid glanced at Ayub.

"Are you the men of the *khanum*, or jackals?"

The hunters thought this over.

"We are her dogs, your honor. But we are uneasy, and the forest is our place."

"Then abide here, until one is sent for you. If you flee into the forest Cossacks will find you and strip you of your hides. Do you understand?"

The Tatars assented, and sat down, unstringing their bows at Ayub's pointed request. They did not know how many more of the Cossacks were in the forest. God had sent many things upon them, of late the taxes of the chief of the city, the death of their young lord, and a ghost. So also the Cossacks had been sent.

With many mutterings, and stifled misgivings, Ayub followed the *bogatyr* that night. He could not see any good in visiting Khor again, but as Demid set about doing so, the big warrior went along after impressing upon the Tatar hunters that if harm came to the horses of the Cossacks, left in their care, all the fiends of the Dnieper would be set upon their tracks, and their souls would be flayed out of their bodies.

It was not difficult for the Cossacks, who were accustomed to scouting in darkness, to make their way through the cow sheds and stables unseen by the outer sentries of the *starosta*. Nor did the palisade give any trouble to men of their height. They had chosen the second hour of darkness, before the rising of the moon, for their excursion.

Once within the wall, they listened a while to the sounds from the soldiers' camp outside the gate. Fires were going there, and the wail of a balalaika and the shouting of the buffoons showed that the under-officers had dined well, and that the camp would not be moved that night.

A yellow square of light, glowing from Ileana's room, indicated that the princess kept to her chamber. From time to time they caught the wailing of a woman-servant in the rambling outbuildings. Demid, keeping close to the logs of the manor house, advanced to the narrow embrasures of the main hall. At one of these he paused, listening to the hum of voices within. With his dagger he cut a piece the size of his hand from the thin horn that served for a window. Pulling the severed strip toward him he peered in.

Five men were seated at the long table, which bore the remains of a hearty dinner. At the foot of the table Hermaphron was filling a Turkish goblet with red wine, and near him the lieutenant, Varan, hooked his booted heels in the rungs of a Venetian chair of ebony and mother-of-pearl.

John of Kudak sat at the head of the table, with two strangers on either hand. One was a young officer, in the fur-tipped cloak of a Russian dragoon, his tunic ornamented with loops of silver. His companion appeared to be a merchant—a man with yellow, creased skin and weak eyes, who took snuff at intervals from a jeweled box. The *starosta* was speaking in his clear, measured voice.

"Gentlemen, you have inspected the manor house and farm. Even in its rundown state the place is worth more than the two thousand thalers, which are the tithes, unpaid for more than two years."

"Khor is worth little," spoke up the merchant dryly, "for it is exposed to raids from river-thieves or brigands. As I live, it would take a round sum to put the farm in working order."

"True," nodded the governor. "But in this hall and the other rooms are sets of weapons and other spoil of the wars. Moreover one score and ten souls go with the farm."

The officer of dragoons tapped his glass reflectively.

"What of the Princess Ileana? Why does she stick to this dog-kennel? I have seen her in Kudak. With her eyes and manner, by Saint Nicholas, she could have a career in Kiev—aye, or Moscow."

"She is of the old gentry, Cornet Boris. Her people stick to her like horseflies and she will not leave them."

"Shades of ——!" The officer's boots clashed on the floor. "Do you mean that the young witch chooses to be sold with the farm?"

John of Kudak was silent a moment.

"Such is her intention, voiced to me by the majordomo, Feodor. Her own words, gentlemen: 'If Khor is to be sold to another master, the new owner must purchase me.'"

"Bah!" The merchant scowled. "A wayward wench. How stands the law in this thing?"

"An insolvent debtor, Master Sigismund, is subject to the *pravioz*. That is, he must be tied up in a public place. If at the end of a month his debts are not paid, he himself may be sold and his family let out for hire—"

"Aye, in the case of the low-born. But this woman is a boyar, one of the old nobility. You cannot tie her up like a horse."

"Ileana of Khor may claim trial before the supreme tribunal of Moscow, but the city is at war, and the courts are empty. I am the *starosta* of the lower Dnieper, and she is subject to my judgment. I have dealt with her fairly. In view of certain offenses of Khor, known to me—" he hesitated briefly—"I declare the family of the Khor debtors to the government, and I decree that their property be sold into better hands. What the princess chooses to do with herself matters not at all to me. She has wild blood in her."

"But a face for the gods!" cried the Cornet. "The —— fly away with your law! Where is the young brother? Prince Michael cut a swathe among

the students of Kiev, and he'd call out the man that bought his sister, as surely as God has given me life!"

The governor frowned.

"Michael, I hear, was slain in the company of the river-thieves."

Cornet Boris tugged at his mustache, and his red face gleamed in the candlelight. Varan uncoiled his legs, to take the pitcher from Hermaphron.

"Then," cried the dragoon, "—— my soul, but the Khoris forfeit their privilege as nobles—"

"Yet the girl has weapons and men," put in Varan.

"And I have a heart and half a squadron," responded Boris. "So Ileana of her own will is to be sold with Khor? Gentlemen, these are gladsome days. I give you the health of the princess!"

Standing, he lifted his goblet and drank the toast, followed by Varan. The sudden movement caused a stir among the falcons perched in the distant corner. Near them an old raven, a pet of Ileana's, croaked harshly.

"Death!" cried Hermaphron, glancing over his shoulder. "Ah, noble sirs, the omen of the raven is true as the message of the apostles."

While the five men stared uneasily at the drowsy birds, Varan struck his fist on the table.

"Michael is dead."

But Hermaphron had seen an apparition the night before, and his olive skin turned sallow as that of the moneylender Sigismund. His hand quivered as he reached for his wine glass, and the red fluid was upset on the table. Varan made the sign of the cross. John of Kudak had no thought for omens. Taking a sheet of parchment from his coat, he laid it before him.

"Gentlemen, here is the title to Khor and its acres, and its plows, cottages and souls. I have placed thereto my seal, only the name of the owner is wanting. Come, who makes the first bid?"

He glanced at Varan inquiringly, but the lieutenant, staring at the crimson pool on the table, shook his head.

"Fifteen hundred thalers," offered Sigismund.

"Two thousand!" cried the Cornet Boris. "What dog would not bid as much to have the fair Ileana for handmaiden? By the five wounds!" he laughed hoarsely. "Summon her out of her room! We must see what we are buying."

The thin hand of Sigismund passed across his lips, and he dabbed at his weak eyes with a lace handkerchief. The *starosta* gave the order to his servant, who alone attended them—Feodor having refused to serve the intrud-

ers. But when the man left the hall, John of Kudak half rose in his chair and his eyes hardened. Demid and Ayub appeared in the outer door.

The two Cossacks had entered the house unchallenged, as the Russians had contented themselves with posting guards at the gate of the palisade, preferring not to be overheard in their talk. Demid advanced to the table, while Ayub, leaning on his sheathed broadsword, took station behind Varan.

Drawing from his girdle a leather bag, the Don Cossack tossed it down by the governor's elbow.

"Gold, turquoise and emeralds, to the value of three thousand thalers," he said briefly. "I have a mind to Khor."

The officers and the merchant stared at the Cossacks in astonishment, but the governor made no response. It was not to his liking to have the manor house in the hands of men from below. Thinking to find fault with Demid's offer, he opened the bag and ran through his fingers the pieces of gold and the jewels. Realizing that their value was unquestionable, he pondered. In asking for bids, to comply with the form of law, he had sought to have only men allied to him in Kudak as buyers.

"Thirty-two hundred," spoke up the merchant Sigismund. "Half on my bond."

"What kind of a horse is this?" demanded the dragoon, who, being from the northern cities, had not seen a Cossack before. "These chaps are not Russians, and, my oath for it—they are not boyars."

"Henchmen of the *koshevoi*, the chief of the Cossacks below the rapids," explained John of Kudak. "Sent up the river to hunt the pirates."

He studied Demid curiously.

"You were for the Wilderness. No good can come of your meddling here. What will your commander say, when it is known that you gave over monies of the Cossacks to pay for a woman and her farm?"

It was a shrewd thrust, but nevertheless a true one. The funds had been given Demid by his chief, to aid in the recovery of the powder. Ayub knew this and was troubled.

Yet, when the young Cossack glanced at him inquiringly, he fumbled in his wallet and threw down on the table a handful of coins, a gold cross set with rubies and a turquoise ring. Believing that Demid was acting under a spell cast by the girl of Khor the big warrior could not endure seeing a Cossack worsted in any contest with the Russians.

"The worth of seven hundred thalers are here," he said bluntly. "So the Jews have sworn to me."

"Thirty-seven hundred!" breathed the governor.

"It is too much," snarled the merchant. "They are fools."

"Four thousand!" cried the dragoon, pulling at his mustache.

"And another thousand," added Demid, "on my word."

The officer bit his lip, and Sigismund sniffed.

"I will pay you the four thousand," said Boris slowly, "in Kudak on the morrow. What avails the word of an adventurer like this, against my payment?"

"Much," put in Ayub dryly. "The word of a Cossack is not smoke. This youth is a *bogatyr*. When he swore that he would ransom me, he did it by cutting off the head of a Turk."

At this John of Kudak smiled.

"I prefer the surety of the Cornet," he declared. "The manor house and the souls of Khor are sold to the officer, Boris."

"I offered more," observed Demid slowly.

"The decision rests with me. I am the viceroy of the Crown!" The governor drew himself up angrily. Just then the Cornet, who thought the matter settled, saw fit to propose a second toast, and to voice a thought that appealed to him more strongly than ever.

"To Ileana, my slave," he announced, raising a wine glass.

There was a whistle of air, a flash of steel over the table, a crash of glass, and Boris stared blankly at the stem of the glass in his fingers. So quickly had Demid drawn his scimitar and struck that the officer had not seen the blade meet his glass.

Demid's face had gone white. All the pent-up passion of his impatient spirit had been loosed by a word from the Russian. A child of the steppe, reared among the Cossacks of the Don who were part Gypsy and Tatar in blood, he was ill at ease in the walls of civilization. So he had moved carefully, feeling his way.

Obeying the order of the *koshevoi*, his chief, the Don Cossack had kept a rein on his temper until now. It remained for the Cornet to anger him beyond endurance. But it was Varan who made clear what had roused the passion of the warrior.

"So the princess has a lover!" the lieutenant cried, pushing back his chair.

John of Kudak glanced fleetingly at Boris. The Cornet was an officer of the Imperial Guard, formed of the young courtiers of Russia—a

picked body of cavalry, drilled by German and French veterans. He was a skilled duelist, formidable because he never lost head or temper. Quickly the governor reasoned that if Boris could kill Demid, the other meddler, Ayub, could be disposed of and the whole thing explained as the result of a duel. The Cossacks of the siech would have no grievance against him in that case.

"A pretty stroke," muttered Boris. "It will earn you a beating from my sergeants. I will have your back flayed, Cossack, and make a dog collar out of your skin. If you were an officer, I'd call you out, but a vagabond—"

Demid was beyond words. He acted promptly enough, slapping Boris on each cheek with the flat of his scimitar. Unseen by the men about the table the girl Ileana and the Tatar servant, summoned by the orderly, had come to the door leading from the sleeping rooms. Hearing the quarrel, they stood there, half hidden in the shadows.

Matters were going to the liking of John of Kudak, who knew the Cornet's skill with a weapon.

"Gentlemen," he said gravely, "if you must meet in my presence, let it be in order. Lieutenant Varan will act as second, to the Cornet Boris. The Cossack clown will second his comrade—"

"Health to you, Excellency," contradicted Ayub, who was not alarmed for Demid, "but I stand where I can see you all." And he drew the broadsword, resting his arms on the wide handguard.

Without further parley, Demid had thrown off his coat. He stood in a white silk shirt, wide and long of sleeve, that accentuated his slender build and the light blade in his hand.

Two spots of color glowed in the cheeks of the officer, who permitted Varan to relieve him of cloak and tunic. He rolled up the sleeve from a knotted arm and stepped away from the table, moving to place the light from the candles in Demid's eyes. As he left him, Varan whispered a word of advice, to stir the Cossack into blind anger, when he would lose his head and be an easy victim.

Boris nodded. He knew how to do that. Moreover his cavalry saber outreached Demid's curved scimitar by the length of a hand. He was sure of himself.

"After you have fallen to my sword, my hand will deal with the maiden of Khor," he observed, smiling.

Saluting with his blade he stepped forward.

The Cossack kept the tip of his weapon on the floor.

"To one of us life, to the other, death," he repeated the salutation of his race.

Boris, who had never faced a Cossack, was a little surprised. But he lunged at once with the point. Demid struck the saber aside, and engaged.

The two blades flashed up, slithered together, and ringed the heads of the fighters with the clang and grind of cut and parry. Boris pressed the attack, hoping to make his adversary give ground.

Demid, however, stood in his tracks, his eyes steady. Only his wrist and forearm moved. So it happened that the watchers saw the Cornet grow red in the face, while the Cossack, under the stimulus of the fight, seemed to be gripped by sheer, savage joy. His white face was composed, his narrowed eyes utterly expressionless.

"Boris is playing with him," whispered the governor to Varan.

The taciturn lieutenant shook his head slightly.

"The light scimitar prevails at close work. Heavy slashes will do the trick for the Cornet. Ha!"

Shifting his ground, Boris darted in, cutting wide at the Cossack's head, and changing swiftly to the point, to try for the throat. Still Demid parried, scarcely moving his feet. The blades clanged more loudly, and Ayub began to breathe heavily, knowing that the long saber must strike home, by sheer weight, unless Demid shifted ground.

Aware of this, Boris leaped forward, slashing down as he did so. Demid had been watching his eyes, and as his arm went up the Cossack's scimitar was tossed from the right to the left hand. Before Boris could turn his blade, the Cossack had drawn the edge of his weapon across the other's lower ribs, as a man might stroke a cushion with a light wand.

But the razor edge of the scimitar bit deep into the Russian's flesh, and as Boris cried out, Demid slashed again with all the power of his left arm, splitting the skull beside the eyes.

The dragoon was dead before his body struck the floor, and only his fingers twitched as he lay in a spreading pool of blood. So abruptly had the ringing of the sabers ceased that the *starosta* and his men stood in their tracks, staring with wide eyes. Ayub moved up impatiently.

"Well, he was no coward. Pick him up, some of you, and carry him to his tent. Why don't you send for a priest? Here—" he made the sign of the cross over the body with the great broadsword—"in the name of the Father and the Son."

Varan, his teeth gleaming, dropped the dragoon's cloak and felt for his saber, but John of Kudak shook his head. Sigismund and Hermaphron shrank

from touching the remains of their friend, and the governor ordered his servant to help Varan carry out the body. This done, he handed the title deed to Khor to Demid, and tapped his snuffbox meditatively.

"You must have been born with a sword in your fist. Eh, Cossack, enter my service and you shall have a commission and half the gold that you paid for the manor house in hand again."

Ayub glanced at his comrade and answered for him.

"We serve the *koshevoi*. Take your payment, *starosta*, and leave our farm."

Hermaphron twitched the governor's sleeve.

"Excellency, already, since the raven croaked, one of our company of five lies dead. Oh, let us go far from here."

Seeing, from the corner of his eye, Sigismund edging toward the door, Hermaphron gave way to superstitious dread and sidled after the merchant like a crab moving between rocks. John of Kudak smiled.

"Cossack, if I had other men here, you should not stand at ease. You have forfeited my friendship, and from this hour I shall act against you."

He swept up the money and jewels on the table and pouched them.

"You were a fool to take up the sword."

Demid wiped his blade and sheathed it. "Then, Excellency, Khor and its souls are mine."

"For so long as you can keep them," responded John of Kudak over his shoulder.

V

Ayub Makes a Camp

Between the hours of sunset and sunrise, when the gate of Kudak fortress was closed, and worthy citizens kept their beds behind locked doors, the eyes of the town were shut. But outside the wall, men moved in the darkness and watched the glimmer of lights. Nothing was to be seen along the bank of the river, yet men came together and news passed in whispers that spread up and down the Dnieper.

By the forest, the Tatar hunters, squatting patiently by the horses of the Cossacks, watched the governor's party strike its tents and move off. They bent their heads together, and clucked and chuckled. The khan of the city, they decided, was taking away his servants and slaves, and would await a more favorable chance to strike Khor with his armed warriors.

They noticed that a body was carried away between two horses, and nodded wisely. Wine had caused a quarrel among the Russians. God was one. It was all to be expected.

Suddenly they fell silent as pheasants taking cover under the shadow of a hawk. In the forest-mesh behind them a horse neighed. The moon had crept up over the river, and for a second the hunters caught sight of a man. They noticed him because he moved back from a rocky knoll when the horse neighed. They judged that he was unusually tall, and that he wore a silver helmet, because the moon glinted on it as he disappeared.

They made no sound, and talked together no more. But within five minutes, all the hunters were heading back to Khor as quickly as their squat legs would carry them. Unanimously, they had decided that the ghost was walking again, and that vicinity was not healthy. They took horses because they feared to be beaten if they came without them.

Along the inlet, in the marshes, the men of the fisher colony observed the torches of the *starosta* going back to Kudak, and beat their hands together softly for joy. Skiffs began to slip along the bank, as the *burlaks* bore word of what had happened to their fellows. John of Kudak would have been surprised to learn how much these bidden listeners had discovered of his plans.

"The serene, great, mighty *starosta*," ran the word carried along the Dnieper's bank, "has withdrawn into his castle. He pares his claws to make them sharper. He has stationed a cordon of musketeers athwart the path to Khor, and guards to watch the river. He wanted to take his retinue out of range of the Tatar arrows. Aye, the *starosta* is like an eagle, an angry eagle, waiting his chance to strike down."

When this gossip had been sent on its way, the fishermen drew closer to Khor, wondering what the inmates would decide to do. If the princess fled with her two score men, the people of the inlet must flee as well, or the soldiers would come and cut them up.

So they waited patiently to see what the princess would do. It was nearly midnight before a group of men moved down the path from the palisade to the inlet and halted on the jetty by the Khor galley. Feodor, who was with them, went to the huts of the fisher folk, and when he came back he had eight sturdy *burlaks* behind him.

Sacks of provisions were tossed into the galley, and the long oars were greased. The watermen sat down on the benches in the waist of the old-fashioned galley; a Tatar slipped forward to the figurehead at the bow; an old fisherman shipped the tiller, and a tall figure smelling strongly of vodka and leather climbed to the after-deck.

Then the moorings were cast off, and the galley slid out of the inlet toward the river silently. Feodor returned to the manor house.

"The Cossack Ayub," new gossip ran from place to place along the river, "he of the long sword, has taken out the galley. The storms have swollen the breast of Father Dnieper. He will go down the current swiftly to the cataracts, and the camp of the men below. He will seek aid for the other Cossack. Then we shall see."

Quiet reigned along the inlet, but at its mouth, as the long craft slid out and turned to drift down the bank under the shadow of the forest, a dwarf ran out nimbly, leaping from rock to rock until he could look into the galley of Khor as it passed over a stretch of water in the moonlight.

Then the dwarf muttered to himself, and, running back from the bank, sought out a wiry little Arab pony. Mounting the horse, he struck into the forest toward Kudak.

In the hall of Khor, by the fire, in the carved wooden high seat, the girl Ileana stared into the flames, chin on hand.

"You are master of Khor," she said, low-voiced, "and I am your slave. My brother is dead, and my men fear you. Even Feodor waits upon your word, for you speak his language."

When no word of answer came to her, she glanced up, under lowered lashes at the slender man whose long-sleeved white shirt gleamed near her arm. The skin of his head and throat was dark, where the blood coursed strongly. His eyes brooded. She turned back to the fire quickly, wondering why the men of the border wore a long scalp lock, falling to their shoulders.

"You are master of the manor house, Cossack," she repeated, with a half smile. "What orders are you pleased to give?"

"They are given, princess. Watchers are at the gate and on the palisade. Your men are counted; to each of the three tens I have given a leader, who has seen fighting, and arms from these walls. We have no powder. That is bad."

The girl lifted a slender shoulder impatiently, and drew her hand down the thick braid of hair that almost touched Demid's fingers.

"For that you slew a drunkard who would have harmed me," she said slowly, "I give you thanks, Cossack *bogatyr*. For the rest, I say that you are a fool, my Cossack savage. How long before your comrade will return with a regiment from the siech?"

"Four days, princess—with luck."

"Ah, if Rurik the Fair were in this high seat, Khor would be greater than Kudak!" She considered the young warrior gravely. "Even you would fear the captain of the falcon-ship."

"Words are words, princess—aye, smoke from the fire of fear. Hermaphron lied to make us afraid of a ghost, so that we would leave this place."

"But the Greek himself was frightened—"

"So he lied, being a Greek. The Lord of the River is mortal."

Demid spread his hands to the hearth, ignoring the girl.

"Moreover, he must be within hearing of Kudak. There, I think, he has stored his spoil—for that is the best place. In some way he communicates with his band, quartered down the river. He is the one who slew the prince, your brother."

The head of the girl sank lower and her lip trembled.

"Michael! Ah, we of Khor are accursed."

For the moment her pride left her, and the tears pressed close to her eyes. "You have bought me, *bogatyr*. Am I a worthy captive, for the first swordsman of the siech? Will you sell me, in the Moslem bazaar on the Black Sea? Or am I too poor a thing for that?"

Disheartened, without any one to turn to for sympathy, Ileana waited for a word from the warrior. Demid said nothing. And the devil of tortured pride rose up in the heart of the girl.

"See, Cossack—" she held out, on slender arms, the braids of rich brown tresses—"are not these worth a few silver pieces? I can embroider, and read written words. Rurik the Fair taught me to polish silver armor—aye, before he forgot he had kindred and a roof and went to the Cossack wars. I can sing—"

She caught up a lute from the floor beside her, and thrust the wolfhound away from her knee.

Show me the way,
O Lord over lords,
For I am astray
In a desert world,
Like a ship in the waste
Of a measureless sea—
Lost and alone.

When she would have gone on, Ileana's voice quavered a little, and she turned her face to the back of the high seat, to hide from the Cossack that

she was crying. As before the duel, Demid's cheeks went white. Something in his high-strung spirit softened and broke. Kneeling beside Ileana, he caught up the edge of her cloak and touched it to his lips. The long tresses touched his cheek and his eyes closed. The girl, glancing down at him, did not draw away.

Her eyes sought the fire, and in them was something a little frightened, and perplexed and glad.

Feodor crossed the threshold soundlessly and salaamed. Then, approaching, he ventured to speak, in Tatar.

"Captain of a thousand swords, word has come to your slave from the fishermen. The cross of fire has been seen above Khor. Always, until now, it has been an omen of the taking of a ship."

When Demid made no response, Feodor hesitated and went on:

"It is in my mind that the fire is a signal, to watchers down the river. It must be kindled on the tower of Kudak, to show above the wall. My lord, shall we do nothing?"

He ventured to touch Demid's arm.

"It is in my mind that the fire appeared after the Russians went toward Kudak. Perhaps the *mirza*, the captain of the infantry, he called Varan, is the Lord of the River, and has ordered the fire signal. No man has been seen near the river so much as he. Perhaps that old fox Sigismund, for he has more spoil in his cellars than a fish has bones—"

"Cease croaking," cried Demid, "and get you to the palisade."

Old Feodor drew back, putting his hand to his forehead respectfully. His mistress's tears had dried. And the eyes of the Cossack were burning as if the warrior had been stricken by fever.

The Tatar was troubled. True, for the first time the sorrow of Ileana for her brother had lightened. But Feodor had lived long, and seen much strife, and knew how the beauty of Ileana could hold the thoughts of men.

"It were better," he confided to his comrades at the gate, who listened attentively, "if the young hero would fall drunk with wine. Then we could cast water over his head, and, perhaps, suffer a beating for it. But the Cossack would be ready for sword strokes."

"All is ordained," whispered one of the hunters, "and from this fire in the heart of the swordsman good may come. Allah is all-wise and who shall say otherwise?"

So the men in the shadows talked together, low-voiced, until a step behind them brought instant silence.

"Are ye old wives, to gabble, and the wall unwatched?" demanded a stern voice.

"Lord," spoke up one of the hunters, "Feodor is making the rounds without."

"Not so," responded Demid, "or ye would be asleep, like dogs. Shall I send the women of the house to keep your posts?"

"The forehead to you, noble sir; do not do that! We will watch, even as you say. A mole shall not creep under the ground, without our knowing it."

They scattered promptly and vanished into the darkness. Strangely enough they were pleased with what had passed. When Feodor came up again they told him what had happened, and he clucked understandingly.

"He has led men before. The Cossack has a horned soul in him. I saw him strike down a Russian with his left hand. It is well for us that this is so."

Ayub's task was simply to get to the cataracts and the Cossack camp as swiftly as might be, and guide back to Khor a *kuren* of the men from below. Having taken internal measures against the cold, he lay down on the afterdeck, wrapped in a bearskin. But he lay on his side and his eyes scanned the Russian bank, as it sped past, in the haze of moonlight. When on the march or in the saddle, Ayub never drank, and did with a surprisingly small amount of sleep, as his foes had discovered.

But this night he was alert for any sign of the apparition, any evidence of the presence of the ghostly Lord of the River. So it happened that he was the first to see, far behind them, the speck of fire that hung over Kudak.

The *burlaks* saw it as well, and the pilot, and the pace of the galley slowed at once. The man at the tiller muttered of snags and drifting tree trunks, but he looked more often over his shoulder.

Presently the moon left the river, the sky having clouded over. At once the watermen rested on their oars.

"Father," said the pilot, "it is vain to press on in the darkness. We would rush upon rocks or snags."

"You are afraid of the portent over Kudak," growled Ayub, "that is why your stomach turns."

Nevertheless he saw that the helmsman was right. To row down the current in that void of blackness might swamp the galley, which was a pleasure-craft and an old one. He looked about him as best he could, won-

dering what Demid would do, in his place. The Don Cossack always had a plan ready formed, when confronted by enemies. In fact, Demid had a way of beginning operations before any one else knew what he was doing.

"Father," suggested the helmsman respectfully, "we are drifting close to the right bank, where trees are near the water. We can moor the galley to the long oars, driven in the mud, for the boat lacks a keel. Under the trees we will not be visible—

"Exactly what I had in mind." Ayub was relieved. "Make no noise."

The *burlaks*, glad of the rest, went about their work with skill and the galley was soon tied up a few rods from shore. They were preparing to snatch a little sleep when the Cossack began to swear.

"Am I a waterfowl, to roost in the river? Do you expect me to feed the fishes? Nay, we go ashore, under the willows."

The river-men murmured, and the helmsman pointed out that they were quite safe in the boat, whereas no one knew what was on shore. The galley belonged to the princess; it should not be left unmanned. Ayub, however, was ill at ease on the water. He forced the *burlaks* to wade ashore. The Tatars followed philosophically, and they all squatted uncomfortably in the damp underbrush, where the wind bit through their garments. Sleep was out of the question.

The breeze rustled the reeds in front of them; an animal splashed into the water. Overhead the long strands of the willows moved soundlessly. Ayub counted his men, told off one of the Tatars to go inland a bit, and another to watch the river.

The helmsman grumbled under his breath at the mad idea of the Cossack.

"We can make a fire," he suggested, "if your honor is chilled. Eh?"

"And you can roast your toes in ——," responded Ayub agreeably, "but you will light no fire on this accursed river, until we are within the barracks of the siech."

By tomorrow evening, he reckoned, they should be below the cataracts. Three days must pass before he could lead a company of Cossacks into Khor. Demid had quarreled with the governor, that was all very well, but the governor could not be reached in Khor; the fortress was too strong to be carried by less than several regiments, with siege-works and cannon. The Cossacks had no powder. Moreover John of Kudak had a squadron of dragoons, and two or three hundred musketeers and pikemen, besides

the townspeople, and the men of the captains who had joined him since the wars began—such as the slain Boris.

Ayub had not wanted to leave his comrade, but Demid had asked it and the man from the Don refused point blank to leave the manor house. Nor would the princess think of quitting her home. She was a young witch and there was no telling what she might turn Demid into before the Cossacks arrived.

"Father," said one of the Tatars who had a few words of Ayub's speech, "the rushes are floating down on our boat."

Ayub cupped his hands to his eyes and stared up the river, and the hair of his head tingled. Out on the water a solid mass of bulrushes was, in fact, floating close to the shore. The moon, behind the clouds, cast a half-light in which objects on the river were barely visible.

"String your bows," he ordered the hunter. "Call the dog-brother who has gone inland. Warn the pigs of *burlaks* to be quiet."

A moment's scrutiny convinced him that the dark blur, surmounted by the stems of the reeds, was a solid body of some kind, possibly a body of earth washed from shore by the flood. But this was doubtful. In any event it was no illusion, no witchwork—and Ayub noticed with satisfaction that if his party had remained in the galley, they could not have seen the drifting mass, against the dark background of the rustling shore reeds.

The object floated down, came abreast the galley, and revealed itself as a flat body, surrounded by rushes, some twenty feet long. When it halted Ayub whispered to the Tatar to bid the hunters take cover behind trees. They had already done so. And not a *burlak* was to be made out in the shadow, although Ayub's keen ear caught faint sounds of feet shuffling back into the wood.

Suddenly his eyes narrowed. The floating island had bumped against the side of the galley, and at once dim shapes appeared amid the rushes—shapes that climbed the galley's side, with a faint jangle of steel that the Cossack knew well to be the clank of drawn weapons against shields or mail.

"Loose your arrows," he commanded the chief of the hunters.

A strident *whirr* drowned the rustle of the wind. By the galley's side a man cried out in pain. Arrowheads clanged against iron or thudded into wood. Someone groaned.

For a full moment the hunters worked their bows swiftly; each man had two and their quivers were well stocked. Shouts now mingled with

the moans of the injured on the floating object. In the darkness, the raiders believed for a time that the arrow storm came from the galley. Then a deep voice roared angrily.

"The shore, fools! Your matchlocks!"

Red flashes darted out of the screen of reeds, toward the willows. Powder roared and smoke gathered between the two craft and the shore. Ayub estimated that the raiders had a dozen muskets. But they were shooting at a black void, and it was the work of long minutes to reload the clumsy matchlocks. Whereas the skilled archers, accustomed to night work, scored many hits. An arrow, in darkness, could be better trained on a mark than a pistol, or the short, poorly fashioned arquebuses.

The galley, parted from its makeshift moorings by the impact of the other boat, had drifted downstream a short distance before being caught in the rushes. By the red flashes, Ayub could make out that the other party had used a flat barge, or scow, for the attack, binding to its sides a screen of reeds. The low bulwark of the barge offered no protection to the men within it, and presently the same voice issued a second order.

"Pikes and swords, you fools. Keep in line, and cut down all in front."

With that some fifteen men jumped from the barge into the shallow water and waded toward shore. The Tatars quickened their bow work, and several heavy splashes told that some of the assailants had been struck down. But they were no cowards, and came on like trained soldiery. Ayub knew that his five hunters would be of little use in a hand-to-hand fight.

For a second the big Cossack hesitated. He knew the voice that gave the order—one of the *starosta*'s officers. His adversaries, then, were Russians. He had started the killing as a matter of course, seeing them stealing in on the galley and thinking them robbers. But he was not the man to turn back from a fight. Besides, the screen built around the barge bespoke no honest purpose.

With a whispered word to his companion, he stripped out the two-handed sword and sprang down to the stone-littered shore. Here, still within the murk under the trees, he was a foot or so above the muddy bank where the line of attackers was advancing through the reeds. His long blade whistled in the air and smote down the first two who stumbled out of the water.

"*U-ha*!" he bellowed. "A Cossack fights. Back to the fishes, you water-snakes!"

As if an echo of his war-cry, he heard from the slope above the trees a faint *U-ha!* Sheer, berserk fury gripped Ayub, when his steel thudded through cloth and leather and bones snapped under its edge. Leaping from side to side he made good his vantage point.

The light on the river was strong enough for him to be aware of the gleam of steel in the hands of his foes, and when he dodged he struck.

"From the sides!" cried the voice of the leader of the assailants. "Take him from the sides. Fail not!"

Then the whirr of arrows past Ayub's shoulders, and a moan in front of him. Feet pounded over the stones toward him and the Cossack made a wide sweep with his broadsword that cut the legs from under one man. Another he jammed back with the hilt. Hands clutched at his head; the butt of a musket numbed one shoulder.

Three or four foemen had him now, and strong fingers throttled his throat. Ayub jerked his head free, and struck out with one hand, while the other held fast to his sword. Unable to win clear, he strode down into the water, pulling with him the others who had not time to brace themselves against such a move. Once in the mud, he whirled like a *dervas*, felt one man fall, and another lose balance in the treacherous bottom.

A sword-stroke knocked the cap from the Cossack, but, exerting his great strength, he cast from him the assailant who gripped his head, and kicked out at the man who clung to his waist.

He was clear of them.

"*U-ha*!" he chanted, swinging his weapon again. "You came into this world when dogs scratched you out of a dung-heap. Time you went back again—"

Steel rasped through his side and jarred against one of his ribs. Turning, he parried the next thrust of the one who had struck him. Their swords clashed heavily, and Ayub thrust against a metal breastplate. Stepping back he swung wide and knocked his adversary sprawling, losing his balance at the same time. He rolled over in the muddy water, came up, found his weapon and peered about him.

On both sides men were splashing away toward shore. Hoarse voices cried out in fear.

"Save yourselves! It is a devil we have found. Each for himself! It is a devil, come up out of the water!"

Ayub, listening in vain for a counter command from the leader, decided that the raiders had had enough, which was well as he was nearly exhausted.

His Tatars, scenting victory, raised a chorus of guttural cries and loosed their arrows anew as they pursued the fleeing. Gifted with keener sight, and having the advantage of the ground, they soon cleared the shore. Silence, broken by stifled groaning from the barge, descended upon the river.

By a fire, kindled by the hunters, Ayub surveyed the fruits of his generalship and found them notable. Four badly wounded footsoldiers and musketeers in the barge, three who had been struck down by arrows and had drowned in the shallow water, and five others, victims of his sword, crippled or dying.

"By the Cross," he muttered, "it was something of a skirmish, after all." His wounds were not serious, and only one of the hunters was slain, by a chance bullet. "Now where is the chief of these devilkins?"

A Tatar pointed to a tall figure in the livery of the *starosta*, a form nearly covered by a dark, satin cloak, water-soaked. Ayub kicked it off with his toe and swore in earnest. It was Varan, his forehead scarred deep by an arrow that seemed to have stunned him, and his right shoulder pierced by another shaft.

Under instructions from the Cossack, Varan was rubbed and bound up roughly, after the water had been emptied out of his lungs. He had looked closely into the face of death, and when he recovered consciousness, lay without speaking.

"Lieutenant," said Ayub gravely, "these men of yours wear not the governor's livery. They are evil-faced hounds. What were you after when you sidled up to my galley like a fox stalking a hen roost?"

Varan winced.

"We thought the galley another craft."

"A lie! I saw the signal fire kindled on Kudak, when I pulled down the river. You or your men saw it also, and followed us on shore and took to the barge when we made camp. You are he who is called Lord of the River, pirate and king of thieves."

The officer's long face set, and he turned away his eyes.

"If it pleases you, say it."

Ayub tugged at his mustache thoughtfully, watching his men strip spoil from the assembled bodies. "Then you are a dog, and this is what will happen to you. The Tatar arrow glanced off your skull, and so you live. But when I am done with you, Lieutenant, you will journey in haste to your liege lord, Satan. So, shrive yourself by telling the truth for once. Why did you set out after me?"

"I had a score to settle." Varan looked at the stained steel of the broadsword indifferently.

"Hm. So you carried on your work of darkness under the shadow of Kudak, protected by the governor's livery. I see now why you took such an interest in the bodies of the pirates. You wanted no dog-brothers of yours to blab your secret."

Varan nodded.

"Well, my pirate, you must have had brains in another man's skull, to guide your work and dispose of your takings, for you are not shrewd enough for that. Is it the merchant Sigismund who is your brother in wickedness?"

"I am no tale-bearer."

Ayub's eyes hardened.

"Nor am I a lady-in-waiting, my falcon. Answer, or these Tatars will flay the soles off your feet. After that we'll burn your flesh."

For a while Varan considered. Then, with a shrug, he raised himself on his elbow. "I am the chief of the band of river-thieves. As you say, another in Kudak guided our ventures and took a third of what we gleaned from the captured ships. That man was young Michael, who dwelt in the town in disguise, the while his sister thought him at Kiev. We quarreled, he and I, and—"

"You strung him up with the thieves that were slain by the governor." Ayub's teeth gleamed under his mustache. "You are a pretty fellow. The *starosta* trusted you. How did you know I was in the galley? Is it true that you can see by night as well as by day?"

The officer flushed.

"I—one of my men saw you go out of the inlet. I was in command of a detachment watching the road to Khor. By pushing our horses on the river trail we got abreast of you."

"Another thing. What is your governor planning to do to Khor? Will he pass over the affront or start a battle with Demid?"

"John of Kudak is angered." Varan chose his words with care. "He is minded to take Khor, keep the princess shut up from her people, in the fortress. If you want to bargain for Demid's life, you can say to the *starosta* that you have taken the Lord of the River. He, at least, will give me an easy death—and he would exchange me for the young Cossack. But you have no time to lose."

Doubtfully, Ayub studied him, but Varan's eyes were steadfast.

"I have talked enough. Do what you will."

Just then there came one of the hunters with tidings.

"Father, the *burlaks* are gone."

"How, gone?"

"They are not here. We have searched the woods. The thickets are dense and the ground impassable. They could not have gone far. But we hear them not."

"The —— take them!" Ayub glanced up at the stars, noting by the Dipper that the hour was close to dawn. "Well, we will take to the galley, with our prisoners."

The lined face of the hunter twisted curiously.

"The galley is gone."

Ayub got to his feet and went to the shore, even walking some distance downstream. Yet the boat, that had been stranded within sight, was not to be seen. He inspected the barge, but abandoned that in contempt. It lacked oars or rudder, and leaked freely.

Sunrise showed him the long stretch of the river, and not a boat to be seen. For several hours he waited impatiently, but except for a single fishing-smack that kept obstinately to the other shore, the Dnieper was bare. Reflection brought him little comfort. He might wait for days before a serviceable vessel came within hailing distance. Varan had sent back his horses to Kudak, and between them and Khor, thirty miles north, was not so much as a hamlet. To push on to the siech on foot was out of the question. Neither Ayub nor the Tatars were cut out for walking, being bred to horses.

"It is plain," he grumbled, "that God never ordained me to be a ship's captain. It was an evil hour when I left my black stallion and took to planks on the water. Now we must tramp like slaves for a hundred versts, to reach Demid again with this prince of robbers."

Leaving, perforce, the crippled and dying thieves, to drift downriver in the barge, he took Varan and the one slightly wounded captive, and set out toward the river trail in no pleasant frame of mind. The sight of the Tatars, stumbling through the brush in their heeled riding-boots, brought him some comfort. To lift his spirits and cheer his men he began to sing heartily.

When you are back from the wars, my lad,
When you are back from the wars,
Your dog will be dead
Your wife will be fled
With a fat pursed alderman.

VI

The Man in the Cloak

Ayub's one thought was to get back to Demid. His *kunak* had been bewitched by a young girl. To be sure, Ayub had decided that the princess, Ileana, was not a vampire; but he believed she might be a basilisk—a thing with inhuman eyes that drained the courage from a man.

It was quite clear that some power, some agency unknown to the Cossacks was at work upon the river. Ayub had caught Varan at his evil trade of plundering and slaying; still, immediately after that the galley had vanished. Moreover the big warrior had heard a shout from the forest mocking his own war-cry. Along with the galley the watermen had disappeared to the last man.

Ayub did not wait to reason it out. The galley might have drifted clear from the rushes, certainly, but—unmanned—it could never have floated out of sight before sunrise. Nor would the *burlaks* have fled from his fire. He had no desire to match wits with a devil.

Demid would know what to do with Varan.

On the second day of the march, luck favored the Cossack for the first time. A boy horseherd of Khor overtook them a few miles south of the manor house with half a dozen ponies—a roundup of the stragglers before the Winter set in.

Mounted, after a fashion, they made better progress, and by mid-afternoon arrived at the forest edge near the spot where the Cossacks had watched the farm. Leaving his men on the trail, Ayub climbed to the knoll to have a look around before venturing out into the fields.

Well for him that he did so. It was a warm afternoon—one of those that come long after Summer, when the sky is dark, but the slanting sun once more repels the clouds, and no wind stirs the bare limbs of the trees or the brittle leaves on the earth.

The blue haze did not conceal a half-squadron of dragoons, dismounted a quarter-mile from the forest, in the pastures behind Khor. Nor the videttes sitting their horses a gunshot from each flank of the line of cavalry. By their plumed helmets, and fur-tipped, blue cloaks, Ayub knew that this was the detachment of the dead Cornet, Boris.

They had taken position in the open, where they could cut off any attempt at flight by those in Khor.

In front of the manor house and its palisade an earthwork had been thrown up, with fascines through which projected the mouths of two

brass cannon. Behind this line stood the banner bearing the arms of John of Kudak. The steel caps of musketeers—a company of Walloon mercenaries—were visible over the breastwork.

On each flank were compact masses of dull-clad footmen, sailors and peasants of the town, armed with pikes and flails. Ayub estimated them to number a hundred, the musketeers a score, with as many officers and their servants. With the three-score dragoons this made close to two hundred men under the command of John of Kudak.

"Enough to draw and quarter every soul in Khor thrice over," thought the Cossack.

The governor knew what he was about; his forces were well-placed, and by mustering the townspeople, he had been able to leave the better half of his soldiers in Kudak, to keep the fortress while he was away.

"And Demid sticks a feather in his nest, the young fool!"

Ayub swore feelingly; at the same time his eye gleamed and he stroked his mustache with a grunt of pleasure. Over the gate of the palisade, facing the cannon, a rude standard had been placed, a pole bearing the wide horns of a steer from which hung buffalo tails—the *buntchauk*, or standard of the frontier Cossacks.

Except for this there was no sign of human occupancy in the manor house. No men moved in the stables, the hay ricks or the rambling wings of the manor house. Devoutly, the Cossack prayed that Demid had been wise enough to withdraw before the farm was invested. If he was within, with Ileana, the hand of John of Kudak would not deal with them gently.

One of the mounted nobles rode around the breastwork and approached the closed gate cautiously. Evidently he sought a parley, but returned to his post without receiving any response. A group of the nobles walked to a slight rise, overlooking the field, and a long plume of black and white smoke rolled from the muzzle of a cannon. A roaring report was followed by another.

Ayub spurred back to his followers, and began to lead them along the edge of the forest, to the brush nearest the gate of Khor. At intervals the cannon barked, and they could hear the splintering of wood where the logs of the gate were being pounded to pieces.

When they gained the point they sought, within arrow shot of the footmen at one side of the earthwork, Ayub dismounted and peered through the screen of brush. The cannon of the governor had made short work of the wooden gate. It lay on the ground, a heap of logs. Ayub could see

through the gap into the palisade, and he thought he made out figures moving through the smoke pall.

An officer rode up to the musketeers. The cannon were swabbed out and moved to one side. The musketeers took up their pieces and formed in a double file, ready to move against the gate. On each side the town militia formed for an advance. Ayub could see the *starosta* now, mounted beside the captain of the German infantry. Out in the distant pastures, the dragoons were climbing into saddle leisurely, drawing their sabers, laughing and cracking jokes about this castle of straw that they were going to take.

John of Kudak lifted his hand, to give a command. Then, without speaking, he turned his head. Several of the militia men near Ayub glanced around curiously. The Cossack was aware of singing.

It came from below and behind the line of the governor's men. It was a deep-throated chant, barely audible. Seeking a new position in his screen of underbrush, Ayub peered down at the inlet.

Up the neck of water from the river to Khor a galley was coming, rowed by long oars. He recognized the song as the chant of the Dnieper rivermen. And he recognized the galley as the ancient craft that had been under his feet not long ago.

But in the stern of the galley, a hand on the tiller, stood a tall figure, hatless and gray-haired. At least the scalp lock that hung down one shoulder was gray, the sun-blackened skull otherwise was shaved in the Cossack fashion. An immense red *svitza* was flung over the bare chest of the man of the galley. This was bound tight at the waist with a green sash, and high boots completed the attire. At the side of this man stood a short Cossack with only one arm.

By now everyone in the *starosta*'s force was staring at the galley and its crew. Ayub reflected that these *burlaks* were the same that had rowed him down the river. But then they had had no song on their lips.

A murmur from the townspeople reached his ears, as the galley slid in to its jetty and the watermen flung up their oars.

"Rurik! It is the, *bogatyr*, the hero. Rurik the Fair!"

"It is the master of Khor, come back after ten years—"

"Nay, dolts, 'tis the ghost of Rurik—he was not buried. See, he has only one eye, and his familiar, beside him, has but one arm. They are ghosts!"

So ran the talk of the watchers, voiced by those nearest the jetty, and repeated further back until Ayub heard. The big Cossack crossed himself

and felt for the hilt of his sword, because his back was cold and his hair tingled. But, presently, remembering that ghosts never walked in sunlight, he peered forth again.

Will-he, nill-he, the *starosta* was forced to postpone his attack, what with the rising apprehension of the town militia, and the appearance of Cossacks at his rear. He waited impatiently, while the two men stepped from the galley to the jetty and began to walk up the slope. The servants, who stood nearest, gave ground before them precipitantly. His own retinue opened a wide lane for the newcomers.

They advanced with a heavy tread toward the governor. And by degrees the men of Kudak quieted their superstitious dread. These strangers were human beings.

Ayub blinked and scratched his head. By now he knew the two men—the *koshevoi* of his camp, head of the siech, and the veteran who had lost his arm in the last battle with the Moslems.

But why had the people of Kudak spoken the name of Rurik?

Two paces from the governor's horse the old Cossack in the crimson *svitza* halted. His one eye flickered about him, taking in the banner of the *starosta*, the demolished gate of Khor, and the soldiery. This eye was curiously light, steel-gray. Those were present who found it disconcerting. John of Kudak gathered up his reins impatiently.

"What man are you? What do you seek?"

The eye of the Cossack fixed on the *starosta* and he seemed to reflect.

"I am the chief of all the Cossacks."

He held up an ivory baton, tipped with gold.

"I am the *koshevoi*, and I have come for powder."

"At an ill time, you have come. I have work to do, for the Crown. Later—this evening—*koshevoi*, I will talk with you."

The Cossack pointed with his baton at kegs of powder, standing by the cannon. "My men must have plenty of powder, *starosta*. The red cock* is loose on the border. The forces of the Grand Turk are stepping over the frontier, from the Black Sea. They are taking slaves from the Christian villages."

"That is your affair. Mine is to keep Kudak fortified."

*Fire.

The *koshevoi* considered this and shook his head. "The tsar, Boris Godunov, gave his word that my children, the Cossacks, should be supplied with means to fight the Moslems. If they rub out the Christians below the Wilderness this Winter, with the first grass the janissaries of the Crescent will be masters of Poland and Kiev and Moscow. I came with one man because my *kurens* are all on the line of battle. My word is enough—for you. Give the powder."

The long chin of the governor thrust out, and his cheeks reddened. But before he could answer, Ayub pushed through the throng around him, with Varan at his side. The wrists of the lieutenant were bound, and he was weaponless.

"By the saints!" cried the governor, "what is this, Varan?"

Ayub spoke to the *koshevoi*.

"Father, we have dragged the Lord of the River out of the river—aye and emptied a bellyful of water out of him to boot. This captive is the leader of the pirates, and he can tell where the Cossacks' powder is hidden."

Those in the retinue of the governor stared at Ayub and his prisoner in complete amazement, only the merchant, Sigismund, fingered his lip and his eyes hardened as if he were casting the lots for a great stake.

Varan smiled.

"Lies, Excellency—as you know. This vagabond attacked me when I was patrolling the river below Khor, and slew most of my men. He is a savage, and to escape torture at his hand, I told him the first tale that came into my head."

"If you lied," growled Ayub, putting his hand on his sword-hilt, "your deeds spoke otherwise. If your men were not thieves, I'm a monk."

John of Kudak let fall the reins of his horse and frowned. Among the *mujiks* and sailors of Kudak a sudden impulse of anger burst into words. They hated and feared the pirates, these men of the town. Every merchant had lost goods at their hands, and every river-man had kindred slain. And their anger was directed against Varan.

At first it was merely a gust of temper that passed through the watchers. They did not know Ayub, nor did they greatly care whether he lied or not; but Varan, the lieutenant of the governor, had been harsh. He had put honest people in the stocks for venturing near the rafts on which the bodies of slain criminals floated down the river; he had given peasants to the rack and the bastinado for failure to pay the fire tax; and no one knew what business he had been about, lurking along the banks of

the Dnieper. It rejoiced them to see Varan bound, and if he were, truly, in league with the pirates, the townspeople would like to tear him to pieces with their hands.

They did not dare to speak openly, for the *starosta* was lord of their souls and property. But John of Kudak was aware of their anger, and he let fall the reins of his horse, placing his hands on his belt.

"Lieutenant Varan," his clear voice rang out, "I gave no order to hold up the Cossacks' boat. Your place was here, at Khor, with your men. Too often have you gone pilfering. I have kept your reckoning."

The face of Varan changed, and his mouth hardened. The swagger fell away from him.

"Excellency, a word with you, apart from these cattle—"

"Serene, mighty governor," broke in Sigismund significantly, "it is time I spoke." He hesitated, and as John of Kudak gave assent by silence, went on with more assurance. "This officer brought to my house of business, certain goods taken from the river-traders. He asked a price for his wares, first swearing me to secrecy. But if he is working with the pirates—"

"Excellency," cried one of the *burlaks* who had come up from the galley, "grant me life, if I add my word. This officer sent men to our village, to take from us the silver we gleaned from our last catch of sturgeon, sold in Kiev—"

"He shot down my son, saying that the lad was spying upon him—"

"If he is the Lord of the River—"

"He sold my girl to the Moslems, pretending that such was the law, when my hut was bare of aught to pay the tithes he demanded in your name, O most worthy *starosta*!"

As if the growing rage of the people were a storm arisen in a clear sky, Varan seemed shaken. His eyes wavered and he tried to throw himself on his knees, to touch the governor's hand.

"Silence!" cried John of Kudak, rising in his stirrups. "No man of mine can play the criminal and wear my livery. Lieutenant Varan, I release you from my service!"

His hands rose from his waist, and in each of them gleamed a long pistol drawn from his belt. Thrusting forward the iron barrels, almost into the white face of the officer, he pulled the triggers. Smoke swirled many feet behind Varan, and through the white cloud his body was seen to whirl about and fall to the earth, with both eyes shot out and its skull shattered.

So suddenly had Varan died that the onlookers were taken by surprise. They watched, without a word, while the *starosta* quietly wiped from his fingers the powder stains from the priming pans of the pistols. A moment more and the captain of the German mercenaries muttered something by way of warning.

Then was heard the tread of horses on the grass outside the breastwork.

"A dog would not do that."

This was Demid. The young Cossack had approached from the gate of Khor unnoticed in the excitement except by the musketeers. These last, perceiving that his sword was in its sheath and that beside him rode the princess Ileana, had permitted him to pass between their files.

Now he reined in beside Ayub, while Ileana edged her pony to one side, her eyes searching the crowd of men.

"So, my cockerel," observed John of Kudak, "you have come to give yourself up!"

"I came, *starosta*, to make report to my chief. And the princess, to welcome him to Khor." Demid glanced down at the body of Varan, the bound hands clasped convulsively. "As God lives, that was a coward's act. Varan served you well, and kept faith with you. Since you have slain him I will say what perchance you feared his lips would tell."

He glanced at the *koshevoi* who stood a little apart, leaning on his baton. The chieftain nodded. John of Kudak studied the Cossacks with lifted brows, and, instead of answering, handed his pistols to a servant to charge and prime.

"Father," said Demid to his commander, "on the river we met with a float wherein were hung many bodies. These were branded pirates, condemned by the *starosta*. Yet their faces, twisted in death, did not bear the look of desperate men. One was a young noble, Prince Michael of Khor. Dying, he gave me a word for the princess, that he should be avenged."

Again the *koshevoi* nodded.

"We searched the bank of the Dnieper," went on the warrior, "and there was not a trace of the river-thieves, save the rumor of a light shown in Kudak tower before a vessel was attacked. Nor did any of the crews survive, to tell how they were beset."

He turned swiftly on the throng of townsmen that pressed close to his horse.

"O blind fools. The Lord of the River kept his secret under the seal of death. He disappeared from the river because he walked among you openly; he had eyes to see in the dark because his spies watched for him. When he took a ship, he cut down its crew, and thereafter placed their bodies on the rafts that drifted down the river. Upon the float he put the legend, 'These are river-thieves.'"

Demid gathered up the reins of his pony in his left hand, his right rested on a fold in his girdle near the scimitar hilt.

"So was it with Prince Michael. Journeying down the river from Kiev, with money, his galley was attacked and taken, the young prince plundered and stripped, within the castle of Kudak."

"Have you proof of this, Cossack?" demanded Sigismund.

"The trail of a snake across the road is proof of the passing of the snake, merchant. How otherwise could the pirates vanish, and the bodies of the crews be found in their place? The thieves came from the castle of Kudak, and acted the part of the river guard. They were soldiers. Proof? The powder of the siech was taken, and I can lead you to where it is hidden."

The merchant began to tremble, in the grip of bodily fear. "*Ai-a*, then will we know the truth. For it was I who bought the powder, during a journey to Kiev, and embarked it on the river. The kegs were all marked with my sign—three circles painted on the bottom, where they are not readily seen. My Armenians—I am of that race—brought the shipment safely to Kudak. Then—"

"It grieves me," said John of Kudak reluctantly, "that Varan should have done this thing."

"And it grieves me, Excellency," responded Demid slowly, "that it was by your command he did it. You are the Lord of the River."

John of Kudak laughed, in his black beard.

"I am appointed *starosta* of the lower Dnieper, so, perhaps, I am its lord. For the rest, you are mad."

At this point the deep voice of Ayub boomed out.

"By whose command were honest people kept from sight of the faces of the dead souls on the floats?" he demanded. "And, by the ——'s lapdog, whose pistols slew Varan?"

Sheer amazement held the dozen men of the governor's retinue silent. The Germans looked on impassively, with loaded weapons; the people of the town gaped and stared, uncertain what to believe. It was then that

Ileana spoke, a woman breaking into the conference of men—a thing unheard of.

"The men from below have found out the truth. Aye, my lord of Kudak, they have uncovered your sin. If you had not turned your hand against Khor and its souls, they would not have known it. To hide your tracks, you accused my brother, who was without sin. For that, you will be called to answer."

She paused and looked at him steadily.

Sight of the girl, sitting her horse without fear, before armed soldiers had its effect on the townspeople. Some began to draw near her, others to stare hostilely at the men-at-arms. If that were the truth!

"To whom, child," smiled John of Kudak, "shall I answer? I am your overlord, and these accusations are no more than the gabble of masterless men."

Pride glinted in the eyes of the girl. "Rurik, the *bogatyr*, my grandsire, did not die at the hands of the Moslems. He stands among us."

She pointed to Where the old *koshevoi* had been. He was not there now. While she sought for him in the crowd, a fearful howling set up near the cannon. Taut nerves quivered and men swore feelingly as they turned about.

Hermaphron had absented himself from the lines when the assault was formed. Discreetly, he had gone far off. His curiosity aroused by the gathering, and the sight of Ileana, he had drawn nearer. Startled by what he heard, he had lingered in the safest spot he could find, among the stalwart legs of the musketeers.

When Ileana mentioned the name of Rurik, the relic seller glanced about apprehensively. What he beheld behind him made him cry out.

"It has come back. Protect me, excellencies! It has sought me out!"

His pudgy finger pointed toward the cannon. There stood the gray-haired *koshevoi*, as it happened, his blind side nearest the Greek.

"His eyes are put out, yet he searches for me. By ——, *he is carrying the cask with which he was drowned!*"

In fact the Cossack chief had taken advantage of the general excitement to walk to the powder kegs, one of which he had lifted to scan its under side. No mark of any kind was visible, but the sight of him so had recalled to Hermaphron the legend of how the Turks had taken the hero from the water with a wine cask in his grasp.

Nor was the effect of Hermaphron's words less potent upon the *koshevoi*. Letting fall the keg, he strode to the Greek and seized his hair in one powerful hand, whipping out his saber with the other. Placing the edge against the Greek's beard, he roared in anger:

"Dog, and traitor! In years agone you betrayed my ship to the Turks, and my heroes looked on Mother Death. Aye, the Moslems took me before I quit this life, and tortured my limbs. One of my eyes they put out, but the other can see. Where are my *kunaks*—where are their Cossack swords?"

His one eye gleamed with a fierce satisfaction, and sweat dripped from the plump chin of the Greek.

"Serene, great, munificent lord!" he chattered. "Father of forgiveness—"

The sharp edge of the sword moved and his beard fell to the earth. Hermaphron shrieked.

"I will serve you! Mighty Rurik, I will confess—"

"You played the spy again," snarled the old man. "Upon the prince, my grandson. He was strung up like a slave!"

"I will s——" Overmastering terror swept everything from the mind of Hermaphron but the steel at his throat. "John of Kudak is the Lord of the River—"

The words ended in a whistling choke. The right arm of Rurik pushed forward—forward and sidewise—and the swordblade passed through the throat of the Greek, gritted through his spine. Lifting the severed head high the *koshevoi* hurled it at the governor.

"Death to you, John of Kudak!"

VII

The Red Sunset of Khor

In a second the deadlock was broken, the calm of the governor gave place to swift action. Sure of his power and the inability of his accusers to bring home their charges, until now, the *starosta* heard swords drawn on every hand. He knew that a fight to the end must follow, between himself and Rurik.

He held the balance of strength, in weapons and men. Startling as the reappearance of the hero in his home had been, after ten years of following the wars in the siech, when in Khor and Kudak he had been given up as dead, Rurik had only his three Cossacks at hand. John of Kudak was not slow to act.

Snatching his pistols from the servant, he wheeled his horse to take aim at the *koshevoi*. His agile mind formed plans instantly.

With Rurik and his warriors slain, Khor could be taken by his trained soldiery who were indifferent to such matters as extortion and piracy. The townspeople, once the issue was decided in his favor, would stand in fear of him. He had no overlord to call him to account. He would, in truth, be master of the river, until such time as he was pleased to quit the district with his gains, and go to Moscow.

He brought his weapons to bear on Rurik. But Demid, urging his pony forward, threw himself against the governor. The *starosta*'s horse stumbled and reared. His pistols flashed harmlessly.

"Musketeers, in line!" he cried. "Shoot me these dogs!"

The German captain repeated the order, and the slow-moving mercenaries began to form shoulder to shoulder, and place the rests for their arquebuses in front of them. Meanwhile other things happened.

Ileana had been working her way toward her grandfather. Coming to Rurik's side she dismounted swiftly and tendered him the reins. Thrusting her toward the breastwork, the Cossack leaped into the saddle. Ayub had whistled up his hunters, who put their short swords into play among the governor's following. These being servants and officials they fled the ground with all speed.

This brought the four Cossacks—for the one-armed Colonel was not slow to pull a man from a horse and join the fray—and the Tatars headlong into the half-formed ranks of the musketeers.

Before a shot was fired from the arquebuses—before, in fact the fuses were lighted—the horsemen were wielding their swords. The mercenaries dropped their clumsy firelocks and drew their hangers. But they were disordered, dismayed by the sudden onset of the riders, and they faced the Cossacks, expert swordsmen who asked not, nor gave mercy.

The Germans were veterans of the Flanders fields, disciplined men, and good soldiers, as they proved later in the Thirty Years' War. They fought doggedly, rallying around the governor because he was their master by virtue of money paid and received.

"Pull them from their horses!" shouted John of Kudak. "Use your steel on the ponies!"

The musketeers did, in fact, drag down the one-armed Cossack, and run him through with their blades. It did little good. The three Cossacks at the head of the Tatars fought with the reckless abandon of their race,

and they kept their horses in motion. Ayub's long sword cleared a wide space about him, while Demid's lighter scimitar whirled around and over the short blades of the Germans like a thing alive.

Half the mercenaries lay on the ground, while only two of the hunters had fallen. Seeing the fight going against him, John of Kudak jerked around his horse's head and raced through the opening in the breastwork, while the Cossacks were at the other end of the struggling throng of men.

He galloped clear, to meet the youthful ensign of the dragoons who had come up, leaving his squadron in charge of a sergeant, to ask for orders. The *starosta* kept on, until the two riders gained the line of the waiting cavalry. So short and deadly had been the struggle at the guns that the dragoons only fancied the governor's men were fighting among themselves.

Now John of Kudak bade the ensign form his squadron in double ranks, and to move on the breastwork.

Meanwhile the flight of the governor caused the captain of the musketeers to throw down his sword and cry a truce. Rurik assumed command of the situation at once.

"Bind them, dog-brothers!" he shouted at the townsmen. "Take their swords."

Until now the peasants and militia had hung back from the struggle which had been wolf-like for their wits. The order of the *koshevoi* was agreeable. Having secured the Germans hastily and snatched up their weapons it was natural that they should look to him for another command. Rurik had counted on this. Standing up in his stirrups, he let his voice out.

"Who are honest men—let them man the *tabor*. Who are cowards—let them leave their weapons and draw back to the water."

No one was willing to discard his weapon and leave his comrades. Sight of the old hero roused their enthusiasm: they had no love for John of Kudak. Sigismund it was who sealed their determination to fight with the Cossacks.

"Stand your ground, comrades," he cried, his sallow cheeks flushing. "We will take Rurik for our overlord, and strike out for our goods and families."

A shout of assent answered him, and the townsmen crowded up to the breastwork in disorder, waving pikes, flails and the captured swords. Rurik and Demid surveyed them without approval, and exchanged glances. Here were more than a hundred followers, but the experienced Cossacks doubted whether the throng would stand the charge of the cavalry.

"Where are Ileana's men?" growled the *koshevoi*. "And where is Ileana?"

Demid pointed out the figure of the girl, running toward the open gate of Khor. It was too late to go after her; and there was no time to throw the throng of *mujiks* into the palisade. The dragoons, already at a trot, were nearing the wall of the manor, between which and the wood they must pass to get at the earthwork.

Ileana passed through the gate, and the Cossacks turned grimly to their task. Ayub climbed up on the fascines and swung his broadsword around his head.

"*U-ha!* Pikes over the breastwork, lads, swords in the rear. Watch the flanks. Say a prayer to the Father and Son, for this will be a red night."

In truth, at that moment, the sun set over the plain of Khor, and the whole sky was a crimson panoply. For years thereafter the people of the town spoke of it as the red sunset of Khor.

Until the dragoons came abreast the palisade and perforce, swung in close to the wooden wall, there was no sign of Feodor and his hunters. But when the ensign lifted his saber and the riders spurred to a gallop, a flight of arrows sped through the dusk. Black heads appeared along the top of the palisade and the short bows of the hunters twanged incessantly.

Half-seen by the dragoons, the sudden storm of shafts wrought confusion in their order. A half dozen men and horses rolled on the ground; a score of injured beasts reared and plunged in the ranks. Those on the end nearest the wall tried to change front, to draw away from the archers. Orders from the ensign and the *starosta* clashed.

The dragoons lost momentum; riders, gazing about for their leaders, fell under the steady whistle of the arrows. John of Kudak raced to the front of the disarray.

"To Kudak!" he shouted. "Each for himself."

With that he turned sharp to the left, and passed midway between the manor house and the trench. The dragoons strung out after him, the best mounted taking the lead. Only the ensign, writhing under the discomfiture of his troop, kept a dozen together, to hold the rear.

"Judas!" bellowed Ayub, brandishing his sword impotently on the breastwork. "So that's the way you fight, with the heels of your ponies! Come back, serene, great mighty lord of the Styx and *starosta* of ——'s cesspool!"

The thudding of hoofs alone answered him—that and the hooting of the peasantry, at the flight of John of Kudak. But the *koshevoi* swore heartily. In Kudak castle, if Demid were correct in his belief, was the great store of powder that the Cossacks had come for, and in the barracks of Kudak were pikemen and soldiery of the governor enough to keep the wall against an army.

Once within the gate, John of Kudak could overawe the inhabitants, and make good his stronghold.

Rurik stood up in his stirrups. "Where is Demid? We must muster what riders we can and follow through the wood. Where is that unbranded Demid?"

The Don Cossack had left the trench, and no one had seen him go.

Taking one of the hunters with him as a guide, Demid had started for the forest as soon as the governor turned his horse. The dragoons were on the main trail, and the Cossack and the Tatar kept to cattle paths. Dusk deepened under the trees and they bent low in the saddle, pushing through brush and trees at the best pace of their ponies.

Sometimes near and sometimes far, they heard the shouting and clash of weapons where Rurik pursued the rear of the dragoons with the hunters from Khor.

Demid wasted no thought on anything but the path ahead of him, that twisted and veered off in maddening fashion. With only a mile to go, he began to stroke his horse with the whip and then to flog it.

They passed the huts of peasants, galloped over a bridge, splashed through a stream and turned into the hamlet outside the gate.

Reining in sharply as the wall came into view, Demid made out that the *starosta* had just pulled up outside the gate with some dozen dragoons at his heels. Moreover, the gate was closed and locked.

It was one of the vagaries of fate that kept John of Kudak from the sanctuary of his castle that evening. By his order the gate was locked always at sunset, and the sun had been down a half hour. He fell to pounding on the iron-bound logs, shouting hoarsely.

The guards who climbed to the watchtower and peered down into the dusk at this sweating and dusty man did not at first recognize the governor. Even when he proclaimed himself profanely to them, and the sound of conflict drew nearer along the main trail, the men on the wall hesitated, such was their dread of breaking one of his commands.

Then they climbed down and began to lower the bars.

It was nearly dark, and when Demid trotted out of the shadows between the huts, he was not noticed until he drew near John of Kudak. Many of the cavalry were riding up, intent on the tumult behind them. But when Demid rose in his stirrups and spurred toward the governor, a shout went up and swords were lifted.

The dragoons were scattered in groups about the trail and the Cossack turned and twisted forward, sliding away from some, parrying the cuts of others. Each turn he made took him nearer John of Kudak.

"Strike him down!" urged the governor. "A hundred ducats to the man who slashes him."

Demid came on in silence, slid from one side of his saddle to the other, shifted scimitar from left hand to right. So, by mastery of his horse and quick work with his blade he reached the horse of the governor.

"Fend him off!" the man cried, pulling back to the gate itself. "Body of ——"

He cut down frantically with his saber, and felt himself parried. Demid leaned forward and his arm shot out. Steel gritted against bone, and the outcry of the governor ceased.

Demid drew erect with an effort, turned in his saddle and caught in his left hand the arm, raised to strike, of the man nearest him. This was the ensign who had just come up.

"Your master is dead," the Cossack said. "Will you serve a slain thief or a Russian prince? Sheath your swords. I will take your surrender."

The ensign was cut up over the loss of half his men; all the boyars of Kudak were dead—Boris and Varan, and the attendants of the governor. In the darkness, he did not know how many men Demid had at his heels.

"Terms—my men?" he asked, panting.

"Fair service—your squadron kept as it is—tell Rurik I pledged it."

Demid's arm drooped and the boy instinctively held him up. Not until the gate was opened and torches flared did the ensign see that he held in his arms a man so slashed and cut as to be utterly helpless. But by then Rurik and his hunters had come up, and the dragoons sheathed their swords.

After a short parley the captains of the Russian pikemen followed the example of the dragoons. Lacking leaders, they had nothing to gain by holding out. Moreover Rurik had a way with him. He summoned a priest and called his men to prayers after candles had been lighted before the icons, after the Cossack fashion.

First seeing that Demid was cared for and put to bed in the officers' quarters and a physician summoned, he called for the castellan, took the keys of the magazines and led the others down into stores of Kudak. There they found powder enough to equip an army for a campaign, bales of silk, and nankeen, captured weapons of all sorts, perfumes and fine leathers, and cotton—in short the plunder of a score of vessels.

Even Sigismund and the under-officers of Kudak were astonished at the wealth gathered by John of Kudak, for in trunks in his rooms were sacks of gold and boxes of jewels, pearls from Persia, rubies and emeralds and carved ivory from China.

That night was long remembered in Khor. The Cossack chief had all of the spoil except the gold, the weapons and powder—including the kegs that had been shipped from Kiev to the camp, and were found, marked, under the other casks—carried to the dining-hall of the castle. Hither he summoned the citizens of the town, and greeted them. Then he announced that he hungered and a banquet was prepared in the kitchens.

"Beat the drums, light the flare on the castle tower. Summon the minstrels of the town with their fiddles, and the *bandura* players to tell their tales. This is a dull place, by Saint Nicholas. It was otherwise in my youth. Eh, we will have a frolic."

He shouted for Ayub.

"No more ships will be lost on the Dnieper. Tell the townspeople that. Bid the *mujiks* and the merchants to come to the courtyard, and the fisherfolk, and the men of Khor. We of Khor are masters of Kudak castle."

The doors were thrown open and candles lighted in every hall, corridor and shrine. The squeaking of fiddles and the songs of men were heard as the throngs from the town pressed into the castle.

In the courtyard the Cossacks took their stand by the bales of goods, and bundles of precious things hoarded by John of Kudak. First the servants of Khor were given rich gifts of ivory and leather, then the peasants were tossed silver and rolls of silk. Bearded *mujiks* stared agape at the glittering spoil poured into their hands.

Rurik the Fair, goblet in hand, towered over the assemblage. Ayub, adorned with a silver helmet and a peacock feather, glittering in a mandarin's coat, was enjoying himself mightily.

"Here, *kunaks*," he bellowed, to the astonished serfs, "is your head tax for the rest of your besotted lives."

He threw into the air a double handful of ducats.

"Here's the horn tax! There goes the river toll."

He kicked loose a bale of goods.

"—— take me, I've forgotten the tithes," and be delved into a casket of pearls. These he presented to the children who had come to gaze at the feast.

"What a waste!" moaned Sigismund. "They are like pigs in a trough, these men from below."

The young ensign, considerably heartened by the turn in his affairs—Rurik had appointed him castellan, and captain of the troops—looked up in displeasure.

"Hardly pigs," he muttered. "At all events, they can fight. How came the old *koshevoi* here?"

Sigismund told him.

"Rurik was leading a scouting-party behind the Cossack lines, when he beheld on the river the float of the men slain by the st—by the thieving John of Kudak. The fisher-folk who knew him then told him of the body of his grandson, Prince Michael. When he looked into the face of his grandson, he came up the river to search out those who had slain the boy. That was why he abode near Khor secretly, and talked with the *burlaks*. He followed the party of Varan, and was present at the fight for the galley. Seeing his boat abandoned, he took possession of it, and whistled up the *burlaks* to row him to Khor, when the one-armed Cossack came to him from the siech with news of the Turks' advance. Truly the croak of a raven is an omen of evil—"

The merchant shivered a little, remembering that of the company that had sat about the table of John of Kudak two nights ago he alone survived.

He drew back, seeing that Rurik had climbed to a table and lifted his baton. In his other hand the *koshevoi* held a great drinking cup.

"To the Faith," he roared, "of all true men in the world."

"To the Faith!" repeated Ayub, not too steadily.

The *koshevoi* lowered his cup and wiped his mustache.

"To the mistress of castle and manor, the princess, Ileana. Until such time as there is a new tsar, you will serve the maid of Khor. Do you agree?"

"Father, we agree!" cried the peasants. And the merchants and officers added their word, because the young girl was greatly loved.

"Fail not to keep faith with her," added the *koshevoi* grimly, "unless you wish to summon up Demid and his sword from below. And with Demid will come ten thousand swords from the siech. Do you hear?"

"We hear!" cried the listeners, and drank the health of the princess.

The fiddlers took up their bows again, and the *bandura* players began their song. Out in the courtyard the peasants began to dance, as if it had been a feast day. The men-at-arms gathered about the wine casks, and teased the prettier girls. The castle servants, glad to be spared their lives, flew about bearing laden platters.

"Faster!" ordered Ayub, pounding on the table. "Play faster. Eh, you have forgotten how to frolic. What a world! The Cossacks come to visit you for a night or two and you don't even take off your coats to dance. When I was young it was otherwise. Look at this!"

Casting his broadsword at Sigismund to hold, he took the center of the hall, squatted on his heels and leaped high into the air, shouting the while. His silk coat swung around his shoulders, splitting down the middle, and he flung it underfoot. The elder minstrels began to tap with their feet on the floor. Their eyes sparkled. They had seen warriors frolic like this in other days, before going to the frontier.

The gloom and the fear fell away from those in Kudak, and the hearts of the people were merry.

In the chamber of the *starosta*, where the clamoring of the fiddles and guitars came faintly, the girl Ileana sat by a couch on which the wounded Demid lay, shielding the light of a candle from his eyes. From time to time she rose to change a bandage, or to urge him to drink of the potions left by the physician. Her glance went frequently to a tall clock ticking noisily by the candle, marking the hours of happiness left her.

Her hand was light upon the youth's forehead, and a flush was in her cheeks when his eyes met hers. A song crooned in her throat until he slept, and then Ileana knelt by the couch, her head against the covers, and cried a little, knowing that before long when the wine cleared from the head of her grandfather, the *koshevoi* would be impatient to be off again. So she treasured up the short hours that kept Demid at her side, and not for the pearls or the silks that Ayub had scattered in the castle would she have exchanged one of them.

Once, in the second day of the feasting, she ventured to speak to Rurik.

"His hurts are many. Why can he not abide in the castle until he is hale and strong?"

"Not Demid," responded the *koshevoi*. "His skin is scratched a little. But the *kunaks*, his comrades, will be waiting for him, down below. There is work to be done. Would you have him grow fat, like an ox, and sleep on the stove?"

Looking keenly at his granddaughter, he patted her head.

"Eh, so you have given your heart to the *bogatyr*? Well, then you must hold your head high. You know the path that lies before the men of Khor."

Ileana sighed. Rurik stepped to the edge of the battlements, looking out to where the vessel into which the powder of the siech had been loaded was waiting for his command to cast off from the jetty. His eye traveled over the gray stretch of the Dnieper, cold and windswept.

"Little Ileana, much water has passed down the Dnieper since I sat in the high seat of Khor. My companions have gone their ways, each to the end of his road. Mother Death has beckoned me many times, and I shall not ride through the gate of Khor again. But no Turkish prison, and no chains will keep Demid from coming back. That is well, for you should have a husband whose sword will safeguard you. He is an eagle, looking down at men from afar; he must fly through the spaces of the world, and match his strength against his foes."

The *koshevoi* placed his hand under the girl's chin, and looked long into her eyes.

"What message shall I bear from the princess of Khor to the *bogatyr*?"

Ileana hid her face against the Cossack's shoulder.

"Say to Demid that when the wars are over, a fire will be kindled in the tower of the castle to light his way."

"Good!" The eye of the chieftain gleamed with pride and satisfaction. "Now it is time for us to go, who have the road before us."

The Witch of Aleppo

When the storm comes, the snow pigeon takes refuge in the earth, but the wild goose flies south.

When the sun is warm, the snow pigeon soars into the air, but the wild goose wings its way to the gray north.

Snow was falling that evening in December, when the year 1613 of Our Lord was drawing to its close. A sighing wind from the open steppe swept the drifted snow from the roofs of the barracks and sent it swirling along the parade ground of the siech, the war encampment of the Cossacks.

White, whirling devils leaped and vanished in front of the yellow squares that were the horn windows of the *kurens*, the long log barracks.

Few windows showed a light in the siech because only a skeleton army was encamped there. A few hundred Cossacks held the border post where thousands should have been, on the island upon the icy breast of Father Dnieper—the river which, in that war-ridden generation, marked the boundary between Christian Europe and the growing empires of the Moslems.

And these Cossacks were angry as the dark and bitter storm that, rising in the limitless wastes of the steppe, held them in its grip. For one thing it was Christmas Eve, and not a full jar of tobacco or a keg of spirits was within the palisade of the camp to lighten the hours before dawn.

"Eh-eh!" The *sotnik* who had brought in the men shook his head. "Such a night. The forest yonder is snapping its fingers, like the bones of the dead. It is good that we are not in the open."

"Aye, so," muttered another, setting his back to the wind, "because there are certainly devils abroad in the air. I could smell witches' oil, where I stood. And a dwarf came up from behind a log and pulled my coat, crying, just like a child in pain—"

"Evil times," assented a warrior who lacked a coat and leaned his spear against his shoulder to hold his fists the closer to the blaze. "Tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow," broke in the captain curtly, "is a holy day, and the vampires and hob-gobs will all bivouac under the earth."

"I heard a maiden's voice singing in the treetops, and her dark hair flew over my head like this smoke. If we had a priest in the camp such things would not be, but we have no priest."

"*Ai-a*," assented the man without a coat, "our fathers, the elders, hold council in the church. Eh, they cannot sprinkle us with holy water. Our *batko*, the priest, went down the river to shrive a sick wench. A Turkish patrol found him and sent him back—"

"With the soles of his feet cut off," nodded the officer grimly. "Aye, they fitted him out with a pair of red slippers. That is how they sent him back to us."

They glanced with one accord toward the low structure of logs and mud where the body of the priest now lay awaiting burial. Only the *sotnik* looked thoughtfully at a nearby hut without a light. This was the quarters of the *koshevoi*—the chief of the Cossack war bands. And it was empty because the siech lacked a leader as well as a priest.

Rurik, called "The Fair," a one-eyed veteran of many wars, had been the chief of the Cossacks. During the hard campaign of last Summer when the frontier had been overrun by the Turks from Constantinople, Rurik had been taken prisoner. After being paraded in chains before the sultan he had been set to work with the other Christian slaves and a demand for ransom sent to the siech. And the demand was for more than a king's ransom—ten thousand gold sequins.

So the temper of the Cossacks who had remained at the siech was savage, because in all the wide steppe of the Ukraine there was not such a sum in gold. The Jews, with a shrewd eye to the hazard, refused to lend it, though promised half the spoil taken by the Zaporogians in their raids for the next few years.

To the men of the patrols who tried to forget the gnawing of hunger in the glow of the fire, the death of the priest was a worse misfortune than the loss of their leader. But the captain knew that without a strong hand to lift the baton of a chief, the unruly clans of the steppe would never hold their own against the Moslems.

So long as Rurik lived, no new *koshevoi* could be elected. Besides, it was unthinkable for Cossacks to forget the ties of brotherhood and leave Zaporogians to be flayed alive by the Turks. Rather, they would consent to have the Syrian and Jewish merchants spit upon their mustaches.

Nothing remained for them but to find the ten thousand pieces of gold. Constantinople was too strong to attack, and as for ventures upon the seas—the Turks and the Barbary *beys* were masters there.

"We cannot ransom the *koshevoi*," the captain mused, "yet if we do not keep faith with our father, all the warriors of the world will point at us and say there is no faith in the brotherhood of the Cossacks. And how is that to be endured?"

"Easier if we had vodka and gruel," said mournfully the man who lacked a coat.

"Or if the *batko* were here to start a carol. Eh, he had such a fine throat—like a brass funnel it was, for the wine that went down and the songs that came up."

They threw more wood on the fire and pressed closer moodily, leaning on their spears, for no one wished to be the first to break away to a dark shed to try to sleep upon an empty stomach this Christmas Eve.

"If we had an *ataman*—a colonel like Khlit of the Curved Saber," muttered the *sotnik*, "who could open up a road for us to follow! By Saint Nicholas, we would find a ransom and weigh it out in blood."

"It was otherwise in those days," nodded a veteran who had traveled long roads with Khlit and Rurik. "Now the brothers do nothing but chew sunflower seeds, and when they hear that noble Cossacks are burned alive by the Turks—"

"To the —— with you!" growled the captain.

"—they spit out the sunflower seeds." Anger, like the dull wrack of the clouds overhead, settled upon the men by the fire, and the last thing to come into their thoughts was that they should actually have a feast that Christmas Eve, or that songs would be heard in the camp.

The door of the church opened and a Cossack emerged, wrapping the collar of his *svitza* about his ears. As he passed by the fire the men who had come in from patrol glanced up, with a vague hope, but saw that it was only the scribe's orderly.

"Someone back yonder," he jerked a thumb toward the church where the council of elders sat, "is mad as a werewolf. Such a night, and a war party is ordered out!"

"What *kuren*?" demanded the captain.

"And they must send *me* to rout out those —— of Don Cossacks."

The messenger shook his head sourly, and passed on, the lanthorn in his hand flickering as it swung beside his bowed legs. The men from the Don country were said to take after their leader, Demid, who was a sword slayer, and a falcon.

"Eh, they will be at home upon the snow road this night," he thought, "because what is not Gypsy or Tatar or brimstone in their blood is akin to the witches."

Unnoticed by the scribe's orderly and the others, a figure came out of the open door of the church and moved after him. This was a man so tall he had to stoop to pass under the lintel, and he walked with the swaying gait of one who had spent the better part of a lifetime in the saddle.

Their course took them by the high palisade, open to the weather, where prisoners were penned. Hearing a muttered curse hurled after the orderly's light the giant paused in his stride. But what mattered the storm to condemned men who would know the feel of a rope around their necks or the icy embrace of Father Dnieper before another day dawned?

They passed the empty stalls, once occupied by dram-shop keepers. Too well the camp followers had probed the leanness of the purses in the siech. True, the wide Cossack steppe was fertile, but the villages had been reduced to burnt posts sticking up in the snow, the harvests had been garnered by the Turks, the horse herds thinned by Tatar thieves, and the cattle were dying off from lack of fodder.

Gaining the lee of the last barrack shed, apart from the others, the messenger kicked open the door.

"An order, good sirs—" he began, with misgivings.

Abusive shouts interrupted him at once—"May the dogs bite you!"

"Close the door, you son of a jackal!"

"You have been swilling the sacred wine, now that the priest is dead. As God lives, you think you are our colonel, to give us an order!"

"No, he is looking for his own quarters, the gallows pen—what evil business are you about, 'Bandy Legs?'"

Sitting in groups about smoking fires some three score warriors were casting dice on scraped hides or matching each other at odd and even. Overhead, hung to the rafters, black sheepskin coats were steaming, and the reed-strewn clay that served as a floor was littered with bear and wolf skins.

In the corners lay men nursing wounds, the evil aroma of short day pipes filled with Turkish tobacco mingling with the smoke of damp wood

and half-dried horse-dung. They were bearded and dark-skinned. Several bore the purple scars of recent sword cuts on cheek and forearm—big-boned fellows, taller than the usual run of Cossacks. The orderly noticed that no gold or silver lay on the gaming boards, and that only the wounded were smoking. Tobacco was in scant supply here, as elsewhere in the Cossacks' camp.

"Sabers and saddles, my turtle doves!" he chuckled. "With saddles and sabers for relish, if the fare likes you not. You take the snow road this night."

"You lie, dog face!" snarled one of the nearest.

Plucking a half-burned barrel stave from the fire, he advanced threateningly on the soldier.

"Satan would not stir out of hell this night. I'll singe your beard, you hyena—"

The *essaul*, the sergeant, loomed up, stripped to the waist. Under his white skin his heavy biceps swelled, and the unlucky orderly paled visibly.

"Nay, 'tis an order, good Togrukh."

"Whose order? Our *sotniks* are dead, and our *ataman*, our colonel, is up the river. Who gives an order to the Don regiment?"

Togrukh reached out and gripped the orderly's beard, swinging the smoldering board with his free hand to keep the flames going. His white teeth gleamed through the tangle of a black mustache.

"So, good sir," he growled, "the noble elders would like to give an order to the men from the Don, eh? They sent you, shrinking rose vine, and you came, lovely little flower!"

"The rosebud came, the lovely little flower," chanted the warriors gleefully.

Togrukh was about to apply his brand when the giant figure in a wolf skin *svitza* entered behind the orderly, stooping as he did so to clear the lintel.

"Are your saddles oiled?"

He glanced up at the pegs on which a hundred saddles perched, each one different from the rest, but each ornamented in some way, worked with silver, or gold coins, covered with flowered silk. All were in good order.

"Your sabers cleaned? Have you boots, a pair to each man? Are they whole?"

To every question the moody Togrukh nodded, puffing at an empty pipe, his handling of the messenger suspended for the moment.

"All is as it should be, Colonel Ayub," he muttered. "The forehead to you, colonel. We did not know you were here."

"That is evident," grinned Ayub.

He had a good-natured, muscular face. His black eyes, set far apart, scanned the assembly without anger. The warriors surveyed him with equal interest, dwelling upon the mighty barrel of his chest, and the two-foot handle of the broadsword strapped to his back. This weapon was unique in the siech, for Ayub had taken it from a German man-at-arms and had used no other weapon since. He alone of the free Cossacks could cut a cross in the air with the fifty-pound blade held in one hand.

Moreover the *ataman* Ayub was a *kunak*, a good fellow. They called him colonel although he had never commanded a regiment; instead he had been in more scrapes than an eel out of water. Togrukh and his mates knew that Ayub's ribs had been burned black over the brazier of a Turkish torturer, and a pound or so of his three hundred-weight consisted of grapeshot in the chest and thighs from a Polish culverin. Because of his reputation for nosing out trouble as a hound scents a hare, he never lacked for followers among the Cossacks.

"Ayub," said the stolid Togrukh, "we know that you are the comrade of the falcon, our colonel. As God lives, you are a very brother to him, and that is good. But what is this about an order? We have no officers in the camp. If you had not come we would have pricked this swollen bladder—" he spat at the orderly—"for bidding us to our sabers this night. Doubtless the scribe wants the life let out of the prisoners in the pen, and it is always the Don regiment that is summoned when a dog's work is to be done."

"If the falcon, your colonel, gave an order would the Donskoi obey?"

An angry mutter went up from the listeners, who plainly considered themselves affronted by this remark.

"Aye," responded Togrukh, who was the only surviving noncom, "if we obeyed not—there would be terror."

"Then," Ayub assured him, "there be terror if you do not obey now. Demid, your chief, is here in the camp. He rode in at vespers and is at talk with the grayheads in the church. He gave the order."

"Allah!" Togrukh shot one threatening glance at the orderly who had failed to mention this all-important fact, and reached up to jerk down his

fur-lined greatcoat. "On your feet, dog-brothers!" he barked over his shoulder at his mates who were scrambling into coats, boots and belts.

"Thirty of you, only!" commanded Ayub. "Two tens with lances, one ten to go to the supply shed, to be issued firelocks, powder horns, matches and bullet sacks. The rest to the stables, to rub down the horses with hay. Two horses to a man, and double saddlebags."

A raw-boned oldster, donning a second shirt, looked up with interest.

"The forehead to you, *ataman*! That means a long ride: do we go far?"

"Far, Broad Breeches." The Don warrior wore, tucked into his boots, a pair of leather pantaloons, wider than any other in the camp, as Ayub noticed admiringly.

"With Father Demid, good sir?"

"With young Demid, and me, dog-brother."

"That means sword strokes." The veteran seemed satisfied. "It may be we shall frolic with the Moslem patrols, eh, sir brother?"

"It may be." Ayub, usually talkative enough, was strangely reticent. "Take what you must have for a journey of some moons, but sparingly. Do not saddle the beasts now. There will be drinking before we mount. Togrukh, when your men are equipped report to the *ataman*, Demid, at the church."

With that he went out of the barracks. Almost as he closed the door, the thirty warriors stood clothed and armed for the road. Taking the first saddlebags that came to hand they began to ransack the various belongings of the barracks, without thought for the question of ownership. One youth tucked a short balalaika, a guitar, into his sack, along with flint and steel and a costly icon—a holy picture set in a jeweled frame.

Broad Breeches—he of the two shirts—took a plentiful stock of tallow, long needles, a hunting-knife and the best of the woolen leg-wrappings lying about. Togrukh surveyed this stock with approval and gathered together a similar one for himself. Tongues were loosened, and the wounded who were to be left behind speculated upon the possible destination of the war party. The orderly could not enlighten them, but added that they were to get from the wagon master a sledge load of tar and a dozen axes.

"Boats!" growled the oldest Cossack. "Hide of a hundred devils! May I roast in a brazen bull if we are not going to build long skiffs."

"But, Broad Breeches," objected the youngest of the party, "the Dnieper is frozen deep."

"I can't help it, Girl Face, if Father Dnieper is solid."

The veteran knotted up the mouth of his sack and selected a lance to his liking.

"It must be that we are going upon an ocean," he added thoughtfully.

"How, an ocean? Where is there an ocean near the siech?"

A roar of laughter from the Don men greeted this evidence of ignorance. The veteran, his tall black hat stuck upon one side of his shaven skull, grinned under his mustache.

"Eh-eh! His mother's milk is still wet on his lips, the little swaddled one!"

"The little swaddled one!" echoed Togrukh with relish.

"Why," added one of the disabled, offering his pipe to Togrukh, "all the oceans of the north must be frozen, or some such thing. So as God lives, sir brothers, you are going to the Black Sea, to the south."

"Or the White* or the Red," put in the veteran, moving about nimbly.

"Black, White or Red," muttered the orderly sullenly, "you will roast in that brazen ox, and the Turks will put your ashes in their gardens, Broad Breeches, before you come back to the siech. The *ataman*, Demid, brought down the river from Kudak on two sledges kegs of brandy and vodka. Where there is a great revel before the march," he concluded sagely, "few warriors come back from the trail."

Togrukh, more and more pleased with events, glanced around to assure himself that the thirty were ready. Confronting the orderly he put his hands on his hips and swelled out his chest.

"By the shadow of the cross, our *ataman* is a falcon, a golden eagle. He soars high—he sees far! Brandy *and* vodka! What a night this will be! And you, you goose, said naught of what was important in your orders. *Hei*, brothers—pluck the goose, pluck the goose!"

In spite of the resistance of the scribe's orderly, he tore the coat from the man, and swung him around to the oldest Cossack, who, waiting alertly, tripped up the messenger and jerked off his boots as he struggled to rise. Then, jumping about like a gamecock, the experienced Broad Breeches planted his booted foot on the victims buttock's and sent him reeling toward the young warrior who ripped off his bag trouser.

"Singe the goose, singe the goose!" several began to cry.

*The Sea of Marmora.

Clad only in his shirt, the unfortunate orderly was whirled about until he was dizzy; then he was knocked down into the embers of the largest fire. Shouts of laughter greeted his efforts to scramble out of the hot coals, and an odor of burning skin was perceptible. His shirttails blazing, and his beard smoking, the messenger howled and tried to run toward the door, but his dizziness drove him against the walls instead, until Togrukh thrust him through the open portal into the snow.

Then, followed by the loud good wishes of the sick and disabled, the Don warriors tramped out, some to go for arquebuses, some to stack lances in the stables and rub down the shaggy ponies, but all with an eye to where, in the center of the muster ground, the dark figures of the patrols off duty were gathered around certain great kegs standing in the snow close to the red glow of the bonfire.

In the log chapel where lighted candles stood under the painted pictures of Christ and Mary, the deliberations of the council had come to an end. The score of gray-haired warriors had laid aside their tall *kalpaks*, the black Cossack hats with red tops, and stood, in stained ermine coats and costly sable cloaks, about an open grave, dug in front of the altar.

They looked at one another questioning, the steam of their breathing rising in the cold air. In a rough coffin on which rested his square can and gold-embroidered stole, lay the body of the *batko*, the priest of the Cossack camp, and they were wondering in what manner they should bury the holy man who had so often performed the ceremony for their brethren but now was past doing it for himself.

"It is well," spoke up one *ataman*, "that the good father should be planted here. This, sir brothers, was his camp and from it he sallied forth whenever the drums rolled for battle."

With that, several, led by the judge and the scribe of the camp, laid hold of the box and lowered it into the grave. Then they drew back and others came forward with shovels to fill in the grave to the level of the earthen floor.

"A thousand fiends fly away with you!" remonstrated Ayub. "Would you plant the *batko* without prayer or bell?"

"Do you manage the prayer. You were ever glib with your tongue."

Ayub glanced around uneasily, and was greeted with a murmur of assent. His broad face grew red with unaccustomed effort of thought, and, mechanically, he unsheathed the broadsword, to lean on its handguard.

The other Cossacks waited hopefully with bowed heads. All at once the big warrior cleared his throat and raised his eyes.

"O Father and Son in Heaven, he began in his deep voice, "this *batko* of ours was a good comrade. He never took another man's bread or silver and what he had of his he gave with an open hand so that now, when he has turned up his toes, we had to bury him in a winding sheet made of a Turkish turban cloth, so little had he in the world."

The judge nodded, his eyes closed, as if he himself could not have expressed the matter better.

"This *batko* of ours," went on Ayub, "had a hardy soul. May I never taste corn brandy again if it didn't stick to his body all the time he was walking back to his comrades, after the Turks had sliced his feet. And now, sir brothers, it has taken wings, this soul of our comrade and it has gone to sing before the seat of the Mother of God, and we will never hear him shout—*U-ha* again. No, he will never ride forth with us again."

He paused to lift his hand.

"If he could talk to us now, sir brothers, what would he say? Not a word of himself. But he would point to the holy images that have not a garment to their backs, or a candle to burn before them. That is what he would do. And what is our answer?"

The elders who were not quick-witted, looked up expectantly.

"Why, we will go down the path of the *batko*, that bloody path. And for each drop of blood upon it we will cut down a Moslem; we will carry the sword across the Black Sea, and bring back silver and gold for this altar. May the fiend take me, if we don't."

"Glory be to the Father and Son!" cried one of the warriors.

"For the ages of ages!"

While earth was being thrown on the coffin someone remembered the bell and from the church tower the chime of Christmas rang forth. Ayub, rendered thirsty by the long oration, sallied out with the councilors to the wine kegs that had made their appearance on the muster field.

II

The Gallows Birds

When the bells of the church ceased ringing the snow no longer fell, and it was seen that the center square of the siech was filling rapidly with warriors from the barracks. Although the muster drum had not been beaten,

the orderly of the camp scribe had had a thrashing at the hands of the Don men, and his tongue was loosened.

The cooks were kicked up, grunting, and kindled fires under still-warm cauldrons wherein were quarters of sheep and sides of beef; as if they had been summoned by the drum, the older warriors appeared and headed for the casks, wiping their mustaches. In their hands they bore beakers and nuggins and broken dippers, and soon the gurgle of corn brandy was heard as clearly as the crackle of the flames, where fresh fires were sending sparks whirling up toward a cold and starlit sky.

The more inexperienced who came late were fain to gather the liquor in caps or cupped fists; and the youngest of them were sent to pull down the stalls of the Jews to throw on the flames. Soon a dense throng of warriors gathered around the balalaika players and the six-foot youngsters who were beginning to dance the *cosachka* on the hard-packed snow.

They leaped and crouched by the red flames, casting off their long coats, their scalp locks flying in the wild swing of the dance of the Ukraina, and the watchers put hands on hips and moved booted feet restlessly as the rhythm of it got into their veins.

They asked the *sotnik* who had been first on the scene how the vodka and brandy had come hither.

"On the *ataman*'s—Demid's—sledges. He drove down the river in the storm, from Kudak where he had been to bend the forehead to Ileana, granddaughter of Rurik. Eh, he must be hot with wine, for he promised the maid he would find ransom for Rurik."

Beating in the head of a fresh cask with a smith's hammer, the officer added reflectively:

"He has called a squadron of the Don men to horse, and he will not take more than that. Because he says we others are oxtails, fit to beat at flies, and he is going south, beyond the frontier."

"Where, then?"

"To the —— most likely, because he is young and mad. He will not say how, since there are spies in the siech."

"Spies? Not to be thought of!"

"Well, the sultan has eyes and ears north of the frontier, by which he knows our strength and our plans. How else did they cut us up last Summer and truss up Rurik like a sheep?"

There was no answer to this, and the warriors began to sample the new keg. Always when a war party went out, they had a carouse, and the setting

out of the Donskoi was apt to be memorable. The wailing of the fiddles rose against the note of the wind, and the thudding feet of the dancers. Word came presently from the church that the priest had been buried and they hastened to drink off a cup to the sturdy brother who had left them.

"Colonel Ayub had sworn he will bring back new garments for the images and jewels for the icons. What days! Our church is like a jackal's hole—"

"Aye, and the Turkish mosques shine like harlots—"

"That is not the worst of it, sir brothers. These mosques, what are they? May the fiends spit on me if they are not Christian churches taken by the Moslems, who rubbed out the holy pictures on the walls. So it is with Saint Sophia, in the Imperial City,* so it is with the Holy Sepulcher."

They muttered angry assent, hanging their heads, for the Cossacks were seldom free from brooding; their moods were born of the great steppe, grim in the long Winter, palpitating and mirthful in the brief Summer.

"What days!" assented the *sotnik*, glaring about him. "Even in the siech a war party must set out at night, or spies would bear word to the sultan. And now that Demid is setting forth, who is there to smoke out the spies?"

"Let us make Demid our *koshevoi*!" shouted one of the dancers. "Even a wolf cannot hunt without a head. Give us the sword-slayer for a leader!"

"Aye, he is a sword-slayer," admitted the *sotnik*, "the finest to be found in the frontier. But he was only weaned a few Winters ago; along the Dnieper he kept his feet, true enough, and his enemies were laid to rest on their backs. But where are his gray hairs, where his Cossack cunning?"

"May the dogs bite you!" Broad Breeches pushed through the throng. "You are brave enough when words are in the air; but as God is my witness no man can find you when swords are out. You drink the falcon's vodka, and that gives you a little courage—"

"Death to you!"

"The lie to you, ox-tail! Did not Rurik betroth his granddaughter, Ileana of Kudak, to our falcon? He found no better man than Demid, and who says otherwise will cover himself with his legs."

The officer stood his ground sturdily, although the snarling face of the Don warrior was thrust close to his eyes.

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*Constantinople.

"What I say," he maintained, "is known to all the brethren. Your chieftain is a hero, but be is a wild one, a madcap. At Kudak a white-armed maid awaits him, like a dove. But he takes the snow road, beyond the frontier, and leaves the castle of Kudak without a master."

Broad Breeches laughed tauntingly.

"Is that otherwise than a Cossack would do? I say Demid will bring back a mighty treasure, enough to ransom all the captives!"

The eyes of the other brightened for an instant; then he shook his head.

"It cannot be. At this season the storms are on the Black Sea, and our boats would founder; the large treasure ships of the Turks stick to the southern shore, as fleas stick where a dog can't scratch."

"Then he will seek the southern shore!"

"How, seek it, when no one of you knows a rudder from a centerboard, or a compass from a Nurenburg watch?"

The *sotnik* took his hand from his sword hilt and turned to the listeners:

"It is true that Demid is mad. If he could lead a horde without falling into the pagan's traps—if he could take a walled city, or outwit one of those accursed pashas of the janissaries—if he were a wolf like Khlit who could catch a Tatar khan asleep, or Rurik who could take a ship through the Dardanelles—"

"He can, you toad!"

"Then let him show how he can! If he does, he will be our *koshevoi*, and we will not say that he is young and mad."

Some murmurs of assent greeted this, and the Don warrior had no answer to the argument.

"Too much talk, too much talk altogether," he muttered angrily. "Out of the way, old women: stand aside dishcloths, that a man may drink!"

Elbowing aside the other Cossacks who did not resent his hard words, as the warrior was going on the road, the man from the Don gained the side of the nearest keg, refusing all proffers of beakers and dippers.

"Hail to the fair young mistress," he roared, throwing back his head, "the round-armed, the soft-eyed maiden! Hail to her whose embrace is the warmest, whose kiss awaits a Cossack—"

"To Lady Death!" echoed the *sotnik*.

At this Broad Breeches plunged his head in the cask, and sprang up, panting, shaking the liquor from his long scalp lock, not quite oblivious to the admiring glances of the younger brethren.

The pent-up passions of the throng sought an outlet and one offered in the prison pen. Two criminals had been confined there, awaiting execution: one for striking the priest some time since—the other for the lesser matter of knifing a Cossack. The men of the siech were accustomed to fighting, but they used their fists. To draw a knife was held to be a shameful act, natural enough for a Greek or Syrian, but contrary to the ethics of Cossackdom.

Warriors were already beating down the gate when the party from the brandy cask came up. Axes appeared at once, and made short work of the beams of the door, so that a black gap showed in the high palisade. Torches flickered above the heads of the crowd and voices shouted for the gallows birds to come out.

Before a second summons could be uttered, a tall man walked through the gate. So singular was his appearance that for a moment it distracted the attention of the throng. His head, wrapped in a crimson scarf, did not come to the level of the long Cossacks, but he carried himself erect, and walked slowly forward, eyeing his captors. One eye, in fact was half closed by a scar that ran down to his lip, lifting it in a kind of perpetual sneer. Instead of the usual Cossack coat he wore a flowing *khalat*, with a velvet vest, heavily sewn with silver ornaments. His yellow boots were high and good—the heels painted red.

"What bird is this?" demanded the *sotnik*.

"'Tis Balaban, Captain Balaban, the Levantine," a voice made response.

Whether Levantine, or man from Barbary, no one knew or cared; it was known that he had once been aboard the Barbary corsairs, and had gone into the service of the Turks for a while, until he had fled the galleys, and, professing Christianity, had been received into the asylum of the siech. He it was who had knifed a Cossack, and be had done it expertly.

"Aye," his voice rang out shrilly for such a powerful man, "'tis Captain Balaban, at your service, my *kunaks*. Do you wish entertainment—then I will give it!"

"As the fiend sired you, that you will, Wry Mouth!"

Hands seized him and voices cried out for the other prisoner, who had struck the priest.

This was a man as broad as Balaban was tall, a man of swarthy face, who rolled forward as if treading the moving deck of a ship. His tiny black

eyes flickered around, seeking in vain some avenue of escape, but his roaring voice showed that he had a steady nerve.

"Aye, sir brothers! Ostrog is present—Ostrog who burned the pagan galley off the Chersonese. What is your will, with Ostrog?"

"That you burn, Ostrog—that you burn!" Laughter greeted this sally. "You will make a rare candle—after you are tarred. To the tar barrels!"

So cried those at the outer fringe of the throng. The Barbary captain had been walking slowly about the ring, staring into the bronzed faces, apparently utterly indifferent to what was in store for him. Of a sudden his right arm shot out and he ripped from its scabbard the yataghan of a young warrior.

With the slender, curved weapon in his hand, he leaped back, to stand against the palisade, his eyes fairly blazing with malignant fury. From under his twisted lip flowed such a stream of sheer blasphemy that the nearest Cossacks stood transfixed. Whatever oaths their lips might utter, they were religious at heart. The Levantine knew well how to arouse them to use steel on him and to forget the torture.

Ostrog, slower of wit, took advantage of the pause to catch up one of the fragments of the door beams and take his stand beside Balaban.

"Cut, slash!" roared the *sotnik* finding his tongue.

Sabers slithered out of sheaths and the throng surged forward. Balaban fell silent, his blade poised, dangerous as a coiled snake. But between him and the nearest warriors stepped a youth who had pushed through the crowd unheeded. He was bareheaded and in his shirt sleeves, and the *sotnik*, seeing him, spread out both arms and thrust back against the men behind.

"The *ataman*, Demid, is here, brothers."

The chief of the Don men waited until a space had been cleared behind him—waited patiently, his gray eves studying Balaban.

"Back you dogs," muttered the non-coms within sight of the colonel. "Do not tread on his heels—see how his head steams! The sword-slayer has been licking up vodka, with the wounded in the Don barracks. See, he is going to play with Captain Balaban. Stand back, you sow's ears!"

"Father," Broad Breeches addressed his chief, "shall we drop lassos over their sconces, and truss them up? I have a rope."

Demid paid no attention to the man. His brows, curving down over deep-set eyes, his sharp aquiline nose, his skull shaven, except for the

scalp lock—in the glow of the torches these features did somewhat resemble a falcon. Although he had been drinking heavily he did not sway on his feet as he confronted the Levantine.

Then Ostrog hurled his timber at the young Cossack. Demid sank on one knee, bending his head as the heavy club whirled over him, but his eyes did not leave Captain Balaban. His scimitar flashed out as the tall man cut down at him with the yataghan.

The two blades dashed and Demid parried, rising to his feet as he did so. To the onlookers it seemed as if the weapons merged into a flowing stream of light, so swiftly did Balaban, who had determined to sell his life as dearly as possible, press the attack, crouching, his teeth gnashing together. He could use a cutlass well and, under the flowing *khalat*, his supple muscles were like steel.

Demid's right arm moved only from the elbow, and—without indulging in the whirlwind sword-play of the Cossacks—he rested his weight on his left leg.

"Raise your weapon, Balaban," he said suddenly, shifting his weight to his forward foot and engaging the other's blade at close quarters.

The Levantine's answer was a snarl that changed to a grunt as he found the handguard of the yataghan caught against Demid's hilt and the two blades wedged together. In spite of his efforts to free his sword, he felt his weapon raised high over his head as the Cossack put forth his strength.

"Now lower it," ordered Demid, and this time his lips curved in a smile.

The two swords swept down in a wide arc, to the snow, and before Balaban could draw the yataghan clear the Cossack had planted his foot on it. Placing the hilt of his scimitar against his chest, he moved forward until the point pricked the skin under the Levantine's lower ribs, over the vitals.

Perforce Captain Balaban released the hilt of his weapon and stepped back against the log pen. With nearly an inch of steel in him he stood quietly, without making a plea for his life.

"Have you heart, Balaban," asked the chief of the Don warriors in a low voice, "to go on a venture with me, over the black water? Will you go against the galleys of the Turks? Have you lust for the feel of gold and the light of jewels? We seek a treasure."

"Why not?" Balaban was surprised. "If I said nay, you would skewer me, so why not, say I?"

"Your life will be short; I will see to that," Demid promised. "You know ships and their ways and the paths of the sea. I do not. If you go with me you will aid me to the utmost; but you will not be a slave. Some months of life you will earn for yourself, and Ostrog. Otherwise, seconds."

Balaban spat to one side, half closing his good eye. If the Cossacks were venturing on a raid of the Strait and Constantinople, he might fare badly. On the other hand, Demid had spoken of months in which to live. Balaban had been through enough tight places to be a fatalist. Much could happen in several months, particularly if he managed to get these Don Cossacks, who did not know one end of a galley from the other, into a sailing craft.

If luck favored him and he could lead the *ataman* into the hands of the Moslems, why then his reward would be great. No longer could he remain in the siech, and here was a way out. A moment ago he was doomed to tar and fire, while now—

"Take your steel out of my guts," he growled. "I'm your man. Do you want me to swear an oath?"

"The ——," observed Ayub who had come up in time to hear the last remarks, "would leap up and laugh if you took an oath! Nay, Demid, evil will come of this gallant. I can face any man on a horse, but the sea is an unruly beast, look you—when it rears up there is no putting the whip to it."

"We need the pair of them, Ayub. Put them under Togrukh's wing; tell him he will walk to the Black Sea tied to the cart tail if they escape. No blows for them, but death if a weapon is seen in their hands."

The Levantine shrugged. Under his breath he muttered a Turkish phrase—

"Time will have another story to tell."

Demid caught the words and understood, being familiar with the Turkish and Tatar dialects; but he held his peace. Withdrawing his sword point he wiped it on the Levantine's girdle. The Cossacks, suspecting that their prisoners were about to be taken out of their hands, swept forward with a mutter of anger.

"Back, dog-brothers," cried Demid. "These men are mine."

"Back, pot-lickers," repeated Balaban with a malevolent grin. "Back to your stoves, I say. We mean to wet our gullets, Ostrog and I."

Heedless of the uproar, he elbowed his way toward the wine casks, followed by the squat seaman, convinced of the truth that the warriors would not go against the word of Demid.

"He keeps his head up," remarked the young *ataman*, following the progress of the renegade with his eyes. "Noble blood is in him somewhere. *Hai*—the Pleiades are low, and dawn is near. We must be across the open ice of the river before light comes. It is time—time!"

"Time!" One of the Don men caught the word.

Balaban, standing at one of the open casks, emptied a beaker of vodka down his throat and laughed, stretching his arms.

"Oh—time! Now for one bravo, now for another! A toast, Broad Breeches, to the fair courtesan, Luck! When we are gone, no one will drink."

With a stifled chuckle he picked a burning stick out of the fire and dropped it into the keg of liquor. Blue flame rushed up from the vodka and the Levantine laughed again.

From across the camp a deep voice began one of the Cossack chants—

Glorious fame will come
To the Cossacks,
To the heroes,
For many a year,
Till the end of time.

III

The Straight Sword

Where the gray ice of the Dnieper began to shred away into cakes that drifted down the white fringes of the shore, a faint snow trail led north. Along this trail a sledge was making its way upriver.

Three steaming horses drew it onward at a round pace; a fur-clad Tatar, astride the off pony, wielded his whip in response to an occasional word from the one occupant of the rude vehicle—a human being so wrapped in wolf skins that only his eyes and sable cap could be seen. Behind, perched on the runners of the sledge, was a shivering servant.

The bells on the shaggy ponies tinkled lustily, the postilion's whip cracked, the leather-bound runners wheezed as they flew forward. It might, indeed, have been the invisible thread of Destiny that drew forward the three men, so that, in rounding a corner of the trail, they came upon a detachment of Zaporogian Cossacks who had been halted by the sound of the bells in the act of crossing the ice of the river at the point where it was still strong enough to bear horses.

They had halted in the trail, and they were the party that had been led south by Demid four days ago.

Seeing them, the Tatar muttered something of mingled astonishment and disgust, and reined his horses to one side, leaving the trail clear for the riders.

"By the Rood! Would ye step me aside, to give yon sons of perdition the road!"

Although spoken in a slow, musical voice, the words were barbed. Moreover they were good, round English words.

"Excellence," remarked the dragoman, a Circassian, by name Giorgos, as it proved, "the Tatar does well. These folk will not stand aside for us, and it is best not to stir them up."

"And Michael of Rohan will not yield the road to the Grand Monarch himself, at all. A pox on ye, George—gibber in their tongue and ask the question of them and we will make shift to answer."

Admonished in this fashion the dragoman seemed to hesitate, his smooth olive face puckered, and when he spoke it was in Turki. He addressed Ayub, removing his cap and bowing low; but it was Demid who made response, curtly. The Cossack chief noticed that the occupant of the sledge listened as if trying to follow the talk, although he was staring at Ayub curiously.

"George, clod," the traveler observed idly, "here is a giant, and—faith—they must be of the race of Gog and Magog. Mark ye, they sit their cattle well, with straight backs and Louis himself would not be ashamed of such dragoons—but what are they? Have we come to the edge of the habitated world, George—to the dwellers of Cimmerian darkness?"

The dragoman, occupied with his own fears, looked up reluctantly. "Nay, excellence, these are Cossacks who are masterless men and bloody minded. Being here they are out of their bounds and so must be bent on evil."

"Blister me, George," objected the man in the sledge, "if they are not Christians, by token of those silver crosses they parade. Being Christians their officer will not draw the line at a friendly bout o' the blades."

Giorgos shivered.

"Sir Michael, the great ambassador of the Franks at Constantinople would whip me if harm comes to you. Be pleased to turn back—"

"I despair," observed Sir Michael reprovingly. "Mark me—I am skeptical of your sporting instinct, George. Ye are sly, —— sly, and—did hear me request, nay urge, George, that ye translate to yonder officer my wish to cross swords for a moment, the winner to take the road?"

The Cossacks grinned broadly at the dragoman's interpretation of his master's desire, then they stared and reined closer when the traveler swept

aside his robes and sprang from the sledge. They beheld not a Muscovite or Turk but a slender figure, diminutive beside their towering bodies, in scarlet boots, buckskin breeches and trim greatcoat. Out of a lean, mobile face blue eyes scanned them coldly, yet with a hidden glint of mirth.

But what stirred their ridicule were the black ringlets that fell from the plumed hat to the lace collar of Sir Michael of Rohan.

"Their weapons would snap your blade, excellence," muttered Giorgos.

"I warrant me," responded the traveler dryly, "ye have not seen a rapier at work."

Whereat he whipped from its scabbard of Spanish leather—a trifle worn, in truth—a straight, tapering length of steel that gleamed blue in the sunlight—a three-edged shaft of Toledo forging that he bent nearly double in his powerful fingers and released with a thin hum. It was not too long, the blade, and at its base it tapered to an inch in width where the handguard joined. And Sir Michael of Rohan laughed, for the blood was warm in his veins that morning, and it was his way to stand his ground when opposition offered.

Sir Michael, bending his blade between his fingers, studied Demid from under level brows noticing the lithe figure, half a head taller than himself, the long reach of the Cossack, the jeweled hilt of the curved scimitar, and the silver cross at the warrior's throat.

"George, lad, say to the handsome bucko that I have no wish to draw blood; nay, at the third pass I will pluck out his neckcloth."

More than once he had matched weapons with the Moslems and he knew the infallibility of the straight blade in a hand such as his. Years of campaigning in Flanders and Italy had schooled him in his work. The *salle d'armes* in Paris had added finish to his skill; he had mastered the tricks of the Italian school, and men who had been so unlucky as to face him in duels had died. He was a *maitre d'escrime*, and so sure was he of the result of the coming encounter, he would have waged the sum of his possessions—if he had any—upon the third thrust. But his greatcoat was neatly mended in more than one place and his vest—Sir Michael sighed—his waistcoat was shabby, indeed.

Demid, on his part, smiled and, touching the green silk cloth around his throat, shook his head.

"*Garde-toi, mon sauvage!*" cried the traveler, bending his knees and sweeping the rapier overhead, releasing the tip as he did so.

The Cossacks urged their ponies around the pair eagerly, pleased at an unexpected entertainment. Demid saluted briefly with his scimitar, and engaged at once, making a careless cut. It was warded.

Again the light blade of the scimitar caressed the thin line of the rapier—then swept it aside and cut swiftly at the traveler's head. His blade passed through air; Sir Michael had drawn back, from his knees, and for two seconds Demid lost touch with him. In that time the Cossack felt a tug at his throat, a tiny burning of his skin as if a pin had passed across it.

Drawing back he beheld Sir Michael smiling, the green silk neckcloth resting on the tip of the rapier. The brows of the young Cossack drew together and the dark blood rushed into his face. To be tricked, like a buffoon—to be played with, like a puppy!

Beholding the mask of anger that transformed the face of the chief, Sir Michael let the silk fall instantly and stood on guard, his left hand raised in the air behind his head, the point of his blade describing tiny circles.

Demid rushed as a Cossack attacks, with unrestrained, reckless fury. His scimitar flashed around and over the rapier; steel slithered against steel; but always the thin blade was between the scimitar and the body of the smaller man. It was Sir Michael now who was careful to keep touch with his enemy, content to rest on the defensive until Demid's fury had spent itself.

For a while he stood his ground; but Demid's strength did not exhaust itself. Instead, Sir Michael gave ground a little under the whirlwind slashes. He was breathing quickly, perspiration under his eyes, the corners of his lips smiling a trifle.

His rear foot, exploring the uneven trail cautiously, felt deep snow, and his knees stiffened.

"No help for it," he muttered.

And with that he took the offensive. Demid, who had been startled out of his usual composure by the first thrust, yet felt the change in the touch of the rapier, and, turning the point of his saber down, parried a lightning lunge at his side. Once more he was aware of the tiny pin point of fire, scraping his skin through the cloth.

Instead of making him wilder, this touch steadied the Cossack. His iron wrist served him well now, and in a dozen tries, the rapier failed to get home upon him. Sir Michael tried intricate feints—complicated passes

that got the other's blade well to one side—but ever as he thrust, the light scimitar warded in time. It was, to him, an exhibition of incredible quickness of hand and eye, for the Cossack was not familiar with such tricks of the sword, such rogueries of the blade.

"'Swounds!" cried Sir Michael, wholeheartedly.

Barely in time, with numbed wrist, he had freed his blade from a twist of the scimitar that would otherwise have sent it flying through the air. If the rapier had been a saber it would have been lost to him.

"Good lad," he panted, with a smile of acknowledgment.

Now the Cossack did not understand the words, but Sir Michael's smile was eloquent, and the glare passed from the eyes of the tall warrior, who sheathed his saber and sprang forward to pull his adversary to his chest and kiss him on both cheeks. The Cossacks, pleased with the sword-play, rose in their stirrups and shouted and the bout was at an end.

Yet the result was still a matter of uncertainty. Balaban muttered that the blade of the Frank was bewitched, and Demid, who was no believer in black magic, shook his head.

"Nay, the play was fair. Yonder Frank is my match. Twice he touched me and I marked him not. What man can he be?"

"No true man," put in Ayub, frowning. "He has curls like a Polish wench, and he is not big enough to amount to anything. Ho, dragoman, what has your master to say for himself?"

The Circassian pondered, his black eyes roving. Drawing closer to the Cossacks he said in a low voice:

"The lord, my master, is high in favor at the Imperial City. He has called you dogs, and bade me order you to stand aside and beat to him with the forehead* as he passes, along the road."

Demid stopped in his tracks, surprised. Ayub, enraged, began to snort and clutch at the hilt of his broadsword. An expression of sullen triumph crossed the olive face of the Circassian, as Ayub controlled himself enough to demand a sight of their papers.

He took the strip of folded parchment that Giorgos drew from his girdle, glanced at the seal and the Turkish writing, and sniffed.

"As I live, though this scroll is a riddle to Christian eyes, the Sultan Mustapha has set his mark at the bottom. At least his seal is here."

*To make the salaam, in oriental fashion.

Protesting volubly that the letter was a *seguro*—a safe conduct—Giorgos managed to whisper to Sir Michael, who was puzzled by the change in the temper of the Cossacks, that it was well the dogs could not read. Demid, who had been studying the open face of the traveler, took the parchment from Ayub and glanced at it, then scanned it a second time, thoughtfully.

"A safe conduct to Satan," growled the big Cossack. "This bird has strange plumage, and why is he here unless to do evil to Christians, if he bears a letter from the Turk?"

Demid folded up the missive again, his face inscrutable. Even Giorgos could not be sure if he had read the safe conduct or not.

"Time to break our fast," be observed, glancing at the sky. "Down from your ponies, *kunaks*. Start a fire and boil millet and mutton—chop a hole in the ice, Ayub. The detachment is in your hand until I come back."

Taking Sir Michael by the arm, and motioning for Giorgos to remain at the camp, Demid led the traveler aside to some rocks where he sat down and proceeded deliberately to light his clay pipe. Placing the black Turkish tobacco in the bowl, he laid a pinch of tinder on it and struck steel against flint until he ignited the tinder.

"This paper," he said abruptly in Turkish, "is sealed with wax, yet its true seal is blood. It is your death warrant."

Demid had full mastery of that tongue, and had seen enough to suspect Sir Michael knew more than a little of it, which proved to be the case.

"*Marash!* That is strange; what does the paper say? I cannot read it."

"First," said Demid gravely, "tell me who you are, and your business here."

In broken Turki, garnished with many a phrase from the slave galleys, Sir Michael told his tale. A one-man Odyssey it was, of wandering, of warfare under different standards; yet most of all it was the tale of a restless spirit.

Chief of an Irish clan, Michael of Rohan was schooled by a monk, one of the wisest of men, and taught by his father to handle weapons well. When James the First sent his deputies into Ireland, and the king's writ ran in the land, Michael went overseas to the French court. Here he sought his fortune in the wars, and won, instead, knighthood.

Embarking in a French corvette for Sicily, he fell foul of the Barbary corsairs, whose appetite for the plunder of Christian shipping had begun

to sharpen. The corvette made a running fight of it and gained the harbor of Syracuse, into which the *polaccas* of Tunis followed. The pirates beat down the resistance of the mariners and made off with prisoners and spoil unmolested by the forts. Sir Michael was one of the last to fall into their hands, and it was long before he recovered from his wounds.

When he did, it was to be chained to a rower's bench with the other slaves of a Barbary galley. And he said little of the years that followed, or the shame of them.

Luck sent his galley with a shipment of Christian slaves to Constantinople. While anchored in the roads, off the Asian shore, Sir Michael won free of his chains, aided by a giant negro who told him where the foreign legations were located near the imperial seraglio, and the two decided to risk an attempt to escape. A long swim at night, across the Hellespont, ended the blackamoor; but Sir Michael evaded the patrols of janissaries and reached the gardens of the British embassy. He was not altogether a welcome guest, he admitted, because the discovery of an escaped slave of the Moslems in the house of the consul would have meant a fine of several thousand pounds, and perhaps imprisonment for the ambassador who lived, as it were, on the edge of a volcano.

Luck had not deserted him, for Sir Michael won at cards and dice the clothing that he now wore and the fair rapier. A mandate went out from the palace that all the legations were to be searched and any weapons found were to be taken from the foreigners. Even the duelling pistols and the sword with which the English ambassador had been knighted were seized by the Turks, but the rapier of Sir Michael they did not gain.

Discovered and identified by his scars as an escaped galley slave, the former cavalier of France presented the tip instead of the hilt of his weapon and won free to the harbor. After dark he had himself taken out to a Venetian bark that cleared for the Black Sea, having a favorable wind, at dawn, thus escaping search.

Running into a storm almost as it passed the twin rocks of the Bosporus, the bark was driven north for two days, eventually striking on a strange coast. At least it was so to Sir Michael, who, cast again upon the water, swam ashore with his servant, Giorgos. The two made their way to a small trading town at the mouth of a great river, and Sir Michael, learning that the frontier of Christian Europe was not many days travel north, hired a sledge hoping to reach in time the large towns of Muscovy—in spite of the objections of the Circassian who favored waiting for Spring and a ship back to Constantinople.

"*Hai*—it is clear that you are not a snow-pigeon," observed Demid. "You are a wild goose, flying to the north."

Most of the tale was meaningless to him, dealing as if did with kings and wars unknown to the Cossacks. But he was weighing in his mind not the story so much as the man who told it. There was truth in Sir Michael's eyes, and in the scars upon his hands. Demid knew well the marks of the slave-bench. Many Cossacks had felt the chains of slavery; many were now under the lash of the Turk slavemaster.

"How," he asked, "did the letter of safe conduct come into your hand?"

At the British embassy, Sir Michael explained, the Circassian who was hanging about the place had approached him and offered to obtain a general passport—for a small sum in silver. Giorgos had been absent on this business when the Irishman had his fight with the Turkish guards, but the dragoman, who had not been paid, found him aboard the bark.

Giorgos had carried the *seguro*, saying that he knew best when it should be shown.

Until his pipe was out, Demid thought this over. Then—

"I will read you the paper, Ser Mikhail:

> *I, that am lord of lords, conqueror of Christiandom, King in Babylon and Istanbul, governor of the holy cities of Damascus and Mecca—I give command to all pashas, governors and captains in my domain to slay the wandering dog who bears this letter and send his head to my court. The unbeliever is an escaped slave who hath lifted his voice against a true follower of the prophet. My favor to him who carries out my wish. The Circassian servant is to be trusted. Peace to him who directs his steps aright. —Mustapha."*

To Demid's surprise Michael burst out in hearty laughter.

"The —— of a safe conduct!" he muttered to himself, and wondered whether he was to believe the Cossack; but there was no doubting the candor of the young chief.

"Your head—" Demid followed out his own train of thought—"Giorgos would have had it to bear back with him, if my sword had slain you. The jackal did not think that a Cossack could read, so he gave the paper and spurred it on with an insult. Who was this true follower of the Prophet?"

It was Sir Michael's turn to reflect. His countrymen, he explained, carried on a trade between Baghdad and Damascus by caravan, and recently they had been forced to give a third of their goods to a certain pasha—the Governor of Aleppo—to gain passage for the caravans.

The English ambassador at court knew of this, and Sir Michael had urged him to demand justice from the sultan for the robbery. But the ambassador was afraid to act, aware that Sidi Ahmad, the pasha in question, was the favorite of Mustapha and the most powerful noble among the Moslems.

"There are eyes and ears hidden about the Imperial City," grunted Demid, "and they reach even to here. Have you been in Aleppo?"

Sir Michael shook his head.

"No Christian can pass the gates."

"Hearken, Frank: Have you a master? Whom do you serve?"

"Myself."

The adventurer shook his head slightly. English, French and Turkish monarchs, he had served them with his youth and he bore the scars of this service; yet faith in princes he had none.

"Good! We Zaporogians are masterless men. Do you believe in God and Christ?"

"Aye, so."

"Then make the Sign of the Cross."

When the Irishman had done so, Demid nodded approvingly.

"We are on the trail of a treasure and a mighty one. It is a hard trail and a steep one, and not often will we breathe our horses. Join us, and you can claim a *sotnik*'s share in gold and silver, if we find what we seek. If we fail, you will not have a knightly death. Nay, you will taste fire or the stake."

For a full moment Sir Michael of Rohan studied the impassive countenance of the young chief, wondering a little at its dark beauty which was more than a woman's, being without fear or consciousness of self.

"No *rafik*, no road companion will I be, unless you make known to me the end of the road."

It was not Demid's liking to speak of his plans, and he was silent a while. Then, with the tip of his scabbard he drew a rough triangle in the snow and dotted the three corners, explaining that the one to the southeast was Baghdad, the one to the north, Trebisond, on the Black Sea, and the third Aleppo.

During this season in Midwinter, the caravan trade from India, Persia and Arabia came partly overland to the Euphrates, but mainly up that river, through Baghdad. Then—the passes of the Caucasus being under deep snow—it was borne over the desert from Baghdad to Aleppo, thence to the ports in the Levant.

This flow of silks—even from China—ivory, woven carpets and worked leather, amber, jewels and cotton, spices and gold gave to the sultan of the Turks his great wealth. Heretofore the Cossacks had sometimes raided the trading-galleys on the Black Sea, but they had never gone into the coast of Asia Minor, the stronghold of Islam.

Demid sought the value of ten thousand pieces of gold. Few cargoes were coming out of the port of Trebisond, from the northern corner of the triangle. He meant to make himself master of a seaworthy craft when they reached the sea coast, and sail to Asia Minor.

Sir Michael shook his head.

"To win through to the caravans you would need to cross the upper passes of the Caucasus in Winter. Then, on the trade routes you would meet the wolfpacks, the Kurdish and Arab robbers, out of the hills and desert. So the merchants of the English say. The caravans are strongly guarded. You might cut one up, but then you would be hunted down—"

"We do not look for pickings from the traders."

"What, then? 'Tis folly for thirty and five to draw sword against the pasha of Asia."

"True, if we were an army. But we are five and thirty, and we will fight with the heels of our horses."

"You cannot carry off gold pieces that way."

"Aye, if we put them first in our saddlebags."

Demid rose, the ghost of a smile touching his lips.

"It would be folly to sit in one place, where the eyes of the Moslems are upon us."

He put his finger on the hilt of the Irishman's rapier. "You can use that. How would you thrust against a shrewder swordsman? Openly, at his throat?"

"Not so." Sir Michael smiled. "I would use my blade clumsily at first—as you did—and pass it under his guard when he struck."

Springing to his feet, he let his glance rove over the white sea of the snowbound prairie, the glittering ribbon of the river, and the gray murk that hid the horizon on every hand, as if a shroud had been drawn around

that particular spot on the earth. The loneliness of the vast spaces penetrated the spirit of the Irishman like a cold wind that could not be evaded, turn where he would.

To tell the truth, Sir Michael had no joy of this steppe that dwarfed the moors of his homeland, and he yearned for the fellowship of men.

Demid, towering over him, with arms knotted on a placid chest that hardly seemed to breathe, was at home here. The dark eyes of the young Cossack saw not the desolation of the prairie over which a raven circled on slow wings. His mind's eye saw the tall grass of the steppe under the warm sun, the smoke rising from wicker cottages by the beds of streams—a horse plunging into a covert whither a stag had started up, and the rider of the horse shouting in exultation of the hunt.

He saw children playing by sleeping cattle, their ears attuned to the ceaseless murmur of the wind upon the prairie.

"I will go with you," said Sir Michael abruptly. "But I serve myself."

Demid nodded, pleased. He had added to his small company a rare swordsman.

"We bid you to our bread and salt," he accepted, gravely, the companionship of the other, and returned to Sir Michael his passport, remarking that it were better burned.

But the cavalier, being anxious to have a reckoning with his erstwhile dragoman, forgot about it. He found, on returning to the camp, that Giorgos was gone. When he asked Ayub how this had happened, the giant pointed to the hole that had been cut in the ice, adding that there was one spy the less in the world.

IV

Ayub Casts a Net

"Mad is he, the Falcon—aye, and yonder his mate is mad." So said Captain Balaban, whispering under his twisted lip as he watched Michael Rohan casting dice, one hand against the other. Michael shaded his eyes to look down upon the strip of beach and the dark line of the Black Sea.

The Cossack detachment had arrived at the shore and quartered itself upon a Tatar fishing village on the sheltered side of a long headland that stretched like a giant's finger out into the waters. The score of natives who lived on the neck of land had been rounded up and placed in the care of Togrukh, the *essaul*, who counted them promptly and let them understand that if one were found missing from the village the rest would be

wrapped up in the great fishing nets of twisted hemp weighted with stones, and dropped into the sea.

"I can read the signs in the sky," went on Balaban, who had discovered that Michael understood much *Turki* and could speak some. "When we rode, at the heels of the Cossacks through the snow wilderness, spirits howled in our wake."

He glanced sidewise at Demid, who sat near them, apparently asleep, his back against a side of a hut, his sword across his knees. The Cossack chief understood Balaban perfectly, and knew that the howling had been from bands of Tatars who had hit upon their trail at times and pursued, without coming up with the swift-moving warriors. The first stage of the journey had been made safely.

"Aye," resumed Balaban, "on horses the brethren do well enough. If they could swim their beasts across to the Asia shore—" he laughed and continued—

"You have more wit than these Cossacks, and it is time you and I took thought for what the morrow would bring us, of evil or good."

Michael cast his dice and picked them up in the other hand. Never in his twenty-five years of life had he taken thought for the morrow. If he had!

Before his mind's eye appeared his home in the fens, the stone house with the thatched roof, the barefooted, long-tressed maids who served him and his, the fold of the countryside listening to the prayers of the old priest—the mist of the sea, and within the house a glowing fire, a nuggin of spirits—talk of other days, over the clay pipes—a comfortable pension from the British king, who would have made him deputy over his clan. Peace and fullness of the body, yet sickness in the spirit.

A deputy, to administer the king's writ, upon his own people! Better the fortune of the road than that! Michael cast down the dice, his eyes somber.

Then his lips twitched and he laughed. For the first time he saw what the Cossacks on the beach were about. Ayub and some others were heating tar and plastering the sides of the half dozen fishing skiffs with it. They had been gathering reeds from the salt marshes of the shore, and these they stuck into the warm tar, making a thick fringe upon the sides of the skiffs. Others were rolling up the heavy fishing nets and laying them beside the boats.

The Levantine looked askance at the Irishman. A Moslem at heart, he considered himself the superior of Christians, who were savages and

dolts—although the women of the Franks were fair and spirited. Balaban knew to a *dirhem* the price they fetched in the slave markets of the Turks, who sought them at some pains—so much for the dark-browed Greek women, so much for the pallid French. A high price for the Venetian maidens, who were better skilled at the guitar and the needle. Once he had sold a French duchess to the captain-pasha of the Turkish galleys in the Mediterranean. A good price, that.

So, a shrewd man, Balaban failed to weigh Michael well. He could not understand a spirit that laughed at the tarred reed skiffs and yet would set foot in the leaky and unseaworthy craft. Still, he felt his way with care, for he wanted something that Michael had—the safe conduct of the sultan.

"Aye, they are mad," he said again. "I know them. Half a moon have we been here, resting on our heels, and their chief sits and looks at the sea. He has not a plan in his head."

Thinking that Demid was asleep, Balaban spat on the ground and shook his head.

"Why will not the Falcon tell his plan, if he has one? Did he hope to gain passage in a ship, so that he could raid into Asia? He has posted a lookout, yet the galleys, the caïques and the barkentines that have passed along this cursed strip are under command of the Turks."

"*Taib*," said Michael, in his broken Turkish. "True. What is that craft yonder?"

Against the gray of the sea and the blue of the late afternoon sky a two-masted galley was drawing up to the headland. Balaban had observed it long ago, but had seen fit to keep his knowledge to himself.

"A fast galley out of Constantinople, under oars," he said, squinting against the glare on the water.

"Why," asked Michael, "do these craft keep along shore?"

"The Equinox is long past, and the run across, from north to south, is against the prevailing winds—dangerous in this season. The sultan's vessels are coasting."

Michael nodded; with his eyes shut he could vision what was happening as the black ship turned slowly into the half-moon of the protecting headland. It was customary when coasting to anchor at night in such a spot, and perhaps to go ashore for fresh water. But no boat put off from the galley, which now swung idly as the oars ceased moving and were lashed to the rowers' benches for the night.

The anchor splashed down, and the thick rope to which it was attached ran out through the trunnel-hole at the prow. On the high poop of the galley figures gathered under the canopy to gaze at the shore, and the setting sun picked out the red and green of *kaftans*, the steel of helmet and spearhead.

Along the strip of bridge that ran the length of the vessel a turbaned figure walked, and Michael knew that one of the overseers of the slaves was tossing to the rowers their evening meal—biscuits soaked in oil and vinegar. Plainly the galley was anchored for the night, half a mile from shore.

Demid had been studying it leisurely.

"How many fighters does that craft carry?" he asked Balaban.

"'Tis a one-bank galley, a courier ship, without cannon. Forty slaves at the bars, a score in the crew, wardens, helmsmen and officers—perchance thirty in yonder company on the poop."

"Come," said the Cossack, "here is metal for our welding."

He turned toward the fires over which the pots of gruel were heating, but the Levantine plucked Michael by the sleeve.

"A wager, O Frank. My sapphire girdle against the scroll you carry in your wallet—'tis worthless to you, now."

"Can you read the writing?"

Balaban shrugged.

"I have a mind to it. One cast of the dice—"

"For the bearer, the *seguro* is a death warrant."

Now the mind of the Levantine read into this response that Michael valued the paper and would not hazard it. So his desire for it grew the more. Time pressed and he spoke under his lip. "Hearken, O Aga—leader of warriors—You and I have our feet in the same path. If the Cossacks are cut up we must look to ourselves. I can serve you, and you me."

"How?"

"What will be, will be. A pity if this Falcon falls under the sword, for he would be worth a thousand gold pieces alive—and a prisoner."

"On which side are you, in this war?"

Balaban raised his eye to the evening sky and lifted both hands.

"Am I not with the Christians, O my Aga?" Adding, under his breath—

"May Allah the All-Knowing cast me down, but I give them cause to remember me!"

Michael studied him a moment and suppressed a grin.

"Be it so. My safe conduct against your girdle upon one cast of the dice."

Gathering up the dice carelessly, he tossed them down on the earth.

"*Bi'llah!*" Balaban muttered, for the adventurer had made a good throw.

His eye dwelt watchfully on Michael, who, grave of face, turned to glance at the galley. And in that second the Levantine cupped the dice in his hand, rolling them off his fingers as if awkwardly as Michael looked down upon them.

"A main!" cried the Irishman. "The paper is yours."

Satisfying himself that no one was aware of the transfer, Balaban thrust it into his girdle and strode off, well-pleased with himself and utterly unthinking that the Christian had permitted himself to be cheated. Michael considered him philosophically.

"What will be, will be, quoth'a. Yon swashbuckler hath rarely the air of a Grand Turk."

From the beach the Cossacks were running up to where Demid stood in the center of the village street. The hamlet itself was half hidden from the galley and already mist veiled the outline of the beach.

"My children," said Demid, when the last man stood within hearing, "we have come far, and now our path lies upon the sea. Before now, I have not said what was in my mind. We are going against yonder galley with our sabers. What do you say?"

"Good, father," muttered Togrukh. "We will pound mightily with our blades."

"That is not all. It is not my plan to frolic on the black waters. What will it avail us to take the chaff that floats on the waters? Word came to me in Kudak that, over the Black Sea, is a treasure city of the Turks, where the caravans from Arabia and Persia unload. In command of this city is a pasha, to whose fingers stick the red gold and the gleaming jewels that pass through Aleppo. This pasha is Sidi Ahmad."

"True, *ataman*," observed Balaban readily. "My silver girdle against your scabbard that you do not come upon Sidi Ahmad unaware."

Demid looked at his men thoughtfully.

"It is far to Aleppo. We do not know what we will find on the way. For some of us there will be a grave dug; others will taste of the torture stake. God only knows who will see the siech again, or when."

The warriors nodded, stroking their mustaches, and eyeing Demid expectantly. Not quite understanding his plan, they were assured that the young chief would lead them to the place where they might set hands on treasure.

Balaban's eye glittered mockingly. He knew more of Aleppo and the road thither than his companions.

"If any one of you," Demid glanced at Michael and Balaban, "has no heart for the stake, let him take his horse out of the line and fill his saddlebags with fodder. No blame to him."

Togrukh ran his eye over his detachment menacingly, but the warriors did not draw back.

"Then," went on Demid, "from here, we are on the march. If one of you is found drunk—a pistol-ball in the forehead. If a brother turns aside to gather up silks or trinkets or silver, his saber will be broken."

"Father, we hear! Shall we go against the ship before dinner or after?"

"After."

Demid took Michael aside.

"It will not be like snaring birds—tackling the galley. You are not one of us and you need not go in the boats. Two men must guard the horses

"Not I, *ataman*."

The adventurer smote his hip with relish of a sudden thought.

"With your leave—I will snare some birds. Aye, the nets are ready."

While the chief listened, he explained carefully what was in his mind. Demid considered a while, with deepening interest.

"But who would cast the nets?" he asked at length.

Near them, outlined against the sunset, the giant form of Ayub stood. The Cossack, with his companions, was praying before the evening meal, his arms raised, facing in turn to each quarter of the horizon.

"There is one who could do it." Michael pointed him out.

When the Great Bear, glittering overhead, indicated midnight, the Cossacks embarked. All the clumsy arquebuses were left with the horse guard, and Demid gave command that no pistol was to be fired until they gained the galley's deck; he himself took one of the caïques, the long skiffs, that were to approach the stern—Togrukh the other. Ayub with ten warriors guided the third skiff toward the bow of the Turkish ship and with him went Michael.

In the waist of the skiff the Tatar fishermen, brought for that purpose by the Cossacks, moved the oars slowly through the water; the warriors, with drawn sabers, knelt in the bow, their heads concealed by the fringe of rushes fastened to the skiff's side. Michael made himself comfortable on the great fishing net at Ayub's knees.

The night was bright—too bright for concealment—yet, obscure against the loom of the shore, the skiffs covered two-thirds of the distance to the galley without being observed.

Michael made out the tall mast, with the clewed-up lateen sail, the hanging pennons and burgees; he could hear the low voices of men in the lookout over the beak of the galley, mingled with the tinkle of a guitar from the poop where colored lanterns gleamed. A figure passed slowly back and forth along the bridge above the slaves, snoring on their benches.

A faint breath of wind, and he caught the odor of the rowing-benches which is not easily forgotten—the stench of sweated rags, of foul water and human flesh. The skin on his back prickled over the healed scars that had been given him by a warden's whip. Another scent came to him, the incense and rose perfume of the poop that served to keep the stink of the rowing benches from the masters of the galley.

By its rig and the cut of the beak he was now satisfied that the galley was from Barbary—an Algerine, most likely, on business of the sultan—a swift craft, adapted for fighting. This meant that a good watch would be kept, and that the two light cannon in the forepart would be shotted.

This fact he could not make known to Ayub. Besides, it was then too late to withdraw. A voice hailed them sharply—

"What is there?"

Ayub muttered under his breath, and a Tatar made answer as instructed.

"We have fish for the noble lords."

The sounds from the poop ceased, and a man in gilt mail and a green turban stood up by the lanterns.

"*Kubardar*—have care! We will make fishes of you, filth eaters. Be off!"

But the skiff rowed nearer, more swiftly now, and there was a moment's silence while the watchers on the galley puzzled over the screen of rushes. A lanthorn was thrust over the forward rail, hardly eight feet above the surface of the black water. By its gleam Michael made out the muzzles of

two perriers peering over the beak, and Ayub thrust the tiller to one side, turning the skiff to avoid the ram.

A shout from the lookout, a pattering of feet, and the clash of cymbals, as the Cossacks crouching in the skiff were seen. Pitch torches began to sizzle over their heads.

"Mud-fish!" bellowed Ayub, dropping the tiller and catching up one end of the long net. "Wriggle out of this if you can. *U-ha!*"

"*U-ha!*" roared the warriors, springing up. The giant Cossack was swinging a length of net over his head. Weighted as it was with stones in the corners, it gained momentum slowly, but soon whistled through the air like one of the lassos of the Cossacks.

Michael stepped clear of the other end as Ayub grunted and released the net just when the skiff drifted abreast the low forecastle of the galley, a spear's stretch away.

The twisted hempen mesh spread out in the air and the stones thumped on the deck as arrows began to flash toward the skiff. Pulling on his end of the net, Ayub drew the boat against the galley's quarter.

Entangled in the mesh, several Moslems struggled to win clear of it. Taken completely by surprise, their efforts only served to draw the strands tighter. As many more—sailors roused from sleep—drew scimitars and sprang to the rail barely in time to oppose the Cossacks who climbed up aided by the strands of the net, by the beak, and the muzzle of the cannon that gaped at them silently.

One pitched into the net on the deck, an arrow through his jaw, but the rest cut down the Moslems before they could flee to the runway leading aft. The sailors caught under the net were dispatched at once.

Meanwhile torches flared up, and bedlam burst forth in the waist of the ship. The slaves, awakened by the fight, were howling, cursing and praying in a dozen tongues. Lacking time to chain their arms, the Moslem wardens who had sprung to the bridge were hewing down the bolder spirits who had stood up. Plying long blades, the guards thrust and cut down into the shadows until Ayub sighted them and leaped upon the runway, his broadsword gripped in both hands.

"Death to the sheep-slayers!" he roared, striding forward.

The runway, serving as a platform for the overseers, was wide enough for only one man to wield a weapon, and the first Moslem who faced Ayub set his back to the mast around which the bridge ran. The big Cossack swept aside the warden's steel and hewed back. Biting into the man's ribs,

the heavy blade turned down, ground through the spine and sank to the hip bone on the other side.

Michael, at Ayub's shoulder, saw the doomed Moslem actually fall apart, his body dropping over upon the slave's bench, his legs twisting on the runway. At once the rowers were on their feet, their hairy faces gleaming, their hands straining at the chains that bound their ankles to the deck.

Three of the guards now formed abreast on the runway; the two, in the rear thrust their long spears past the center man, who glared at Ayub from behind his round shield.

The prospect of having to deal with three weapons instead of one did not halt Ayub, whose blood was up. Luckily for him the Cossacks on the foredeck used their pistols and the leading Moslem stumbled forward to his knees. Then the broadsword flashed and Michael saw the two remaining guards knocked over the rail of the runway as if the mast had fallen upon them.

They fell into the upstretched hands of the slaves, and Michael was glad to look away, toward the poop where a hot fight was in progress.

Demid, in his shirt-sleeves, had climbed over the rail of the afterdeck followed by a dozen warriors. Long pistols flashed from behind him, and cleared a space for the Cossacks to set their feet. A score of white turbaned janissaries fared them, plying scimitar and dagger, while nearly as many under the *reis* of the galley defended the other rail against Togrukh and his men.

As more of the Moslem swordsmen came up from the cabins, where they had been asleep, the captain of the galley drove back Togrukh, casting him bodily into the water

"Yah Allah!" they cried, triumphantly.

"*U-ha!* Christ!" echoed Ayub's men, pushing forward along the bridge.

This shout drew the attention of the *reis*, who, experienced in hand-to-hand fighting aboard ship, determined to clear the runway. He feared the slaves who were striving desperately to win free of their bonds and take their share in the fray now that the slave guards had been slain.

For the moment the Moslems had the upper hand. Good swordsmen all, they were fired with the ardor of their race, and to Michael it seemed as if they were a picked lot, and the galley no ordinary merchant craft.

When a dozen of them swarmed down the steps to the runway after the *reis*, Ayub stepped forward to meet them. But he felt an elbow in his

ribs, and looked down to see Michael slip past him. The cavalier took his stance in the center of the narrow bridge, and the light from the spluttering torches glittered on the slender rapier. Perforce the big Cossack hung back, for to press against Michael would be to throw him off balance, and already a youthful warrior was rushing upon the rapier point.

Gliding rather than running, the Turk struck down at the slender weapon of the cavalier. Then, leaping bodily through the air as a panther springs, he brought down his left arm that held a curved dagger.

Quickly as the Turk attacked, the wrist of the swordsman forestalled him. Michael's rapier flickered around the scimitar and passed through the heart of the Turk, who fell heavily to the planks.

Drawing his blade clear at once, Michael faced the bearded captain who came on crouching, shield advanced before his throat, mail encasing his body.

Thus, he presented no opening for a thrust. His black eyes over the round, leather shield glittered. Twice he cut powerfully at Michael's head, and twice the curved blade slithered off the rapier that moved only in tiny circles before his eyes.

"Reload your hand-guns, dog-brothers," snarled Ayub over his shoulder to his men who pressed close behind him.

Michael studied the eyes of his foeman, and when the *reis* lunged three inches of steel passed into his knotted forearm, and withdrew, all in the same instant. Pain maddened the Moslem, who began to slash fiercely, yet as he did so, felt the burning dart of the rapier point into his biceps.

Foam flew out on his beard, and he lunged with all his remaining strength. In so doing he let the shield drop just a little, and, swifter than the eyes of the intent spectators could follow, the rapier flashed into the beard of the Moslem and its point came out at the nape of his neck.

He coughed once convulsively and straightened to the toes, then Ayub thrust the cavalier aside and rushed with his mates upon the captain's followers. Long pistols barked in the Cossacks' hands, and smoke swirled around the twisting figures.

A shout of dismay went up from the poop at the fall of the *reis*, and Michael, satisfied with what he had accomplished, saw that more Cossacks had come up under Togrukh, who dripped blood and water alike as he moved. All hope of victory now left the janissaries, who fought stubbornly in knots and were cut down by the heavier weapons of the Cossacks.

To the astonishment of the Moslems, when a score of them were still on their feet, Demid held up his arm and offered quarter.

"*Mashallah!*" cried one, his lips snarling. "Are we to be thrown to the rowers?"

"On my head," Demid made answer in their tongue, "it shall not be."

First a few and then many, the scimitars clattered to the deck and Togrukh gathered them up. Above decks, resistance on the galley was at an end.

Taking with him one of the unwounded janissaries Demid made his way down the steps into the aftercastle, the long, narrow cabin that perched on the upward slope of the galley's stern. Several Cossacks hastened after him, to ransack the castle.

A great lanthorn, gleaming with many colors, revealed a confusion of carpets and mattresses, tabourets that still bore little bowls of coffee, garments and the chests of the Moslem warriors. Incense was burning and its pungent scent mingled with the acrid odor of powder.

The cabin seemed deserted, and the Cossacks, listening, heard only the splash of bodies thrown over the galley's rail and the thumping of booted feet overhead.

What held their attention at once was the pair of glistening black forms erect against a heavy teak lattice at the upper end of the cabin. Two Ethiopians stood here, upon a kind of dais. They were naked to the waist and they held drawn scimitars; only the sweat that shone on their skin and their rolling eyes marked them as living beings, so still did they stand.

"What men are these?" Demid asked the captive.

"Eunuchs of the mighty, the merciful Protector of the Faith. They are a guard set over the treasure."

"Bid them throw down their weapons."

"O my lord, a higher command has been laid upon them by one greater than I." The soldier lifted his hands indifferently. "Also, they are deaf mutes."

Impatiently Demid ordered his men to disarm the mutes without slaying them, and the Cossacks sprang forward obediently. The slaves struck out wildly, and defended themselves with fingers and teeth after they were thrown to the deck. It was more difficult to break down the wooden bars that had been built into place without any door as far as Demid could see.

He tore down a damask hanging within the lattice, and stared in silence at the treasure of the galley.

At the end of the cabin and raised above it by several steps was a large recess made comfortable with silk rugs, draperies of cloth sewn with gold, and pillowed couches.

"Women!" Balaban's voice was exultant.

Straight as a spear, a young girl stood beside an older woman who crouched, wailing and tearing at her hair. One glance the serving maid cast at the Cossacks, and straightway ripped off her jade armlets, her rings and even the long earrings. These trinkets she pushed toward them, on the floor, and fell to beating her forehead against the rug.

The Cossacks glanced inquiringly at Demid, who shook his head without speaking.

Balaban stepped forward and thrust his knee against the attendant, rolling her over on the floor; then, turning up her face with his foot, he pulled off her veil and stared at her, scowling.

"Wrinkled as a quince," he observed in disgust, "and bony as a camel, by the Unshriven One. A scavenger of —— would flee from her if she smiled."

And he stooped to pick up the ornaments, muttering at their poor quality as he put them into his pocket. His eyes gleamed as he contemplated the young girl.

"A veritable moon of delight," he leered. "Surely the angel Riwah hath opened the gates of paradise and let out this houri."

And he made a motion to pull aside the *yashmaq*, the veil which all Moslem women must wear before the eyes of men.

"It is death to touch me," the girl cried, in a clear, high voice.

Balaban, a little disconcerted, glanced at her robe of flowered silk, her tiny slippers, embroidered with diamonds, and the long sleeves that concealed her hands.

"On her girdle—the writing on her girdle!"

He pointed at several Turkish words sewn upon the length of green silk that wrapped the body of the girl under the breast.

"'*The treasure of the lord of lords.' Ohai*, my Falcon, that means the sultan and this is one of his women."

Even Balaban hesitated to set a rude hand on one who had been taken into the household of Mustapha, knowing that to do so would be to place

upon his own head a price so great that life would be sought of him in the uttermost corners of the earth.

"What is your name?" Demid asked the girl.

"Lali el Niksar—Lali, the Armenian."

"Are you a sultana?"

She shook her head, the dark eyes watchful and defiant.

"A slave?"

"*Taib*—true."

Hereupon the maid saw fit to voice the importance of her mistress, hoping to impress it upon the Cossacks. "*Yah khawand*,—my lord, she is a pearl of the palace, a favorite singing girl. How many times has she been given a robe of honor! How often have noblemen offered a thousand dinars for her! She knows the rarest Persian verses, aye, the blandishments of the Greeks, and the dances of the Cairenes. The child can wag her tongue with priests, even as she can confound the wits of the young warriors—"

"Peace, or your tongue will wag no more. Is she a captive?"

The old woman hesitated for a bare instant.

"O captain of a host, it is not so with her. They call her the Armenian, but she was raised from childhood in the imperial seraglio. May I burn, but that is truth. Now she is sent as a gift to Sidi Ahmad, Pasha of Aleppo, as a token of the favor of the sultan to that great lord."

"Was a writing sent with the girl?" asked Balaban, frowning.

"Beyond a doubt, the *aga* of the janissaries had it upon him. He was our leader."

Demid gave command to his followers to search for the body of the officer and retrieve all papers before it was thrown into the sea: also to ransack the quarters of the *reis*. The serving woman grew bolder because no harm had been done to her mistress, and plucked Demid's sleeve.

"O thou captain of nien, take thought for the profit thou canst garner. Turn the ship back to Constantinople; ask what ransom thou wilt of the Grand Signior, and it will be granted if the hand of an unbeliever is not laid upon the singing girl. Aye, even to two thousand pieces of gold, it will be granted."

The lidless eyes of Balaban blinked shrewdly, as he tried to gain a glimpse of the letter that one of the men brought to Demid presently. Two thousand pieces of gold would tempt most men.

"The price is not sufficient," responded the Cossack chief, who was scanning the parchment.

It was not, as he had hoped, a pass for the janissaries, nor did it contain directions as to the route to be taken to Aleppo. But it gave Demid food for thought, in that it contained a veiled reproach from Mustapha because Sidi Ahmad had not sent the revenues from the captured provinces of Armenians or the tax from the caravans for the last year.

Mustapha said that a general campaign was to be undertaken against the war-scarred nations of Christian Europe in the Spring—that he, Mustapha, had broken the power of the Cossacks, and concluded a secret treaty with the nobles of Poland by which the Poles were excused from paying tribute to Constantinople, so that the way into the cities and monasteries of Hungary and Russia was opened.

"Gold," muttered Demid angrily to himself. "When will gold buy peace? Nay, the point of the sword is surer."

The letter concluded with an order for Sidi Ahmad to set out from Aleppo over the mountain passes to the Black Sea, as soon as the snow melted, with horses and men and the revenues of the sultan. As surety of the favor of Mustapha to the first of the pashas, the singing girl was sent.

"The Sidi must be a strong prince," Demid reflected, "for the Grand Signior uses soft words with him. Aye, and Aleppo is far from Constantinople. That is well, for us."

The kohl-darkened eyes of the singing girl did not appear to look at Demid, but under the long lashes they studied covertly the face of the young chief. In it she wished to read her fate. And it piqued her that she could read little.

Demid had dismissed everyone else from the women's cabin; he had stationed the two blacks on guard again at the broken lattice, and now stood looking out of the oval port, apparently listening to the sounds on the upper deck where the captives were being chained to the rowers' benches.

The girl, too, heard the uproar of the slaves who were being freed from their chains. Her eyes, over the silk veil, were stoic, although the flowered robe quivered where her heart beat thuddingly.

Suddenly the muscles of her slender arms tensed, and her eyes snapped angrily. Demid had reached out swiftly and grasped both her wrists under the wide sleeves. A moment she strained, gasping, and then, feeling the power of the man, ceased struggling. From the limp fingers of one hand he took a dagger that had been hidden by the sleeve.

"*Yak shatir*—captain of thieves! Prince of hyenas, father of treachery!" she cried. "Can a dog change his hide? *Eh, wah!* He cannot. Nor can a son of ill-born robbers stay his fingers!"

Between those same muscular fingers Demid snapped off the blade of the poniard and tossed the steel out of the port, returning to Lali the hilt, set with sapphires and gold bands.

"Keep all your jewels, singing girl," he observed, "for the time will come when you will need them."

"And how, my ruffian?"

"To make you beautiful."

"Boar of the steppe, what know ye of beauty? I have heard of your people; they spend their days digging in the ground for roots, or feeling hens for eggs. Aye, Kazaks, vagabonds, eaters of filth—ye ride two on a horse, ye suck the juice of one weed and swallow the smoke of another!"

Her tongue was barbed with the caustic wit of the seraglio women, and yet Lali was not a woman in years. Robbed of her dagger, she resorted to her readiest weapon, but even this failed her for very rage when Demid ran his hand over her girdle and dress to satisfy himself that she had not a second weapon concealed about her.

"You have put your hand upon me, O *caphar*—O, unbeliever! For that they will draw you on the stake with horses. I have seen it."

"And what are you?"

The gray eyes of the Cossack gleamed from his dark face, and Lali caught her breath to study the splendid head of the warrior. He towered over her, unmoving, and unwearied. She had felt the strength of his hands, and now she answered the challenge of the gaze that searched her thoughts.

"I am the daughter of a *cral*—a chief."

"Then you were not born in the seraglio, as your woman said."

Lali considered for a second or two, which was long for her.

"Nay, I was born in the mountains, among my father's people, the Armenians. He was killed in a raid, and the Turks carried me off with the other children. But what is that? I say to you that you are a fool, if you spare me, for you will be tortured when the soldiers take you."

A flash of memory, and she saw how to make the Cossack flinch.

"*Ohai*, my captain of rogues, I have seen your warriors in chains in the city of the sultan, aye, and dying on the rowers' benches. Your chief I saw, when Mustapha paraded the captives before the palace. He was like the grandfather of the eagles and his hair was white."

"Rurik!" cried Demid.

"So they named the Kazak. They hold him and his comrades for ransom of which the Grand Signior has need—otherwise their Kazak heads would have been salted and set up outside the gates. The shoulders of Rurik were bent by shame and he walked slowly like an ailing ox."

So said Lali, fiercely, delighting in the shadow that passed over the brow of the young warrior.

"If you would not share his fate, free me and go back to your fishing boats. There is time."

"Time," mused Demid. "Aye, but little for what is to be done."

"Yet enough, O youth," she added softly, "to serve the king of kings, whose memory is long—who can reward you with a province. A thousand emirs ride in his suite, and the Frankish kings bend low their heads to him. Only your *cral* stands apart from the court," she added, "chained."

Lali laughed under her breath, seeing Demid turn to a couch and sit down, holding his head in his hands. She was quite surprised when he remarked presently that she should fetch food and set it before him. Even her forehead flushed at the command.

"I, to serve a boar of the steppe! I, who go to the pasha of a kingdom? What words are these words?"

"A command, Lali."

Togrukh or Balaban could have told the girl that the Cossack had a habit of never repeating an order; nor, once given, did he change the order. Experience had taught them the value of obeying Demid at once, and discussing the wherefore later. But Lali had come from a narrow world where her sisters were mistresses of numberless slaves. Slaves themselves, they often ruled the Moslem men through beguilement and flattery.

In the world of this child, the person of Mustapha and all that belonged to him was sacred. She had her share of the instinctive wisdom of her race and sex where men were concerned, and had decided against flattering Demid. Moreover, she had the pride of her birth.

"I will not. You will be torn in pieces."

"First, Lali, bring that tabouret and set out whatsoever you have."

The girl grew quiet, staring round-eyed at the motionless Cossack.

"If I do not?"

Demid looked up.

"I will bind you, little song-bird, and put you through yonder port. Once the sea embraces you, there will be no more song."

He meant what he said, Lali decided at once. In her unfledged spirit there was no great fear of death. What was ordained would come to pass, and not even a favorite of the palace could outwit the Severer of Society, the Ender of Days. Even before she had been taught by the instructors of the seraglio to walk with the swaying step of a gazelle, or to sing, low-voiced, she had seen women led away to be strangled, and once a sultana had been poisoned at her side during a feast. But the sea!

Lali shivered, and glanced at the curtain behind which she knew the negroes were standing. Little use to call them, now, when the Cossack had his sword. She thrust forward the tabouret with a slippered foot.

She wondered if she was finding favor in the eyes of the chief. It was possible. So Lali changed visibly. She rolled up sleeves, disclosing slender arms bearing the finest of bracelets, and went briskly to work fetching sugared fruits and rice and saffron and bowls of preserves from the cabinet that served as a larder.

Demid eyed the array of dishes with disgust, and she made a sign ordering one of the negroes to go for wine.

"Bid the other," suggested the warrior, "draw back the curtain. Let him summon hither some of my men and also the galley slaves."

"Fool," she whispered, "would you have them set eyes on me?"

As Demid made no further remark she concluded reluctantly that he meant what he said.

In a moment there came trooping to the lattice bearded Cossacks, weapon in hand, and gaunt, shambling figures reeking of sweat and wine. They thrust aside the blacks and pressed close to the openings. As a swift current draws flotsam upon a stream, the singing girl drew their eyes.

"This captive," said Demid, putting his hand on the girl's arm, "is mine. If any of you venture to the lattice again, a ball in the forehead. Have you heard?"

"We hear, father!" cried the Cossacks, who stood erect, arms at their side.

As they were trooping away Ayub came swaggering up, his duties on the upper deck at an end. He sniffed at the negroes; then his glance wandered through the lattice and his jaw dropped when he beheld Demid at ease on the couch, emptying the goblet of wine.

"Oho!" he roared, thrusting his great head through the aperture, "Sultan Demid, it is! May the —— fly away with me, but I thought your sconce had been cracked by a scimitar, so long were you below. Aye, that would

have been better than this, for your wits would not be covered up by a petticoat."

A smile curved Demid's thin lips. Ayub had a deep conviction that all women were witches—the more beautiful, the more dangerous.

"You will be safe from my men who have seen that you serve me," he said gravely to the flushed girl. "Meanwhile, consider this, Lali. Our road leads to Aleppo, and thither we will take you. You have a mind to stratagems, so beat your wings against the cage, if you wish, but do not forget that you must please Sidi Ahmad, or the sultan's gift would be vain."

Lali bowed, deeply puzzled.

"When will my lord visit his slave again?"

"When the slave summons the boar of the steppe."

The curtain fell behind him and though Lali ran to it and listened she could not make out what the Cossacks said to each other. She contemplated the untouched dainties, frowning. Then tripped to an ivory chest and drew out from a pile of garments a mirror of burnished bronze.

Glancing around to be sure that she was unobserved, she snatched the veil from her cheeks and stared at the image in the mirror—at the delicately moulded cheeks, the fair, white throat and the lips that had been termed rose-petals by her women. She pushed back the strands of dark hair, to see the better.

Lali had believed in her soul and her women had assured her that the first man to look upon her unveiled would become her slave. And the Cossack had not so much as touched the veil.

"Have you eaten opium? Has a vampire settled upon you and sucked your brain dry?"

Ayub walked around his comrade and contemplated him from all sides with the greatest amazement.

"Did I hear you say you would take that peacock to—Aleppo?"

"You heard."

Ayub's head had room within for only one idea at a time. Now he scratched his skull with stubby fingers, caked with dried blood.

"With the Don Cossacks? With me?"

"You will have her under your care, for she is valuable to me."

The big Cossack crossed himself and breathed heavily.

"I would rather shepherd yonder turtledoves of the rovers' benches. Nay, *kunak*, in what way have I crossed you? Has the young witch begun to make play with you already—like a fish on a line? Hearken, Demid,

I was with Rurik when he stormed a galleon of Constantinople in other days, and when he found a nest of these Turkish girls in the hold, he weighted them down with shot and dropped them over the side. That is the best way."

"Nay, *kunak*, she is our passport to Aleppo."

That night Ayub in common with the other Cossacks drank heavily, for Demid had given leave. But, though he sought enlightenment in wine, he did not grasp what Demid had in mind. How could a woman serve as a safe-conduct? His experience had been otherwise.

"It cannot be," he remarked after long brooding to Togrukh. "If she had been a horse, that would be well, because a horse can be managed even at sea, and, besides, is worth more than a woman. Even our *ataman* cannot make any good come out of a woman on a journey."

The sergeant sighed and moistened his mustache in a nuggin of mead. He was a melancholy man, and he had troubles enough, at present.

"If the Father says she will be a passport, she will be."

"A passport to purgatory!" Ayub snorted. "Your horse has more intelligence than you, Togrukh, because he shies at a petticoat. I say the girl is a witch! If you say otherwise I will pound you."

Togrukh sighed again.

"Then, *ataman*, let us drink to the witch."

"Well, this is rare good mead: there is sense in you, sergeant, if a man digs enough to get at it. Let us drink to the witch."

V

The ways of the sea are blind ways; whosoever follows them knoweth not the end of the road.

The caravansary of the sea is a place of sleep; whosoever sleepeth within it is not seen again of his fellows.

Arab proverb

The Cossacks had learned by long experience on the road to make the most of whatever came to hand. Being skilled carpenters, they were able to remove the central bridge and build horse-pens around the main mast, sufficient for two dozen ponies. This done, they set up larger water-butts at the break of the poop.

Embarking the horses was a problem. Ayub built with the timbers taken from the galley a narrow jetty at the deepest point of the shore and the vessel was brought up to this during a calm.

The rowers' benches were rearranged—half a dozen before the horses, as many behind. Three men were put to an oar instead of two, the captured janissaries near the poop on which the Don Cossacks quartered themselves.

Balaban shook his head.

"If we run into a storm, the horses will break loose and bring terror among the rowers. The galley will steer badly, and how is the sail to be lowered?"

"That is your affair," pointed out Ayub. "What would we do without horses when we set foot in Asia?"

"They will die of thirst before then, because the water will suffice only for a week. Your chief has ordered me to strike out across the main sea instead of coasting. It is a hundred leagues to the southern shore—eight days sailing if the wind holds fair. But what if we have a *bonanza*, a dead calm? Take thought of this: the oars will not drive the galley against a head wind, nay, nor a crosswind."

Fortunately the galley was well stocked with foodstuffs, and in the sleeping compartment of the dead *reis* they found an astrolabe, and an old Venetian compass. No charts, however, were discovered and when they shipped the anchor and set out from the half-moon bay, they were forced to rely on Ayub's knowledge of the coast line, and Balaban's reckoning.

The surviving Christian captives—Greeks, Genoese, Spaniards, with a smattering of French and Dutch—pulled willingly, for Demid had promised that once the Asian shore was reached, the galley and all in it would belong to them. They preferred to take their chances in some trading port of the southern shore, rather than land on the bleak Tatar steppe off which the fight had taken place. Moreover their toil was lightened because now they rowed in shifts, and as they labored, their eyes dwelt gleefully on the naked backs of the janissaries once their masters, now chained to the benches.

In such fashion did *El Riman*, the swift galley, set out to sea.

"Faith," grinned Michael, casting his eye down the deck, "'tis Jason and his Argonauts, come to life again."

Leaning his weight on one of the long steering-oars—he and Ostrog shared this duty with Ayub who alone of the Cossacks had voyaged on a galley—he bethought him of the saga of Jason and his men, the first of the adventurers of the sea.

Surely, the Argonauts had been the first to come into this sea, and they, too, had steered for Asia and the court of an unknown king.

"If we had a Medea aboard, now," Michael meditated, following his whim, "the company would be complete. Aye, we have no sorceress."

Now it happened then, the day being fair, and the sun warm, Lali in her cabin below was minded to song. The thin note of her guitar seemed to come from the water itself, and the voice of the girl rose clearly to the listening men.

It was a love song of Persia, wild and plaintive. Hearing it, the man who had been sounding the drum to time the stroke of the oars ceased his efforts, and the Cossacks who had been washing out their wounds with salt water lifted their heads.

The rush of water and the creaking of the oars did not drown the voice of Lali. The song deepened, sounding the ring of weapons, the thudding of horses' hoofs, and mellowed to a note of grief, dwindling so that long after she had ceased the warriors strained their ears to catch her voice.

The eyes of the *ataman*, Demid, sweeping the stretch of gray water, were moody. He was thinking of the steppe, the homeland of the Cossacks, and of another voice. So Ileana, the granddaughter of Rurik, had sung to him when he was weary.

Michael, who alone of the ship's company had known nothing of Lali, gripped his oar hard.

"Medea! Child of Aetes, and mistress of the black arts! By the blessed saints, what other woman aboard this vessel would have a song in her heart?"

The whim seized him again. Here were the Argonauts and he was one of them. They were in search of the Golden Fleece. He wondered what they would find.

"In the name of the Horned One!" The harsh voice of Balaban bellowed at him. "Would you drive us upon the rocks?"

Glancing over the rail, Michael thrust on the sweep, straightening the galley on its course. The drum resumed its beat, but the older Cossacks shook their heads sagely. This singing girl to them was an omen of evil fortune.

During the next week their uneasiness grew. While Balaban was clearly heading south by southeast—between the signs of Sirocco and Levant on the ancient compass—they raised land continually on the port bow. When they should have been, to the best of their knowledge, out in the

open sea, they encountered numerous sails passing along the bare headlands of this strange coast.

The aspect of it was not familiar to Ayub, but Balaban, after questioning some of the Genoese, announced that they were passing along the peninsular of the Krim Tatars.* Several of the passing vessels were flying the Turkish colors, but Demid kept his distance from them, and no effort was made to speak the galley. He made several attempts to find water along the coast, and was at last successful.

This replenished the water-butts, and Balaban assured them that only some seventy leagues remained to be covered, across the main sea. Ostrog pointed to the sunset that evening—a red glow, centered in drifting cloud banks.

"A wind on the morrow," he said to Balaban.

"Aye, wind."

"Surely we must put in to shore and drop anchor."

"Nay, the Falcon will not." Balaban shrugged.

"A falcon is at home on the land; he is not a gull. Bah!"

Oaths flowed from the thick lips of the seaman.

"Aye, pray if you will. It is the hour of the *namaz gar*, the evening prayer."

Balaban pointed to the rows of Moslem warriors who were kneeling, facing the east, and going through the motions of washing.

"The wench brings us ill fortune."

"What will be, will be. My luck still holds."

The Levantine gave the order to pull away from the lee shore. Two men were sent up the mast to the spar, and the great triangular sail loosed its folds for the first time. But Balaban did not yet make fast the lower corner, to which the sheet was attached.

Clouds rose higher against the stars. The glow of a lanthorn fell on the bronze disc of the compass, over which, in the shadows, Demid stood. The surface of the waters was dull and oily, and the galley rolled, so that the Cossacks could not sleep.

Still the oars creaked, as exhausted men pulled in time to the monotone of the drum. It was hard work, for the swells were running strong,

*The Crimea, on modern maps.

but the slaves knew the danger of a lee shore. From time to time a cold breath of air came from the northwest.

"The sea is restless," muttered the Cossacks.

"Soon it will begin to prance and then you will know sorrow," spoke up Ayub from the darkness.

Suddenly the sail snapped, as if a giant had cracked invisible fingers. The stays hummed, and the galley leaned to port, ceasing its rolling. Balaban had made the sheet fast.

"Lash the oars with the blades aft!" he shouted.

The slaves, expecting this command, hastened to obey, and shouted with relief when the two banks of oars were secured and their labor at an end.

The *bonanza* had ceased and the wind had come. The galley, deep of keel and slender of beam, rushed ahead through the darkness like a fish-hawk, skimming the surface of the waters, ready to rise into the air.

By the next evening the wind had risen to a gale. Balaban, glancing to the north with the last of the light, ordered the oars inboard and lashed to the rail. White gleamed on the crest of the swells, and a roaring was in the air. Foam flecked the faces of the men and spray, dashed up by the prow, drenched the chilled bodies of the rowers, stretched on their benches.

"It is a *maestro* wind," explained Ostrog wisely. "For two days it will lash us. Slay the horses while there is time."

But the Cossacks would not do that. The ponies staggered against the dip of the vessel and jerked at their halters. One screamed, and another, plunging, broke its halter. The men nearest the frantic animals began to barricade themselves behind piled-up benches.

Balaban and Ayub took one of the steering sweeps, Ostrog and Michael held to the other. A dull creaking began in the depth of the galley, and before the third watch the sail ripped loose from its sheet. Snapping and lurching, it whipped forward from the slanting spar. But the braces held.

The mishap to the sail brought about what the seamen on *El Riman* had been dreading—the stampede of the ponies. Rearing on each other, and crashing against the rail, half of them were loose in a moment. Demid, running to the break in the poop saw what had happened and went down with Togrukh and a half dozen Cossacks. They climbed over the barricade of benches, and worked in among the horses, half swept from their feet when a roller came over the windward rail.

Several of the beasts were lost in this wave, borne over the side. Cursing and straining every muscle, the Cossacks worked to get the rest in hand. To add to the confusion on the galley many of the long oars had broken from their lashings. These had to be secured, and the heads of the ponies bound in sacks. With their heads muffled the beasts quieted somewhat, but the gray light of morning revealed the Cossacks still among them, silent and blue with cold.

They were driving ahead in high seas, the tatters of the sail on the spar serving to keep the prow of the galley steady. Rain, in gusts, lashed them, and the whine of the wind sank to a moan.

From the depth of the galley came again the song of Lali, barely to be heard, fitful as the cry of a *ghil* of the waste. The Cossacks crossed themselves. One of their mates had been washed from the waist and another lay crippled among the horses.

Late the next afternoon they sighted a Moslem war galley. Only a mild swell was running, and for some time they had been drawing in to a new shore.

An irregular coast, with jutting headlands and dense forests first appeared and, later, the white walls of houses and the cupolas and minarets of mosques. They had not observed the town until they rounded a long point and found themselves almost in the mouth of a narrow harbor where a score of carracks and galleys had assembled to ride out the storm.

Balaban perhaps, could have told them what they would come upon, but he kept his own counsel, and Demid, after a glance into the bay, gave order to row on, without haste. He made out the ramparts of a fort, and noticed that one of the galleys had its anchor up.

They had no choice but to try to steal past, trusting that no one would think it worth while to send after them.

Sight of a half-dismantled Algerine galley passing the port without putting in proved to be too much for the curiosity of the commander of the war vessel, and the Cossacks saw its prow appear around the headland before they were two miles distant. Presently smoke puffed from a port in the fore-deck of the pursuer, and Ayub swore under his breath.

"Yonder serpent of the seas carries half a dozen barkers, and fourscore warriors. Demid, *kunak*, we must put spurs to *El Riman*, and outstrip the dogs, or they will pound us with iron balls and sprinkle us with arrows."

"Aye," assented Balaban, "nor can you close with them, for the war-galley is handier and by the way the oars dip, the rowers are fresh."

Demid nodded, observing everything with care, as was his way when matters went ill. His own rowers were tired after the two days' battle with the storm; water had seeped into the hull of *El Riman* and the galley moved sluggishly. The Moslem craft was covering two spans to their one, and in an hour they would be overtaken. Never before now had he been called upon to defend a galley and his mind misgave him, as to what should be done.

"What is our best course?" he asked Balaban, who stood with Ostrog at the steering oars.

"Row on, lash the slaves and gain what time we may. The sun is near to setting, and when darkness falls we may run the galley ashore and shift, each for himself, in the forest."

"Better," growled Ayub, who liked this counsel little, "to turn in our tracks and fall on them with our sabers."

"They are no lack-wits, to be taken so," the Levantine pointed out. "Rather, they will comb us over with cannon and bows, and your men will die like sheep."

There was truth in this, and Ayub glanced helplessly at Demid, muttering that their plight was the work of the witch. Had she not summoned up the storm with her song, and had not the tempest made *El Riman* like a foundered horse, fit only to drop into a ditch and be plucked by kites?

Demid's keen eyes studied the polished poop of the pursuer, outlined clearly in the setting sun, and the steady beat of the long oars. Now he could hear the measured throbbing of the drum on the Moslem ship—could make out the lateen sail clewed up skillfully. Every warrior except the helmsman and the reis was stretched prone on the deck, to offer less resistance to the air.

"Aye," Balaban noticed his gaze, "'tis a corsair from Barbary, on cruise in the Black Sea to collect wealth for the sultan, doubtless. Those —— know the art of racing a galley. Better for you if it had been a Turk."

The commander of the corsair was still in doubt as to *El Riman*, which flew a Moslem pennant; but the fact that she avoided him made him suspicious; in a few moments he would be able to see the Cossacks, and then all doubt would vanish. The distance between the two galleys had been cut in haft.

"Lash the slaves!" Balaban whispered to Demid, who gave the order to Togrukh.

The sergeant had picked up a *nagaika*, a Cossack whip, and was running to the break in the poop when a shout from Ayub arrested him.

Simultaneously, Balaban and Ostrog had let fall the steering sweeps, and had sprung to the rail at the stern. Leaping far out, they disappeared into the foaming wake, while the galley, without a hand at the helm, lurched in its course.

"*Akh!*"

The sergeant, in whose care the prisoners had been, ran to the rail, plucking out the long pistols from his belt and staring down at the swirling water. When the heads of the swimmers came to view, they were a cable's length away.

Togrukh steadied his hand and fired at the broad skull of Ostrog, the seaman. No splash in the water followed the report, but, Ostrog flinched and sank from sight quietly. Togrukh took the second pistol in his right hand and sighted with care.

The weapon flashed, and this time the bullet struck spray a foot from Balaban's ear. Togrukh, peering through the smoke, muttered to himself, and came to attention before Demid. The renegades had been in his charge, and, except during the storm, he had not left them unguarded a moment. True, he had an excellent excuse, but among the Cossacks excuses were not in favor.

Demid saw Balaban raise an arm and wave it, in taunt, and then strike out toward the onrushing corsair. The Levantine had taken a desperate chance, that the Moslems would pause to pick him up, for the shore was beyond reach at this point. He was able, however to make some signal that caught the attention of the *reis*, for the oars were lifted, the galley slowed as its momentum ceased, and a rope was cast to the swimmer who hauled himself to the rail.

Turning, Demid was aware of the sergeant, standing at attention, and realized that Togrukh considering himself at fault, expected a blow from his saber or denunciation before the warriors which to a man of Togrukh's long service was as bad.

"You had an order, *essaul*. Go forward with the whip."

"Then there is no blame, father?"

"No blame to you."

Togrukh's eyes brightened and he cracked his whip, glancing around to make certain that the Cossacks had heard. Meanwhile the galley gained speed again, for Ayub and Michael had caught up the steering-sweeps. There was now no seaman on *El Riman*, and a distant shout from the corsair announced that Balaban had lost no time in making known the identity of the fleeing galley.

He had chosen well the moment to make his hazard, for he would be honored for boldness in escaping from the Nazarenes, as well as for the news he brought. Ayub glared back resentfully.

"That fellow has turned his coat so often, —— alone knows which is the lining and which the color. May he burn!"

"We have not done with him," responded Demid. "A barb is in him that will goad him against us."

"See the Turk reins in, and slows from a gallop to a trot. He seeks to tire out our men at the oars, knowing that we cannot hide our trail from him."

So said Ayub, and in fact the pursuer settled down to a long stroke that kept him about a mile distant. Aware by now of the exact strength of the men he was following and their lack of seamanship, he could afford to choose his own time to attack. *El Riman* had drawn closer inshore, but the coast was rocky and bare of cover. They searched it with their eyes, rounding a cliff-like headland, but saw no place for a landing.

It was Michael who first noticed that around the headland the shore fell away and the mouth of a river showed. With a cry he swung hard upon his sweep, motioning for Ayub to do the same, and the prow of *El Riman* entered the shadows between the hills.

The river was not wide, but it was deep and tortuous, between shelving clay banks. No landing place offered, and Demid gave order to cast over anything that would lighten the galley—water-butts, anchor, and such of the stores as were on deck. Some of the warriors walked among the benches thrusting biscuits soaked in wine into the mouths of the rowers, while others saddled the ponies—to the amazement of the slaves—and filled the saddle-bags hastily.

"The saints grant us a place to land," muttered Ayub, "before the Turk comes up."

But by the time they had passed through the range of hills on the coast and were approaching open country darkness had fallen, and the pursuers were within gunshot. *El Riman* limped along while Ayub and Michael

strained their sight ahead, making out the channel by the break in the trees that lined each bank.

So the race had been lost, and they were forced to listen to the mocking shouts of the pursuers who were clearly to be seen under lighted flares and torches, set in place on the corsair's rail.

"They are taking their daggers in their teeth, father," Togrukh pointed out. "They are ready to attack."

Demid's indecision vanished at the prospect of action. Making sure that his leaders understood what they were to do, he explained that *El Riman* must be run to shore—beached, so that one side should be toward the river. Meanwhile Ayub was to issue to the Christian captives the weapons taken from the janissaries, and the starboard rail was to be cut away in one place, to allow the ponies to jump from the deck and make their way ashore. The defense of the poop he entrusted to Togrukh with a dozen of the Cossacks who had arquebuses and pistols.

"Can you beach the galley?" he asked the cavalier quietly.

"I think so, if you will take the other sweep and do as I do."

Michael leaned forward to peer into the dark lane of the river. Behind them, the corsair was coming up quickly, her beak cutting into the wake of their galley—so swiftly that already the glare of the torches shone on the water. This light enabled Michael to make out a short sandbar and the glint of rushes along the shore to the right. Where rushes grew he knew the bank must be muddy and low.

"Weigh starboard oars!" he barked, and thrust his back against the steering oar. Demid followed his example.

"Pull, all!" he commanded, moving his sweep over sharply.

El Riman glided in, diagonally, toward the rushes, and Michael, glancing over his shoulder, saw the corsair duplicate the maneuver.

"Weigh, all!"

Once more he leaned his weight on the steering oar, bringing the drifting galley parallel to the shore, and braced himself for the shock. The beak of *El Riman* plowed into the mud and sand of the bar at the same time that the keel grated over rocks and came to rest in the ooze. Slowly the deck inclined a few degrees toward the land, so that the starboard waist was nearly level with the water.

Red flashes rent the darkness and thudding reports deafened the Cossacks who were scrambling to their feet. The corsair had raked the stranded galley with its cannon, and now checked its course. Its ram ripped slant-

ing along the ribs of the galley, splintering the long oars, and bringing the forecastle abreast the poop of the galley.

"*Yah Allah!*" howled a hundred throats.

The Cossacks answered with a discharge from their firearms, and Demid sprang to the rail as lithe figures swarmed upon it. Togrukh and his men stood shoulder to shoulder with him and sabers rang against scimitars.

"Slash, slash!" roared the Cossacks.

Arrows whizzed down from the higher after-castle of the corsair, and Ayub, running aft, saw several of his comrades fall. The big warrior was in a seething rage because the Christian slaves would not touch the weapons he offered them. Aware that the Cossacks were bound to lose in the fight, they sat passively on the rowing benches, choosing for the most part to go back to their lot as slaves rather than be cut down by the Moslems. Some jumped into the water and waded ashore with the ponies who stampeded as soon as the firing began.

Barely half a dozen followed Ayub to the poop. He was met by Demid, who had cleared a space on the afterdeck for the moment, aided by the cavalier. The eyes of the young *ataman* were dark with excitement, and his lips snarled. The hot blood raced in his veins, and he longed to cast himself back into the thick of his foes and strike with the sword that served him so well, until he could strike no more.

Upon him, however, rested the fate of his men, and a quick glance fore and aft told him the fight was lost, on the galley. The janissaries were shouting and breaking from their bonds in the waist, and behind them scores of bowmen were wading through the rushes from the corsair, to cut them off from the shore.

"To the bank with the horses!" he ordered Ayub. "Hold the shore."

With that he sprang down into the after cabin and darted to the lattice, sweeping aside the quivering negroes. Here was gloom, relieved only by a flickering lamp—gloom where smoke swirled around the form of Lali, erect beside the couch, and the wailing maid. Since the capture of the galley these two had not met, and now the fine eyes of the girl stared at him tauntingly.

"Come out!" Demid cried.

"Nay, O captain of thieves, shall I flee when dogs are whipped? Said I not the hand of the sultan would cast you down?"

Demid stepped through the opening in the lattice and grasped at her waist. Lali evaded him deftly, and laughed as he stumbled over the rug.

Then his fingers caught her shoulder and she squirmed, beating at his throat and trying to set her teeth in his forearm.

Her veil was torn away and for the first time the young chief looked into the flushed face. The scent of musk was in his nostrils and the breath of the girl warmed his lips. Tears of sheer rage made her dark eyes brilliant as they flew to his, questioningly.

With the flat of his scimitar Demid struck Lali in the side, driving the breath from her lungs. An instant she quivered, and her eyes widened, then half closed as he caught her behind the knees with his left arm, throwing her over his shoulder. He could feel the throbbing of her heart against his throat.

Turning back through the lattice, he raced for the steps, expecting to have to hew his way through the throng of Turks upon the poop. But here Togrukh still stood with one of the warriors, back to back. And Michael, who had seen Demid go down into the cabin, was poised over the stairhead, his rapier making play against three scimitars, his lean face expressionless as a mask.

Signing to him to follow, Demid made his way down to the waist of the galley, struck the hilt of his sword into the eyes of a foe who was climbing over the wale, and leaped bodily down into the darkness and rushes. He went into water up to his waist, but kept his footing with an effort. Michael splashed beside him.

Arrows whistled overhead, and once Michael went headlong into the shallows, just as the giant form of Ayub loomed up before them.

"This way. We have the horses."

He pulled the slender Michael bodily after him, and covered Demid with his long broadsword. On firm ground, under a network of trees a group of Cossacks were rounding up a dozen ponies.

Demid mounted the first that was offered him, and placed Lali before him.

"To saddles!" he commanded, and as he spoke, beheld Togrukh and the old Cossack in the center of a ring of Moslem swordsmen on the slanting deck of the galley.

The sergeant caught the voice of his leader over the uproar, and lifted his left hand.

"Farewell, father. Tell—of Togrukh—"

Demid started in his saddle and tightened his rein. Then, realizing that he could not leave his men, who were now about him, to go to the ser-

geant's aid, he whirled his horse and trotted back into the shadows. Once he glanced back, at a shout from the Moslems, and saw Togrukh's head, the eyes still quivering, stuck upon a spear.

"He had an order to hold the afterdeck!"

The thought tortured him, and he drove his spurs into the beast under him in silent fury. The Cossacks, accustomed to finding their way about in darkness, seemed to cluster about him by instinct. One spurred forward to seek out an opening in the trees. The rest muttered satisfaction. They were ashore, at a heavy cost, but upon the earth again, with horses under them.

Nine times in ten, a company of soldiers thoroughly thrashed and dispersed in strange country would have scattered helplessly through the forest. The cry, "Each man for himself," would have meant death for all at the hands of the Moslems.

In fact the warriors from the corsair had kindled torches and were searching the wood in bands, expecting to hunt down the fugitives.

On every hand, however, as the Turks advanced, the cries of beasts arose in the brush. The yelp of a jackal answered the whining snarl of a panther, and, more distant than the rest, the howling of a wolf rose steadily. Here and there the thickets ahead of the searchers were shaken by the rush of a four-footed animal.

But no forest animals were there. The men from the Don were at home in timber, and this was their fashion of calling to each other. Single warriors joined together, evaded the torches and made their way to the howling of the wolf, where Demid had assembled the nucleus of their band.

By the time the animal calls had ceased, some score of men, half of them mounted, had gathered about their *ataman* in a clearing by a ruined farm, and Demid knew that no more were alive to come.

He satisfied himself that Lali was living and not much hurt, before he handed over the girl to Michael, whom he had kept at his stirrup during the flight from the beach. Then he called the roll softly and discovered that two of the riders were Christian slaves from the galley—an Armenian and a Syrian who had found themselves horseflesh as promptly and skillfully as a Jew pouched ducats. These he ordered to give their mounts to Cossacks.

Without troubling to learn if his men still had their weapons—a Cossack of the Don is separated from the skin of his body as easily as from his saber—Demid asked a question quietly.

"Have we sword strokes for the —— who took Togrukh's head?"

"Aye, father," spoke up the oldest of the Cossacks—he who wore two shirts and was called Broad Breeches. "We have sword strokes and we are ready. Once our mothers bore us," he added reflectively, and a trifle indistinctly, for his upper lip and some teeth had been shot away by an arrow.

The dark line of the forest was kindled by oncoming torches, and the main party of the Moslems who had followed the trail of the horses came into sight, loud-voiced and flushed with slaying. They had put to death the unfortunate galley slaves who had decided to await their coming, and were reinforced by the liberated janissaries.

The bowmen, eyes on the trail they were following, ran forward into the clearing, and halted at the sound of hoofs thudding toward them in the dark. They snatched up their bows and loosed arrows hastily, without seeing clearly what was coming upon them.

Rising in their stirrups and striking on each side, the Cossacks broke through the archers and wheeled about among the scattered groups. In the saddle and on open ground they were different men from the dogged crew that had been beaten from the galley, and so the Turks found them.

Wherever a knot of swordsmen still stood together, Ayub galloped, his broadsword whistling over his head, and the massive blade cut into flesh and bone as a scythe passes through the stalks of wheat. Half seen in the elusive torchlight, the tall riders assumed gigantic proportions in the eyes of the corsair's warriors who began to flee into the brush, leaving a score of bodies in the clearing.

More torches were coming up, as the bodyguard of the Moslems with their leaders deployed from the trees. Demid lifted his head and howled, and the Don men wheeled their horses and trotted back in a dozen different directions, so that the Turks could not be sure where they were headed.

Demid, the last to go, circled his horse within arrow shot of the torches, looking for Balaban. He saw the Levantine, but in the center of a mass of swordsmen. He saw, too, something that gave him food for thought.

The Levantine was armed with a silver-edged shield and a fine scimitar and he was directing the array of the Moslems, although officers of the corsair were at hand. It was more than strange that he should have been put in command, almost at once, of men who had not seen him until he was hauled out of the water like a fish.

"Wing me that hawk!" Balaban shouted to his archers, recognizing Demid.

A dozen shafts whistled in the air, and as the first one reached him the young Cossack was seen to cast up his arms and fall back from his saddle. His body slumped over the pony's rump, until it was held up only by his feet, caught in the stirrups and his knee crooked over the saddle.

His scalp lock and swordarm dragged on the ground, as the horse swept past the torches.

"Shoot, O dullards—O dolts fathered by fools! See you not the man has tricked you?" cried Balaban in wrath as the archers held their shafts to watch the Cossack drop to earth.

He gritted his teeth as Demid, out of range, twisted up his body and caught the saddlehorn.

"Allah grant thee to live until I come up with thee again."

A voice answered, out of the darkness, laughingly—"And thee, also."

The sharp about-face of the Cossacks slowed up pursuit that night, and when the next day the Turks moved forward from the farm they followed the trail of the horses to a small village. Here was found no living thing, for the inhabitants had fled to the hills and the Cossacks had made off with a dozen head of horse.

By now mounted men were arriving from the nearest castles of the Turks, and couriers were sent to the outlying *begs* and chieftains with word to gather swordsmen and take up the trail of the infidels.

Before nightfall the pursuit was on in earnest, and the pursuers were confident because on the skyline, ahead of the Cossacks, uprose the lofty snow slopes of Charkahna, the Mountains of the Wolves, known today as a spur of the Caucasus.

While the levies of the neighboring *begs* were coming up, separate riders—Turkomans, on picked horses-were sent ahead to gain touch with the fleeing Cossacks. These reported that the unbelievers were changing horses at each village, and were stocking up with provisions as well as grain and dried camel's flesh for the horses when they should reach the snow line.

Once they passed into the higher altitudes, the fertile hamlets of the fruit and vine growers and rug makers of the shore of the Black Sea were left behind, and the Cossacks headed in a direct line for the nearest break in the barren peaks that rose, like a bulwark of the giants, in their path.

So the outriders reported and there was satisfaction in the camp of the Turks when word came that the Cossacks had entered this gorge. Because,

unwittingly, the fugitives had chosen a blind valley. Here the Mountains of the Wolves could be entered, but the gorge ended in an impasse.

Into this canyon the Turks pressed, sounding their *nakars*—cymbals and kettledrums—because some of the Turkoman tribesmen believed that the Mountains of the Wolves were inhabited by *ghils*. By *ghils* and by other spirits of waste places.

They remembered these things all the more because snow flurries smote them, and bitter winds buffeted them. They pounded the cymbals and smote the drums, until the wind died down and the flurries ceased and they came to the sheer walls of rock on two sides and a frozen waterfall at the end of the ravine. Whereat they yelled aloud in amazement.

The Cossacks were not in the gorge. Several lame ponies huddled together, but not a human being was in the trap. Upon the ground was only the white sheet of new-fallen snow.

The trap had been sprung and the victims had escaped.

It was vain to look for tracks, and the ponies were palpably left behind as useless. The Turks eyed the wall of rock on three sides with misgivings; no ponies could climb the cliff here, and yet the Cossacks were gone.

"*Dil i yarana*—be of stout hearts, comrades," they said, one to another. "The *ghils* have taken the infidels and without doubt we shall behold them of nights. Aye, fire will rush out of their nostrils, as they spur their ponies through the air while the spirits whip them on."

With this wonder to relate in the villages they hastened back rather more quickly than they came. Only Balaban smiled his wry smile—

"The time is not yet."

VI

Ibnol Hammamgi

"As I live, *kunak*, you have brewed a fine gruel for our eating," Ayub throttled his bull's voice to a rumbling whisper, so that the Cossacks would not hear his complaint.

Some hours before the Turks, Demid and his men had reached the end of the gorge, and now sat their steaming ponies gazing blankly at the ice-coated waterfall, the black sides of the impasse, and the fringe of green firs on the heights above—which might have been the forest of Ardennes so little chance had they of scaling the sides of the gorge.

"Did I not warn you to sprinkle the witch with holy water and drop her into the sea?" Ayub went on, full of his grievance. "You did not, and what happened? First the storm happened and then the Turkish galley,

and then Togrukh and his mates performed a deed. Nay, God deliver us from such deeds! Their Cossack heads were stuck on pikes. That is what they did."

Demid, hands clasped on his saddle-peak, surveyed his company. Fifteen of the Don Cossacks had come through, and now were waiting patiently for him to lead them out of this scrape as he had done out of many another in the past. Sir Michael of Rohan strolled along the nearest rock wall, stretching his legs stiffened by the long rides.

"There she sits, the witch!" rumbled Ayub. "Brewing ——for our quaffing. For the last two days you followed the way pointed out by the Armenian youth, her countryman, who swore he knew the snow road through these mountains. Where are we now? Save that we are south of the shore of the Black Sea some forty versts, no one knows. We cannot go on, and we cannot go back. The Turks have already entered the foothills below, and that hairless jackal, our guide, slipped out of sight last night like a weasel out of a chicken roost. May the dogs bite him! He knew we were going to halter ourselves in this stall."

Demid pulled at his mustache reflectively. He had no reason to distrust the Armenian boy, who seemed anxious enough to lead them to safety, and whose life was as much at stake as theirs.

"Have you an idea?" he responded curtly, for the fresh misfortune was serious.

"Aye, so," answered Ayub promptly. "The witch can work a spell for us as well as against. She can find a way out of this if she will. When I deal with her she will bethink her of a way."

Taking Demid's silence for assent, the big Cossack swaggered off to Lali, who was cracking walnuts on the pommel of her saddle and chewing with relish. From somewhere she had conjured up another veil and Demid had seen to it that she had a long sable cloak to wrap around her light attire. Seated disconsolately by her horse were the two blacks who, impelled by a dread mightier than the fear of dismemberment and eternal damnation, had struggled along at the side of the woman given to them to guard.

Standing beside Lali, the head of the warrior was on a level with her own. He crossed himself by way of precaution, and swelled out his chest, letting out a roar of mingled lingua franca and bad Turkish.

"Daughter of unmentionable evil! Wash woman of the Styx! Wench of the Grand Turk, which is to say the foster-child of Beelzebub himself—you pulled wool over my brother's eyes, you took him in nicely, you did!"

The wide eyes of the girl met his squarely, and a tingle ran through the Cossack's veins.

"Demid struck me," she responded.

"Well, that is nothing. He will make saddles out of your skin and whips out your hair if you don't bestir yourself and find a way for us to escape from this spot."

The dark eyes dwelt on Ayub fixedly and he was aware of a prickling of his own skin that was not altogether uncomfortable.

"Send the captain to me," she offered at length.

"Impossible. The *ataman* is in the —— of a fix and has no time for a woman."

"Is he a great khan in your country?"

"Aye, he is first among the Cossacks, who are all nobles."

Lali glanced at the young chief, who had just set the men to work preparing food for the noon meal. His long, black coat was more than a little tattered and the white ermine *kalpak* was torn by thorns. But Demid sat erect in the saddle, his colonel's baton held on his hip. Lali sighed under her breath—"He has few followers."

"Not so, prattle tongue. He has as many as the pasha of Aleppo, whom we will hang on his own gatepost. But these are enough for our needs—Demid's and mine."

"I could tell you much of Sidi Ahmad, pasha of Aleppo."

"Ha!"

"You, who are a man of understanding, know the value of information to a leader. Is the little Frank also a *khan*, that Demid should talk to him always, and cherish him?"

"*Ser* Mikhail—aye, he is adrift from his people. I know not if he is truly a chief but he wields a sword—"

"I saw you hew down the Moslems in the fight by the farm. You tossed them about like chaff. Have you forgotten how I bound up your cuts that night?"

Ayub rubbed his chin and looked everywhere but into the dark eyes that warmed his heart like a nuggin of mead on a cold night.

"Child of evil," he responded sternly, "do not think to trick me. Is there a way out of this lobster-pot?"

Lali tossed away the last nutshell, humming lightly to herself. Her dark head bent nearer the Cossack, who no longer took his eyes from her.

"What is evil?" she asked. "And what are we but leaves, on the highway of fate? We know not the road before us. *Ai-a*, I have known sorrow."

She rocked in her saddle and her warm fingers touched Ayub's scarred fist. A shrewder man than the Cossack would have thought Lali's lament sincere. And it was.

"Father of battles, I would aid the hero, but he struck me. I know a way by which he can escape; will you help me to find it?"

"Oho!" Ayub twirled his mustache, bending his shaggy head closer. Now, he thought, we are getting the milk out of this cow. "How?" he asked.

"Build a fire, a great fire. Place upon it branches from yonder cedars, dampened with snow."

"Then what?"

"Do that first, then come to me. I am going to summon up my people for your aid."

Ayub stared and went away. With some pains, he kindled the blaze as Lali directed, and heaped on the branches. To the Cossacks who asked what he did, he explained that the witch had repented, when he—Ayub—had argued with her, and was about to work black magic for their release.

She wanted to speak to the *ataman*, but he—Ayub—had denied her that. The *ataman* had warm blood in his veins, and the girl was a very peacock for beauty; she would make eyes at him and melt the iron out of his heart. Perhaps she would make him kiss her and after that the young hero would be as wax in her hands.

So said Ayub, not knowing that Lali had beguiled and tricked him completely in a scant moment.

"But, *kunak*," observed the oldest of the Cossacks, scratching his shaven skull. "Our father Demid has steel in his heart. He whacked the fair young witch with his saber. That is the way to handle a sorceress."

From her pony Lali contemplated the shaggy men with amusement, guessing the subject of their talk.

"O headman," she called softly to Ayub, "I will bring your Demid to sue for speech with me before the fire sinks to embers."

"What says the witch?" asked the veteran mistrustfully.

Ayub explained, not altogether at ease. It seemed to him that Lali was too confident. Still, magic was needed if they were to escape from the gorge. Demid had no plan as yet; in fact the chieftain was staring up through the smoke at the narrow walls of their prison, as if contemplating birds in the

air. His quiet heartened the Cossacks, who went on munching their barley cakes and dried meat.

"Were you not afraid to let the witch girl touch you?" they asked Ayub.

They believed implicitly in ghosts of unburied warriors and spirits of the waste places—vampires who sucked a man's blood, hob-gobs who turned horses into toads, and will-o'-the-wisps who could lead even the hardiest astray of a dark night. They were sure that Lali had laid a spell on Ayub.

"Oh, that is a small thing with me." Ayub swaggered a bit. "When I was born my mother put me in a snowdrift to season me, and though the dogs howled all night and the vampires were thick as locusts in harvest time, I came out without a chill. Once, when I was old enough to ride herd, a witch came into our village in the likeness of a panther to draw some blood from the horses. But I said a prayer and took her by the tail—"

"Only think!"

The Cossacks shook their heads in amazement at such daring.

"—and twisted it. Straightway, she turned herself into an eagle, and tried to fly off, but I had hold of her tail feathers—"

"Such a man as he was!"

The warriors lifted their hands helplessly.

"—so that she was fain to change herself to a maiden, like a flower for beauty. *Ekh*, I danced with her a day and she could do no more with me than this peacock—in the name of the Unhallowed One, what are these?"

The Cossacks glanced up in alarm, seeing Ayub's jaw drop.

"To your sabers!" shouted Demid angrily.

Down the cliff wall on either hand were scrambling human beings who resembled limbs wrapped in coarse wool, long hair hanging about their eyes glared at the warriors. Some perched on narrow ledges, poising heavy stones; others leveled small bows. Out of the mist and the drifting smoke, shaggy heads came into view silently. Only goats, the warriors thought, could have made their way down the cliffs.

The Cossacks formed in a ring around Demid and the horses. As they did so, a score or more of the gnomes emerged from a cleft in the rock near the fire. They were squat and stoop-shouldered, and they glided forward moving softly in the loose snow. Among the rearmost Demid made out the brown face of the Armenian lad who had undertaken to be his guide, and who had set him on the path to this gorge.

It was Michael of Rohan, ever careless of events, who laughed. "Burn me, but here are the wolves of the mountains. And yet—they have come a little early to pick our bones."

"Ibnol Hammamgi, Ibnol Hammamgi!"

The girl, sitting apart from the ring of warriors, called clearly, and at once a shape disengaged itself from the other shapes. This was a bent figure wrapped in a shawl over which thrust out a head bald as a vulture's. A single glittering eye fixed upon the singing girl; the other eyeball had vanished from its socket. Ibnol Hammamgi shambled forward and, with disconcerting suddenness, twitched the veil from Lali's face.

"Eh-eh," he whined, "verily you are the child of Macari, the *cral* of our folk. It is eight Winters since Macari, your father, was burned alive by our Turkish overlords because the tithes of our clan were in arrears to them. Yet I knew your face."

"Ibnol Hammamgi, the day the Moslems raided our village, they took me with other slaves as payment of the tithes—"

"Aye, that also is known to me. Our folk numbered you among the dead, daughter of Macari. Until yesterday when the youth, your messenger, came to me at Sivas with his tale."

"You saw my smoke?"

"I am not blind. We hastened. A goatherd ran up to us with word that many Turks have entered the lower defiles."

Being headman of the clan, Ibnol Hammamgi would not condescend to question a young woman, but his eye turned appraisingly on the Cossacks.

"They are Franks from across the sea. Their sword edges are sharper than their wits, or they would not be upon the road to Aleppo. I want you to lead them from this place, to our folk. Can you save the horses?"

Ibnol Hammamgi hunched himself closer in his shawl and shook his great head gently from side to side.

"The horses, aye. The men are another matter—"

"You will profit much."

"How?"

The two spoke together, low-voiced, and in the end the Armenian gave his assent, surlily enough. A bridle chain clinked behind them, and they beheld Demid within arms' reach. Lali did not draw back.

"*O ai*," she greeted him, "the slave has summoned the boar of the steppe, and, lo, he comes."

"Are these your people?"

"Aye, so. Are you ready to bend the head and sheath the sword, to win safety for your—" Lali, glancing at the young warrior, altered her word—"your men?"

"My men do not bend the head, nor do I."

Slender hands uprose to her brow in a mock salaam.

"Great mighty captain of beggars and king of nowhere—have you wit enough to understand this. The low-born lad who led you here did so at my behest. This is a trap, sometimes used by my folk, but a trap for pursuers, not pursued. There is a way out, unknown to the Turks, who will think that demons have made off with you, if you come with us—"

"Enough," whined the *cral*, who had been sniffing the air like a dog. "Snow is coming down from the crests, and we must be upon the paths."

He glanced at the gold and silver trappings of the Cossack's saddle, and at the packs of the warriors, who had managed to carry off more than a little spoil from the Moslem towns.

"These Franks have chosen good ponies from below. That is well. Will they keep truce with us?"

Lali shrugged and turned to Demid.

"Will you share our bread and salt, and sit down with the maid you struck?"

Demid considered, for he did not pledge his word lightly, and the girl puzzled him.

"Lead us out of this gorge and we will share bread and salt with you."

She tossed her head, disappointed perhaps because he showed no anxiety to go with her. Ibnol Hammamgi lifted his voice in a shout and his followers began to scramble down from their vantage points. Signing to Demid to accompany him, he trotted away toward the cliff. Passing along it for some distance, he turned in among a nest of boulders. Here the path bent sharply and led into what seemed to be the black mouth of a cave.

Entering, the Cossacks dismounted. Torches were kindled and they pressed forward on foot, drawing the horses after them. The tunnel ended in a narrow cleft in the mountain where the gray light hardly penetrated.

Evidently, the Cossacks noticed, the mountaineers were following the course of a stream, now dry, that had once forced its way into the gorge they had left.

Gradually the chasm widened into a wooded ravine, up which they climbed to come out on the ice-coated slopes of the mountains above the timberline. The Armenians pushed on with a shambling trot that made the heavier Cossacks pant to keep up. A word of warning was passed down the line as they threaded along a narrow ridge where stags' antlers, stuck into the stones at intervals, marked the trail. In single file they felt their way where snowdrifts on either hand made the road impassable for any who did not know the marks. And, as they mounted again, on firmer ground, snow began to fall.

They had left the Black Sea and its guardians behind.

VII

Lali Makes a Promise

An idea once planted in Ayub's mind stuck as a burr sticks to lamb's wool. He was sure that the young witch had suffered a change of heart since her talk with him. Had not the Cossacks been well received by the mountain folk, and given shelter in a large hut that was more than half a cave—so steep was the side of the valley on which the hamlet perched?

Had not these goat-like people brought to them a goodly pot of mutton and rice, and bottles of really excellent red wine? And straw to sleep on? True, the Cossacks had taken much of this to rub down the ponies, and bed the tired beasts beside the fire within the earth hut. They had done this before eating themselves, and refused to give over the horses to the care of the village folk, for Demid had promised a vivid unpleasantness to the warrior who lost a horse.

Demid himself had gone off at sundown to the cabin of Ibnol Hammamgi, leaving the detachment in the hands of Ayub and Michael. They had slept all through the day, having come in the night before on the heels of the storm, and, being rested and fed, Ayub was moved to give tongue to the idea that possessed him.

"It would be a great miracle, Mikhail, lad, if the singing girl mends her ways and uses her arts to aid true men. Aye, a mighty miracle. Yet she touched me—all the *kunaks* saw her touch me—and here I am with a whole hide and a full belly."

Now, being quick of wit and having the gift of tongue, Michael of Rohan understood a little of the simple speech of the Cossacks, especially the military commands.

"When you sleep at an inn, keep one eye open for the innkeeper," he responded, in his own language.

"Eh?"

Ayub bent his head down, for the cavalier's hat came only to his shoulder. He had grown attached to the youngster, who always listened to his remarks at times when Demid, who used few words, was uncommunicative.

"Why here she comes, the dove!"

Lali in fact was passing the wide mouth of that hut where they leaned at ease, but it was a changed Lali. Her veil and cloth-of-silver had disappeared and her face was pallid under a high lace headdress. A tight-fitting bodice sewn with silver coins and a voluminous overskirt of black velvet failed to hide the girl's natural grace. She saw the two men and made a quick sign for them to follow her.

Ayub coughed and glanced covertly at Michael, who was fastening his collar and adjusting his sword-sling at a more becoming angle.

"It is said among my people," the Cossack ruminated, "that a Syrian can cheat two Jews, and an Armenian can lift the shirt from a Syrian—but still she looks like a dove."

The two followed Lali through a dog-infested alley, past a donkey pen and up winding steps where the hovels of the tribesmen could be touched by the hand on either side. Up more steps where children ran out to stare at the girl and to run from the warriors. Sivas was a nest of refuge for the harassed Armenians, hidden in the higher gorges near the caravan tracks. Michael wondered how human beings could exist there in such squalor, not knowing that the clay and the earth of the huts and the grime and the grease of the children all served to insure them against the visits of Turkish collectors and janissaries.

Above and beyond Sivas towered the mighty crests of the Caucasus, bathed in the purple and scarlet of sunset—as forbidding and awe-inspiring that day as when the priests of Armenia had walked openly in the footsteps of the Christian saints, who for a brief generation had been the monarchs of men and the counselors of kings.

"Now what is this?" Ayub clutched his arm.

Lali had slowed her steps and turned into a shallow ravine up which ran a broad flight of marble flags, broken and chipped by age and frost.

Once she cast back at them a glance mocking and searching, then she fell to working at something in her hand, and when she pressed forward again into the shadows she carried a lighted candle.

They were aware of muffled voices close at hand and a glow from some hidden source. Lali rounded another corner in the rocks, and they halted in their tracks.

Before them uprose the portico of chapel, but such a one as Michael had never seen before. Columns of blue marble supported it, and within a hundred candles glimmered upon glazed tiles, and images wrought in gold. Lali bowed her head and stepped into the throng of people that stood facing the altar. Everyone held a taper, except the watchers in the portico who stared out into the shadows to give word of the coming of intruders.

Ayub, however, thrust past the guard and fixed his eyes on the black figure at the altar—an aged man with a white beard, falling down the wide collar that covered his shoulders, who leaned upon the arms of two acolytes as if wearied by the weight of the white stole and black robe.

The patriarch was intoning a chant, in a high, clear voice, while the people sang responses. Ayub listened with open mouth.

"Eh-eh," he whispered, "here is a *batko*, a holy father, like ours who was cut up by the Moslems. I will rouse up our lads; they will want to set eyes on the *batko*."

With that he hastened off, leaving Michael in the shadow of a pillar. Unobserved, the cavalier watched Lali. When the prayers were ended the girl pressed forward, and there was a stir among the Armenians, when she knelt before the patriarch. The aged man asked a brief question, and cast the smoke of incense upon her. Out of the white wraiths of vapor the delicate face of the girl appeared, and Michael saw her lips quiver as the priest touched her forehead and shoulder.

With a sudden motion she pressed to her cheek the edge of his robe and then drew back to her place. The heads of the Armenians nodded over their tapers understandingly.

When the singing began again, it was reinforced by the deep voices of the Cossacks, who crowded in eagerly from the portico. Michael now caught the words, which were indeed old and familiar—

"*Kyrie elieson*."

It seemed to him that Lali was taking the sacrament, and that in some way she was bidding farewell to the people of Sivas.

He was puzzled by this, for Lali's nature appeared many sided, and he managed to ask Ayub about it as they made their way back through the snow. A cold wind swept the heights about them, and overhead the stars gleamed like jewels in imperial purple.

"Why," the big Cossack explained, "the girl was incensed and took a blessing from the patriarch, because she is going to her fate. That is, to Aleppo. Aleppo, they say, is —— and there the fiend has his court. It was well we met with such a fine *batko*—he is the patriarch of Armenia come up from Antioch, in the Holy Land."

The Cossacks were indeed in vast good humor and the visit to the church seemed to remove all suspicion of them from the minds of the folk. Michael, too, felt at ease and ready for the next turn of affairs. The splendid edifice struck him as something of a marvel, and he did not know that he had been within a chapel built by a Roman emperor, Theodosius, in bygone days.

But he felt a stirring of the pulse, an intimacy with ancient and mighty things. He stood on the threshold of an older world and perhaps within his memory was awakened the pageant of ancestors of his line who had stood upon this ground when the hosts of the Crusaders moved about the Holy Land.

Even Ayub was somewhat reflective. "Well, I did not know that the maiden had changed so much, from a few words of mine. Still, I argued with her amain, and she listened."

At the entrance to the hut, one of the younger warriors took Michael's hand with a smile—

"Eh, will you frolic with us this night, Frank?"

"Why this night?"

The Cossack stared, and laughed artlessly as a child:

"Eh, the day after, the *ataman*, Demid, leads us forth to a long road. It is our custom to frolic before the road."

So Michael went about with them, and heard the note of fiddles and harps, drank of the red wine, and gazed at the whirling throngs of the young girls who danced before the warriors, encouraged by the shouts of the Cossacks—he shared the bread dipped in wine, and studied the lined faces from which care had fallen away for a few hours.

But most of all he watched the girl Lali, hearing for the first time her voice freed from all restraint, hearkening to the song that had come from her lips on the galley, beholding the grace of her light figure in the dance.

And as he watched he frowned a little, repeating under his breath Ayub's words—

"She goes with us to Aleppo."

When Demid entered the dwelling of Ibnol Hammamgi he bore with him two heavy sacks that clanked as he set them down near the tiled stove. A dozen pairs of eyes flew instantly to the sacks and lingered desirefully. They were hard, bleared eyes, those of the headmen of the tribe of Sivas—aye, sharp and penetrating withal. They pierced inside the heavy leather sacks and a dozen minds, shrewd as foxes, probed at the value of the things that clanked.

Beards wagged upon the breasts of ancient *kaftans*, shiny with grease, and the eyes, by a common impulse, traveled to the face of the young Cossack.

It was an open, weather-beaten face, that of Demid. The corded muscles of the bare throat and the slow-moving hands were evidence of lean strength not at first noticeable in that slender figure.

The headmen were satisfied. With half a glance they could pick out a man whose thoughts did not dwell on money values. It was well, they thought, that the stranger was such, because they meant to have some gain out of the windfall. Ibnol Hammamgi, their *cral*, had saved the thick necks of the Cossacks, and something was owing to the tribe for that—if not gifts, then some horses stolen, a few weapons pilfered by boys—a purse slit here and there by the young women—

Methodically Demid emptied out the contents of the sacks. Gold armlets, a silver headband for a horse studded with sapphires, bits of ambergris, poniards from India with ivory hilts, odds and ends of coral. He had gathered together the pickings of the warriors on their ride up from the coast—some hasty plundering, done at his command.

Now, to give the headmen time to weigh the value that was scattered on the rug by their knees, he paused to light his pipe. This served, too, to stifle the smells of the hut, for overhead on the rafters were drying woolen pantaloons, and salted fish and the stove hinted at goose feathers and bones in the fire—distasteful to the Don Cossack, who had no liking for the odors of a house, especially a dirty one.

But long before he had replaced the booty in the bags, a dozen agile brains had guessed the value of his takings to a copper drachma in the markets of Trebizond or Sinope.

"I leave these sacks in your keeping," he said to Ibnol Hammamgi, in the Turkish that the Armenians understood, "until we ride back from our raid. If we are successful all this shall be yours. If we fail we will take them again, having need of them."

"Whither will the noble lord raid?"

"To the castle of Sidi Ahmad, in Aleppo."

"Impossible!"

The headmen drew back into their fur-lined *kaftans* like birds ruffling their plumage at a sudden alarm.

"That is madness!"

"How, madness?" Demid pushed the sacks away from him. "Is not Rurik, our *cral*, captive at the Imperial City, with many Cossack knights? Does not the sultan demand ten thousand ducats for his ransom alone? Well then, we must lay our hands on a treasure and surely there is a treasure at Aleppo."

The elders all began to talk at once, lifting their hands, and raising their voices, one above the other until Ibnol Hammamgi shrieked louder than the rest and shrieked for silence.

"What do you want of us?" he demanded, and now the headmen were quiet, seeking to weigh Demid as they had his booty. But this they found more difficult.

"A guide—horses—information."

"How many horses?"

"Two tens. But they must be good ones, Kabarda breed, or Kabulis."

"Not to be thought of! The horses would be lost to us, because you will never come back."

"Some of us will come back, Ibnol Hammamgi, and you will do well to aid us because one of your blood rides with us."

"To Aleppo?"

The bald head of the chief shook with a dry chuckle.

"We do not visit the stronghold of Sidi Ahmad, the Turk. Once I visited Aleppo, and they took a toll from me—thus." He shut his good eye and opened the red socket of his blind side.

"Lali, daughter of Macari, goes with us."

"*Ekh!* Does a clipped hawk fly back to the hunter? The daughter of Macari is not one in heart with the Moslems; in her veins is the blood of her people. Does the noble lord think that now, when she is restored to us, she will be off at once to that demon's place, Aleppo?"

The noble lord looked at Ibnol Hammamgi thoughtfully. To tell the truth he had not reflected much upon Lali. The singing girl, that evening, had assured him that she would journey with the Cossacks to the castle of Sidi Ahmad, and Demid had found it a fruitless task to try to reason out why a woman—Lali especially—did things.

"Perhaps the distinguished captain," went on Ibnol Hammamgi, "does not know that Lali el Niksar is the child of a line of kings. Like a wild goose she is not to be tamed; her forefather was Kagig the First, who was monarch of a thousand spears when Greater Armenia was free, when the Frankish crusaders passed under our mountains and our chivalry fought at their side, and the ravines ran blood in rivers. *Christos vokros!* That was a day of days."

A gleam came into his sunken eye and his fingers clawed restlessly at his wisp of a beard.

"Blood will flow again before our horses turn their heads, O *cral*. Bid the girl stand before you, and you shall hear the promise she made."

Ibnol Hammamgi muttered over his shoulder and a tousled lad upheaved from a nest of sheepskins, to run out of the hut in quest of Lali.

Meanwhile the fire had departed the pallid face of the chief and the habitual mask of caution descended upon it. It would not do at all, he reflected, for the Cossacks to make trouble for the tribe of Sivas.

"It is quite clear to me," he said, "that the noble sir does not know Sidi Ahmad at all. Except only the Sultan Mustapha, himself—may the dogs litter on his grave—the pasha of Aleppo is the greatest of Moslems. He has a heavy hand and a quick wit, and his treasury is full as a squirrel's nest in Autumn."

Here Ibnol Hammamgi sighed, thinking of the vast wealth of the pasha.

"He has bled our people white, and he has taken a third from all the caravans that must cross his province; he took prisoner some of the finest emirs of Persia and no one can count the ransom he had of them. Besides that, he is overlord of Jerusalem, and has raised the admission fee to the Holy Sepulcher to four zecchins a pilgrim, not to speak of the entrance toll to the city for a Christian, of another six, and the certificate of visitation. Besides that, he has farmed out to the Arab chiefs the privilege of plundering the Frank pilgrims, at three thousand *sultanons* a year—"

"Dog of the ——" Demid growled. "Why do not the Franks make their pistols talk to these usurers?"

Ibnol Hammamgi shrugged philosophically.

"Eh, the Franks are pilgrims, not warriors. A pilgrim pays money to keep his hide whole, a soldier is paid to have his cut up. Verily, Sidi Ahmad is the father of stratagems."

Suddenly the Cossack's white teeth flashed in a smile.

"A trafficker such as this pasha cannot be a man of battle."

"Then the handsome captain does not know the repute of Sidi Ahmad. It is said that he was whelped during a sea fight, on a galley. They call him a sword-slayer, another Rustam—"

"Good! Then he will be worth cutting down."

The old Armenians glanced at each other and threw up their arms, thinking that Demid had been drinking, which was not the case.

"The noble lord jests," remarked Ibnol Hammamgi sourly. "The pasha is the worst of all foes because he is *ghazi*—a conqueror of Christians, who has sworn on oath to keep his hand raised against them. Moreover, as I said, he is a very fox. Before he was appointed to the *pashalik* by his master the Grand Signior, he roamed the seas and the land like a tempest, bringing woe upon the enemies of the Moslems. But the minute he stepped inside the gates of Aleppo he shut himself up in his palace. The palace is shut up inside a wall, and the wall rests on a hill in the city. In the palace is a tower called the Wolf's Ear."

Demid nodded, listening attentively.

"Within the Wolf's Ear, Sidi Ahmad holds his *divan*—his judgment seat. There he receives his officers. About the tower is a garden, and there he takes his relaxation. He is gathering together a veritable thundercloud of men."

"And yet he sits in the tower."

"Always. It is said in the bazaars that in the Wolf's Ear is the treasury of the province. But, because he distrusts all men, the pasha allows few besides himself to dwell in the palace; moreover—" Ibnol Hammamgi lowered his voice from habitual caution—"some say that no one is allowed sight of the face of Sidi Ahmad."

Demid merely puffed at his pipe, assuming lack of interest, knowing that this was the quickest way to draw forth truth.

"Since he came to Aleppo, the pasha has given his judgments and tortured his prisoners at night, and the lights in the tower are kept away from him. Why is that? There is something hidden here. At times is heard the voice of another man behind the pasha and always this voice laughs."

It was the way of the Grand Signior to send officers to his governors who picked quarrels with the pashas or hired others to do so, and—when an official was dead, the sultan by virtue of the Moslem law became master of his possessions. In such fashion the treasure of the two predecessors of Sidi Ahmad had fallen to Constantinople. But the present pasha had guarded himself effectively until now, when his power was such that Mustapha did not dare do away with him. Moreover, Sidi Ahmad had been a favorite at court, and was *ghazi*.

This was late January and in some four months the passes of the Caucasus would be clear of snow. Then the forces of Aleppo would move to join Mustapha, and the united strength of the Turks and Tatars would go against Christian Europe. This meant the Cossacks would be the first to face invasion.

"It is strange," Demid said slowly. "A fanatic, a warrior—and now a miser in his own prison. Is Sidi Ahmad tall and powerful of build?"

Ibnol Hammamgi shook his head.

"Nay, slight as a bird, and quick as a fox. How will you attempt to raid such a place?"

"By a trick."

"Ah!" The Armenian was stirred to interest. "By what trick?"

"I will walk through the gates, and they will all open to me."

"Riddles! By what key will you open the gates?"

"There is the key."

Demid nodded toward the door of the hut and the elders started, beholding Lali leaning against the doorpost. No one except Demid had heard her enter.

"*Ai-a*!" Ibnol Hammamgi glared. "Daughter of Macari, will you ride to that place of all abomination with this Frank?"

"Aye, so."

A tumult of protest and reproof arose, heads wagged, and sleeves were rolled up that lean brown arms might gesture the better; foam started on the bearded lips of the headmen. They agreed that Lali had eaten shame by dwelling in the palaces of the Imperial City. By leaving her people for the seraglio of Sidi Ahmad, she would make that shame memorable, they cried.

"I have been incensed and blessed by the patriarch, O fathers," she cried at them. "I am ready for what is unseen and unguessed."

"But to go to the man who cut open your father, like a fish!"

The white face of the girl stood out, a cameo against the shadows of the hut, and seeing that their words were unheeded, the Armenians ceased their outcry. Lali, being the child of a chieftain, and her parents dead, was free to follow what path she would. She even smiled, for Demid glanced at her with frank approval.

The young warrior could deal with the shrewd brains of the Armenians, perhaps because his life had been spent until now in the wilderness where his friends and enemies were beasts, the man from the Don could see through the schemes of men; because of nights passed in riding herd and sitting by the lair of a stag, he had learned how to rely upon instincts that warned of danger.

But he could not judge what was in the soul of Lali nor did any instinct warn him against the danger that dwelt in the passion of the girl for him.

On the next day Michael of Rohan vanished from Sivas as if the caves in the hillside had swallowed him up. He left not a trace, and Ibnol Hammamgi was as astonished as the Cossacks.

But Lali had never been merrier than on that eve of her setting out for Aleppo.

VIII

Where his grave is dug there shall a man die, and not otherwise.

He who hath a small soul walks with a short step, searching with his eyes for that which may not be seen, but the warrior who is great of heart strides free, knowing that Providence is greater than he.

Arab proverb

In the guard rooms of the musketeers of Paris many times had Sir Michael of Rohan wagered what he had in the world at *ecarte* or dice. It was his habit to accept the quips of fortune smilingly. The world was full of quips and he asked no more than to have a hand in the jest that was going the rounds. He had one peculiarity in play; whenever the women of the court or the nobles' halls took seat at his table, Sir Michael was wont to rise and lay down his hand or pocket his stake, making the excuse with perfect good humor that the ladies dazzled his poor wits.

The truth of it was that the fairer sex had no little skill at cheating, and it was not the part of a cavalier to call attention to peccadilloes of this nature. Michael preferred to sit and watch, taking much amusement therefrom.

It was a fair bright morning, and the cavalier had been in good spirits as he watched the last of the sunrise from the edge of a cliff that formed an impregnable barrier between the tribe of Sivas and an invader. He had not heard Lali approach until she stood behind him, but upon perceiving the dark-haired girl, he had made a courteous bow, sweeping his plumed hat upon the very surface of the snow.

She stepped to the edge of the rock and looked down, the wind whipping her cloak about her limbs, and her long tresses unruly.

"From this rock, O Frank," she observed, "we cast down those who have offended. Many stout Turks who sought to climb to our nest have been tumbled back into purgatory from here."

"Ah!"

Michael offered his arm, and she took it, though sure of foot as a mountain goat. An imp of mischief danced in her dark eyes.

"Why does the young warrior always seek you?" she questioned gravely. "He never came for me but once and then he struck me."

From beneath lashes her eyes searched his face, and Michael did not answer because just then his ear caught the rasping of gravel displaced behind him. Lali's lips hardened.

"You are always with him, and your words have turned him against me," she accused hotly.

"I? Not so!" Michael glanced at her, puzzled, and, as he did so, the light was shut out. A heavy bearskin fell upon his head, thrown from behind.

A man standing with his toes over a sheer fall of some thousand feet does not move haphazard. Michael reached swiftly enough for his sword, but before his fingers touched the hilt he heard the steel blade slither out. Lali had drawn it from the leather sheath.

He threw himself back, groping at the thick folds of the skin, and stumbled over his scabbard. A fiery wave passed up and down his spine as his feet slipped in the loose stones. Then powerful hands caught his wrists and ankles, and a rope was passed around his neck, binding the bearskin upon his head.

The assailants lifted him, and bound his hands behind his back, passing the ends of the rope through his belt in front. Steel pricked his shoulder, and he heard Lali's contented laugh.

"Farewell, O my companion of the road. You go the way of an offender, but down the cliff path, so do not think to run away."

The rope attached to his belt tugged him to one side; another cord, tied to his bound wrists, swung him into the path—as his groping feet assured

him. Muffled as he was, Michael did not think of shouting for aid, judging that if he did he would be thrust over the rock. Men's voices reached him and feet crunched before and behind. The bearskin, as the sun grew stronger, nearly smothered him, while he felt his way down the path.

It was noon by the sun when the skin was pulled from his head. Michael was standing in the valley under Sivas, looking up at the tiny spots that were the huts against the glitter of the snow. Around him were the bare stalks of a vineyard, and within it he saw three Armenians taking money from a pockmarked merchant who kept glancing at him, doling out a silver coin after each glance, more slowly, until he stopped and the four fell to railing, until the Armenians finally left the merchant.

As they passed Michael—one was the boy who had served as guide from the Black Sea—he called out—"The Cossacks will give more if you take me back."

But the boy turned his head away. Michael's lips stiffened.

"Where will they take me?"

One of the Sivas men looked over his shoulder.

"Bagdad—I don't know."

Michael opened his lips to call again, then squared his shoulders and turned to the two Turkomans who were leaning on their spears and looking at the line of laden mules standing near the vineyard—the caravan of the merchant who had bought Michael.

They untied his wrists, led him to a mule and when he was on the animal's back, bound his ankles together under its belly. A word of command was passed down the line of the caravan, saddles creaked, dogs barked, and voices rose in vituperation without which nothing is ever done in that bedlam of the world—Asia Minor.

Michael took off his hat and bowed to the distant height.

"I wish you well of the silver, Mistress Lali," he cried in English. "'Twas a slender price for such a man as I—who wished you well. If God sends we meet again I shall weigh you with more care."

He struck the mule with the flat of his leather scabbard and moved on with the caravan, the guards finding amusement in this antic of the Frank. It occurred to him that Demid had been wise to keep him with the Cossacks.

A week later they threaded through the last mud of the foothills and dropped down below the snowline, having passed under the ruins of Zeitoon, once

the stronghold of the Armenians, now razed on its crags by order of Sidi Ahmad. Some of the merchants of the caravan drew off here, to take the highway to Damascus, but Michael's owner remained with various rug sellers and other slave traders, on the southern trail.

Being merchants who disliked hardships, they camped that night on the near shore of a swift, blue river that Michael fancied to be the Chan or Jihan, once crossed by Xenophon and the Greeks. Being swollen by the melting snows its crossing was no easy feat, and the next morning the Turkomans were forced to strip, to carry over the goods on their heads, while the slaves were set to work to build rafts.

Michael, setting about his share of the task philosophically, was the first to note a band of cloaked horsemen spurring up over the sands. The merchants shouted for the guards, but those who were in the river made haste to complete the crossing, and the few remaining, after a glance at the drawn scimitars of the Arab marauders, cast away their spears and sat down to watch events.

So did the slaves. Several of the owners of the caravan offered fight, probably hoping to make better terms by a show of resistance. The raiders made no bones about riding them down, and Michael noticed that they cut the throat of the merchant who had bought him.

In a few minutes the slaves who had been about to cross the Jihan were lined up and divided among the chiefs of the pillagers, together with the bales of cotton and furs. Camels were then brought up by grinning boys who signed for the prisoners to mount and accompany their new masters. A couple of the Turkomans were included by way of good measure, and Michael suspected that those who were left behind took advantage of the happening to plunder the remaining merchants.

So began a strange chapter in the long wanderings of the Irishman, who, in the eyes of his captors, the Arabs, was no longer a living spirit, but a thing of flesh and muscles, to be sold for the best price it would bring.

He noticed that the Arabs headed southwest along the river and crossed lower down that same day, moving out before dawn toward a rocky range of hills where only one pass was visible. After laboring through the mud of this ravine, they made camp in a ruined *khan*—a traveler's shelter in a plain green and pleasant with olive trees and pomegranates.

Here again, the company divided after lengthy discussion, and an old Arab who looked what he was—a monarch of horse thieves—signed for Michael to come with him and a stripling who bristled with weapons as he tried to strut like the warriors.

This was different from the mule caravan. On a swift-gaited camel Michael sped along a beaten track with the desert riders, who circled the villages and headed toward a nest of minarets on the skyline.

Studying their destination as it drew nearer, Michael made out the white sides of a castle rising on a height—the green of gardens showing over the walls and a lofty tower over the gardens. Perhaps because the ground outside had been cleared of all brush and huts, he had never beheld walls so massive as those which hemmed in the city of minarets and domes—a city gleaming white and yellow and purple under the utter blue of the sky.

One of the thieves let fall a word that roused his curiosity at once—"Haleb."

Now Michael was almost sure that this was Aleppo, and the thought that he had come before the Cossacks to their destination made him smile.

Michael reasoned that the Cossacks would delay only a short while to search for him; learning nothing of his seizure, they would press on, playing as they were for a great stake. They might come into sight of the city about this time, and he cherished this flicker of hope.

But, passing through the heavily guarded gate—Bab el Nasr, Gate of Victory, it was called—on the north side of the town, and threading into the crowded passages between the sheer walls of mosques and the dwellings of the nobles, he mentally increased the odds against Demid.

Aleppo was full of Moslem soldiery.

Moreover it was full of mosques, which meant throngs of armed worshippers, who indeed fired at him volleys of abuse, with more than a little mud and stones. The old Arab, however, was equal to the task of caring for his stock-in-trade. Giving back insult for insult he took the center of the alleys with his camel while his son brought up the rear with display of teeth and steel, until they gained the shelter of the caravansary of the desert men near the slave market.

Here space was procured for the three camels in the crowded lower court, and Michael's captor bought oil and vegetables and coffee from the shops within the *serai* wall, enough for three men. Holding up the skirts of his long cloak, and using his tongue in lieu of elbows to clear a passage, he conducted his prisoner to the wide gallery that ran around the court, where in rows of cubicles, raised a foot or so off the floor, motley groups of visitors sat about dung fires, cooking each one a different thing with a different smell. The Arab ousted a worried looking Jew from the

cell he selected for himself, and built up the fire started by the Jew who really was in the wrong *serai* and knew it and was glad to get off with a whole skin.

As soon as they had eaten their fill they trussed Michael up, and the son went off to see that their camels were not stolen or to steal others himself, and the sire squatted comfortably to listen to the scraps of talk that floated up from the coffee house within the arcade of the *serai*.

Michael could make nothing out of the bedlam of tongues, until a dandified janissary strolled past the cell, noticed the waterpipe of the old Arab and asked for a whiff in the name of Allah the Compassionate.

The elegant one had a fierce beard and a stock of blades and hand-guns in his girdle that would have aroused the instant envy of the boy who had left; moreover the taint of forbidden wine was heavy upon him.

"Set it between thy hands."

The Arab extended the stem of the hubble-bubble across Michael's prostrate form, so that the warrior was forced to squat on the other side of the prisoner, thus precluding a knife thrust from either.

The Arab, being in from the hills, desired to hear gossip, and he drew information from the janissary in such masterly fashion that Michael gave keen attention.

He heard that he was to be sold on the morrow, since a *zineh*, or festival, began the next day, when all the shops were to be closed. This festival had been ordered by Sidi Ahmad, to celebrate the arrival of a courier from the sultan.

Sidi Ahmad, then, was in Aleppo.

Meanwhile the forces of the pasha were being ordered up from the Persian border and the Euphrates. A detachment of mamelukes had crossed over from Egypt and was waiting in Damascus for marching orders.

"The Sidi will strike a great blow when he goes against the Franks," boasted the warrior.

"True. The slaying of infidels is pleasing in the sight of Allah. And yet—and yet, the master of Aleppo has grown too great for Aleppo. It may be that he will also strike a blow for himself at Constantinople, and thou and I may yet serve Sultan Ahmad instead of Sultan Mustapha."

The janissary muttered and handed back the pipe stem after wiping it with his sleeve. Glancing around cautiously, he leaned over Michael to whisper:

"Then our backs would be strengthened—we would have a wiser head to lead the faithful. No man is as crafty as—the Wolf's Ear."

"Perhaps it is written."

"Aye, he is *ghazi*."

"In the hills there was talk of this and that. Some said Sidi Ahmad had been seen in Egypt, others that he had gone upon the sea for some purpose. He hides his thoughts."

"Allah, those were lies." The janissary opened his beard in a soundless laugh. "Sidi Ahmad has kept to the Wolf's Ear, like a squirrel to its nest. For months he has not mounted his horse. I have seen it."

The old Arab puffed at his pipe thoughtfully.

"When you look at a stone do you see a mountain? When you watch a horse can you answer for its master? Sidi Ahmad is one among ten thousand; you say he is here, and I must have dreamed by hashish when I beheld him riding like the devil of the air when the moon was last full."

"You must have dreamed, waggle-beard."

Michael was pleased that no one had word of the Cossacks as yet—if indeed they were nearing Aleppo. The two fell to talking of the riches of Sidi Ahmad, the Arab with an eye to thievery probing shrewdly at where the treasure was kept in the castle. But the soldier was cautious here.

"Where, if not under the hand of the *wazir*, the treasurer?"

"You are doubtless a captain of many. Only yesterday it is said that the *wazir* collected a new tax from the *suk*, the marketplace. Allah alone knows how heavy are the money bags of Sidi Ahmad. The *wazir* must be tormented with doubt if the treasure is guarded by men—surely he has hidden it, while Sidi Ahmad was absent."

"Fool! The pasha has not left the Wolf's Ear. Gold dinars and costly jewels are to be his sinews. With them he can buy swords and swordarms."

"True. And yet I have not counted more than a score of guards about the tower that is called the Wolf's Ear."

"Few can be trusted. And now—the Peace!"

The janissary rose a little unsteadily and swaggered off. When Michael turned over to ease his cramped limbs he beheld the son of the thief squatting in the shadows, inspecting the most valuable of the daggers that the warrior had worn in his belt. The old man nodded approvingly and returned to the gentle sputtering of his pipe.

Buyers in the *suk* were few, because every householder was busied in laying out the best of his rugs and hangings in stall and balcony to prepare for the festival.

Some felt of Michael's muscles, as he stood, naked to the waist in the glaring sun above the two Arabs who knelt at ease. But they passed on after learning the price of the Frankish slave. Others stared curiously at his strange hat and long boots, and walked on to where women were offered. Michael saw dark-haired Armenians, and statuesque Georgians, with many Persian maids standing near him; these waited patiently, until a trade was made, then followed their masters off the square with the passivity of animals. Michael preferred to watch the riders that trotted by along the street leading to the castle gate.

His attention was drawn back presently by the crying of some Spanish girls, taken—he heard related—by a raid of corsairs on the coast of that country. Their mother had just been sold to a stout Turk, who was berating the slave merchant for the uproar caused by the children. Michael saw the trader strike the girls with his staff, and, instinctively he took a step toward them: Then, recollecting his plight, at a snarl from the Arab he turned back.

But not before the eye of a tall sheik, wrapped to the cheekbones in the folds of his white robe, had fallen upon him. The newcomer strode over to Michael and studied him for a full moment.

"At what price is this one offered?"

The Arab called a thousand greetings upon the stranger and said that it was no more than two hundred dinars, that Michael had an excellent disposition, was strong as a horse, and—

"He has been a galley slave."

The stranger pointed to the thick wrists and gnarled arms of the cavalier.

"A hundred is enough, the tax to be paid by you—"

"O blind and small-of-wit—"

A powerful hand freed itself from the folds of the other's dress and the Arab's face changed visibly as he saw a seal ring on the thumb before his eyes.

"O father of blessings—"

"Deliver him to my men."

The stranger moved on, leisurely, with his long stride and was lost in the throng. Meanwhile a group of armed servants closed around the cavalier after paying the Arab his price, which he took dourly enough now that the man of the seal ring was gone.

But Michael did not move. Down the street came a clash of cymbals and a shouting of guards, pushing the crowd back. Those around him rose to peer at the commotion, and a joyful shout from the street was echoed in the market place. A body of janissaries moved into view, escorting a splendid white camel on which a canopy of carpets half concealed the slender form of a woman.

"Way for the messenger of the mighty, the merciful Mustapha, Protector of Islam, Sword of Mohammed! Way for the distinguished *aga* and the gift he brings!"

So cried the soldiery, and the rabble roared in glee when the handsome noble on a blue-veined Arab barb—he who rode directly before the camel—began to cast handfuls of silver coin over the uplifted heads. Michael noticed that the *aga* sat his high-peaked saddle like a rider born, that his turban was sewn with pearls, and the fringe of his *kaftan* glittered with gold thread.

"Allah's blessing upon the giver! Ten thousand welcomes to the *aga*, the victorious, the youthful lord, El Kadhr."

So cried the multitude, and Michael's eyes sparkled. The man who came as the sultan's messenger was Demid.

His beard had been clipped short and parted in the middle, after the northern fashion, but no other disguise—save the garments, plundered perhaps from some caravan on the way—was needed, for the face of the Cossack chief was lean, the dark eyes slanting—a heritage from some Tatar ancestor. His attire was that of a Turkoman chief and his manner, composed and slightly contemptuous, bore out the part.

Michael turned his attention to the rider on the camel. Lali had been furnished new garments, but the poise of her head was unmistakable although she was heavily veiled. Before her walked the two blacks, once more at ease despite their scars. Well for Demid, thought Michael, they were mutes. They had a tale for the telling!

Yet now they stalked proudly, aware of their importance—two eunuchs of the imperial court, unmistakable as such.

Alone, in that great throng, the cavalier did not call out. He could have made Demid hear, for the cortege passed within stone's throw. But to signal to the Cossack before those hundreds of vigilant eyes would be to place the chieftain in jeopardy at once. Michael remained silent, smiling a little as he understood the trick by which Demid had entered Aleppo. He had merely taken the place of the *aga*, who had been slain on the galley—the

officer who had had Lali in his charge. But Ayub and the other Cossacks were not visible, and Michael wondered what part they were to play.

"The Sidi will have a warm welcome for this bringer of gifts," spoke up someone near him. "It is said that El Kadhr had a wolf's fight with a band of unbelievers in the hills and overthrew them, after all but these few of his men were slain."

A savage shout gave token of the joy of the Moslems at this feat of the *aga*, and Michael, listening, grew thoughtful. In this way Demid had explained his lack of escort; the janissaries he must have picked up near the city. But, successful in passing the gates of Aleppo, where no other Christians were suffered to enter except as slaves, he was now in the center of a fanatical mob that would tear his limbs apart at a slip of the tongue or a false move.

All at once Michael was aware that Demid had seen him. The gaze of the *aga* had passed over the slaves and lingered a second on the cavalier. Tossing some silver toward the clamoring Arab younglings he rode on without a sign of recognition.

Another moment and he checked his horse where the multitude at the road leading up to the castle held up the cavalcade. Stooping he spoke swiftly to one of the officers of the guards, handing the man at the same time a purse from his girdle.

The janissary made a sign of obedience, looked around at Michael and made his way back to the *suk*. Swaggering as one who had just been noticed by the messenger of the sultan, he approached the Arab.

"How high is the bidding for this Frank?" he asked curtly.

The desert man fingered his beard thoughtfully, and seeing no loss in talk, drew the soldier a little aside from the Turkomans who were still staring after the envoy.

"Three hundred gold pieces, to you, my friend, and the tax on you. You have seen how docile he is—"

"I have here two hundred and twenty dinars. It is yours for the slave. The lord from the imperial city has given me command to buy this dog. The Frank crossed his glance with the *aga*, and perhaps made a spell upon him. So the lord from the imperial city has selected me to buy him, in order that he may be slain and the spell rendered of no account. The *aga*, El Kadhr, is a hater of the Nazarenes, as a man should be."

At this Michael's pulse quickened, for covetousness darkened the Arab's eyes, and he schemed palpably to avail himself of the new offer. The

guards observed that Michael was standing by them, but took no notice of the merchant.

"Surely you have more than that in the purse," objected the desert man. "I saw the *aga* hand it to you. Is it not all for this Frank? The envoy is open of hand."

"By my beard, it is not so. And the tax is on you—"

"*B'illah!* What do you say?"

Inwardly cursing their quarreling, Michael listened to their rising voices in a feverish suspense.

"Allah! What words are these words. The door of bidding is closed!"

The leader of the Turkomans swung around and grasped Michael's shoulder.

"Dog of an Arab! Saw you not the *wazir*'s ring?"

The desert man flung up his arms with a groan.

"Aye," he muttered to the puzzled janissary. "A dweller in the Wolf's Ear saw fit to claim this slave for a fourth of his value. I have eaten wrong-dealing—"

"Which you will spew out again, father of thieving!" growled the Turkoman, and made a sign for his companions to close around Michael.

As they moved off Michael saw the janissary stop to curse the desert man, and then—well aware of the danger of crossing an official of the castle—stride away toward Demid. He had not gone far before a lithe, tattered figure stole after him, and stumbled over his heels. The blade of a knife flashed, and the purse which the soldier had tied to his girdle dropped into the hand of the son of the Arab.

Michael, despite his disappointment, could laugh merrily at this. The butt of the Turkoman's spear smote his cheek, splitting the skin.

"O *caphar*, unbeliever, you can work your spells in the darkness under the Wolf's Ear. Hasten, for you will have an audience with your master."

So it happened on the day of the festival in Aleppo that the man with the signet ring passed into the gate of the palace wall, and after him Demid and his charge, and upon their heels, in a sad strait indeed but no whit disheartened, Sir Michael of Rohan.

IX

The Voice of Darkness

A night and a day Michael waited for the interview with his new master. The chamber in which he had been confined without food was bare

except for two hemp ropes suspended from the beams of the ceiling and ending in slip-nooses about a yard from the floor. Under the ropes lay two lengths of bamboo, tough and pliable. Under the bamboos was a thick veneer of dried blood—the mark of the bastinado, in which a prisoner was strung up by the ankles and beaten with the bamboos upon the soles of his bare feet until exhausted nerves gave way and he confessed, or lied to save himself.

At the end of the time a door opened and two armed negroes entered with cresset torches, signing for Michael to advance to the black square of the open portal. But on the threshold they stayed him, and he made out a figure in the shadows beyond.

This was a thin, stooped form draped in striped silk. A form with a beak of a face and a pinched mouth, seeming to droop under the weight of a massive green turban set with emeralds.

"The Sidi ibn Ahmad," grunted one of the slaves, "would have speech with thee."

Michael bowed and stood at ease, sniffing the odor of musk and opium, while two large eyes considered him.

"O Frank," said the Moslem sharply, "where are the *kazaks*?"

It startled Michael more than a little that this man should be aware he spoke Turki, and had knowledge of the raid of the Cossacks.

"Who knows," he replied musingly, "if not Allah?"

"You do."

"That is not true."

"Bah! Offspring of swine, the Sidi has eyes that can pierce beyond the hills. A band of *kazaks* rode toward Aleppo. Where did you leave them?"

"If you can see through the hills, then you can see them. I know nothing."

"Dog of an unbeliever! You were in their company. What plans had they formed when you were taken from them?"

If, Michael thought, the pasha of Aleppo could not see beyond the Caucasus, he must have ears in every bazaar in Asia Minor. And this was close to the truth, for the man in the doorway was well served by spies.

"The chief of the *kazaks*," went on he of the turban, "is like a falcon, striking far from home. But where are his men?"

Michael, wondering if Demid's disguise had been pierced, only shook his head. Demid had been careful to say nothing of his plans to any one.

The man in the door snapped his teeth angrily and motioned to the guards to string Michael up. As they moved to do this, a high voice whispered something from the darkness behind the dignitary, who hesitated and drew back.

"We will not wheedle you like a woman. You have until the midmorning prayer of the morrow to make up your mind to confess. When that time comes if you do not speak you will be drawn on the stake—" he paused, the pinched lips curving with relish—"by horses."

"Nay, not that!" cried Michael, starting.

"Aye, unbeliever. Prepare to taste *maul ahmar*, the bloody death."

The slaves drew back and the door closed, leaving him to the shadows of the torture chamber and the contemplation of the bastinado ropes that now seemed luxurious compared to the fate in store for him. He wondered who the unseen speaker had been—for who would countermand an order of Sidi Ahmad, within the palace?

"Perhaps a woman," he reasoned.

To be drawn on a stake by horses, before a throng of watching Turks! Michael gritted his teeth. Hanging was better, and yet—and yet, he would not play the part of a coward. If he could make up a false tale—but instinct warned him that the pasha was not to be hoodwinked.

"Ah, if they would put a blade in my hand, it would be a blessed thing."

He thought longingly of Demid, and the chance of having a weapon smuggled in through the grating of the window. Demid had tried to get him free, and speak with him—had taken a daring chance—but the Cossack could not know where he was confined.

"What a lad he is! God save him!" thought Michael admiringly, and wondered what plan the Cossack meant to follow.

Demid had done as he promised Ibnol Hammamgi—had passed openly through the gate of Aleppo and the wall of the castle, into the Wolf's Ear.

Perhaps Lali, who seemed to know all things, had an inkling of where the pasha kept his treasure; perhaps the singing girl could find out. Michael had reasoned that the treasure would lie in the tower or under it. He was quick of wit and he had noticed that the janissaries who brought him had turned over their prisoner to the personal slaves of Sidi Ahmad at the tower door.

He had used his eyes and had a fair idea of the plan of the palace, which was much like that of a medieval castle in England. At the rear a sheer cliff some twenty feet high rose from the slope of the hill. Above this were the terraced gardens of the palace itself, protected on the other three sides by a wall of solid marble blocks, too high to climb, too massive to beat in.

The road that led up to this wall from the alleys of Aleppo passed through the single gate of ironbound teak. Seen from the *suk* this gate seemed to be the eye of a wolf, the palace its skull, and the tower its ear.

The palace itself was small, forming three sides of a courtyard. The embrasures of the dungeon, set with iron bars, looked out upon the cedars and olive trees and the pleasant fountain of the courtyard. Michael could see no more than the tops of the trees and the spray of the fountain, for the opening was a spear's length over his head.

It seemed to him that the torture chamber was the base of the tower, as the walls were of massive black basalt and the columns supporting the ceiling were thick as buttresses, instead of the slender pillars of Arabic design. In fact the grim, black tower with its rounded cupola was like nothing else in Aleppo. Perhaps it had been built centuries ago for an astrologer—certainly it served to guard Sidi Ahmad from assassins.

All at once Michael stiffened where he sat in a corner of the torture chamber. A slight sound had reached him, the muffled gritting of iron against stone. Often before when the chamber was in darkness he had heard this sound, but now he was aware of a breath of stale air that passed across his cheek.

As quietly as possible he rose to his feet, with an effort, for long fasting had sapped his strength. Too clearly to be mistaken he now heard the tinkle of a guitar, and a swelling voice, high and plaintive.

From afar I watch for thy coming,
"O my lord!"

These were the first words of Lali's song and the sound of it came through the embrasure overhead. Michael felt for the heavy ropes that hung near at hand, put his foot in one of the loops and drew himself up by his arms until he could see out into the court.

Sidi Ahmad was giving a feast near the pool. Cresset torches held by motionless slaves revealed a company of Turkish officers, in colored silks and velvets, kneeling on carpets, listening to the song of the girl. Beside the host was Demid, the stem of a hubble-bubble in his hand.

Lali sat a little apart from the other slave girls, behind a screen of palms, and Michael noticed that, even while she sang for the pasha, her glance went to the Cossack. At the end of her song, while the guests were smiling and praising her to the slender Turk, Michael ventured to call to her softly.

"Daughter of Macari, a boon I crave of him who shared bread and salt with me—a sword from him, passed through this grating. Give him that word."

Lali, rising, half turned her head toward the embrasure. Then, without response, she walked slowly to the feasters, adjusting her veil as she did so. The master of the palace gave command for a silver-sewn robe of honor to be brought her, and, receiving it, she bowed her dark head to the carpet. The officers of the janissaries and the dignitaries of the city lifted their hands and voiced courteous praise, for the grace of the girl could not be veiled.

"Hair blacker than the storm wind!"

"Eyes like a gazelle, softer than pearls—"

"Nay, she walks like the wind of dawn among the flowers!"

The host, sitting back in shadow himself, motioned Lali toward his slaves and leaned forward to present a costly gift to Demid, a scimitar of blue steel, chased with gold. Michael groaned under his breath, for Lali had not ventured near Demid and he remembered that now the singing girl had been given to Sidi Ahmad, and it would be mortal offence for Demid to exchange a word with her.

Then a voice from near at hand spoke laughingly—

"O watcher of the feast, is there no ease for thy hunger?"

Michael looked down into the gloom of the torture chamber and slid to the floor. The speaker seemed to be within the wall.

"Tell Sidi Ahmad what he seeks of you, and go unharmed from Aleppo on the morrow."

"Who are you?"

"A prisoner like yourself, until my time comes. Aye, I have fled from daggers that would pierce these walls."

Now was Michael aware of the truth that an elusive memory had been whispering to him. He knew the man who spoke from the wall.

"You are Captain Balaban, the Levantine!" he cried.

A pause, broken by a low, amused laugh—

"Nay, unbeliever, I am Sidi ibn Ahmad."

Grim was the palace of the Wolf's Ear, and dark the passageways beneath. Michael, hearkening to the lisp of lutes in the garden overhead, strained his eyes to make out the man who spoke to him, yet beheld only a black square where a secret door had opened, away from the torture chamber. In this opening stood Captain Balaban, erstwhile captive of the Cossacks, and the gloom of the dungeon was not more forbidding than the whispering glee of his high-pitched voice.

Michael bethought him of several things: the talk of the Moslems in the caravansary—that Sidi Ahmad had been on a journey from the Wolf's Ear. And the warning of Ibnol Hammamgi that the pasha kept his face hidden when he was in Aleppo. Also, he remembered the high honor accorded the Levantine when the man escaped to the Moslems of the corsair.

How better could Sidi Ahmad protect himself from assassins than by taking another name, and allowing one of his officers to pose as pasha during his absence?

"O dog of an unbeliever," went on the amused voice, "do you doubt my word? Would you see the signet ring of a pasha that I kept on a cord about my neck when I ventured among the Cossacks who guard the Christian frontier, to learn their strength? Or shall I summon my *wazir* who sits now on the carpet of honor in my stead—he who questioned you at my bidding?"

He clapped his hands and somewhere behind him a door opened, letting in a glow of candles. Michael saw that a section of the stone wall had been swung back upon its sockets, revealing a stair leading down past the dungeon. On a landing of this stair stood Balaban, robed in an Arab's cloak.

"Aye," the Moslem said, "I bought you of the thief in the *suk* and cheated him out of his profit—for you may be worth more than the price I paid. Verily, my word, a while ago, sentenced you to the stake—if you are fool enough to turn from my service."

He lifted a hand significantly.

"My word can save you from the stake. Consider this, O Nazarene: my star is rising in Asia, and men flock to me. Soon the green standard will be carried from Bagdad to Moscow, and I shall ride before the standard-bearer. Eyes serve me in hidden places and lips whisper in the Wolf's Ear; but my eyes have shown me the weakness of your peoples, who flee from the sea before the corsairs."

"Can your eyes find Demid and the hand of Cossacks?"

"Yes, by Allah! Demid sits at the feast over our heads. Alone, on the frontier his spirit is daring. Age the Cossack a bit and he would work harm, but now he is a fledgling flying before his time. I shall cut him down after you are staked."

Michael's heart sank, and his weariness grew upon him, for, indeed this man seemed to know all things.

"Consider again," the Levantine went on, fingering the scar upon his cheek, "that the Cossack drinks his fill without thought for you."

"A lie, that! Demid would strike a blow for me if he knew my plight."

A calculating light came into the Moslem's narrowed eyes.

"*Insh'allah*, that we shall see. I shall bid the young hero to watch your torture on the morrow, and you will see that he stirs not—not so much as a hair of his beard. But I can put a sword in your hand, and give you a golden name. Aye, you may not lack a *pashalik* if you will acknowledge Mohammed, and turn to the true faith. One thing I ask, that you make clear where the bull Cossack and his dozen are hidden, for until now they have escaped my search."

"I shared bread and salt with them."

"Bah—what is faith? A word that dies on the lips. Lali, the young witch, sold you—I know not why. What faith do you owe her lover?"

"The word of Michael of Rohan!"

With that the cavalier stiffened his muscles and leaped at the man who mocked him. His body shot into the open door, but his cramped limbs were sluggish and Balaban, stepping back, brought down the flat of his blade upon Michael's skull. Searing flames shot through the vision of the little man, and then—darkness.

X

The Zineh of Aleppo

When the middle of the morning came, and a captain of janissaries flung open the door of the prison, Michael walked forth steadily. He kept his head back, and by an effort of will stiffened his knees against trembling. Hunger that had been an agony, left him and he did not feel weak; but, coming out into the glare of sunlight on the uppermost terrace, just under the castle wall, he was conscious of sweat starting out all over his limbs.

In the center of the terrace the blunt end of a ten-foot stake had been sunk into the earth at an angle, leaving the sharpened end projecting along

the surface of the grass. Near at hand, slaves held the bridles of two Arab ponies, while others attached ropes to the breast-strap.

About this cleared space the guests of the night before sat on carpets in the shade of olive and lemon trees; officers of the guard strolled around, swaggering, some with hawks on their wrists, for the latticed windows of the palace hid the women of Sidi Ahmad—soft-limbed girls of many races whose lustrous eyes would brighten at the spectacle of the torture.

Here and there negroes placed trays of sherbet and sweetmeats before the watchers, and Michael heard voices crying wagers—how long would he endure before crying out. Beyond the low line of foliage, he beheld again the white minarets, the gold and purple domes of the Moslem city, and, like an echo upon the breeze came the faint cry of the caller to prayer:

Allah is the only god; and Mohammed is his prophet . . .
prayer is good . . . the hour of prayer is at hand . . .

A drone, as of multitudinous bees, arose from the streets below, where hundreds of worshippers were facing toward Mecca.

The spectators on the terrace arose and salaamed. The bird-like man—who acted the part of Sidi Ahmad—had appeared in the shadows under the trees, and with him Demid. The Cossack left his host and strolled over to inspect the stake and the horses. Michael's gaze flew to him and lingered, while, absently, he noticed that Demid wore two swords, his own and the scimitar of honor bestowed by the master of the feast the evening before.

This struck Michael as strangely ridiculous.

"Two swords—and one man—one sword too many, I'faith!"

He wagged his head, and a chuckle arose in his throat. The guards looked at him askance, and a mameluke in a fur-tipped *khalat* strolled over to stare his fill at the victim of the *maut ahmar*.

"A comely dog," the dark-faced warrior from Egypt muttered, caressing a gold chain at his throat, "but too lean in the limb—his bones will crack like a chicken's. I have seen—"

He confided, low-voiced, to one of the Turks what he had seen in the way of torture visited upon other Nazarenes. Michael's voice croaked.

"*Yah khawand*, a word with yonder noble, El Kadhr. I who go to the Severer of Life ask it."

"Will you confess the hiding-place of the pig *kazaks*?"

Michael shook his head, not caring to trust his voice again. He wished to warn Demid that Balaban was in Aleppo and that Balaban was Sidi Ahmad; but when he took an uncertain step forward toward his friend, nausea seized on him.

"Wine!" he whispered. "A cup of wine before the ordeal."

"To hear is to obey!"

The janissary whispered something to one of the palace slaves, who presently fetched a silver goblet from the courtyard. Michael seized it and raised it to his lips with a hand kept steady by the utmost effort of his will.

Within the cup was vinegar.

Michael quivered and hurled the silver goblet at the Moslem who had tricked him, and the mameluke smiled, beholding his musk-scented companion soaked with the vinegar.

"Eh, there is a devil in this prince of unbelievers! Nay—" as the other, red with rage, strove to draw sword—"this Frank is to be spared for the fate that awaits his kind."

Perceiving the attention of the throng on him for a second, the warrior of the *khalat* made a mock salaam before Michael.

"I pray your honor's honor to ascend the throne prepared for you. Ho, Moslems, give heed to this dog-coronation!"

A ripple of mirth passed over the savage faces, and merciless eyes fastened on the prisoner. Pleased with his own wit, the mameluke leaned forward to pull the stubble of beard that had grown on Michael's chin.

"Will you go forward to the stake, or shall I bid the palace wenches hither to whip you on?"

For a second the thought of angering the soldier—provoking him to use his sword—came to Michael. But then he was aware that by going to the stake he might speak to Demid, who had recognized him before now.

Michael crossed himself, and, followed closely by a janissary and the mameluke, walked up to the stake. Now he saw that Demid's face was tense, and that the Cossack's eves were smoldering even while he stood with folded arms.

A high-pitched voice, rife with amusement, floated from one of the palace windows.

"Where are the *kazaks*, O Nazarene?" Sidi Ahmad asked.

Michael halted and from very weariness leaned on the stake, while the slaves pulled forward the ropes attached to the horses.

"*Here is a Cossack!*"

It was thus that Demid spoke for all to hear, and answered the question of Sidi Ahmad. And before his lips closed on the words, his two swords were out of their sheaths. Michael never knew how the blades were drawn so swiftly, because he did not see Demid's left hand drop to the hilt of the scimitar on his right side, and the other hand to the sword of honor, on his left hip.

Nor did Michael see which blade it was that struck off the head of the mameluke, sending it rolling over the grass. But he did notice that one of the scimitars struck down the weapon the janissary drew, and then passed across the silk *vedt* of the Moslem warrior. The curved blades seemed only to stroke the man, but its razor edge severed the abdominal muscles and left the janissary dying on his feet, still staring in blank amazement.

Demid whirled on the slaves and struck one down; the remaining Moslem took to his heels, but tripped and fell, such was his dread of the steel that had taken the lives from three in thrice as many seconds.

"Two swords—one man," Michael muttered, still in a half stupor.

For a brief moment the Cossack and the cavalier stood alone by the stake, but already men were recovering from their amazement and rising to their feet under the trees. Sidi Ahmad, the clever, had indulged his whim to test Demid a trifle too far, and the Cossack knew how to use the minute of time that was worth more than the treasure of Sidi Ahmad to him.

"Can you stick to a horse's back?" he cried at Michael who was stumbling toward him. "Grapple the mane, but stick!"

With that he gave his comrade a hoist up, to the nearest pony. The other horse had shied at the smell of blood, but Demid ran to him, caught the dangling bridle, and glanced over his shoulder.

"On your faces, dogs," he roared at the oncoming guards. "A Cossack *ataman* rides through you. On your faces!"

He pointed to the prostrate forms around the stake and a shout of anger answered him. Perhaps the rage inspired by his challenge hampered the effort of the Moslems on the terrace to get near, perhaps no one cared to be the first to step into the path of Demid's horse. They had grouped toward the road leading to the gate, and hither Demid started, taking the rein of his pony in his teeth.

But almost at once he swerved from his course, caught the rein of Michael's horse in one hand that held a sword and beat both beasts with the flat of the other blade. They struck into a short-paced trot, and passed

between the in-running guards. Demid's sword flashed on either side, steel striking against steel, and one man fell.

The ponies lengthened their stride, guided by the superb horsemanship of the Cossack, and broke through the foliage of the terrace edge, taking the jump to the garden below, almost unseating Michael as they did so. Demid steadied his friend and headed toward the roadway, which was here unguarded. They reached it before their pursuers could come down from the upper level, and Michael saw that the gate in the main wall was open before them.

A shout from above brought out the warriors who had been squatting in the shade of the wall, but at that distance no command was heard clearly and no man thought to try to stop the notable El Kadhr, who galloped through the gate and down into the marketplace.

Old is Aleppo, mother of cities and father of thieves. Time has brought to its streets in turn the changing peoples of the earth, the Indian, the Parsi, the triumphant Israelite—saints and pharisees, princes and lepers—and the conquering Moslem. Each built upon the ruins of the other, and made of the city a labyrinth where alleys ran underground and bathing wells were the cisterns of former palaces. And where the caravans came, thither came the thieves.

Hither had come the old Arab who had stolen Michael of Rohan, and the boy Hassan, the Arab's son.

At midmorning they were sleeping in their cubicle in the *serai* of the desert men, sleeping with one eye open, because the boy had cut a purse not long before from a soldier who might bring an accusation against them—and they had no desire to face a Turkish *khadi*, a judge who might have a memory for past crimes, and who would certainly have an itching palm. Also, they wished to lie low before venturing out that evening to join the procession of the Guilds, when quarrels and purses might be picked.

So the curtain was drawn across their compartment, but the weasel ears of the boy Hassan heard the trumpets blare from the direction of the palace.

"Allah," he muttered, yawning and spitting, "has caused something to happen. The trumpets have called for the city gates to be closed."

Horses' hoofs thudded in the alley underneath and entered the arcade of the caravansary's shops, and passed on after a fragmentary pause. Both Hassan and his father, however, heard boots on the stone steps that led up

to the gallery of the inn, and presently their curtain was snatched aside and two men entered, the leader being the Nazarene slave whom they had sold to the Turks. Michael had guided Demid to the only place of refuge known to him.

Demid strode across the chamber and jerked the old thief to his feet by the beard. The Arab's whiskers bristled, like an angry cat's, and he grasped at his weapons, when he recognized his assailant and hesitated.

"O *Aga*, what is this? It is not fitting to put the hand of violence upon the beard of age—*Ai*, spare the boy, O captain of men!" Hassan had started to knife Michael in the ribs and Demid bruised the lad's wrist with a backward slap of his scimitar. "Verily, the youth is of tender years, and, without guile. What wrong have we done?"

"Enough," whispered Demid curtly, and proceeded to disarm the desert man by undoing his girdle and letting the various knives and handguns fall to the floor.

"Off with your garments."

"What madness is this?" The Arab looked anxiously at Michael, who had caught Hassan by the throat. The plight of the boy affected him more than the danger to himself, and, after a shrewd glance into the set face of the Cossack, he peeled off the hooded cloak, shirt and loose trousers.

Demid bade Hassan strip to his shirt, and kicked the weapons of the Arabs into a comer. Standing between his prisoners and the entrance, he cast off his own valuable garments and the Arab's eyes glistened on beholding the jewel-sewn folds of the turban and the cloth-of-gold girdle.

When the Arab was naked, Hassan almost so, and the two fugitives clad in their clothing, Demid adjusted a veil about the lower portion of Michael's face, and turned to study the old man who without weapons and cloak looked very much like a shorn lion.

"Hearken, O father of trickery," he said quietly. "It is for you to cover the road of our flight with the dust of discretion. You have no love for Sidi Ahmad, and I am his foe."

"Then you are a fool, because within these walls you cannot escape him," retorted the thief frankly, adding that the gates were closed.

"No more can he escape me," assented Demid, and even Hassan choked with astonishment. "You are the gainer by my garments, but wear them not abroad or show them, lest you be put into a shroud."

"*Mashallah!*"

"And these garments of the Frank, conceal them likewise. You will have your weapons back again. But as surety for your silence I will take with me this boy, your son, who must guide us to a place of good hiding."

At this the Arab wailed and fell on his knees, beating his head against the stone, and crying that Hassan was a piece of his liver, the very core of his heart.

"He will not suffer," said Demid grimly, "if we are not found by those who seek us out. If you betray us I will cut his body open and lay him out by the butchers' quarter where the dogs will—"

"*Ai-a!* Allah prosper thee, harm him not, and the master of the Wolf's Ear cannot make me speak. By my beard, upon the Koran I swear it!"

"Good. I am not a breaker of promises: see to it that you are likewise."

While he spoke, Demid thrust the sword given him by the Turks under his cloak, signed for Michael to do likewise with the other weapon, and pushed his beard behind a fold of the voluminous garment. Picking up a cord, he bound one end about the wrist of Hassan and the other to Michael's sash.

"Stoop when you walk, my friend," he said, "and speak thickly if one addresses you. Look upon the ground, and wonder not. The reason for this will be known to you when we reach the only place that is safe in Aleppo."

It was not hard for Michael to counterfeit weariness, and they passed unnoticed out of the gallery, through the courtyard, into the crowded alley. Demid caught snatches of talk that told him how their horses had been found not far from here, but as they had dismounted at the end of the arcade where deep shadow had hidden them, no one was sure where the prisoners had gone. Even as they turned away, a detachment of janissaries pushed through the throngs and entered the *serai*. A *miskal* of gold had been promised the one who found El Kadhr and the escaped Frank.

Demid however, loitered along and stopped to buy some dates and rice for Michael. When Hassan came up, leading the supposedly sick man, Demid whispered to the boy to show the way to the Gate of Victory. And Hassan gave proof that the byways of Aleppo were well known to him.

From one arcade to another, down into a dark wine cellar, thence through a passage to a coffee house—where Demid took time to sit and drink a bowl—up into the quarter of the saddlers and shield-makers where hides, hung up to dry, filled the air with a stench greater than that of the hov-

els they had left—from there to the covered court of a bathhouse he led them.

Men stopped him, to ask questions, but the boy's wit found a ready answer and Demid took the center of the alleys, reeling along like a desert man who had sat up with the wine bowl the night before.

"To the well of the lepers," he muttered, drawing up to Hassan.

The boy shivered, but just then a group of the palace guards came up to search the bath and he turned aside among the heaps of cinders from the bathhouse fires, to a nest of clay hovels grouped around a square hole in the ground. Steps led down this excavation, and Michael flattened against the wall when a mournful figure climbed up past him—a man with loose, white-blotched flesh and swollen lips, who grunted from a tongueless mouth.

At the bottom of the steps where shadow gave a little relief from the sun squatted other foul shapes, watching with lackluster eyes several of their companion lepers bathing in the sunken well. Hassan sought out a corner as far as possible from the sick men, and Michael watched Demid stagger up and lie down beside him.

A drunken Arab and another leper with a boy for guide aroused no interest in the unfortunate people of the well, and no questions were put to the three.

Demid waited until Michael had eaten a little, and then rolled over to whisper: "Sleep will help you, for you are weary. Yet hearken first to what is to be done. The fight at the stake cannot change my plans because Lali acts with us, and we may not get word to her before night."

"Lali—do you trust her?"

"Why not? She could have betrayed me, yet she has been faithful."

"Aye, she had me taken from Sivas and sold! She was jealous, because you cherished me."

Demid swore under his breath.

"What a girl! There is a demon in her, and she boasted of her prank to me, then wept because she was not forgiven. We were close upon the heels of your caravan when the Arabs raided it; then I made Lali play the spy upon them, and bring us the tidings that you were being taken to Aleppo. The *rahb*—the fast camels—went too swiftly for our pursuit. Yet that is past and now we have work to do."

He cuffed Hassan, who had crept closer to listen, upon the ear and promised him a bath in the lepers' pool if he tried to overhear what was said.

"I owe you my life," said Michael, starting to hold out his hand but remembering that he was a leper for the time being.

Demid wrinkled his nose and spat.

"Hide of the ——, what a smell is here. I would rather bed down with the goats of —— than in here. Nay, you saved my skin on the galley when I was burdened with the girl. You owe me naught."

"Balaban!" Michael started, at mention of the galley. "He is here and he is the pasha, Sidi Ahmad. The other is a mask in his place."

"I saw that."

Demid was silent for several moments, his lips set in hard lines as he listened to the tale of what had befallen his friend. "So we had the leader of these Moslems on the galley, and knew it not. The thought came to me at the Cossack camp that Balaban was a spy. So I took him with us, to point out the way across the sea, and he escaped our hand."

The young Cossack frowned, gnawing at his heard, his arms crossed on his knees.

"*Ai* this is an evil place. Here there was once the church of a Christian saint, and now over its ruins stands a nest of thieves. How is that to be endured?"

His dark eyes fell moody, and Michael knew that one of the fits of brooding had gripped him. Yet the Cossack was not thinking of the opportunity he had lost. He was musing upon the work to be done, and this he explained to Michael, slowly, making sure that the cavalier understood the part he was to play. Demid never hurried himself or his men. When the time for quick action came he took the offensive at once, Cossack fashion; but, always, he had thought out beforehand what was to be done.

So it seemed to his enemies that he acted on impulse, and they spoke of him as a falcon that strikes on swift wings from an open sky; but even that morning at the stake he had seen in his mind's eye how Michael might be saved. In this he was different from Michael, who—utterly daring as Demid—acted altogether on impulse.

"This night," said the Cossack, "we will lift the treasure of Sidi Ahmad."

"'Swounds! That disguise of yours will never pass you into the Wolf's Ear!"

Demid nodded.

"True, my friend, and that is why Sidi Ahmad will not look to find me within the Wolf's Ear. So, the fight at the stake has aided us, when all is

counted—aye, because it has given a messenger to send to Ayub and my children."

"What messenger?"

"You, a leprous man."

Michael shivered, for the well of the lepers did not strike him as much better abiding place than the torture stake.

"Where have you quartered Ayub and his blades—in the lazar house?"

"Nay, with the dead, in the burial place of the Moslems without the city wall. Even Sidi Ahmad did not think to search the grove of trees among the tombs on yonder hill by the Bab el Nasr. The Moslem warriors do not visit the graves, and the women who go there fear the spirits of the place. Ibnol Hammamgi told me of it—he has taken to cover there, in other days."

"Good!" Michael grinned a little, thinking of Ayub. "But that is without the gate, and the gate is closed."

"Hassan will open it."

"With what?"

"With you, O my companion of the road. You will be a leper, about to yield life; he will be your son, taking you to the ditch in the burial place wherein those who are unclean are laid while they still breathe. To rid themselves of you, the guards at the gate will open it a little, unseen, because it will be dark by then."

"And after that—"

Demid took up the dates left by Michael, who had eaten what he dared, and fell to munching them.

"First there is a tale to tell."

And it was a tale that banished all desire for sleep from the weary Michael.

A generation after Christ, the body of St. George was laid in a tomb in one of the cities of the Israelites. When the wave of Moslems overswept the land, the Turks heard of the legend of *al-khidr*, the Emir George, and sought for the tomb but did not find it. The Armenians, however, who took refuge from the invasion in the northern mountains knew the situation of the tomb of the warrior saint, and during the crusades pilgrims from their folk visited it—until the order of the sultan of the Turks forbade Christians to enter Aleppo. So much Demid had heard from the *batko*—the priest of the Cossacks.

The tomb was at the base of the tower which now formed the Wolf's Ear, a dozen feet or more underground.

At the time of the Moslem conquest, the last Christians to leave the tower had screened the entrance to the stair leading down to the tomb as well as they could. But since the pasha's palace had been built around the tower, Ibol Hammamgi had heard that the stair had been uncovered.

The *cral* had ventured once with the Armenian patriarch in disguise to penetrate to the site. The patriarch knew of another entrance, also covered up by rocks that led in from the hillside behind the palace at the base of the cliff. They had been able to remove the protecting boulders unseen by the guards of the palace above, and had made their way up a short passage to the vault, only to find that the inner door could not be opened from the outside.

It was on leaving the passage, after replacing the rocks, that Ibnol Hammamgi had been seized and tortured by janissaries. During his captivity Ibnol Hammamgi had used his good eye and his ear to advantage and suspected that the tower was now a treasure vault of Sidi Ahmad.

"Faith!" cried Michael of Rohan, "the one-eyed mountain goat has the right of it! The torture chamber where I lay may be the chapel of St. George, and the tomb must be below it. Aye, I mind that Sidi Ahmad passed at times up and down a stair into which a door opened from the place of torture."

He described how he had encountered the master of the Wolf's Ear the evening before and Demid listened attentively.

"The stair leads higher, into the tower," Michael added thoughtfully. "The Moslems built it upward, I'll wager odds on 't, when they turned the chapel into a dungeon. Well for you they did. Small good it would do you, Demid, to enter the vault and pass through the door into the dungeon. They would crown you in my place on the stake."

"Aye," responded the Cossack slowly as was his wont. "From the sepulcher the stair will take me high in the tower—the treasure of Sidi Ahmad is bulky, ivory, silks from India, gold plate from Persia—and —— knows what else. He would keep it in a place apart."

"Saw you such a place in the Wolf's Ear?"

Demid shook his head.

"Faith! Ibnol Hammamgi found the tomb door closed against him. How then will you enter?"

"Lali will come to the other side. She has pledged it."

It had been agreed between them that the Armenian girl was to make her way down the stair at the beginning of the second watch of that night, and open the portal to Demid.

"The fox Sidi Ahmad cannot trust his officers with his secret—there is no faith between them—so the place of the treasure must be hidden. Lali will find out what may be discovered. At that hour the procession of the Guilds—the weapon-makers, the gold spinners, the saddlers, will pass through the terraces before the palace as is customary on this day of the year. Many within the palace will have their eyes on the festival—on the lamps, and their ears will heed the kettledrums and pipes."

"Even so, what if Lali whispers one word to Sidi Ahmad—"

"She could not go back to her people. The girl has a spirit of flame, there is nothing she will not dare. Besides, she has a longing to go back to her tribe. We will see."

And Demid, in a whisper, told Michael what he must do to aid him. At first the cavalier said stubbornly that he would not leave him, but the Cossack pointed out that Michael's presence would be of small use if he failed in the Wolf's Ear, whereas if he won clear he would need Michael and the men, to escape from the city. Besides, if no messenger were sent to the warriors, they and Ayub would remain on the hill outside the wall until they were discovered and slain.

"They had an order," he added gravely.

"Egad," thought Michael, "and so have I."

"Keep Hassan by you until the last; so long as you have him the Arab will not lift his voice against us."

XI

Ayub Issues a Challenge

After sunset, when the heat began to pass from the baked streets of Aleppo, the light and tumult of the festival arose and swelled through all the quarters of the guilds, even to the gate, el Nasr, formerly the Gate of the Jews but named otherwise by Saladin the Great.

The flickering lamp against the iron fretwork of the portal—the lamp kept lighted since the day of the prophet Elisha—vied with the colored lanterns of a puppet show before which lean Arabs and stout Osmanlis stood gravely, bubbling, however, with inward mirth.

A party of saddlers assembled in the *faya*, the cleared space just within the gate, sweating under their sugar-loaf hats and tiger skins and the bur-

den of a float manned by several agile buffoons, who cracked jokes with the half-dozen janissaries on guard at the post.

Other lamps appeared on the balconies of the nearest houses, where veiled women sat, and occasionally a shrill voice rose over the monotonous tinkling of a guitar.

Nimble-footed urchins scurried about in the throng, wielding pig bladders inflated and tied to sticks, casting wary glances when a silence fell at the bulk of the Wolf's Ear, which, apart from the merry-making, showed black as a bat's wing against the glowing sky over the hills. But Hassan, the Arab, was not among them.

Hassan came limping toward the gate in bedraggled garments, snuffling and tearing at his hair. Behind him staggered a slender figure, veiled. The throng gave back as the two neared the gate and the child's cry could be heard.

"'Way for him who goes to the mercy of Allah! Riwan hath opened the gate of mercy to this one. *Ai-a!*"

He tugged valiantly at the rope which seemed to drag the figure of the leper along. Shrewdly enough, Hassan, on seeing that the *faya* was alight and crowded, had abandoned the idea of secrecy and made outcry sufficient for a half-dozen deaths. Moreover he did not make the mistake of asking that the portal be opened. But he edged closer to the janissaries, who drew back with oaths.

"Child of misfortune. Cover the fire of disease with the water of solitude."

"*Ai-a!* I am his son!"

"A lie escaped thy tongue." They began to curse the weeping boy and his ill-omened familiar. "You are the son of all stupidity."

"I know not where to go."

"Allah!" One of the maskers spoke up feelingly. "Instruct the boy in what he should do. The leper is far gone: let him go out to the burial place of the unclean."

Here Hassan began to wail the louder, and the crowd began to revile the guards who did not open the gate.

"It is forbidden!" growled the one in command.

"So also is a dying leper forbidden within the city."

"This may be the Frank on whose capture is the price of ten slave girls."

"O pack-saddle of an ass! The warrior Frank was tall as a spear; this one is like an ape."

The janissary hesitated, and for a moment Michael feared that Hassan might betray him; but the boy remembered very well that the cavalier had a scimitar under his cloak, and besides, he had heard his real father swear an oath on the Koran. That was binding on Hassan as well.

"*He* cannot speak." Hassan forestalled the soldier's intention of questioning the supposed leper. "Lift the veil and you will see how his tongue is rotted away, and the bone sticks through his nose."

The horrors of the lepers' well were still vivid in Hassan's mind, and his voice shook. When Michael took it upon himself to make some uncouth noises the janissary drew back quickly.

"*Darisi bashine*—the grain may have been reaped by thee! Go, the two of you! Open the gate to them!"

"Where shall we go?" whined Hassan.

"*Mashallah!* Where but to the burial hill yonder—behold the grove of pistachio trees against the skyline."

So the two slender figures passed under the flickering lamp of Elisha, out into the void of darkness, and the hubbub at the gate resumed its even key. It was a weary climb for the tired Michael, up the path to the shrines and stones of the cemetery, and for some time they stumbled around, feeling their way toward the blotch of the grove.

Here Hassan gave a real yell of alarm and the skin prickled on Michael's back. From the deeper gloom ahead of them issued the call of animals, and they heard the whining of panthers, the grunting of camels, and the whir of wings. Hassan, knowing that no beasts larger than jackals were in the thickets, started to flee and the rope pulled his companion headlong.

Perforce, they both halted, and the boy whimpered when a muffled screech sounded from a tree almost overhead; but Michael remembered the Cossacks' trick of mimicking animal calls and cried Ayub's name softly.

Presently the giant Cossack *ataman* loomed over them and Hassan quivered, believing firmly that now he was about to be carried off by the *djinn*—for he never thought a man could be as huge as Ayub.

"Are the men safe?" whispered Michael.

Ayub ran a hard hand over the cavalier's face, and grunted with pleasure.

"—— fly away with me if it isn't the little Frank behind a woman's veil. Have you wine-meat? Is it a feast day in the city? Then lead us to the frolic."

Other Cossacks crowded up to salute Michael and stroke his shoulders in high glee at seeing him safe again.

"As I live," rumbled Ayub, shaking his head sadly, "we have played at ghosts until our own skins crept each cock-crow—not a single pretty woman came to pray at the graves in all the three days. Not a lass."

"How could you tell, father?" asked one of the younger warriors. "They were all wrapped up."

"How could I tell? Eh, I can judge what lies behind a Turkish veil, as well as you can tell your nag from another. When I was on a raid in Trebizond, the maidens used to nudge me in the streets so hard that my ribs would have given out if I had not worn a mail shirt. And how is my granddaughter?"

"Your granddaughter? What kin have you below the sea?" Michael did not understand the big Cossack.

"Eh, what kin? Why, aforetime, when I raided the Black Sea with Rurik—God break his chains for him—I left sons and daughters in every Turkish port where the women were above ordinary, and by now they have children of their own."

The warriors, clustering restlessly around their leaders, smiled, knowing that Ayub was more afraid of a woman than of a *chambul* of Tatars. Michael reflected that the veteran must have kept up the spirits of the detachments rarely in the trying time of waiting for orders.

"That is why," added the giant gravely, "the Turkish knights have grown so notable of late."

"Aye, grandfather," Michael grinned, "you were a great man in your time."

"In my time? May the dogs scratch you, Mikhail! You are no bigger than a flea and I could break you on my thumbnail." He breathed heavily a moment, and went on. "But I spoke of my granddaughter Lali. When she bade us farewell to go off to Sidi Ahmad, she wept like a ewe lamb under the shearer, and I kissed her like a grandfather, not otherwise. She is a good witch, and I will salt down the Turk that harms her."

"She is to open the postern door to Demid, and we are to contrive to pass through the nearest gate of Aleppo, to ride around to join him at the fourth hour of darkness."

Michael explained Demid's plan, realizing for the first time the odds against them. It pleased the Cossacks rarely, and they remarked that they would brew a fine beer for Sidi Ahmad to quaff.

"Sidi Ahmad is really Balaban, so strike when you see him."

"Eh, that hedgehog? I warned Demid that we should slice him but the mad fellow would not listen."

Ayub fell moody at this, and became silent as Michael cautioned the warriors to wrap their scabbards and take care to ride without noise as they approached the gate.

"Our scabbards are leather and the boys have hunted Tatars often enough to stalk a gate without making a hubbub," he remarked stiffly, "but as you are taking over the detachment, we are at command and will do as we are ordered."

"At command, little father," repeated the Cossacks readily.

But Michael understood that Ayub was offended.

"Not so, Ayub," he responded, against his better judgment. "You will be *ataman* as before, and I will guide you to the place."

They decided to leave one man with the spare horses—they had two to a warrior—at the base of the burial hill, a pistol-shot from the gate. A scout sent down toward the Bab el Nasr reported that the revelry within the gate had died down, and Michael reflected that the throngs of Moslems must have gone off to watch the procession at the castle.

The Cossack who had acted as scout said that the guard had just been changed, and this meant the third hour of the night had been reached. They were to meet Demid at the beginning of the fourth hour.

"Time," announced Ayub, prompted by Michael's whisper. "Time to mount and go."

In the dense gloom under the trees the word was passed among the warriors. Here and there a pony stamped and a saddle creaked, then fell silence broken by the snuffling of the horses which were restive after the long idleness. Ayub repeated his instructions in a low voice.

They were to go down in column of threes, the new *essaul* in advance of the men, within hearing of Ayub and Michael, who took Hassan with them. On approaching the gate the leaders would dismount and go forward with the Arab, and they would contrive to have the portal opened. At the first shout, or rattle of weapons, the *essaul*—the old warrior, Broad Breeches—was to bring up his men on the gallop and rush the gate regardless of who stood in his path.

As Ayub had said, the men from the Don descended the hill and walked their horses along the highroad without so much as a rattle of a bridle chain or clink of a weapon. Yet Michael knew that by now their sabers were drawn. He wondered what Balaban was doing—Balaban who had sworn that time would bring his revenge—Balaban who had eyes and ears in every secret place, and in whose power Demid now stood.

When the wall loomed up, he whispered to the sergeant to halt his men and dismounted, feeling weariness in every fiber. The blood was pounding in his head and he had a mad desire to rush on the iron portal and shout, to end the suspense.

Pulling himself together, he consulted with Hassan instead. That cool youngster pointed out that the gate was formed of open iron scrollwork, and offered to creep up and try to turn the key in the lock on the inner side.

Michael assented and the three made their way forward cautiously, keeping to the side of the highway where the glow of the lamp over the portal would not fall on them. They heard a half-dozen Moslems talking lazily on the other side, but no one was on watch at the threshold because Aleppo was barred in of nights and people of the countryside never approached the walls.

The boy crept along the base of the wall and stood up to thrust his arm slowly through the fretwork. A low whisper told Michael that the key was not in place.

By mischance one of the guards happened to look toward the gate and made out the shadow of Hassan, cast by the lamp.

"*Kubar-dar!* Take care! What is there?"

The half-dozen janissaries hurried up on the other side and Michael drew back against the granite blocks of the gate pillar where he could not be seen. Hassan wisely kept his place.

"Allah be praised," the boy cried loudly, "I have come in time. The *kazaks* are hiding in the burial hill, where I went with the leper my father. I have come with the tidings. Take me to Sidi Ahmad that I may have a reward."

"Who art thou?"

"Hassan, the Arab, who passed out two hours since. Be quick."

"Still thy crying, whelp."

The man laughed and Michael knew him to be the janissary who had smoked with the Arab in the *serai*. As before the soldier reeked of forbidden liquor, and the key he took from his girdle rattled in the massive lock.

"I will see to the matter of a reward for tidings of those accursed swine, the *kazaks*—"

"Accursed swine yourself!" boomed Ayub indignantly, out of the darkness.

The big Cossack had been growing restive as a horse and the insult was too much for his patience.

"Open this cage and I'll cut your bristles—"

Michael started and swore under his breath. No help for it—the janissary gave a shout and jerked to free the key. But in the same instant the cavalier passed his scimitar through the ironwork and through the body of the officer.

Pulling it free, he turned the key in the lock with his left hand, and Ayub shoved mightily at the gate. The janissaries pressed it on the other side; swords flashed and Michael turned aside a thrust that would have split his companion's head.

Then he caught Ayub by the arm and flung himself aside with the Cossack as horses raced up and their followers spurred against the gate. It swung open under the weight of the horses, and for a minute there was rapid swordplay.

Several of the Moslems turned to flee but were cut down by the riders and soon there was no other sound than the heavy breathing of the horses within the deep shadow of the wall. The bodies of the guards were pulled out of sight and Michael was satisfied that the fight had been ignored by any who had heard it within the nearby alleys. Brawls among the janissaries were commonplace and this was the night of the *zineh*. Hassan had betaken himself elsewhere, unharmed.

Posting two of the Cossacks at the wall where they could not be seen, he ordered the *essaul* to close the gate and guard it until they returned.

Broad Breeches saluted, and drew back reluctantly as they trotted off, keeping to the cleared ground by the wall where no one could see them against the lights of the alleys. They went through the quarter of the Jews, where the houses were shut and barred during the festival and the folk within doors. Once or twice they avoided patrols of janissaries, and fumbled through blind arcades where lights gleamed from cellars and the reek of opium was in the air. Beggars started up out of stairways and stared in bewilderment at the huge bodies of the dark riders, the high black hats and the gleaming sabers.

No Cossacks had penetrated into Islam before and the rumor spread in the alleys that the *djinn* had come down from the air and were riding winged steeds toward the palace.

But Michael and his men outstripped the rumors, and, guided by the dark bulk of the Wolf's Ear, reached the steep, rock-strewn slope that led to the rear of the palace. Here they halted under some plane trees and Michael ordered five of the ten to dismount and follow him.

Climbing the slope as Demid directed, he moved under the base of the tower to where he could touch the wall. Then, spreading out his followers he searched among the heaped boulders until he came to a hollow in deep shadow, where small rocks were piled on either side the depression. Here the air was colder and, dropping into the depression, he felt the mouth of a narrow passage open before him.

And he heard the clash of weapons from within, and the triumphant shout of Moslems.

"*Ekh!*" cried Ayub, heedless of caution. "Demid is betrayed!"

XII

A woman's wit is sharp as the dagger of a Rifi thief; a woman's soul is like a covered mirror wherein no man can behold truth with his eyes until the veil is drawn.

Jal-ud-deen, the treasurer of Sidi Ahmad, was taking a reading of the stars in the cupola of the tower when the third hour of the night drew toward its close. His vulture-like skull gleamed under a red lamp as it bent over a Persian zodiac, and a table of the movements of the planets.

Glancing up from time to time, he peered from an open square in the dome at the pinpoints of fire in the heavens that were stars. Old was Jal-ud-deen, old and shrewd and cautious. Skilled in astrology, he was about to take the reading of Sidi Ahmad's birth star.

"Fortune has served me," murmured the pasha. "Aye, time brings its fulfillment and the day when my standard will be raised in Islam."

Lying full length on a sofa, only his eyes moved as he watched the labor of the man who had taken his name and place until this time should come, so that Sidi Ahmad should be alive to reap the fruits of his efforts.

"O lord of the planets—mirror of the glory of Allah," murmured the savant, "that which is written will come to pass."

"And what is written?"

"The message of the stars is not clear. A portent lies under my hand, and within the hour—"

"Nay, I will name the portent for you." Sidi Ahmad smiled, well content. "It is good. The Shah of Persia, with whom thou hast been negotiating, hath poured water on his sword. He will aid me. So will the mamelukes of Egypt and the beys of Tripoli."

The *wazir,* marking down his observations on a sheet of parchment, inclined his head.

"Within the vault below the tower, O favored of Allah, thou hast a hundred thousand swords."

Sidi Ahmad started, and then smiled approval.

"Aye, wealth to buy them. And the confidence of the Sultan Mustapha to use them. At the imperial city they say that he who controls the janissaries of the court rules Islam. For a time I feared the king of kings, who made gifts of a dagger's point to other pashas of Aleppo, but to me he sent a damsel who is like the moon."

The astrologer frowned.

"Why did the dog of a *kazak* burden himself with the maiden?"

"She was the surety of his mission—it would have put the shadow of doubt on his tale had he appeared in Aleppo without the woman."

Sidi Ahmad fingered the scar on his check thoughtfully.

"Before the night is past my men will have thrust a spear into every comer of Aleppo, and the dog will be brought to me. He has not escaped the walls."

"But the other?"

"Is a fool. Behold, I have here the safe conduct given him by the sultan. Allah deliver us from such safe conducts, for it calls for a life! I shall earn another coin of goodwill from my master by sending the Frank's head with this paper to Mustapha."

The *wazir* smiled.

"Then should we have the head washed in rose water, and the beard combed and scented. What has my lord done with the maiden?"

"I have sent for her. The slaves are long in finding the wench. I have a mind to look upon her unveiled."

"Beware of trickery, my lord. The singing girl prays not with the faithful, and I do not think she is a Moslem at heart."

"What matter, O reader of the stars? Hath a singing girl a heart?" Sidi Ahmad yawned and sat up abruptly.

"O lord of lords, king of kings, commander of the faithful!" Lali's voice from the open door of the tower room startled the two men because she saluted Sidi Ahmad as a sultan. He sprang up, brows furrowed, and snatched the veil from under her eyes.

"Allah! What man told you—"

"Pardon your servant, O Pasha." Lali bent her dark head, the trace of a smile trembling on her lips. "Am I blind not to know who gives orders in Aleppo? Are you not Sidi Ahmad, the Lion of Islam, the far-seeing, the great in heart?"

The narrow eyes of the tall Moslem sparkled as he realized the beauty of the girl. She met his gaze without flinching, her cheeks pale against the dark flood of hair.

"Verily Riwan hath opened the gates of paradise," murmured the pasha, "and let out this damsel for my delight."

But even as he spoke with a satisfied smile, his hand went out and he unclasped the earrings that fell to her shoulders. A black pearl was set in each, and Sidi Ahmad felt keener pleasure in the touch of them than in the soft skin of the girl.

"Worth twenty sequins, the pair," he muttered, and stripped a gold bracelet from her arm. "And this almost as much. Why did you linger, at my summons?"

"Lord," spoke up one of the armed slaves who conducted her, "we found this woman fumbling at the door that leads to the tomb below the tower—a thing forbidden by your command."

Sidi Ahmad ceased smiling, and his lips set cruelly.

"Ah, so you have light fingers."

Lali tossed her head, watching the pasha from under lowered lids.

"Favored of Allah, there was talk that you had in the tower a store of Persian silks and rolls of cloth-of-gold, sewn with pearls—"

"What talk is this?" The man's cunning was written in every line of his thin face. "Nay, what have you seen? You had no key—"

He read confusion in the girl's flushed cheeks and lowered eyes, and nodded thoughtfully. His vanity prompted him to show to Lali greater riches than she had seen at the court, and suspicion impelled him to examine the door at the stairhead. Lali seemed to hang back, and he fancied that she was troubled.

"Come," he said.

"O my lord!" Jal-ud-deen started up from his calculations. "The portent of the stars is dark indeed. I fear—"

"Bah!"

Sidi Ahmad had eyes only for the singing girl as he strode through the door. The guard was changing, and he took eight swordsmen with him into his chambers on the floor below, leaving the same number posted without—for the guard was doubled that night.

The astrologer, having made his salaam, drew back to study his chart again. From the opening in the dome he stared down upon the lighted terraces where cordons of janissaries stood between the throngs of revelers and the palace. Tall minarets rose against the stars like so many spears upraised. A gong sounded the hour from the courtyard below and the heavy tread of soldiery answered it.

Jal-ud-deen reflected that it was well the pasha's anger had fallen upon the girl rather than on himself.

With a key taken from his girdle Sidi Ahmad unlocked the door in his sleeping chamber and signed for the men to conduct Lali after him. One with a cresset torch went ahead, down a narrow stair that wound upon itself steeply, being built in a corner of the tower. At the landing opposite the dungeon Sidi Ahmad halted his followers and bade them await his coming or his call.

Lighting an oil lamp that stood in a recess of the wall, he signed for Lali to descend with him. At the foot of the last flight of steps he drew back a heavy curtain, and entered a vaulted chamber where the air was chill and heavy.

Here he set down the lamp upon what bad been once an altar of black marble. Drawing Lali with him he stepped to a row of teak caskets placed upon bales of silk. One of the boxes he opened, disclosing to the gaze of the Armenian a mass of loose pearls.

With the careful fingers of a miser he opened other caskets, showing rubies and sapphires and turquoise—gold ornaments, and rare, carved ivory. At the far end of the wall were heavy bags and Sidi Ahmad explained that they contained coins. He tossed Lali's trinkets into one of the boxes and turned upon her suddenly.

"So you were minded to escape from the tower and go hence to join the *kazak*! Nay, I read in your eyes upon the galley that you loved him, and my memory is long. Is it not true?"

"Verily," said the singing girl, lifting her head, "it is true."

And there was pride in her voice. Sidi Ahmad shrugged, studying her as he might muse over a wayward hunting leopard.

"Eh, then I must buy you. What is your price?"

Lali looked at him and instead of answering, pointed to a black cross set in the white marble of the flooring—

"What gold can buy *that*?"

"By the wrath of Allah!" The Moslem frowned. "Here are strange words for a singing girl. Some bones of the accursed Emir George lie hereabouts and his crypt hath served me well."

"Have you no fear of the wrath you have stored up against you, by entering here?"

The eyes of the girl traveled ceaselessly over the walls of the tomb, searching for the outline of a door. But nothing was to be seen. Solid rows of bricks of dried mud stood on every hand, gray and crumbling with age. Cracks and gaps between the bricks showed only the dark clay behind. Lali had made the round of the chamber, and she dared not tap the wall to seek for the door, if one existed.

With the guards within call on the stair she would not cry out, in the hope that Demid would hear, if he should be near at hand. If, indeed, the Cossack should appear in the tomb now he would walk into a mare's nest.

Lali's whole thought was to get Sidi Ahmad away before his suspicions were aroused, and yet he continued to watch her as if taking delight in her distress. If, she reasoned swiftly, there had been a door leading from the tomb into a passage, he would have observed it before now.

Her pulse quickened, at a dull sound close by—a grating, rumbling noise, as if a heavy stone were being rolled about.

Sidi Ahmad heard it, too, and his black eyes darted into the shadows of the tomb. Nothing there. But suspicion like a flame, rising in dry tinder seized upon him. His powerful hand caught her slender arm, and his lips drew back from his teeth.

"*Ohai*, I can read your soul, singing girl. Allah fashioned you to be a dove, but you would fly like a falcon. You came to Aleppo, and you have spied into what is hidden. You know my name, and the place of my treasure, and now your eyes search for a way hence. Did Mustapha set you to slay me?"

His free hand sought fruitlessly for a weapon on the girl, who stood passive in his grasp. His face pressed close to hers.

"Were you sent by the sultan, to do away with Sidi Ahmad? The truth, or you will not sing again! Ah!"

Lali's dark eyes blazed into his.

"I came of my own will, and my thought was to cast you down—who slew my father and hunted my people like beasts."

The words came softly, for his ear alone, yet without pretense of deception. Lali had given utterance to what was in her heart, knowing that her next act would make her defenseless before the rage of the pasha. Her voice, full and clear as a clarion, echoed in the tomb.

"Away Demid! Nine are here with weapons. Away, while there is time!"

The scar on Sidi Ahmad's check grew livid and his hand groped for his sword hilt. And then he crouched as if struck. Something thudded against the wall across the chamber. Dust and fragments of brick flew out. The bricks of the wall moved and fell inward under a series of shocks. A black opening appeared where they had been.

Another blow and a large boulder rolled out over the marble floor. The tall figure of an Arab emerged from the hole.

Although he had looked to see something of the kind, Sidi Ahmad felt a twinge of superstitious fear—fear that the dust and bones of the inmate of the tomb had taken human form. But this passed as he made out the dark countenance of the Cossack, blinking in the glare of the lamp.

Demid strode forward out of the cloud of dust from the shattered bricks that had walled up the passage, and stumbled against the massive rock that—fetched from the hillside—he had used to break down the barrier.

"Go back!" cried Lali, beside herself with anxiety. "Swordsmen wait on the—"

Her lips closed on the last word and a moan rose in her throat. Sidi Ahmad had drawn his dagger and thrust it into her side. The steel blade, slender as the tip of a palm frond, passed through the girl's silk vest without a sound, and the Moslem made no effort to draw it out.

Lali's hands flew to the ivory hilt of the dagger, and her eyes opened very wide, fastening on the livid face of the man as if bewildered. His voice shrilled in a shout:

"Ho, Moslems! To me—"

His scimitar flashed out in time to parry the first cut of the Cossack who had crossed the tomb in a stride and a leap. The lamp flickered in a

draught from the stair and gleamed red on the whirling steel. The swords hung for an instant as if suspended in the air.

Then the Moslem tore loose his blade and hacked at the Cossack, snarling as he felt his weapon turned aside. The scar on his face made it seem as if be were laughing. Demid was smiling, yet his face was dark and the veins on his forehead stood out.

"O pasha—O captain-pasha," he said softly, "you, who would take the life from a girl, remember the sword trick that I taught you! So, it went, and so—then your sword in the air again, and then—this!"

Demid's blade whirled around the Moslem's scimitar and passed through his body. Sidi Ahmad coughed and fell heavily, first his knees striking the marble floor, then his head. His followers rushed into the tomb in time to see him stretched out motionless, upon the great cross.

The eight men stared from the body of their master to the strange Arab standing before them sword in hand. Swords slithered from scabbards, but before they could recover from their astonishment the voice of Lali halted them!

"The order is fulfilled, O men of the tower. Lo, I was sent hither by command of Mustapha, the Sultan, upon whom be peace. And the order was that Sidi Ahmad, who would have betrayed his master, should die."

Kneeling, one hand to her side, she fought for breath.

"Look, in the pasha's girdle—a letter there, asking that his head be sent to the court. Harm not the *aga*, who was sent with me—El Khadr—"

She was silent and the janissaries glanced at one another questioningly. Their eyes fell on the treasure chests, and they fingered their weapons, knowing not what to believe. Lali's wit served her even when her strength was failing, and for the last time she acted a part, hoping to gain respite for Demid.

One of the janissaries called out that they should go for Jal-ud-deen, another that search should be made for the letter, another besought Demid—fruitlessly—to cast down his sword.

Instead the Cossack threw back the hood of his garment, and they saw the black scalp lock that fell to his shoulder. The pent up anger of many days of brooding blazed in his eyes, and those who beheld him thought that he was stricken with madness. The iron restraint of the long journey to Aleppo fell from him when he saw Sidi Ahmad strike Lali, and the blood was leaping in his veins as he watched his foes.

"Come, dogs," he laughed, "slaves of a slave, come and take me or you will taste the stake and fire. Do you hear? I am the Cossack who rode over you this morning."

Remembrance of how he had dealt with their comrades made the guards hesitate, but they were no cowards. Spreading out, they advanced on him, and he struck the first one down. Then, turning in his tracks, he sprang at those nearest the wall, warding their cuts and slashing back, hewing to the shoulder bone the slowest of them.

One of the Moslems stumbled over Lali, as they raised a shout of rage, and the point of the Cossack's sword raked him under the eyes before Demid stepped back to the wall in the nearest corner.

The gleam of steel was before his eyes, and in a second he was cut across the arm and chest. Two men were pressing him close when the others heard the thud of footsteps drawing nearer, and the war cry of the Cossacks.

"*U-ha!*" It was Ayub's bull voice. "Cut, slash, Demid! Where are you?"

The giant *ataman* thrust his head through the hole in the wall and displaced a goodly quantity of bricks in getting his body through. Whipping out his broadsword, he made at the five surviving Moslems, and Michael hurried after him. Other heads appeared, and swords gleamed as the Don men came after their leaders.

Far below the halls of the Wolf's Ear, the Cossacks worked busily to remove the pick of the treasure of Sidi Ahmad, taking first the jewels, which were thrust into saddlebags; then the gold ornaments. Ayub, having stationed two warriors on the stair, and satisfied himself that Demid was not seriously hurt, fell to rooting out the best of the carved ivory and the silver fittings. This he did deftly enough, shaking his head with admiration at the hoard Sidi Ahmad had gathered together.

"We must not fail to take off the value of ten thousand sequins," Demid observed.

He was leaning on his sword while Michael bound up the deep cuts about his shoulders.

"Aye, the ransom of Rurik," nodded Ayub, intent on his task. "May I never taste mead again, if we fail. Sidi Ahmad had a tight fist, though little good it did him in the end."

The noise of the fight had been muffled by the depth of the secret stair and the music in the courtyard. Over their heads the Moslems sat at ease, and the astrologer still studied his chart.

But presently a young warrior ran into the vault.

"Father, the brothers at the horses have sent word that people have seen them, and many are crying out—"

"To horse!" barked Demid. "Here with that torch!"

Taking the burning brand, he hurled it among the wooden boxes, and tore down the curtains, tossing them near the flames. Glancing around at the bodies of the slain, he stooped and picked up Lali.

"If you must bear hence the witch," grumbled Ayub, "give her to me. Your wounds will bleed overmuch."

The eyes of the girl opened, and the mask of pain lifted from her drawn face when Demid's arms raised her. Her lips moved.

"To Ibnol Hammamgi—ride to my people!" she whispered. "*Ai-a*, we have kept faith, you and I. We have ridden far with— a free rein, and have I not— kept faith?"

"Aye," said Demid, pausing and bending his head to catch the almost soundless words.

"Then set me down. I—am not a witch and I do not fear—"

Her hands reached up to touch his face, but closed convulsively on his cloak as a spasm of pain seized her. Demid moved into the passage, ahead of Ayub.

"Nay, little falcon," he said, almost tenderly, "the end of the road is not yet, and surely you will go with me."

They were in their saddles, and put the ponies to a gallop before the pasha's guards could close in on them. Through the deserted alleys of the Jews' quarter they passed like the first gust of a storm. From balconies and housetops turbaned heads peered at them, but saw no more than gigantic black forms bending over steeds that spurned up a cloud of dust and were gone.

"They ride like the *djinn* folk!" voices cried from housetop to balcony.

The colored lamps of a pleasure garden touched bearded faces and naked steel, shining through the dust. Here a patrol of mounted mamelukes drew up, in startled haste, in their path. The pistols of the Cossacks flashed and bellowed, and several of the Moslems dropped while their horses reared and plunged, throwing the rest into disorder.

Headed by Ayub, who wielded his two-handed sword like the father of all the *djinn*, the Cossacks bunched, and, standing in their stirrups to

strike the better, broke through the mamelukes and strung out toward the Bab el Nasr, while behind them the Moslems rallied, and the pursuit gathered headway. The shrill roll of kettledrums sounded near at hand and behind them from the dark tower of the dead Sidi Ahmad blared the trumpets giving the signal to guard the city gates.

A shot barked somewhere near the wall and Ayub began to ply his whip.

"That is the *essaul*. The dogs are biting him and his men. *U-ha!* Brothers, warriors, is your Cossack strength spent—are your horses hobbled? Faster, then!"

Emerging into the cleared space by the gate Michael saw Broad Breeches standing pistol in hand by the iron portal, while one of his men lay stretched on the earth. The other was engaging a trio of Moslems, who drew back as Demid and his men galloped up.

The *essaul* plucked the key from his belt and twisted it in the lock. Then he tugged open the barred gate, thrusting it back, to allow the riders to pass through without slackening pace.

"After us!" Demid called over his shoulder.

The warrior who had been fending off the swords of the Moslems whirled his horse and spurred through the gate. The old sergeant whistled up his pony, but, beholding the mass of pursuers drawing near from the mouths of the alleys, he changed his purpose.

"Once my mother bore me," he muttered, and lifted his hoarse voice in a shout as he perceived that Demid and Michael had reined in to wait for him to come up. "Speed on, *ataman*. Tell the *bandura* players my name—"

With that he closed the gate hastily, turned the key in the lock, and tossed it far into the darkness on the outer side of the gate. Spitting on his hands, he drew his sword and placed his back against the inside of the iron barrier. He was the oldest of the Cossacks, the *essaul*, and many Winters had whitened his hair; his eyes were growing dim and his aged heart glowed with satisfaction because the minstrels would now hear of his name and perhaps put it into their songs. Besides, Michael had given him an order to keep the gate closed.

So he drew his sword and his gray mustache bristled fiercely as the Moslems spurred their horses in on him.

The locked gate and the lost key delayed their pursuit for a precious half hour while they rode to another opening in the wall and circled back to take up the trail of the Cossacks.

Michael had spent his strength. He stumbled down from his saddle when Demid called a halt at midnight, and another warrior changed the saddle for him to a fresh horse. Vaguely he was aware that Demid still carried the body of the young girl and that the flood of her black hair fell down over the *ataman*'s knee like a silken cloak. She had died before the ride began.

He was too tired to feel the ache in his limbs, or the salty dryness of his throat. With his hands gripping the pommel, he let the pony have its head, and, looking back after a while, he puzzled over a red glow that rose above the black line of the wall of Aleppo. The palace of Sidi Ahmad was burning to the ground, but Michael was past caring.

Dry dust of sand was in the air, stinging his eyes; the wind brushed the damp hair from his forehead; the glimmer of the stars through the haze over the desert grew to a flare of torches, and Michael pulled himself awake by a sheer effort of will, to see that the Cossacks had halted and were lighting flares to search for tracks in the sand to show the path they should follow.

"Why do you talk," he muttered drowsily, "when there is a debt to be paid?"

A shaggy head loomed over him and a voice rumbled in his ear.

"The little Frank is past his strength. I will see to it, but he has a true thought. We cannot bear the money to our brothers if we talk about the road, with Satan's hunting pack at our heels."

Demid took the lead and they went on at hazard. Once more the saddles creaked, and the cold wind stirred about them. Michael swayed and went into a deep sleep but Ayub's arm steadied him until the streak of dawn on their right hand showed them the first ridge and the valley through which the northern trail ran, full ahead.

Here they breathed the horses and let them roll, until dust began to show on the desert floor behind them and they mounted the freshest beasts, going through the pass and striking out for the river Jihan, two miles in advance of the nearest Moslem.

It was not yet dusk when they reached the river and forced the sweating horses across. Their animals were done by now, but the leading pursuers were on camels that balked at crossing the river, and by the time that the horsemen came up, Demid was able to turn aside from the trail and hide his tracks in a rocky ravine. Safe for a few hours, they walked their horses, sleeping in the saddles.

Before dawn they dismounted to eat a little and drink from the water bags they had filled at the river. With the first light Demid sent men to the nearest heights to try to place the detachments of janissaries that must be well up with them by now.

Michael found that one of his saddlebags was filled with heavy bits of gold. He took some up in his hand, wondering whether the treasure would serve them in the end. But Demid would not hear of abandoning it.

Late that afternoon they entered the first fringe of timber, on the higher slopes of the mountains, and over their heads loomed the white peaks of the Caucasus. It was here that a youth in sheepskins came leaping down toward them, crying eagerly that Ibnol Hammamgi was awaiting them in the nearest pass with fresh horses, and that fighting was in progress between the Turks and the Sivas tribe that had waited here to cover their retreat if they came back.

Michael, in fact, soon heard the flicker of arrows in the brush and the neighing of horses. Not until then had he known how close the pursuit had drawn about them. But Demid greeted the chief of the mountain folk without comment and bade him draw his men back with them, for the Turks were in force at their rear.

"I have brought back Lali, daughter of Macari," he added, "do you bear her to the patriarch, that he may perform the rites due to the child of a chieftain."

XIII

Where the road ends the warriors dismount, and when all have come up they talk together of the paths each one has followed; but of those who set out in the beginning upon the road, not all have come to the end. Aye, many have followed another path, and of these the warriors talk, saying over the names of those who will not take the saddle again.

The sun grew warmer on the Cossack steppe, and the snow dwindled to gray patches; then grass came and the whole steppe was like a swamp, over which no army could move. Spring passed, and crops were sown and still no Moslem banners were seen crossing the frontier.

When the wheat and oats were ripening, minstrels and Gypsies drifted in to the camps of the Zaporogian Cossacks, where a nucleus of warriors were guarding the frontier. These wanderers from the sea brought word of Demid.

They told how the tower of Sidi Ahmad had been fired, and how the Don Cossacks, or what remained of them, had reached the Armenian mountains and had been conducted by the shrewd hillmen to the east, along hidden valley trails used by the Armenians. Gypsies told, furthermore, that the Cossacks had been seen off Trebizond, coasting by the shore in two open boats, and that a rabble of Greeks, Syrians and whatnot had put out from that port to intercept them, hearing that they had gold.

After that no word came of Demid and his followers, and the Cossacks of the siech shook their heads mournfully, and settled down to their watch on the Dnieper. Yet still the Turks hung back from the expected invasion.

There was a reason for this. The burning of the tower of Aleppo and the loss of the treasure had spread suspicion throughout the Turks of Asia Minor. Sidi Ahmad no longer ruled their counsels; some whispered that the sultan had slain the pasha. The mamelukes, who had not been paid, marched back to Egypt and took their reward in plunder from the cities in their path. Always intriguing, the shah of Persia held back his forces to use for his own advantage.

Meanwhile Jal-ud-deen met the fate that so long he had feared—an assassin from the court ended his life, and in Aleppo, fighting and thieving again quite naturally, the janissaries banded against the townspeople and the Arabs, well content, against both. So Mustapha mustered his army slowly in Europe, hoping for word of the treasure of Sidi Ahmad that had vanished from the ken of men.

It was when the crops were being gathered in on the Cossack steppe, and the favorite time for a Moslem invasion was at hand, that fresh tidings came to the siech from the imperial city. A new priest took up his abode in the log church of the siech and gave forth a word that was repeated from the Dnieper to the Don, as far as the forests of the north.

Rurik, the chief of all the Cossacks, was slain.

He had been killed by a quarrelsome Moslem guard, in the last Winter, and the sultan had kept the news a secret, believing that he could trick the Cossacks out of the ransom money. But Rurik, the greatest of all *koshevois*, captain of the falcon-ship and father of the Zaporogian brotherhood, had been cut down with a scimitar before Demid was fairly on his long journey.

The word passed over the steppe like a grass fire, driven by a high wind. Riders bore it to the far districts of the steppe, and warriors emerged from their villages—veterans of other wars took to horse before sunset and

youths came from the horse herds to join them. Bands of black-capped riders began to move south over the steppe, and the balalaikas sounded in the taverns where the men of the lower country were drinking and talking over their wrongs.

Ten thousand Cossacks, aroused by the death of Rurik, crowded into the siech and called for a council to be held. The drum was beaten and the warriors thronged from the barracks to the central square where their colonels stood with the priest. The *rada*—the council of the brotherhood—had not assembled by the empty hut of the *koshevoi*, when a message came from the patrol on the river that a new band of Cossacks were swimming their horses across to the island camp.

And these newcomers were from the Tatar side of the river.

"It is that unbridled ——, Demid, come home to roost at last," said the *essaul* of the patrol. "Have you food, noble sirs, for the wanderers? Have you garments? If they come from the east they must be lean and tattered."

"They have passed over a long road," responded one of the colonels. "We will have food, for their eating. Garments we lack."

In fact the siech was bare of aught but a sprinkling of horses and the weapons each man brought. Nor did he resent the rough words of the *essaul*, for, until the siech was at war, there was no rank among the brotherhood.

It was quite a while before the men on the outskirts of the assembly sighted the new arrivals. (It turned out afterward that Ayub had halted the band to dress up a bit.)

First came the young warrior who had once asked where the sea was. Now he rode in the *essaul*'s position, one hand on hip, his hat tilted at a rakish angle. His old boots had been discarded for a new pair of red morocco, with blue heels. His leather belt was replaced by a green velvet scarf, and in it, carefully displayed, was a long Turkish pistol with gold-inlaid hilt.

Four out of the Don men, decked out in all the finery they could lay hand on, trotted in line after the young sergeant, showing off the steps of the blooded Kabarda mounts. When the staring Zaporogians pressed too close they thrust out with their stirrups, and bade the onlookers yield place to the Donskoi who had been on a visit to Aleppo.

"Eh, they are tricked out like pashas, the dogs!" muttered the colonel who had spoken of garments.

Four more of the riders escorted a bullock cart laden with heavy leather sacks. But ten thousand pairs of eyes passed over the cart to focus with astonished admiration on Ayub.

The giant *ataman* had robed himself that morning for the siech. His *kalpak* was white ermine, bordered with gold braid; a purple cloak of damask embroidered with peacock feathers hung from his broad shoulders; instead of the long Cossack coat he had on a Turkish robe of honor, of the sheerest silvered cloth, studded with pearls. Diamonds gleamed from the armlets that held in place his wide sleeves.

"His trousers!" cried a stranger to the siech. "Only look at his pantaloons!"

Ayub stroked his mustache, delighted with the attention given him. Instead of the usual Cossack attire, he wore a pair of silk bag-trousers, as wide as sails, and the purest yellow in hue.

Behind the cart Demid and Michael rode into the ring of the *rada* almost unnoticed. Only eleven had come back, of the thirty-four that had set out. The new priest saluted Ayub gravely, taking him for the leader of the band.

"You have come from a hard road, my son—surely the *bandura* players and the minstrels will sing of your deeds this night."

He did not know the man he addressed.

"Why do you talk to me of minstrels, *batko*? As the saints are dear to me, I have as good a tongue as theirs, and I do not need any fiddles or lutes to give it tone. Come, brothers, a cup of vodka, now—I tasted the pasha's sherbet in Aleppo, but he had no vodka."

Someone gave him a cup and he poured it down his throat deftly.

"Not bad!"

He rose in his stirrups and lifted his voice.

"Noble sirs, it is not modest in a man to relate all his deeds, so I will only touch on a few. When you wish to know how to capture the sultan's navy, I can put a word or two in your ears, where at present there are only fleas. And as for capturing such cities as Aleppo with walls as high as the tallest pines—why I and Demid and the little cockerel of a Frank do not bother our heads about such trifles any more."

The throng pressed nearer and Ayub's old comrades began to grin and nudge each other.

"I could tell you how it feels to fight night vampires and ghosts in a Turkish burial ground, or to change the heart of a witch—"

"Enough!" broke in Demid coldly.

"—or to row in an open skiff across the Black Sea, when the waves were like the slopes of the Caucasus; but you, sir brothers, only want to scratch the backs of your heads that itch from too much lying down."

"May the dogs bite you!" howled an angry warrior. "How did you get away from the Greeks, off Trebizond?"

"How did we do that? Easily—it was nothing at all. When dusk fell the little Frank bade us light two score slow matches that we still had with us for the arquebuses. As I live, we had no firelocks any more, but the Greeks counted the burning matches and sheered off, thinking we were in force. After that we landed, and it is the truth that we passed under the mountain where the blessed ark landed when God flooded the world.* Aye, we climbed mountains—such mountains! The fiend himself could not have flown over them. Then we mauled the Tatars a bit on their steppe and cut down a hundred or so, because we wanted their horses. But as to that, everyone in the world knows except you, dog-brothers, who are swimming in fat because you have eaten in kitchens so long. I will say only that I—and Demid and Ser Mikhail—have here a million sequins as ransom for the *koshevoi* Rurik."

"Rurik is no longer *koshevoi*," observed one of the Cossacks.

"How, no longer?"

"Because the Turks have cut his head open and sliced his heart and salted him down, so that he is no longer alive."

Ayub's brown face became grim and Demid spurred up to the speaker.

"When did that happen?" he asked.

"Last Candlemass, *ataman*."

"And you stand here, like midwives at a borning!"

The eyes of the young warrior flashed around the circle of lifted faces, and he raised his clenched hand over his head. Seven months of achievement in spite of nerve-trying obstacles—his whole journey into Islam had been wasted.

The nearest Cossacks hung their heads, and avoided his gaze.

"The forehead to you, *ataman*," spoke up the colonel who had greeted Demid. "We are not cowards that you should use words like a whip, and we lacked powder, cannon and horseflesh. If the Turks had come up at us we would have pounded them, but we had no leader to go against them."

"Rurik dead!"

Demid turned to Ayub, who for once was speechless. Then he spoke to Michael, evenly:

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*Probably Ayub stretched matters here, but Ararat is visible from a long distance to the north.

"This treasure, then, is ours. Your share is a large one, and I will put it aside—"

"Not so," answered the cavalier promptly. "It was a rare voyage—and my share of Sidi Ahmad's loot goes with yours."

"And you, Michael?"

"I shall venture with you henceforth."

"Eh, the wild goose has chosen its flock." Demid's white teeth flashed in a smile. "Good."

Once more he surveyed the watching brotherhood, who were ill at ease.

"Now, noble sirs—" he leaned over to jerk a bag from the cart and toss it to the priest—"here is a new church for the *batko*, aye and new images of gold and silver."

Pulling out the other sacks he slashed them open with his sword, releasing upon the ground a flood of shining gold, amber and ivory—and a torrent of the finest jewels.

"It is not fitting for one Cossack to have more than his brothers. So set your hands in this trash and drink it up, or lay it out in garments or horses, just as you will. Guzzle and gorge and then go back to hug your wives and tend your cattle."

Taking up his reins he turned away, his face dark with disappointment.

For a while the elders of the council were angry, then they scratched their heads, and began to pull at their mustaches moodily. A buzz of talk drifted in from the groups of the warriors, and yet no man put hand to the wealth that lay on the earth.

"He spoke well. That's a fact."

"Aye, he has a horned soul in him. There is no milk in his blood. Did you hear him call the officers old women?"

"Well, his sword will back up his words, right enough. No getting around that—"

"He flew down on Aleppo—"

"But we are not old women. Let us buy powder and bullets and carriage guns and pound the Turk."

The murmur grew to a shout and the colonels asked what the will of the assembly was.

"Our will is that Demid should be *koshevoi*—chief of all the Cossacks!"

"Aye," roared Ayub, who had lingered to hear what was to follow, "that was well said. He was Rurik's chum."

The head men put their heads together, and admitted that Demid had shown wisdom; he had outwitted the Turks, and only the —— was cleverer than the Turks.

"Demid!" howled the throng of warriors. "Give him the baton, you oxtails, or we will pound you!"

The colonels held up their hands and gave their assent and a voice somewhere took up a song:

Glorious fame will arise,
Among the Cossacks,
Among the heroes,
Till the end of time.

And that Winter when the *bandura* players sat by the fireside in the cottages on the steppe, they had a new song. Bending their aged limbs toward the blaze and nodding their lean heads, they told how Demid the Falcon rallied the strength of the Cossacks along the border and went against the sultan.

They sang, these *bandura* players, who were blind minstrels, of the deeds they had not seen, of a slender Frank who was made colonel of a regiment, and of the storm that was brewed by the giant Ayub who rode his horse within sight of the imperial city. They told how the sultan tore his beard, and the streets of Islam ran red until all the world knew how the Cossacks had come to a reckoning with the Turks for the death of Rurik.

Bogatyr

When the trail is lost and the stars are hidden, the warrior looks in vain to his right hand and his left. When there is neither meat in the saddlebags, nor grain in the sack—let the horse show the way.

Tatar proverb

Ayub, the Zaporogian Cossack, was lost. As far as he could see in every direction the sea of grass stretched, rippling under the gusts of wind, brushing against his shoulders, although he was a big man and the stallion he bestrode was a rangy Kabarda.

Behind him the sun was setting and the whole steppe was turning swiftly from green to purple. The wind had a cold bite to it, and Ayub, all the three hundred pounds of him, ached with hunger. In the chill air of evening an old wound twitched painfully. He wanted very much to build a fire and lie down under shelter for the night.

But how the —— was a warrior, even a Zaporogian—a free Cossack from the war encampment on the river Dnieper—to make a fire when there was not wood? And grass and tamarisk bushes would not make a shelter fit for a dog.

"*Tá nitchògo!*" he muttered to the silky ear that the black stallion turned back, "it doesn't matter."

He pulled the soiled sheepskin over his shoulders and crossed heavily thewed arms on a chest burned as dark as the *svitza* by the sun's rays. His nankeen trousers, a prized possession, fell in wide baggy folds to the tops of costly red morocco boots with high silver heels. Not in all the steppe that stretched from the Black Sea of the Tatars to Moscow, the city of the Muscovite lords, was there another such pair of trousers. Ayub had found them on a dead Circassian chief.

The black Kabarda he had taken in a raid on the horse herd of Gerai Khan, the Nogai Tatar, and it was the pride of his heart. Although the horse had come a hundred leagues in four days, it was only sweating under

the saddle; a wise and stout stallion of the breed known as wolf hunters. Ayub stood up in the stirrups and looked north and south in the last level gleam of the sunset. And he saw no trace of smoke from a hamlet in some distant gully, no glint of light from the horns of straggling cattle.

"—— take you, steppe!" he said, angrily. "You are fragrant and smooth as a Circassian maiden, and I know none fairer. You are full of tricks. You beckon and smile like the maiden, then leave a warrior to sleep in a cold bed."

Laughing, he sank back in the saddle that creaked under his weight. Although there were gray hairs in the scalp lock curled under his black *kalpak*, his Cossack hat with the red crown, Ayub never bothered his head about anything. It was easier not to think about things and to follow where others led. For this reason the Zaporogian Cossacks who held the frontier of the steppe had never made him an *ataman*, though few warriors could stand up to Ayub with the sword, or ride more swiftly or drink more corn brandy.

Ayub had a way of trusting everything to luck, and so he got into more scrapes than a drunken bear. Somehow he had kept life in his body in an age when men rode with death at their shoulder on this steppe where the vultures circled over the scurrying quail and Cossack and Tatar alike left their white bones to be washed by the rain. But if he had been put in command of a regiment of warriors there would have been nothing left of the regiment.

In fact, he could not remember how he had left his comrades at the Zaporogian Siech. He had been drunk when he saddled his horse, and he recalled vaguely a tavern a couple of days later where he had thrown coins to the musicians and had led out the prettiest girls to the cleared space between the tables. At his belt hung a heavy pouch of silver, and he did not know how it had come there.

Reaching over his shoulder he touched the cross on the hilt of his sword and reflected. A sunset like this, the Moslems said, was an omen—Allah had hung the banners of death in the sky. He had seen such sunsets before and always men had yielded up their breath before the night was done. Where was he to find shelter?

As nearly as Ayub could remember he had ridden east and a little north from the war camp. He was at the edge of the salt barrens where sage begins to appear. Ahead of him somewhere should be a small river, the Donetz. Beyond that should be the *auls* of the Nogai Tatars, though God

alone knew just where those tent villages were, since they moved around like wolfpacks. In fact Ayub suspected that he had come too far into Tatar country, and this put a new thought into his head.

Not far from the Donetz in this part of the steppe was an abandoned wooden castle, built in forgotten times by the hordes that had followed Tamerlane to the very gates of Moscow. The log castle would provide him with firewood and shelter, and as for the Tatars, they avoided it for superstitious reasons. But where was it?

"*Tchorttielya vosmi dvortzi!*" he grunted. "—— take you, castles! The stallion will find you before I will."

So he tossed the reins on the Kabarda's neck and settled back in the saddle.

The stallion was trotting along a lane in the grass with the purposeful gait of a horse that knows very well where it is going to be quartered that night. They were approaching a river because wild ducks rose with a discordant clamor from the reeds far ahead of them. By the time the last streak of orange had faded in the sky behind them, Ayub's keen eyes picked out the glimmer of fire on a knoll near the spot where the ducks had started up. Toward this speck of light the Kabarda headed with a rush, as if to say the day's ride was over.

But Ayub, who had no desire to stumble into a Tatar ambush, reined in the horse while he studied the light.

Many ruddy gleams pierced the darkness on the hillock, and a vague glow rose from the earth, as if the summit of the mound had been hollowed out and a fire kindled in its depths. A mutter of voices and a hammering of axes reached the Cossack.

The steppe around here should be deserted—he had not seen a living man for days.

"Can't be Tatars," he reflected. "They wouldn't make such a —— of a racket after dark. Can't be any honest folk out here either—" With a prickling of the scalp, he remembered the evil omen of the blood-red sunset and wondered whether the knoll might not be in possession of hobgoblins and gnomes. Such mounds, common enough on the great steppe, were often burial places of the tribesmen. In other ages the conquering Mongols had interred their dead in mounds, with gold and silver plate and jeweled weapons, and had slain war horses to bear the dead company to the kingdom of Erlik below the earth. Ayub had seen hardy spirits, Muscovite merchants who came from the cities of the north, dig up

such bones and buried riches. For his part he did not fear the live Tatars half as much as the dead.

He was on the point of turning back when he reflected that his horse showed no uneasiness. The stallion always shied when a vampire was about at night. Besides, ghosts did not chop wood to start fires going. Cautiously—for a man who did not know the meaning of caution otherwise—Ayub advanced until he made out a palisade on the hillock and the shapes of wooden towers.

The ruddy glow came from large fires within the wall and the light he had first seen from the openings that served for windows in the blockhouse. This was the abandoned stronghold of the Tatars for which he had been searching. Reassured, the Cossack went around to the gate and found a man on guard.

"Health to you, brother," said Ayub. "What company is this?"

Either the sentry did not understand or would not answer. He leaned on his spear, looking up at the Cossack sidewise, so that Ayub did not know if he were friendly or not. But inside the palisade were other men-at-arms and slaves sitting about the fires where quarters of sheep and joints of beef were roasting. Spears were stacked in the corners and rusted iron helmets lay beside some of the warriors. A line of carts, heavily loaded, stood by the stables. Some of the slaves wore wolf skins, but many were nearly naked. All of them stared at the horseman who had appeared in the gate—evidently they had never seen a Zaporogian Cossack in his regalia before.

At the doorway of the main building, a rambling one-story log structure, Ayub dismounted and found that an officer had come out to look at him—a black-browed giant who carried a whip and a battle ax.

"What fellow are you?" demanded the stranger, scowling. "Where are you from?"

Light dawned on Ayub. By his accent the captain of the warriors was a Muscovite, a Moskya in Cossack speech. So this company was from the northern towns, a long journey. What was it doing in the steppe?

"Are you the master here?" retorted Ayub who did not relish the other's surly tone. "Hey, Krivonos—Crooked Nose?"

For a moment the two warriors exchanged glances without the slightest change of expression, the impatient Cossack repressing a broad grin and the stalwart Muscovite wrestling with his own thoughts.

"How could I be master?" he responded. "My lord the prince is within."

Ayub had seen Muscovite merchants before, but never one of the grandees, though he had heard of their growing power. Tempted by curiosity and the smell of roast meats and fragrant wine, he thrust Crooked Nose aside and stalked into the log fortress.

The roof had fallen in long since and trees were growing within the ruins, but the tall grass had been trampled down and the debris of rafters had been heaped on two great fires. Tables had been built out of the timber, and at these tables sat thirty or forty men, some wearing mail that had once been gilded, others in long tabards with painted collars, their armor thrown carelessly underfoot.

Their leader, a young man, sat at the head of the higher table where the firelight struck full on his red-gold hair that hung to his shoulders, and his face as colorless as wax. His head, jutting forward as if he could not manage to hold it erect, was turned toward the Cossack who, cap in hand, bowed low, expecting an invitation to seat himself at one of the tables—perhaps to be offered a goblet of wine by the young lord. Such was the custom and the hospitality of the Zaporogians, who would never suffer a stranger to go unfed at mealtime.

Servitors in long blue coats ornamented with gilt braid, and wearing green slippers, glanced at him apathetically as they hurried about with flagons to fill the cups of the vassals.

A steward who wore a hat trimmed with sable and as high as a minaret—as Ayub thought admiringly—and who carried a staff came over to him and announced that His Illustriousness, the Prince Vladimir, was pleased to ask a question of the stranger, and Ayub bowed again, to his girdle, at the bench where the young lord was seated.

"You are wearing a sword, Cossack—such a sword!" observed Vladimir.

"Aye, noble sir," Ayub admitted, scenting a chance to tell one of his stories.

No other Cossack had a sword like this one, for he had taken it from a Walloon, and it was a two-handed affair, as heavy as a sheep and as long as a pike. Only a man of really great strength could make it whistle around his head, and Ayub wore it slung on his back.

"By your top-knot you are a Zaporogian. I warrant you are one of the hero-warriors they call *bogatyr*."

"Nay, God knows, your highness, no such luck is mine. In our siech only the wisest and most famous knights are given that title."

Ayub stared thoughtfully at the gold goblets on the white cloths, and the steaming platters. Before Vladimir a whole swan had been set, and two of the slaves were hard at work carving it. Many of the vassals had fallen asleep, overcome by the wine that stained their rich linen and damask. In one corner, where the prince's bed had been set up under a canopy, he saw several leather chests, and Ayub wondered what they contained. Either this was a wealthy lord, traveling in state, or a notable brigand. Truly a notable robber because a dozen boyars sat at his table—nobles who did not wear the iron collar of slavery.

"They drink like lords," he thought, admiringly. "Only they don't talk or sing at all—just drop off."

Struck by a sudden impulse, he turned again to the young noble who was watching the carving of the swan.

"Your pardon, *kniaz grodny*," he muttered, "but this is an ill place to camp for long. The frontier posts are far off—far off. You'll have Tatars around like bees."

One or two of the soberest vassals looked up at him angrily, but Vladimir laughed.

"What a dolt you are, Cossack! There are no Tatars on this bank of the Dnieper."

Ayub fancied that he must be jesting, until he looked into the vacant gray eyes.

"Noble sir, may I roast in a brazen ox, but this is not the river Dnieper. Nay, Father Dnieper lies a hundred leagues to the west. This is the Donetz, beyond the frontier."

One of the boyars, a gentleman in attendance on the prince, rose from his place and struck his fist on the table.

"How could this river be the Donetz?"

"Because it is, noble sir," responded Ayub bluntly. "God be my witness, I have slept in this *dvortza* many a time after shooting wild ducks in the reeds."

"You dolt!" The boyar ran his words together, being heavy in drink. "We cannot be beyond the frontier, because His Illustriousness, the Prince led us himself, taking no other guide, from his estates near Moscow over the devil knows how much accursed barren plains to this place. Here is the Dnieper, our destination. No doubt other Christians will come to greet us before long."

Ayub shook his head.

"Not other Christians, noble sir, but heretic Mohammedans will greet you. You will hear their *shout—ghar-ghar-ghar!* Then they will take your horses and cut you up like hares; that is how they will greet you."

The stout boyar blinked his good-natured, watery eyes and thrust both hands into his beard, looking at his lord for support in the argument. Instead, Vladimir saw fit to ask a question.

"You speak of the Tatar hordes, Cossack. Why do you think they will raid this place?"

"Because it is the month for them to come. When the snow melts and the steppe dries out enough for horses, noble sir, the Tatar comes across the line for cattle and prisoners to sell as slaves. You see, after the Winter they need beef and money. Later, when the harvests are being gotten in, we look for him again."

"*Gospody batyushka!*" said the young prince. "God save us! Would the Tatar hordes, think you, attack a hundred men in a walled place like this?"

"Well, not here perhaps."

The Cossack remembered that the tribesmen avoided the ruined castle.

"Why not here?" Vladimir pressed.

"Because this place—Sirog they call it—has some of their graves in it."

Vladimir waited until the cup-bearer behind him had filled his goblet with foaming spirits before he answered, the shadow of a smile in his gray eyes:

"This is the Dnieper right enough. They all look alike, the rivers in this wilderness. You've got them mixed, that's all. Ah, what a splendid horse!"

Hearing a scuffling behind him, Ayub glanced over his shoulder. The Kabarda stallion, hungry and restive, had come through the door to look for his master—to be unsaddled and have the bit taken out of his mouth. On the rare occasions when he slept within walls, Ayub permitted the horse to share his quarters, to make sure that the stallion was comfortable and safe from thieves.

Tossing his small, lean head and avoiding the servitors and the fires, the stallion came up to Ayub, snuffling the back of his neck.

"Go along, you devilkin!" grunted Ayub, vastly pleased, nevertheless. "A wolf hunter, this!"

The prince had not taken his eyes off the Kabarda, and now he spoke a word to the cup-bearer, who offered Ayub the untasted goblet that had been on the table before Vladimir. Ayub stroked his mustache down, lifted the goblet in both hands and drank the health of the company, while the indolent glance of the prince dwelled on his long sword.

"Now go," said Vladimir, "look at the river again, and tell me if it is not the Dnieper."

After quaffing the heated spirits Ayub swaggered through the gate, accompanied by Crooked Nose. They went out of the palisade and the Cossack stared up at the towers, painted crimson by the glow of firelight. Then he studied the strip of gray that was the distant river.

"That is the Donetz," he observed decidedly. "What kind of a game is the young lord playing, eh, Crooked Nose?"

The man from the north seemed to be enveloped in impenetrable silence. Leaning on his battle ax, he loomed over the powerful frontiersman, his small eyes shifting from one thing to another.

"My name," he growled at length, "is not Crooked Nose. They call me Durak, the Idiot."

"They named you well," acknowledged Ayub, striding back to the fort. As he drew near the entrance he shouted suddenly:

"Look out for his heels—keep your hands off him, fools! Stand back!"

Some of the servitors who wore the iron collars about their necks had attempted to take the saddle off the stallion within the blockhouse. The horse was tossing his head and circling, and when his leather-shod hoofs lashed out, a luckless slave was knocked prone, his ribs crushed.

"Out of the way!" Ayub repeated impatiently to the dozen men-at-arms who had taken position in front of the door. Instead of stepping aside, they unsheathed their swords and lifted their shields. Stopping in his tracks, Ayub grunted and shaded his eyes to look into their faces.

"You may not go back," Durak cautioned him. "The lord prince has taken a fancy to your nag. Half a verst away is a settlement of your fellow Cossacks. Go thither and give thanks to the Saints that your skin hasn't been slit."

It did not enter his head to take the Muscovite's advice. Quick-tempered as the Kabarda that had carried him over the steppe trails for half a dozen years, Ayub was gripped by hot anger that left him quivering and snorting. His horse could be taken from him in only one fashion.

Reaching back over his right shoulder with both hands, he gripped the hilt of the heavy sword and pulled it clear. With the blade swinging in front of him in glittering circles he stepped forward. Two shields splintered under the edge of the sword and the Muscovites slipped apart, to run at him from the side.

But Ayub had been at hand blows too many times to be cut down in this fashion. Leaping to the right he knocked a man prone with the flat of the blade, and whistled shrilly.

The Kabarda answered the whistle instantly. Rearing and avoiding the hands that clutched at the rein, the horse galloped through the entrance, and no Muscovite had hardihood to stand in his way. With a final flourish of the long sword Ayub ran to the stallion, gripping the saddle horn with his left hand.

He crouched for the leap into the saddle, and something crashed down on his skull. Flames spread before his eyes, and he pitched forward. Nor did he feel the earth upon which he sprawled without consciousness. Durak had picked up a small log and had thrown it with all his strength at the Cossack.

II

Ayub was not long in coming to himself, because the blood on his neck had not dried yet. It was still dripping from his broken scalp, and he sat up, spitting it out savagely. His head hurt him and he swallowed a groan when he stood up, leaning on the sword that was still fast in one fist.

To take a man's horse—to set him afoot in that part of the steppe—was something beyond belief. To take a horse like the Kabarda stallion was a blacker crime, to Ayub's way of thinking, than to strip him naked. They had carried him a good way from the palisade. Possibly they had meant to toss him into the river but had found him too heavy to carry.

Better for them, perhaps, if they had. Because the Cossack had no intention of leaving Sirog until he had recovered his horse or settled the account.

He remembered that the man-at-arms, Durak, had said something about a camp near at hand, and he could see, in the half-light of a quarter moon, a road leading from the blockhouse off into the tall grass. Sheathing his sword, he began to walk away, cursing the weight of the heavy blade, his silver heels that were made to grip the stirrup, not the earth, and all Muscovites of past and future generations.

In a little while he came to the lights of a village. A cluster of wattle and daub huts stood around a log *kortchma*, a tavern, and a half-finished church. Farther off were sheep folds and cattle pens. It was plainly a frontier settlement, like a thousand others that had crawled out into the plain protected by Cossack outposts. But he did not understand what it was doing on the Donetz.

When he kicked open the tavern door a half dozen men stared at him apathetically. They had long, unkempt hair and hollow cheeks and were smaller in build than the Zaporogians. One wore the leather apron of a smith, and another, seated by the fire, was making a pair of shoes out of a strip of horsehide.

"Give me corn brandy—food—anything," he cried, and, seeing a bucket of water standing near the door, emptied it over his head. Wiping his eyes clear with his sleeve he moved toward the fire, noticing that a young fellow in a white *svitza* rose to make way for him.

When he had emptied the last bowl of gruel and had downed his fourth cup, he stretched his arms, rubbed his head and spread his legs out to the fire.

"Well, forgive me. God be with you, brothers, Cossacks! I had a little rap on the dome up there at the castle—but who are you and what the —— are you doing in this place?"

To this the tavern-keeper, a dour man, and heavily bearded, made answer slowly.

"We saw that you had met with misfortune, good sir, but that is nothing strange in this country. Are you a Zaporogian?"

Ayub wrung the water out of his mustaches, and from the long scalp lock that hung down one shoulder.

"Don't you know a Zaporogian when you see one? Then you must have been born in a Jew's backyard—that's certain."

The tavern-keeper fingered his beard, and the others nodded understandingly.

"Aye, it's true that this fine knight is a Zaporogian. That's the way the warriors talk, on the border."

"We are town Cossacks," explained one. "From up Moscow way, —— knows how far. We built cottages there and worked at trades, near the castles of the great lords."

"*Shapoval*," thought Ayub, "workmen who take their hats off to everybody." Aloud he asked, with growing curiosity: "What are you doing here?"

The tavern-keeper, who was called Kukubenko by the others, sat down on a log and spat into the flames.

"We're here along of Prince Vladimir, noble knight. It happened like this: The illustrious prince was in disgrace at court because he angered the emperor himself in some way or other. So said the priest who is with us here. That is why the prince has let his hair grow long, to show he is in disgrace. Such is the custom up there. But Vladimir fears no man and even his wolfpack—for that is how he calls his boyars—take pains not to taunt him to his face."

"But what has that to do with you?"

"*Ekh*—the boyars up there and the emperor said that villages must be sent to settle on the border. Out on the plain here there are not enough villages, nor men to tend cattle and raise wheat. So the priest told us. And sure enough, we were ordered out into the steppe—all of our village. And His Illustriousness, the Prince, was ordered by the emperor, because of the crime he committed, to take his boyars and his vassals and go and protect us. Aye, to go into exile and not to show himself again until our village was settled."

"It angered him," spoke up another. "It's God's truth that he has been severe with us. We lost half the cattle on the way and the wolves took many of the sheep."

Ayub had heard of these colonists who were being sent out by the Muscovites to claim the new lands along the rivers, and had no great love for them. They turned the open steppe of the Cossacks into tilled land and grazing ground for their cattle.

"Do you know where you are?" he asked.

"Nay," responded Kukubenko. "This river is the Dnieper, isn't it?"

"Who told you that?"

"Durak, good sir."

"May the foul fiend fly away with Durak!" growled Ayub, clenching his hands on his knees.

Kukubenko glanced at the door in alarm, and hastened to talk of something else.

"This youth who crossed the river a little while ago says it is the Donetz. But after all, what does it matter. We are here."

"What youth?" demanded Ayub, and saw at once who they meant.

In the far corner was the boy who had given up his place at the fire to the warrior. He sat against the wall, Tatar fashion, a *bandura*—a three-stringed guitar—across his knees.

His white *svitza* was clean camel's hair, and his slender chest was covered with an embroidered vest. A wide, black velvet sash bound his middle from loins to upper ribs. But what drew Ayub's scrutiny was the boy's pantaloons, tucked into high slippers of soft leather. They were green.

Now green, among the Moslems, was a color only to be worn by the hadjis. A Christian having any green upon his person would, if he were captured by the Moslems on the border, be immediately tortured in a peculiarly unpleasant way. Ayub knew of one Cossack who had flaunted the forbidden color until he fell into the hands of the Tatars, who stripped the skin from his legs and feet and turned him loose on the steppe.

And Ayub thought that this stripling had donned green either because he was ignorant and reckless, or because he was at heart a Moslem, and if so, he was here for no good. Certainly the boy did not belong to the village. Even the Cossack maidens, who loved bright colors, did not wear green.

"You minstrel," he cried, "you with the guitar, what's your name?"

"Kirdy," the youth answered at once, without ceasing to run his fingers over the strings of the *bandura*.

"You speak like a Circassian—no, like something else, I don't know what," growled the warrior. "Do you mean to say that you swam the Donetz in flood?"

"Aye, uncle, and the Volga too. But my horse is a good one."

Ayub was silent, thinking of his own horse, and wondering whence the young minstrel had come. Beyond the Volga were the plains and deserts of the Tatar khans. Beyond that, he vaguely imagined vast mountains barring the way to Cathay and Ind—a part of the earth where no Cossack, save one, had ever set foot. This one was an old *ataman*, Khlit by name, who had taken it into his head to wander into the world under the rising sun, and had never been heard from again.

"I, too," he said reflectively, "once swam a great river. It was the Dnieper, and such a flood you never saw because your mother had not brought you into the world then. At night, too, and no one could see the other bank. My Kabarda jumped in when I lifted the reins, and when we were out in midstream a new wall of water as high as this tavern came rushing down."

The villagers who harkened attentively to every word of the Zaporogian, now gazed at him, open-mouthed.

"It was impossible to get across, impossible to go back," continued Ayub, emptying his glass and stroking his mustaches. "But my Kabarda was a fine nag. He turned and began to swim downstream, and after I had

said a prayer to Saint Nikolas, I sat back and waited for what was to come. *Ekh*, my brothers, it was a fearful night—trees rushing past us, torn up by the flood, and boulders rumbling down underfoot. But my horse did not go down, and after a long, long while he brought me to safety."

"How?" demanded Kukubenko. "I thought you couldn't get out."

"No more we could," the warrior assented. "The stallion swam to something I couldn't see at all. It was a galley, anchored in the river. You see, before then, he had gone out to attack the galleys of the accursed Turks with me, and now he brought me to this one. As I live, good sirs, it was a Turkish craft."

"Then you were gone, sure enough," remarked the cobbler.

"Nay," Ayub assured him gravely, "it is well known, if you had come to the Dnieper, now, instead of this devil-infested place, you would have heard yourself, that I once brought a captured Turkish galley up the river. I and my horse."

The simple-minded villagers shook their heads in admiration, and Kirdy with half-closed eyes, swept his hand across the strings of the *bandura*.

They, who made me bow my head
Their heads have I laid low with my sword.

So he sang under his breath, and Ayub, looking at him grimly, was not sure whether he jested or not.

"But, noble sir," objected Kukubenko, "were you not blown out of the water with a cannon?"

"Not then, uncle. Another time, when the knights of the siech were boarding a ship of the sultan, that was my lot. The ship had been firing off cannon like mad. *Pouf-bong!* For hours they had burned powder until they had not a shot or even a bit of chain left. The accursed Turks had fired off all their belt buckles and iron armor, and so they took the rings from their fingers and emptied their wallets of all sorts of spoil—gold crosses and fine jewels."

Ayub considered while Kukubenko filled his glass. Then he sighed and shook his head.

"For, look you, good sirs! Jewels and such-like would have been no use to those Turks after they had lost their heads. So they loaded one great cannon as I have said. And the cannon went off right in front of me. It blew me out of the skiff and I would have drowned if a brave Cossack—Demid, it was—had not fished me out by the scalp lock and put mud and powder on

my wounds. The cuts closed up, but whenever I have needed a bit of coin or a jewel to give to a maid, I have taken a knife and cut them open again and taken out some of the charge of that Turkish cannon."

He ceased his boasting and grunted in astonishment. A girl had slipped into the tavern from the dark regions behind the stove.

"Galka!" cried Kukubenko, frowning because she had presumed to show herself to strange warriors.

"Nay, father—" the maiden seized his arm and whispered to him, her bright head with its tinsel circlet, and straw-hued curls pressed against his dark, shaggy locks. Ayub did not finish his story, and Kirdy ceased stroking his guitar, his fingers poised in midair. The dark eyes of the youth glowed for an instant and then he paid no attention to Galka as if fair-faced girls did not interest him in the least.

"Hmm!" said the Zaporogian to himself. "The young minstrel has not seen a lass like this before. That's strange, because girls always crowd around the *bandura* folk like ravens in a cornfield."

But Galka was not like the dark-browed, warm-blooded maidens of the southland. She was too slender, as if wasted by illness or brooding—only lips and eyes vivid in a bloodless face. Nearly all the color had gone from her once-bright kerchief, what with many washings, and her neat *beshmet*, the long smock that all girls wore, was ornamented with many cross-stitchings where it had been torn. And her boots, instead of soft red or green leather, were of stiff horsehide—evidently the work of the cobbler in the corner.

Nevertheless, Ayub watched her, and a pleasant glow went through him. Ten years ago he would have had a lass like Galka out on the clear sand between the benches, dancing. He would have had Kirdy playing a gay tune, and Kukubenko drawing off all the mead in the place. He would have been gloriously drunk.

"——fly away with you, Kukubenko!" he bellowed, the wooden bench creaking under his weight suddenly. "You don't laugh at a story; you hide your women like a Turk.* What kind of a dog-kennel is this? Strike up, minstrel! Fill up the cups! We can't live forever."

*Cossacks did not seclude their women, who were high-spirited and well able to take care of themselves; the Muscovites of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not allow their wives and daughters to be seen by anyone outside the household, as a rule.

Kirdy's white teeth flashed under his dark mustache and his fingers struck out the first, swift notes of a Gypsy song. And then they all heard the shuffling of steps outside, the clank of steel, and the spluttering of a torch. The door was thrust open and Durak entered, bending his head to clear the lintel. Behind him could be seen the steel caps of half a dozen men-at-arms.

Ayub rose, towering against the chimney piece, taking in his right hand the heavy scabbard that he had unshipped while he was drinking. To a man, the villagers bowed low and fastened their eyes on the giant Muscovite who strode over to the tavern-keeper.

One of the boyars, the same who had bandied words with Ayub about the river, followed Durak, accompanied by the servant with the torch.

"Ah, *moi batyushka*—little father mine—you have hidden your bright jewel all this weary way!"

So said the boyar, and Kukubenko fell to his knees, his head lowered between his hulking shoulders.

"Don't you know, you dolt," went on the boyar, "that it's a crime to hide things from your prince? If he had not seen her himself the other day, driving in the cattle—you kept her well hidden on the road in one of your wagons, old fox."

Kukubenko bent his head and managed to say hoarsely—"If it please His Illustriousness—"

"Well, it does please His Illustriousness, your master," interrupted the noble, "and so you'll get off with a whole back this time. Only make haste and send the girl up to the castle."

On his knees the tavern-keeper edged toward the boyar and caught in his scarred hands the folds of the soiled purple kaftan. Bending still lower, he kissed the other's muddy shoes. The noble stared down, his red eyelids twitching with the sting of the liquor in him, steam rising from his round crimson face.

"Pardon," said Kukubenko slowly, "it was no fault of mine that the lass was not seen by Your Excellencies. She was ill—you know young girls fall ill on a long journey like that. She's my daughter."

Perhaps the sight of his own rags made the stout Muscovite angry. His good nature vanished, and he shouted to Durak to take Galka along and have done.

"It's no fault of yours, you say, *mujik!* You peasants think you're landowners—when a cow drops a fine calf you hide it, and show a skeleton

instead! I'll eat with the dogs if your old woman hasn't pieces of gold and silver tucked away in her stocking this minute. No, it isn't your fault at all! When we send for wine, you take a cask of mead up to the castle and save the *gorilka* to pour down your own stems."

Going over to the table, he lifted Ayub's half-filled mug of corn brandy, sniffed at it, and drank it.

"It's as I said, you dog! And now —— save us!"

Galka had remained perfectly quiet, her gray eyes fastened on her father, while the boyar was pronouncing judgment. But when Durak put his hand on her arm she wrenched free and darted at the sleepy servant with the torch. Snatching the blazing brand from him, she beat the stout boyar over the head with it, sending sparks and hot coals showering all over him.

With a barbed oath he jumped back, clawing at neck and shoulders. Running up to Durak, the girl struck at him, but the captain of the guards thrust out his shield and the brand was knocked from her hand.

Durak held her fast while he unbuckled his belt and proceeded to lash her wrists together behind her back. This was too much for Ayub, who had never before played the part of a spectator when a broil was in progress. A strong belief that the boyar would order him cut down or trussed up had kept him in the deep shadow by the chimney, where the wandering gaze of the Muscovite had not identified him. Now he was beginning to fidget and snort.

"Look here, brother," he lifted one of the kneeling villagers, "take up the benches, shout your war cry and we'll make crow's meat of these chaps."

The man twisted up a face pallid with fear.

"Oh, as you love Christ, do not lift a hand. The prince is our lord."

"How, your lord?"

"It would be sin to lift hand. Besides, he would take the cattle and hang some of us up. Then the old folks and the brats would starve."

"Well, your mother bore you once, you can't live forever," grumbled the Cossack who could not understand the other's fear, but realized now that these men would not take up weapons against Vladimir. He glanced at the minstrel, and then a second time, thoughtfully.

Kirdy had shouldered his guitar and was pouring water on the smoking head of the boyar. This accomplished, the boy put a hand on his hip, smiling.

"Good sir, is the noble prince out of humor? Does he toss on his bed, sleepless? I can sing of the deeds of the old heroes—aye, of the falcon-ship

that sailed without a wind, or of Rurik the Fair who slew in his day a host of Moslem knights. I can relate the wonders of the court of the Moghul, or Prester John who lives in a gold tent beyond the roof of the world—"

The boyar grunted and chewed his lip.

"Vladimir cannot sleep that is true. Are you a *koldun*—a conjurer, to know that?"

"Nay, the *bandura* man must know all things."

"Come along then—put the prince to sleep. You'll wish yourself in purgatory if you cross him."

They filed out into the darkness, lacking a torch. Kukubenko did not rise. His shoulders heaved in a sigh, and presently he went to stir up the fire. His task half finished, he sat down heavily, his chin propped in his mighty fists. The cobbler put away his wooden last and his knife.

Ayub's merry-making had come to a sorry end. His broad, good-natured face was troubled as he watched the men who sat in the tavern without so much as a word between them. So might one of the massive *ovtchai*, the gray wolfhound, have sat on his haunches among sheep dogs, puzzled by the sights and smells around him, eager to be off on the trail again.

Such a fine little one, Galka was. Fire enough in her veins! How she had basted the boyar on the noodle with the torch! Ayub chuckled aloud and then sighed. Like a heavy mantle, the silence of the northern men enveloped and oppressed him.

A woman entered the room from behind the stove—a bent form, lean with the stoic strength of age and toil, her head hidden in a black kerchief. She crept over to Kukubenko and stooped to whisper to him, brushing back a gray lock of hair from her eyes. Then, kneeling by the tavern-keeper, she began to rock back and forth, groaning shrilly and clasping her hands against her wasted breast.

From time to time her bony fingers went up to her face, as if to claw it. The helpless bleating of this mother, aged before her time, was too much for the Zaporogian to endure.

"I can't stay here," he muttered to himself. "I'll go out on the plain, by ——, and sleep."

Rising, he sought the kegs of spirits in the corner by the cobbler, sniffing them until his experienced nose identified the best *gorilka*. From this cask of corn brandy he filled a stone jug. Then he ripped the purse from his belt, tossing it into the lap of Kukubenko, who did not look up or cease stirring the dead ashes of the fire.

"God keep you, good folk," he said and drew a sigh of relief when the tavern lights were left behind.

He did not take the trail that led back to the castle, but struck out past the cattle-pens to the open steppe, going toward the moon that was sinking into the mist. Like an orange lantern, it hung in front of his eyes, lighting up the stems of tall grass, glinting on the surface of a hidden pool. When he stopped for a moment to choose his path, the myriad sounds of the night swelled louder in his ears—the pulsating rasp of grasshoppers, the buzzing of gnats and the distant crying of wild geese, startled by something or other.

A thousand glow-worms beaded the grass and the scent of the river with its forest of rushes filled his nostrils. Hearing and seeing all this, the warrior nodded to himself gravely.

"A good place, the steppe."

Then he drew in his breath sharply and rubbed his eyes. The moon, half full, was sinking behind a mound on the plain. The high grass was clearly to be seen, and, rising from it, the black outline of a man.

Ayub could not tell how far away the figure was. It loomed gigantic one instant and looked small as a dwarf the next, in that elusive glow from the sky. The figure wore no hat, but the orange rays gleamed on its head as if it had been polished steel. A long cloak concealed its limbs.

Its head was bent forward as if looking into the gloom or listening to the multitudinous sounds of the night. To Ayub's fancy it might have been the spirit of the steppe, incarnate—lord of waste places, ruler of darkness.

Or, he reasoned, it might be the spirit of some Tatar khan, arising from its age-old bed in the burial mound.

"Perhaps it is the arch-fiend himself," he muttered between his teeth, without feeling any fear.

He had had quite a bit of spirits down his throat, and after the dark deeds he had beheld in the settlement, what was more to be expected than that Satan should have come to look at his own?

"In the name of the Father and Son!" he shouted. "Away with you! Devil, you can't terrify the soul of a Cossack."

At once the figure vanished from the mound, and the moon was once more to be seen, glowing over the grass. Ayub uncorked the jug, and, following a custom of which he himself knew not the meaning or origin, lifted it to the four quarters of the earth.

"To the Faith—to all the sir brothers, Cossacks—wherever they may be in the world."

Then he stroked down his long mustaches, lifted the jug in both hands, and threw back his head. After a long moment he sighed and tossed the jug away, empty. Stretching himself out full length in the grass, he spread his coat over his chest, pushed his lambskin hat under his head and began to snore almost at once, oblivious of the evil wrought by a prince who was not at peace in his own soul, of the loss of his horse, and of the presence of a village in the wilderness where no village should be.

Nevertheless, his sleep was broken. Voices penetrated his hearing. The voices belonged to two good Zaporogians and were close to him and quiet. He turned over and was sure that he heard a Tatar war cry—*ghar—ghar—ghar!*

III

Distance tries the horse's strength—Time the strength of man.

Kirghiz proverb

The cry echoed in Ayub's ears until he roused himself, certain that Tatars were rushing on him. Instead, he beheld Kirdy squatting beside him, the rein of a piebald pony over his arm. It was the hour before dawn and the whole eastern sky was alight. "The Tatars—"

"I am the Tatar. It was the only way to wake you, Uncle Ayub. I tried everything. Now you must listen to me because I have far to ride."

The high grass, waving under the fresh breeze that comes with sunrise, hemmed them in. The young minstrel's face was flushed, and his coat and *kalpak* glistened with dew. Ayub saw that his eyes were coal black and slanted at the corners—the eyes of a man with Mongol blood in him.

Another thing he noticed was that the glow in the sky flickered, and shot up as if the reeds by the river were afire.

"Did you sing the prince to sleep?" he yawned.

"Vladimir did not sleep last night. The Tatars came."

Ayub's jaws clicked together, and his drowsiness vanished. "—— burn this Muscovite drink! Then there was a fight—"

"Nay, there was only a little fight."

Getting up to his knees Ayub beheld dark clouds of smoke rising over the trees where the hamlet of Sirog was—or had been. The glare of flames beat into his eyes, and he heard now a far-off crackling that he had taken to be the wind in the reeds.

"We were near the river gate of the castle," went on the minstrel, "when a *chambul* of Tatars swept on us. They speared the boyar and three men,

but Durak broke through with his ax and gained the gate. We heard other Tatars at work in the village—"

"And you—what were you doing?" growled the warrior.

Kirdy smiled and shook his dark head.

"I tried to carry off the maiden, when the Muscovites were cut down. What availed it? A lance raked my ribs and my sword blade snapped. They bore her off and I ran to seek my horse."

His green *sharivar* were stained with blood, but Ayub drew a long breath when he looked at the boy's side. A leather scabbard had been thrust through the black sash, a scabbard stamped with strange lettering and strengthened with bronze. From it projected a hilt, not of horn or of iron, but ivory inlaid with gold. It curved, Moslem-fashion. Such a weapon might be worn by the khan of the Golden Horde.*

Without a word the Cossack reached out and drew the sword from the scabbard. The blade was whole—an arc of blue steel, unstained and sharpened to a razor edge. The flicker of the distant flames ran along its length, illumining a line of writing, worked in gold. This writing was not Turkish, nor was it any Christian tongue.

Ayub thought that it was an uncommon youth who could take his horse from the stables and ride out of a Tatar raid.

"Your sword was—broken," he said slowly.

"This—" Kirdy hesitated a little—"was given me."

"Hmm. Who was the Tatar?"

"Gerai Khan, of the Nogais, made the raid. I saw his white horse when the tavern was burning."

An old foe of the siech was Gerai Khan, and a valiant man. Ayub knew that the Tatar was shrewd as a steppe fox. And he thought that the boy had a wise head on him to see so much when swords were out and flames were roaring.

"Did the prince beat him off?" he asked.

Kirdy was silent for the time that water takes to boil. When he spoke, his accent was so marked that the Cossack barely understood him.

"*In'shalum bak Allah*. God forbid I should judge where I have little wisdom. I did not see the prince or his men. It may be they were too

*The Tatars of the Golden Horde were a branch of the Mongol-Tatars who conquered Russia in the time of Kublai Khan. Their chief was called the Altyn Khan, or Golden Khan, and their descendants today are the Kiptchaks, or "desert people."

late, or Ghirei-ka hemmed them in. But the Tatars cut down the villagers who took weapons in their hands. They slew many, taking some for captives—the young lads and maidens for slaves. They drove off all the cattle and sheep."

Ayub eyed the piebald pony attentively. It was, as the minstrel had said, a good horse.

"And whither do you ride?"

The youth looked up quickly.

"After the maiden, Galka. I will bring her back from the Tatars."

All this while Ayub had been revolving things in his mind. Kirdy was not like the *bandura* players he had known—too young for one thing. The boy had come from beyond the frontier; his speech was strange. Stranger still, he had emerged from a Tatar raid with almost a whole skin, with a horse and a sword worth a noble's ransom. Now he proposed to cross the river in the path of the Tatars, which was a good way to die immediately, unless he was known to the raiders.

Was he a spy? Had he come to Sirog to measure the strength of Prince Vladimir? Yet, if he were a foeman, why should he linger to talk to Ayub?

"Look here, my lad," said Ayub bluntly. "We shared bread and salt at the tavern, that's a fact. But when you say Prince Vladimir turned his back and picked his nose while a Tatar *chambul* raided his villagers, I believe you're lying like a dog. The prince may be half a devil, but he's an orthodox Christian like myself, and no coward. So I think you're a spy, and that's the long and short of it."

Kirdy's dark head went up and he drew a breath between clenched teeth. Both men reached for their swords, the youth more swiftly than the big warrior. Both were on their knees, their movements hampered by the dense growth around them.

The minstrel did not raise his weapon. No sooner had his hand closed on the hilt than the curved blade sprang from the scabbard. His arm darted forward and to the right, and the scimitar gleamed under Ayub's chin.

Death's scent was in Ayub's nostrils as he flung himself to the left, crashing full length on his back. The razor edge of the scimitar did no more than touch his *kalpak*.

Lying so, he saw Kirdy bending over him, saw the boy's face, pale and twitching, the black eyes burning. In the brush behind him a horse stamped and someone growled a word of reproof. Kirdy, as if struck by an arrow, remained motionless while the big Cossack tried doggedly to free the broad sword upon which he was lying.

Then, to Ayub's astonishment, the boy thrust the curved sword back in its scabbard and put his foot on the pommel of the Cossack's weapon. He cried out something in a language Ayub did not understand, and added under his breath, "Nay, between us must be peace!"

"You give me life?" Ayub scowled up at him. "By the five wounds, I'll take naught from the hand of a Moslem."

The boy's set lips smiled, though the veins still stood out on his forehead.

"I am no Moslem."

Sitting up, Ayub beheld his cap lying on the ground, cut in two. "Well, you are no minstrel either. Who taught you that cross-stroke with the blade? What are you, then?"

The blood flowed back into Kirdy's lean cheeks and he withdrew his foot from Ayub's sword, standing a moment in silence while the anger of the two men cooled.

"Sir brother, it is true I am no *bandura* player. I have come from afar through many enemies, and a minstrel may go where a warrior would meet only sword strokes.

"I was born in the tents of the Golden Horde, in the sands of the Gobi, beyond the mountains that you call the roof of the world. My mother was a princess, of the line of Kublai Khan. She had the right to bear with her wherever she might go the gold *yarligh* and to sit on the white horse skin. Before I had backed a horse she and my father were slain by tribesmen who raided down from the mountains. A servant hid me in a cart and so I was not carried off a slave.

"My grandsire was a *bogatyr*, a hero. Alone among men he entered the tomb of Genghis Khan in the pine forest where the Kerulon flows, in the land of the Five Rivers. He carried hence the yak-tail Standard of the Mongol Horde, and with it in his hand, he made war against the emperors of Cathay. But my grandfather was old, and the Horde was no more than a scabbard from which the blade has been drawn. He took me into his tent and taught me how to handle a sword.

"He taught me many things, but not by words. When the Cathayans searched for us, we drew our reins toward the passes in the southern mountains,* and these we crossed in regions where the snow lay and the winds were very strong. A good swordsman, Chauna Singh, of the tribe called

*The Himalayas.

Rájputs, gave us aid. He had a fine beard and knew a horse when he saw one. He served Jahangir, the Moghul of Ind.

"So we also took service with the Moghul, and crossed swords more than once with the Moslems. Yet there was one Moslem who was a *bogatyr*. He was Abdul Dost, and he taught me how to steal horses and lie in wait for a caravan. I was old enough to follow him in battle, but not old enough to have men to my command.

"Once I think we saved the life of the Moghul of Ind in a war against the Usbeks, and many were slain. But my grandfather tired of the Moghul's court, because there he made many enemies who were always close at hand, and not in a distant camp that could be watched. There were women who plotted against him, smiling at him because he had found favor with the Moghul, but whispering and stirring up the *mansabdars* of the throne against him.

"I, and others with me, begged my grandfather to go before Jahangir, the Lord of the World, the Moghul, and justify himself. But he would not go. He said that once a man might justify himself with words, but not a second time. Besides, he was very weary of the court.

"So we went at night and led out the best of our horses, taking no more than that with us, for we could not. Aye, many fine pieces of armor and hangings of silk and coralwork and weapons we left behind in the palace grounds of Balkh where the Moghul lay.

"Again we drew our reins toward the mountain passes to the north. We carried grain for our horses in saddlebags, because snow had put an end to grazing. On the other side of the mountains we found a land of rolling, green valleys where the people did not live in tents, but in clay houses, and had a great deal of cattle. The horses, too, were good. When we reached a wide river with ships that bore masts and sails, my grandfather said that he had been in this place before. He called it Khorosan.* It was not a good place for us, because the people were turbaned folk—Moslems.

"Though the grazing was good we had to press on, my grandfather pretending that he was blind, and I saying that I was a cup-companion, a teller of tales from the court of the Moghul. We followed the river and it led us to a city on a sea where all the shore was gray with salt. Aye, we crossed a desert of gray salt where we found no grazing at all, and the caravan beasts were camels.

*Northern Persia.

"In the city my grandfather talked with men who had thin beards and wore dirty caps and seemed always to be afraid. When they heard what my grandfather wanted they feared the more, but they took from us the last of our gold. They were called Jews. When a Jew passed a Turkish grandee in the street, the Moslem would snatch off the Jew's cap and spit in it and put it back on again.

"My grandfather, the *bogatyr*, wanted to be placed on a ship with the horses, to go across the sea. He had begun to feel his age, and his joints were stiff. At that time he would sit against the wall of a house and talk to me about his home. He had never done this before.

"So I learned that his people were all knights who cared not about trade, but fought the Turks and the Tatars. My grandfather's people were the Kazaki—Cossacks of your tribe.

"He said that the brotherhood of Cossacks never left the war camps, but when they had taken gold or fine jewels in plunder, they would give it all to the musicians, to play and the girls to dance, and hold revelry. Now, when he felt death standing near him, he desired above all things to see the Cossack steppe again, and to greet the warriors, his brothers, so that the minstrels would know of his deeds and his name would not be lost to fame, but would be sung from camp to camp in the steppe.

"And the Jews, greatly fearing, put us on a ship. For a month we sailed across that sea toward the Jitti-karachi, the Great Bear in the sky.* Then the shores closed in on us, and we passed up a river, where only reeds and the wagon-tents of the Tatars were to be seen.

"When we set foot on land again the bellies of our horses were drawn up into their ribs. But the eyes of the *bogatyr*, my grandfather, were bright and he shouted and plied his whip. For days we sped on through the tall grass, avoiding the Tatar *auls* and swimming the freshets. We swam the Donetz, and my grandfather began to quiver all over, like an eager horse, when he saw the roofs of the village of Sirog and the men going in and out of the castle.

"But after we had come up to the gate he said to me that these were not Cossacks, because the Cossacks were free men without masters, and he had seen the banner of the prince. So we kept our saddles.

"We stopped after a while, and my grandfather sat down because he was weary, and because he was grieved at finding strangers where he had

*This must have been the Caspian, and the river the Volga.

looked for the sir brothers, Cossacks. I went back to the tavern for meat and wine, and there I met you, sir brother."

So spoke the young Mongol prince, and Ayub meditated upon his tale with lowered eyes, finding in it truth and not falsehood. The Cossack warrior remembered the man he had seen outlined against the moon the night before, and remembered too the Cossack voices that he had heard when he was stretched out drunk. And he was deeply ashamed that an elder Cossack, a *bogatyr*, whose renown had traveled over all the steppe from the Black Sea to Moscow, should have seen him drunk when Tatars were burning and pillaging near at hand.

"*Ekh*," he said at length, "you are mistaken, Kirdy. The fame of your grandsire has not been unvoiced, his deeds have not been forgotten. The gray-haired *bandura* players have sung of him and children have heard his name. It is in my mind that your grandsire is the Koshevoi Ataman of the Zaporogian Cossacks, who was called the Wolf. Khlit of the Curved Saber, so his enemies named him."

"That is true," assented Kirdy. "And this is his sword. He gave it to me last night when mine was broken. A Tatar or Mongol would have known it at once for the blade of Kaidu, the rider of the white horse."

Ayub nodded soberly. He had heard of such a sword, but had never set eyes on it before.

"Take me to the *koshevoi*, so that I may hold him in my arms. Eh, he was a hero, and there are not such in the siech today."

Kirdy glanced up at the sun and shook his head. "Nay, he is far away by now. Come, there is much to be done—if you trust me."

Rising to his full height, Ayub stretched himself until his bones cracked, then shouldered his sword, and flung an arm around Kirdy. "Nay, youngling, when you are older you will know that it is ill work rousing one who has been fighting the bear—drunk."

Instead of mounting his horse, Kirdy walked beside the older man, his courtesy forebearing to sit in the saddle while Ayub was afoot. As for the Zaporogian, he eyed the youth sidewise, taking account of the dark brows, the clear, quick moving eyes and the stalwart neck.

"He's a swordsman, no doubt of that," he thought with pleasure.

"He's tall and plain-spoken, and he led a horse out under the spears of a Tatar *chambll*. —— take me if we don't make a good Cossack out of him. Only I hope Khlit put this plan in his head—the lad's unfledged yet, for making a plan, and —— knows my head isn't suited for such things."

IV

Prince Vladimir had not slept that night. When his sentinels had brought word of the Tatar attack, he had left the massive chests of gold and silver plate where he had been making a tally of his possessions with the aid of a sleepy clerk and had himself given the alarm. For hours his retainers had stood under arms while Vladimir, in a tower of the blockhouse, watched the sacking and burning of the village a musket shot away.

Not until dawn, when the last of the riders had disappeared toward the river, did the prince give command to open the gate in the palisade and sally forth. His arquebusiers went out, carrying lighted matches, and the boyars went with a strong guard of pikemen, but Vladimir was attended only by Durak, the clerk, and the priest who had come with him from Moscow.

He merely glanced at the smoldering and charred walls of the tavern, the demolished huts and the broken cattle pens. He did not go out to the fields where horses had trodden down the tender barley and wheat. Instead, he went from one body to another commanding Durak to turn each one over and identify it.

There were many bodies and few living souls in the hamlet of Sirog. Old women, who had flocked together, dry-eyed and voiceless, kneeled as he went by, mounted on the black Kabarda. Boys, who had run out into the steppe and so had escaped the Tatar lances, took off their caps. To all these Vladimir spoke, asking the names of the slain. He even bade Durak's men-at-arms rake over the debris of the larger buildings to see if any bodies had been buried in the ruins.

The boyars soon went back to the castle because the penetrating odor of hot ashes and blood was distasteful to them, but Vladimir kept at his task with feverish eagerness, watching to see that the clerk marked down all the names of the dead on a long roll of paper.

An hour later they came across the forms of the cobbler, and his sons in the trail well on toward the river.

"Mark down Ivashko, and his sons," Durak growled to the clerk.

"See, they took cudgels in their hands, and so they were spitted."

"*Deus eos accipe*," murmured Vladimir. "God receive their souls." The captain of the men-at-arms glanced up at his lord bleakly, as if wondering why His Illustriousness bothered his head about so many peasants.

"The tally is complete, Serene Highness," vouchsafed the clerk. "How many?"

"Fifty-three, please you, my lord."

Vladimir motioned him to give the list of names to the priest. "Here, father—these names must be prayed for, *per diem*, in perpetuity. As a whole and by individuals, by Mother Church. At Easter candles must be burned." He considered a moment. "Will five hundred and thirty gold ducats be a sum sufficient?"

The priest, with downcast eyes, took the list and bowed.

"Yet there is no altar and, save for the icon at the castle—"

"Tomorrow we begin the march to Moscow. There the sum will be paid down." Again Vladimir hesitated, fingering his lip. "Nay, I doubt me that it suffices. Ten garments of cloth-of-gold, with pearls sewn therein will I give the holy images in the Kremyl."

He glanced at the haze of smoke that still hung over Sirog. "It is manifest, is it not, father, that I am now relieved of my oath to abide by and protect the dogs of serfs on the border?"

Durak, the voiceless, uttered a croaking sound that might have been a laugh.

"Cattle gone, wenches gone, brats gone—only *kolduns*, only magicians, could rebuild the village."

"Aye, my lord prince," acknowledged the priest to whom exile in the steppe was as abhorrent as to Vladimir, "it is manifest. Will you return to bend the knee at court?"

Vladimir, hands crossed on the saddle pommel, bade the clerk read over the list again, and when he had done, remarked: "Kukubenko's Galka is not set down. What became of her?"

Durak pointed up the trail.

"There are twain who can give my lord some word of the lass."

The two Cossacks had appeared. They were on foot, Kirdy limping to favor his injured side, Ayub flushed and breathing heavily. At sight of him the stallion had neighed and started forward, only to be restrained by a dig of the spurs. The Zaporogian stifled a groan, because he had never used spurs on the horse, and he could see plainly that the Kabarda had not been rubbed down or fed that morning. The silver cross on the chest strap that all Cossack horses wore had been taken off, and now the reins had been ornamented with rows of tiny gold crosses in the Muscovite fashion.

When the warriors doffed their caps at his stirrup, Vladimir studied them from under bent brows, his head craned forward from his shoulders. Some slight deformity of the back made it impossible for him to hold it upright,

and this painful poise of the head may have made its mark on the man's mind, for the young prince had a restless spirit, beset by black moods that were like evil demons tormenting him with the pangs of conscience.

"Can you lead me back to the Dnieper?" he asked.

"If God wills," responded Ayub, thinking that the prince must have changed his mind about the river. Even a Muscovite could see now that this was no place for a settlement.

"Well, take service with me. Only see that you obey orders."

Prince Vladimir was new to the frontier; he had heard that the Cossacks were vagabonds—masterless men, sprung from fugitives, soldiers, Tatars, Gypsies and whatnot. Since they acknowledged no masters, they were in his eyes no better than the slaves that deserted the estates of the boyars in Muscovy. He did not know that in these plainsmen there ran sometimes the blood of nobles.

"We serve a Cossack *ataman*," said Kirdy gravely.

"I'll pay you for your horse, tall ruffian."

Ayub shook his head.

Now Prince Vladimir was not the man to take a refusal from two wanderers. Yet he needed them to guide him into settled country, and it fell in with his mood to humor them a bit. He bade them follow him to the castle, and this they did—Ayub's eye ever on the stallion, Kirdy occupied with thoughts of his own. Near the end of the trail where the ground sloped up sharply the Cossacks halted in surprise.

All the space at one side of the palisade had been dug up. The black earth lay in heaps as high as a man's head and between the mounds were great pits. Ayub thought first that the Muscovites had been making a ditch around the wooden wall, then he wondered if they were burying their dead.

But the bones that littered the ground were dry, and here and there he saw the skull of a horse. The rotting shaft of a spear had been flung aside carelessly and rusted iron arrowheads lay among the stones. The knoll was nothing but a great cemetery, except where the palisade had been built.

"In other days," explained the prince, "a battle was fought in this place. Merchants up the river told me of it, and I have dug out enough gold to line the walls of a palace."

Ayub thought of the goblets and plate he had seen on the boyars' tables, and the chests that had been standing in the corner by Vladimir's bed.

"You twain shall have your share, and you shall not lack thereby—I pledge my word."

Covertly the big Zaporogian reached up and touched the cross on his sword. It was ill doing, to his mind, to meddle with bodies under the earth. Kirdy, who had seen the digging in progress the day before, made no comment, and there fell a silence that was broken by the prince, who still sought to win the warriors to his service.

"What was the fate of the tavern girl—she who fared with you to my gate?"

"Since she is fair of face, my lord," responded Kirdy, "the Tatars would not take her life, but would sell her to the Turks for a slave."

A gesture as of tossing something lightly from his fingers, and Vladimir sighed.

"I would have given a hundred silver crowns for her."

"Sir prince," said the youth earnestly, "I will free her and bring her to this place unharmed."

"Now by all the saints," Vladimir smiled at Durak, "here is a minstrel of deeds as well as words. But surely that is a mad thought. The raiders will be fifty versts away—see, the sun is at the zenith."

"Not with sheep, lord prince," spoke up Ayub. "They were driving cattle, too. When a Tatar raids, it is like this: They ride at night, two horses to each man in the horde. They go far into Christian lands, molesting no village, like ghosts riding to the Devil's summons. At dawn they turn, spreading out on each wing, making a long net that closes around the *stanitzas*. You have seen what they do to the fold of a village. They put the children in hampers and mount the captives on the led horses. Before you can say a prayer to the Father and Son, they are across the river again."

Pointing through the haze of smoke at the gray ribbon of the Donetz, he added:

"But Gerai Khan knows that you haven't horses, and he will take his time. Only God knows how he got the sheep across—maybe in carts, maybe he just drove them in to drown—still, he's not more than a dozen versts away."

There was bitterness in his voice and harsh accusation in his bleared eyes. Ayub had looked over Vladimir's forces as only an experienced soldier can, and he saw that the prince had a score of arquebusiers with good weapons, thirty pikemen, and as many under Durak, besides the boyars and the servitors—nearly a hundred and fifty in all, with two brass can-

non. Enough to have driven the Tatars out of the village, had the prince advanced at once to the aid of his peasants.

"Give me a horse, my lord," put in Kirdy quickly, "and I will bring back the maiden."

For a moment the prince considered, staring into the dark eyes of the wanderer. He would give much to have Galka again

"You will return here, minstrel?"

"Aye. Only remember that we serve the *ataman*."

Vladimir shrugged. "Serve the devil if you will—but come back. You are young for the embrace of Mother Death."

Some minutes later Kirdy was leading a sorrel pony toward the thicket near the river bank where he had tethered the piebald—his own horse. Here they were out of sight of those who watched from the castle, and they mounted in silence, urging their beasts into the gray flood of the Donetz, kneeling in their saddles to keep dry above the waist.

"That is an ill place," grumbled the Zaporogian. "No good ever came of meddling with graveyards, that's a fact. Only, now, it will be worse for us with the Tatars. You ought to take off those trousers, by the saints. If Gerai Khan gets the upper hand, he'll crucify you and make dog collars out of your hide, and as for me—"

Shaking his head gloomily, Ayub meditated on what the tribesmen might do to him.

"Stratagems are all very well," he went on, "as long as your enemy's at a distance. Trick him all you like as long as your sword point's in between, but don't put your head in the bear's mouth and then kick him in the belly by way of a stratagem."

Kirdy, humming a saddle song under his breath, let the piebald out on the level plain of grass, and Ayub, still grumbling, hastened after him.

V

When the sun is high the lion roars unheeded: when night covers the earth men harken to the howling of a wolf.

Tatar proverb

Gerai Khan could not count above a hundred, and when, after some calculation, he decided that he was the richer by half a hundred captives and a good many more than a hundred cows, he was not altogether satisfied. He could not get a good price for the peasants from the Turkish slave trad-

ers and he did not want them himself. Not so much as a fistful of gold or silver had come out of the raid, and he began to think he had ridden away from Sirog too quickly. His spies had told him that Muscovite warriors were camped near at hand—and the Tatar always kept his distance from the ruined castle.

While his men made ready to feast on the sheep they had slaughtered and carried along in the peasants' carts, Gerai Khan sat on a horse skin in a grassy valley by a stream and meditated.

He had a round head, a stub of a nose and eyes that were like black beads. They gleamed angrily when he looked at the groups of Christians who sat wearily in the sun, their hands hanging over their knees. Mounted Tatars paced around them—short-legged riders in polished mail—holding long lances with tufts of painted hair under the steel points.

Gerai Khan had put aside his armor, and his thick body was resplendent in an orange *khalat* with sleeves too long for his stumpy arms. But either arm could wield with fury and skill the scimitar that lay across his knees. His men feared his anger, his enemies his craftiness. For the Nogai chieftain had lived long on the border, and the sparse red hairs under his chin that did duty for a beard were turning gray.

While the mutton was cooking in the pots he ate sunflower seeds, taking them from the hand of a warrior kneeling beside him—and counted over the prisoners again.

His slant eyes rested momentarily on Galka, who had covered her face and huddled up against gaunt Kukubenko. Then, at the tread of approaching horses, he looked up and resumed his chewing. Six Nogais were bringing in two Cossacks—one as big as an ox, the other slender, a born horseman. The weapons of the Cossacks were in the hands of the Nogais, but Gerai Khan saw at once there had been no struggle.

"Exalted of Allah, lord of lances, lord of the plain and the river, bearer of the sword of Islam—" one of the Tatar riders began the usual salutation.

"Who are these sons of dogs?" exclaimed the khan.

"They are envoys, they say."

"From the Muscovite pigs?"

"Nay," put in Kirdy, who had understood the remarks, "we come from a Koshevoi Ataman of the Cossacks, from the one called Khlit, of the Curved Saber."

Gerai Khan stopped chewing and the red hairs on his chin bristled. His memory was good and not so long ago this same Khlit had brought fire and sword against the Nogais. "How many men has he? From what quarter does he ride?"

Kirdy seated himself by the fire and stared into it while the tribesmen watched his face attentively.

"He will come, Gerai Khan, to your *kibitka* when the shadows grow long. And he will come alone. He has no weapon but there are words that must pass between you twain. You can see we are not mounted for war, otherwise we would not have given up our arms."

Outwardly impassive, Ayub held his breath until his lungs burned in his chest, while he waited to see what the khan would do. Their lives hung in the balance, and he was afraid that Kirdy might grow anxious and urge again that they were envoys and so, according to the custom of the steppe, inviolate from harm.

"What message do you bring?"

"The *ataman* demands that you do not ill-treat the captives, for they are to be freed."

When the Nogai said nothing more, Ayub sighed with relief and stared about him with interest. Never before had he been in the camp of Tatars and his experienced eye took in the horse lines, the orderly groups around the fires—the riders who came as near as they dared to the chieftain to inspect the Cossacks. After a while the khan gave an order and warriors trotted out of the ravine—to double the guards, Ayub reflected, because none came in again. Also, the men at the fires did not eat their fill, but sat or walked about with bows strung and lances in hand.

Nevertheless, Khlit came in without being seen by the guards. He walked his horse down the bed of the stream, and Ayub knew it was he because he wore no sword and because he was older than any Cossack in the siech.

Gerai Khan put one stumpy hand on the hilt of his scimitar, and the other on the leather sheath, and his black eyes were no longer beads, but pinpoints of fire. His voice rumbled in his chest.

"What word have you, who have not an hour to live, to speak to me, O Kazak?"

Khlit dismounted and loosened the girth on his pony before coming to the fire and squatting down a spear's length from the Tatar, apparently not noticing that a warrior led his horse away and others crowded in behind him.

"You have mare's milk, Gerai Khan," he said. "Give me some."

The unblinking gaze of the Tatar was fixed on his old foe. He decided at once that Khlit was unarmed. No knife was in the black girdle around the Cossack's lean waist, and no pistol sagged the pockets of the sheepskin coat that was thrown loosely over his bowed shoulders. Age had thinned the once massive body of the veteran *ataman*, hollowing the flesh under the cheekbones.

Gerai Khan grunted with satisfaction. Not for the best pony in his herds would he have exchanged this Cossack who had come, afflicted perhaps with the madness that besets the very old, under his hand, to be tortured or slain as he saw fit.

He bent forward to scrutinize his guest, and grunted again. Khlit's attire had changed—under the sheepskin he wore no more than a red shirt, once brilliant but now faded by the sun. He had no tall Cossack *kalpak*. But the gray mustaches that fell to his bare chest, and the somber eyes that peered out under grizzled brows were the same.

With a quick movement of the wrist Gerai Khan unsheathed his scimitar.

"Many Winters have covered the steppe since we have spoken together, O Kazak, and is this the only word you have for me?"

Khlit nodded, and Ayub, who could already feel in imagination the lances of the Tatars between his ribs, glanced at Kirdy. The young warrior was apparently not listening at all—he lay on his side, drawing lines and circles in the sandy soil with a stick. Outside the ring of tribesmen, the village Cossacks, who had started up hopefully at sight of the Zaporogian, returned to their seats by the stream.

"Then hear my word!" The lips of the Nogai drew back from his white teeth. "Your grave will be dug here. Infidel—dog—I will drive my horses over you, and jackals will litter over your bones."

"Eh, I'll have better burial than your fathers."

Blood darkened the Nogai's forehead and his hand quivered on the sword.

"I have seen their graves dug up, Gerai Khan. Their bodies are no longer covered—nay, their bodies are kicked about."

"*Bak Allah!*" cried the Nogai involuntarily. "God forbid! But that is surely a lie."

When Khlit remained silent, curiosity began to temper his rage. "What grave have you seen?"

"At Sirog the Muscovites have uncovered the burial-place."

Gerai Khan took time to consider this. In reality, the Nogai tribesmen knew little of Sirog. But tradition persisted among them that their ancestors had been masters of the steppe and that the dead in the mound by the river were of their race. In any event the act of the Muscovites was an everlasting insult to a devout Mohammedan, and he considered this also, drawing a conclusion from it that brought small comfort to Ayub.

"*Insh'allah*—as God wills. Then I will crucify the three of you, setting the posts where the unbelieving swine, your kindred, can see them."

Khlit glanced at him fleetingly and his mustaches twitched into a smile.

"Do you want the women of the Nogai to point their fingers at you, and the children to shout after you?"

The Tatar was becoming more and more surprised, and he thought again that the *ataman* must have lost his senses. "What words are these words?"

"Truth, Gerai Khan. The women would mock you, saying that when the bodies of Sirog were uncovered, you turned your back and fled like a wolf, because the Muscovites had cannon."

Meanwhile Kirdy, who had been weighing the moods of the chieftain, spoke quickly:

"Many a gold goblet and an ivory sword hilt—many a chain of silver did the Muscovites take from the mound of Sirog."

"How much gold?"

"One horse could not carry the load of it—two horses could not carry the silver."

Gerai Khan began to calculate on his fingers and this took him some time. When he had finished his eyes were open and he no longer clutched the sword.

"It is clear to me, O *caphar*," he said reflectively, "that you would like to set a trap for me. You are trying to lead me back across the river."

At this Khlit chuckled, deep in his throat.

"I have known the time, Gerai Khan, when you did not fear a *chambul* of the Moskyas."

"By the ninety-and-nine holy names, I do not fear them. O Khlit, you have seen me drive the folk of the villages like sheep—even Cossacks."

Ayub stirred uneasily, but seeing that his companions were silent, suppressed a hot retort. It was true that Gerai Khan was a daring raider,

wily and experienced, and the Cossacks of the siech respected him for these qualities.

"But," the Tatar added, "there are more than a hundred Moskyas and I have not a hundred. *Hei-a*, they are behind walls with cannon. I would break my teeth on that place. I grow old, Khlit, and it is more pleasant to sit in the smoke of my yurt fire than to carry a torch."

"No need," said Khlit bluntly. "Take back these captives, and exchange them with the khan of the Moskyas for gold and silver. Gerai Khan, you would redeem the lives of your men with gold—is the Moskya prince less than you? The way is open, without pitfalls. I have spoken."

As if dismissing the others from his mind, he dug a short clay pipe from the pouch at his girdle, and fished in the fire for a glowing ember.

For a long time Gerai Khan considered matters, and it became apparent to him that he was master of the situation. Riders had come in from scouring the steppe and reported that the three Cossacks had traveled without companions to his *kibitka*. He knew that Vladimir and the footsoldiers could never catch his Tatars, and the Cossacks were unarmed—hostages. The prisoners were in his hands, and he could make his own terms with the Muscovites.

He thought of slaying the three warriors before going back to Sirog. When in doubt Gerai Khan always took up the sword, and for this reason he was still alive on the steppe where few of his race lived to count their grandchildren on the fingers of both hands. But years had taught him caution. True, he could not understand why the three Cossacks had given themselves up, unless it was to set free the village Cossacks who were their kindred in a way. Without them he could not speak with the Muscovite prince, and if he did not strike a bargain with Vladimir, how could he claim the gold?

"The gold belongs to the Nogai!" he muttered, fingering the strands of his thin beard.

Not for the treasure of the Golden Horde, not for the standard of Genghis Khan, his ancestor, would he have uncovered the bodies of Sirog. Now that the Muscovites had dug up the gold that had been buried with the bodies, Gerai Khan saw no reason why he should not take it. This done, he could cover the bodies again, so that the spirits of the slain warriors would not ride upon the steppe, a thing of terror.

"God is one," he said finally. "I will go back to Sirog with the captives. Remember, O youth, the *bogatyr*, your grandsire, has sworn that the prisoners will be paid for with gold."

"He has sworn it," assented Kirdy.

"If matters fall out otherwise," said Gerai Khan grimly, "you will bow your head to this."

And he touched the scimitar on his knees.

Kirdy laughed.

"Aforetime, O lord of lances, my grandsire was the White Khan of the Golden Horde. Alone among men he stood within the tomb of Genghis by the shores of the Kerulon in the land of the Five Rivers. His word is not smoke."

"Then let him keep it," responded the chieftain impassively, but with something like wonder in his tiny eyes as he looked at Khlit. The old Cossack's pipe had gone out, and his head was sunk on his chest. Sleep smoothed the hard lines from his brow and lips, and Gerai Khan thought that here was a man like himself, desiring peace rather than the path of war, and the cup by the fire more than the back of a horse.

Not without reason was Vladimir called the Fortunate. He had been in many scrapes, but a quick wit and a ready sword had brought him out unharmed. Even his disgrace at court was little more than a shadow, and he knew it to be thus. He had slain in a duel a noble whose wife was a woman comely beyond others. When he returned to the emperor's presence he would be pardoned because his sword and the slaves of his many estates were needed in the wars.

His failings were two—pride of person and birth, and superstition.

These qualities among the Muscovite boyars were common enough, yet in Vladimir they wrought strange fancies. He had gilded the doors of a great church in memory of the noble who had fallen to his sword, and to the woman who had caused the quarrel he sent a pilgrim's staff upon his departure into exile.

From a hint given him by merchants who dared not take the risk themselves, he had shaped his course to Sirog, and its graves had yielded a treasure.

And now, out of the steppe itself—that wilderness of grass and reeds and sandy black earth that he had cursed when he first saw it—had appeared Cossacks who could guide him back to the frontier posts.

"Yet, my lord," suggested the priest, "the young warrior may not return alive from across the river."

Vladimir thrust the last of the sturgeon-roe into his mouth and wiped his plate clean with a morsel of bread.

"Well, little old woman, the youth may not come to Sirog but the tall rogue, his companion, will do so."

The dark priest lifted his eyes inquiringly, and Vladimir rubbed the grease from his fingers on the coat of a shaggy wolfhound.

"He will come to try to steal his horse—that much I read in his face."

"You were ever fortunate, my lord. All men say it."

"Then all men lie, my father. What is fortune, save luck, good or ill? Now the wind blows fair, now foul—who can win mastery by chance?"

The boyars at his table shook their heads, for such words were beyond their understanding. More than one glanced over the rim of his wine cup at the chests ranged beside Vladimir's bed. The chests told a story clearly. Yonder was gold, and they would all have a share in it.

"The wind rises," said one. "Hark to it!"

"Chance?" Vladimir pursued the thread of his thought. "'Tis a foul mistress, that—a wench with a heart for any comer. Nay, I am only fortunate in this: I have seen through the tricks of my enemies and they have not seen through mine."

"Still, lord prince," remarked a noble, "you are fortunate. You have never been wounded."

"Nay," growled another who had caught the gist of his leader's remarks, "skill, not luck, brought that about. Who among living men could touch Vladimir the Red with a sword's edge?"

Now the young prince smiled, because mastery with weapons was his pride.

"Drink, my wolves," he cried. "We have found the hunting good. And you, *batko*—old gabbler—what ghost do you see, that your eyes are cast down?"

Mustering an uneasy smile, the priest drew his robe closer about him.

"My lord, the wind blows cold from the river."

In fact, savage gusts beat at the high walls of the blockhouse and whistled through the gaps in the towers. The canopy over the prince's bed flapped, and the fires, fed by great piles of wood, since this was their last night in

Sirog, roared, while eddies of sparks shot up against the stars. A vagrant puff of air swept the table and extinguished all the candles on it.

"Saint Piotr guard us!" cried Vladimir, pushing back his chair.

The priest crossed himself thrice, for the darkening of the candles was an evil omen.

"A torch!" commanded the prince, whose mood had changed. Motioning his sword-bearer to follow him, he made his way from the blockhouse into the outer enclosure, his sable cloak whipping about his broad, stooped shoulders. At sight of him the servitors and warriors bowed to the girdle, and he flung harsh words at them, for they labored slowly at greasing the carts and mending the ox chains for the morrow's journey.

Making his rounds, Vladimir hardly glanced at the men who were his slaves; his keen gray eyes rested more often on the cattle, on the few horses, on the weapons of the pikemen, stacked by their quarters in what had been the stables of Sirog, and the firelocks of the arquebusiers who paced their beats along the palisade. Others stood at the two brass cannon, placed a few paces within the gate that now stood open.

The moon gleamed on mail and spear points, and on the ruffled waters of the distant river, save when clouds, racing across it, darkened the faces of those who stood about the young lord of Novgorod.

"Where is Durak?" he asked, when all was arranged to his satisfaction.

"So please you, my lord," spoke up Barnetski, the captain of the arquebusiers, "the sentries on the village trail thought they heard horses."

"It was the wind in the rushes," muttered another, "or else the goblins of this place are riding to the devil's mass."

"By the Saints," laughed Vladimir, "'tis my vagabond, with the maiden!"

His quick eye had picked out three figures advancing between the mounds of earth in the burial ground. A sentry challenged sharply and Durak answered, striding forward with Kirdy and Galka, the daughter of Kukubenko.

"How now, youngling," demanded the prince, "do you take service with me?"

Taking his *kalpak* in his left hand, Kirdy bowed in greeting, and Galka, disturbed by the eager glances of the followers of the prince, bent her head and stepped back beyond the feeble light of the spluttering torch.

"Noble lord," said the young warrior gravely, "I have brought the maiden from the Tatar *aul* as I promised. By the wisdom of the Koshevoi Ataman, my grandfather, was this done. Yet in only one way could it be done. We were too few to make an onset with swords, so we made a bargain with Gerai Khan."

"What matter? You are here, even if you left your sword behind and the wench is here. Tomorrow you will show us the road that leads to the Dnieper."

"Perhaps—it rests with you, my lord. Gerai Khan has brought back all the captives, and they are waiting now under guard across the river."

"I perceive," smiled the prince, "that you have an old head on young shoulders. You are not only a warrior, but a statesman."

"The bargain was this: for your Muscovites you must give over to Gerai Khan all that you have taken from the graves of Sirog. He has kept the cattle, but your people are unharmed."

For a moment Vladimir considered this, frowning, while Durak and the sentries watched him expectantly.

"And where," he asked, "is the big Cossack, your comrade?"

"The Tatars, my lord, are holding him fast with lariats, against our return. If we should not go back they would tie him and begin torture immediately."

"Will you go back?"

"Lord prince, if Ayub were here in my place, he would go back. No Cossack would forsake a brother in captivity. It was by order of the Koshevoi Ataman that I came in Ayub's stead."

Kirdy did not add that Khlit, who had quaffed more than one stirrup cup before setting out from the camp of the khan, had been drowsy. The old wanderer had been swaying in the saddle and talking to himself, and bade Kirdy go to the castle to consult with the prince, saying that he would follow in a moment. But Kirdy had seen him head for a goatskin of wine as soon as the river was crossed.

"Nay," responded Vladimir, "I see that you are a fool. I will pay down no ransom for two-legged cattle—or four-legged."

The young warrior started, and his hand caught at his belt where his sword had been.

"My lord, do you jest? What was your answer?"

"Gerai Khan will have no gold from me."

Kirdy looked at the Muscovite in silence, the veins throbbing in his forehead. It had not entered his mind that the prince would not redeem the captives, and he thought with something like dismay of what would follow when he brought such an answer to Gerai Khan. Like as not, the wild Tatar would massacre the captives out of hand, or even throw his tribesmen against the castle. There was no doubt whatever about the fate of the three Cossacks.

"The khan is not to be trifled with, *pany*—noble lord," he said. "If you do not alter your decision the waters of the river will be red at sunrise."

With uplifted hand the prince checked his words and peered from the gate within which they were standing. Durak had seen something moving in the moonlight and challenged sharply.

"*Stoi*! What is there?"

It was Khlit, stumbling out of one of the grave pits. He had left his coat somewhere, and he smelled strongly of wet leather and mare's milk. When they saw that he was unarmed and palpably drunk, the sentries let him pass, and he bowed solemnly to Vladimir.

"*Tchelom vam, kunak*—the forehead to you, brother. And to you, brothers, warriors. And to you, headsman, I give greetings."

Blinking at Durak's great ax, he merely shook his scalp lock, when they asked his name.

"I tell you, I am a falcon in from the steppe. I fly high—I see far."

Sighting a cask of mead around which several pikemen stood, waiting for the prince to depart so that they could drink, he shambled over to it and, grasping the rim with both hands, thrust in his head. So long did he remain buried in the cask that the Muscovites edged over to look into it, and no man could say for sure how much he drank, although the level of the mead was much lower than before.

A slight figure darted from behind Kirdy and flung itself down before the Muscovite.

"Do not send us away, little father. We have done no harm. Did we not pay the head-tax and the hoof-tax to the noble lords? If Your Illustriousness had come to the tavern you would have seen that we harmed no one—"

"*Par dex*," cried Vladimir, "no hurt shall come to you, Galka. As for the others—" he shrugged and waved a muscular hand at the priest. "That is more his affair than mine."

With a girl's quick intuition Galka saw that Vladimir would yield to no pleading and that the little dark priest was afraid to say anything at

all. Catching her breath, she turned to Khlit, who was supporting himself against one of the cannon. But then the torch died down to a glowing stump and the shadows rushed in on them, so that only the pallid face of the Cossack maiden and the vague gleam of armor on the warriors was to be seen.

"God have mercy on us!" she cried suddenly and, hearing a whispered command from the prince, sprang up and fled like a goat down the road before Durak and his men who had been moving toward her could seize her.

Clouds veiled the moon, and Vladimir called back his followers from pursuing the swift-footed maiden. A new torch was brought and Khlit, steadying himself with a hand on either cannon, managed to walk to Kirdy's side.

"Let the brat go—she was a wild one," the prince was saying, "but to you, Koshevoi Ataman of vagabonds, and warrior without a sword, I again offer service. No need to go to the Tatars and be hacked into bits."

Khlit sucked his mustache and passed a quivering hand across his brow, and Kirdy, seeing that he could not manage an answer, lifted his head and spoke for the veteran warrior.

"I say what the *ataman* would say in a better moment. How could Cossacks face life when that maiden has set her foot on the way to death? How could we greet a brother if we broke the law of comradeship and left Ayub to be flayed by the Tatars? We could not!"

The deep voice of the young warrior echoed strongly, because his spirit was moved. Now that Khlit would take no hand in affairs, the responsibility was his to say the right thing. He lifted a hand but did not take off his *kalpak* this time in farewell.

"Vladimir! We will save our lives as best we may, and make what bargain we can with the khan. Only remember this, Gerai Khan will rage, and it may be that he will come up against you. So guard yourself and do not take off your armor this night."

He had spoken as if to an equal, and Vladimir gazed after the two, frowning, as they made their way down the road to escape the pits. Long after they were lost to sight he heard Khlit singing a saddle song:

Ov vy moi—tchoboty schovi—
My riding boots, my riding boots—You are nice and new,
But to —— with you!

Then Vladimir shrugged again. He had been mistaken when he thought there was pride in these men. "*Kasaki**—vagabonds!" he exclaimed.

VI

A fool or a moneylender may gird on a good sword, but only the hand that uses it may hold a scepter.

Arab proverb

As the hair of a jackal entering the den of a lion, or of a dog that has come suddenly upon a wolf, the hair on the head of Gerai Khan stood up, and his small eyes became fiery sparks that smoldered when he heard the answer Vladimir had given the Cossacks.

"You spoke well at the castle gate—by —— you spoke well there!" Khlit whispered to Kirdy. "Now choose your words with care. Tell this Tatar if he would have his gold he must attack the gate. He has seen his graves uncovered and there is blood in his nostrils. If you do not choose the right words, my fledgling, you will wish you were drunk like me—"

Indeed the anger of the Nogai, squatting in the moonlight like some slant-eyed, armored idol, was enough to inspire fear.

"What did you promise?" cried Gerai Khan, gnashing his teeth. "Where is my gold?"

"Your gold is in the castle of the Muscovite, O Khan," responded Kirdy calmly.

"Dog of an unbeliever! I will put the torch to the castle. I will spread a carpet of the slain."

"Aye, Gerai Khan. But without us you will not have your gold."

The Tatar grunted and beat his knees with his fists. "You cannot bring me the gold. You said it."

"When we asked the Muscovites for it we had no swords in our hands. Give us our swords and we will take it."

"Allah! Am I a blind man to fall twice in the same pit?"

Nevertheless, he began to ponder. Even in his rage the Nogai chieftain was far from being a fool. In the past he had raided more than one walled town, and while the Cossacks had been within the gate he had visited the outskirts of the cemetery, and the blood was hot in his forehead. He

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**Kasaki*—Cossacks. The meaning of the word is "vagabonds" or "masterless men."

had seen the desecrated graves, and the battle lust was beginning to take hold of him. No longer did he think of returning peacefully to his yurt fire. A few guttural commands brought his leading warriors about him, and when he had spoken with them he turned to Kirdy who still stood before him with folded arms.

It occurred to the savage Tatar that the young warrior might have saved his skin if he had stayed in the castle instead of coming back. Gerai Khan could appreciate daring, as well as loyalty to a comrade.

"My falcons have been flying about the castle. I have no more than seven tens, and they say that the Muscovites have more than a hundred—many with firelocks. I myself saw two cannon. The wooden wall of the castle is stout; our arrows cannot pierce it nor our ponies leap over. You say that you can lead my men to the gold. Has your grandfather, the *bogatyr*, a plan? What is it?"

Kirdy glanced at Khlit anxiously, but instead of helping him with a word, the old Cossack was still chanting hoarsely the saddle song, his legs spread wide before him.

"Aforetime," he said boldly, "the *bogatyr* took by stratagem Alamut, the Eagle's Nest of Islam, and a walled city of Cathay. To him, a wooden castle in the steppe is a small matter, and he bade me attend to it."

"Allah!" The khan, no little astonished, scrutinized Khlit keenly and what he saw seemed to enlighten him. He did not know how to smile but his black eyes snapped.

"And what is your plan, puppy?"

Kirdy himself did not know this, but to hesitate would have been disastrous.

"You also made a promise, O Khan, that the captives should be spared and permitted to go with us in safety from Sirog."

"My word is not smoke."

A powerful voice from the darkness near at hand interrupted them.

"And a horse, Kirdy. Do not forget my Kabarda—black with a white star on the forehead."

"And Ayub is to take out his Kabarda stallion."

"So be it. And what will you do, O my colt?"

Kirdy considered and made his choice

"We will draw our swords against the Muscovites."

The aid of three such men was worth twenty Tatars, and Gerai Khan nodded grimly. He understood well enough that the Cossacks' only chance of life was to prevail against the Muscovites and this was well.

"What is your plan?" he demanded.

Having gained a moment for reflection, Kirdy answered without hesitation:

"Divide your forces, half on the steppe side, half by the river gate. Light a fire here—send men to gather dry reeds, and tie bunches to your arrows. Set the reeds afire and shoot your shafts into the blockhouse."

"*Shím!*" cried Gerai Khan, rising. "Go! Send an arrow through the gate so the dogs will know their fate."

While a warrior mounted and sped up the roadway, wheeling his horse on its haunches after he had loosed an arrow that quivered in the wall of the blockhouse, the Nogais began to flit about in the darkness. Soon the howl of a wolf was heard from the far side of the castle, but the wolf was a Tatar calling to his companions. Gerai Khan's slant eyes glowed in the murk of moonlight like a cat's and from every quarter came the soft thudding of hoofs, the creaking of saddles. Only a man who knew the warfare of the steppe as Kirdy did could have told what was going on.

The preparations roused Khlit. He rose to his feet, stretching and sniffing the air, and when Ayub came up bearing the two swords of the Cossacks, the *ataman* grasped Kirdy roughly by the shoulder. "Hi, what kind of a plan is this? If these Nogais dismount to climb the wall they'll be beaten off like flies. Don't go on foot, only dogs do that! Stay in your saddles. Let a dozen Nogais fire the burning arrows from the far side and raise a tumult—and gallop up the road with the rest. The gate is open."

Kirdy shook his head.

"I thought of that, but Vladimir has placed his cannon to bear on the gate. They would wipe us out. You've been licking the cup, *bogatyr*."

Planting his legs wide, though a little unsteadily, Khlit surveyed his grandson from under shaggy brows.

"*Tchoupek-shaitan!* Dog of the devil! What if I had a glass or two? My head's sound. I'll ride up alone if you hang back."

"Well said!" laughed the reckless Ayub, swinging his great blade around his head. "Only Gerai Khan doesn't love those cannon. He'll make us three lead."

The pulse began to beat in Kirdy's forehead and his thin lips tightened. His had been the responsibility and he had tried to quit himself of it—to save Galka and the captives while Khlit was drinking and Ayub exchanging taunts with his Nogai guards. But now his quick temper flamed up and he cast all cautions aside.

"Aye," he cried, "we'll ride at the gate. Alive or dead, I'll be through it before you twain."

Khlit's eyes gleamed and he turned away to seek his horse, while Ayub, whose spirits had risen at the prospect of action, leaned on the crosspiece of his broadsword and boasted.

"Eh, *oùchar*—eh, young warrior! No one will take away your bib or spill your milk. But as for me, I've had cannon go off under my nose too often, to cry about it."

Kirdy had gone off to find his horse and tell Gerai Khan what they meant to do, and Ayub finished his recital to himself.

"Well, it's not exactly all sugar and cream, charging two guns loaded with grape. The balls will go through us as a sickle through grass, but God knows it's better so than lying stretched out for these last hours with a Nogai lariat fast on every wrist and ankle and the ends of the lariats tied to the saddle peaks of their ponies."

The Cossacks were too experienced to try to escape in the darkness now that they had their weapons. The Nogais would have run them down within a mile.

It was noticed in the castle that after the first arrow struck in the wall the howling of wolves was heard on every quarter. The Muscovites climbed the towers but could see nothing in the elusive moon light. When the first flaming arrows quivered in the palisade on the steppe side, Vladimir's captains roused the sleepers and formed their men in the enclosure, and the prince himself, who had been through more than one siege, gave command to extinguish all fires.

"Gentlemen," he said to his boyars, "the glow-worms of the steppe are showing themselves. We must put our heels on them."

The arquebusiers, slow-match in hand, were told off, half to the menaced quarter and half to take station behind the cannon. They were phlegmatic Moldavians, veterans of the emperor's wars. Under Durak the thirty pikemen were placed in reserve at the door of the blockhouse itself, while the sixty-odd retainers of the boyars, armed with sword and spear, were sent to the defense of the palisade.

Watchmen were dispatched to the towers, and reported that the burning arrows were doing little damage. Sometimes the blazing reeds fell off in mid-air, and when a shaft, fanned by the gusts of wind, began to kindle flames in the heavy logs a sack of water or a wet cloak put them out.

More deadly were the unseen arrows of the tribesmen, which hissed through the air whenever a head was shown on the steppe side. Here, too, resounded the shouts of the Tatars and the trampling of horses through brush.

Vladimir listened, his head out-thrust as if he were looking into the darkness beyond the walls.

"They make too much ado yonder. The attack will come here, through the gate. Barnetski, are the cannon primed? Then set your firelocks in the rests, and Durak, you send a dozen stout fellows to each side of the gate. Keep them out of sight."

The captain of the Moldavians, Barnetski, bent over to look at the priming of the two pieces, where black grains had been spilled over the touch-holes. The holes were properly covered, and so he made announcement to Vladimir, swinging the slow-match gently to keep the glowing spark at the end of it bright. Like his master, Barnetski believed in leaving nothing to chance.

Glancing back from where he stood between the two cannon, the veteran captain observed that the arquebusiers had laid their heavy firelocks in the pronged rests.

At either of side the door Durak's men waited, some with their hands on the wings of the gate that Vladimir had left open on purpose.

Shining dully in the moonlight, clad in bronzed armor even to shoulder pieces, brassards and crested morion, Barnetski looked like some black Vulcan tending a tiny spark of light. But it was Vladimir who first heard the thudding of hoofs down by the river.

"They come, Barnetski! Wait for my word to touch off the cannon."

His level voice, amused and eager, as if he were about to watch some new antics of mountebanks or dwarfs grimacing to pleasure him, carried to the pikemen by the gate.

"When the artillery has blasted them, close the gate, my fine fellows. If some few ride through alive so much the better. My iron wolves will pull them down."

Sure of what would happen, having left no slightest alternative to the whim of that fickle lady, Fortune, Vladimir narrowed his eyes to stare down the strip of moonlight. By holding his fire he made certain of havoc, knowing that the tribesmen would never ride to a second attack, once the gate was shut. So he watched a dark blur of horses race up the roadway until he could see flying manes and the flicker of lance points. When he

made out the white *svitza* of Kirdy, the black bulk of Ayub and the gray head of Khlit within stone's throw of the entrance, he laughed. The Cossacks were standing in their stirrups, whipping on their ponies, racing with death.

"Touch off both cannon, Barnetski. May the Lord have mercy on their souls!"

The captain lowered the point of flame in his hand to one breech, shifted it to the other and pressed it down in the priming. Then, shouting out an oath, he dropped on one knee, calling over his shoulder—

"Fire with the arquebuses!"

Both cannon had failed to go off.

Behind Barnetski the firelocks roared, covering everything with white, swirling smoke. But an instant before the volley every rider dropped in the saddle. Some, gripping the long manes of the ponies, swung down, crouched upon one stirrup. Some leaped to the ground and sprang into saddle again when smoke rolled over them. Others bent close to the necks of the racing horses.

Kirdy's horse was shot from under him, and he cleared the stirrups in time to run out of the way of the pack behind him, plunging among the arquebusiers who were drawing their rapiers. Ayub's leg was pierced by a ball and he lost his seat in the saddle, rolling to one side and limping to his feet.

"Down pikes!" roared Vladimir. "To me, Durak, you dog!"

Shaggy ponies were catapulting through the portal—only a pair of horses and riders had gone down at the hasty volley from the firelocks—and the prince saw at once that the gates could not now be closed. The entrance was jammed with Tatars barking their war-cry: *ghar-ghar-ghar!*

Meanwhile the armored boyars and their henchmen were running up from all sides.

Khlit had slid from the saddle and had run beside his horse until he was past the cannon. Regaining his seat with a leap he reined off to one side and peered through the smoke. The moon was bright in a clear sky, and one of the wind-whipped towers was breaking into flames. The figures that darted and stumbled through the haze were easily to be seen.

The first Tatars, urged on by Gerai Khan, had not checked their ponies, but were circling the enclosure around the blockhouse at full speed, brandishing their round shields and thrusting with their lances. So they made

room for others to come after, and now seventy or more were wheeling and plunging in the enclosure.

Ranged in clusters, the boyars were hacking with their long, straight swords, trying to unite with other groups. The arquebusiers of Barnetski had been separated, knocked asunder by the rush of horses, and the Moldavian captain was down with a broken lance point under his chin. Ayub was nowhere to be seen and Khlit looked anxiously for Kirdy.

He saw the white *svitza* at once, on the far side of the scattered Moldavians. Kirdy had heard Vladimir's shout and made toward him as a hawk stoops. He had lost his hat, and ran bent low, his bare right arm swinging by his left hip—at the end of it a glittering arc of blue steel.

"Cut down the horses!" Vladimir's clear shout rose above the shouting and the clashing of blades. "We are the stronger."

A Muscovite with a pike stepped in front of Kirdy and the young warrior thrust up the man's weapon, drawing the edge of the curved sword under his ribs. The Muscovite lifted the pike as if for another blow, when his knees gave way and he fell on his back.

"Guard yourself, lord prince," Kirdy cried.

Although Vladimir turned eagerly, he was not permitted to cross swords with the young warrior. Durak had brought up the dozen remaining arquebusiers. Neither time nor space served for them to set up their clumsy matchlocks on the rests and their bullets went wild for the most part. Plucking out their rapiers, they advanced in a body toward the prince, coming between him and Kirdy, who raged at them, his sword striking sparks from the massive armor that had been cast to turn bullets. And Durak's great ax swept up and down, slaying a dismounted Nogai and splitting open the chest of a rearing pony.

This did not escape the keen eye of Gerai Khan who had been circling around the heart of the struggle.

"Take your lariats!" the chieftain called to his men. "Pull the iron warriors apart."

His words ended in a grunt, and the *zvuk* of a bullet striking into flesh. He barely swayed in the saddle, but one gnarled hand gripped the horn and he rested his scimitar across his knee. The Nogais swept before him, swinging their long ropes with running nooses at the end.

Then began a strange struggle, the Moldavians thrusting at the elusive tribesmen and the Nogais wheeling away from them. But the heavy iron plates, the gussets at the shoulders and the hip pieces, slowed up the

movements of the armored men, and first one, then another, was caught by a noose about the neck and jerked from the rank. As the Nogais whipped up their ponies, the arquebusiers were pulled from their feet and dragged, clattering about the wide enclosure until they strangled. Durak and those who escaped the flying nooses ran back to the blockhouse entrance, where the boyars had formed at last.

"Will you end your life on a rope, Vladimir?" laughed Kirdy.

"You will not see it!" cried the prince, springing forward. His scimitar grated against the curved saber and such was the power of his long arm that Kirdy gave ground at once.

The Tatars had suffered as severely as the Muscovites, pent in by the palisade, and there fell at this moment a quiet in the merciless conflict. The Muscovites who still kept their feet were backed against the blockhouse, the tribesmen circling about Gerai Khan, swaying in his saddle.

Over their heads the flames were devouring the tower and burning brands fell thick among the warriors.

Khlit, sitting his horse apart from them, shaded his eyes against the glare of the fire and watched the sword duel, his muscular hands clasping and unclasping.

The two blades, now flashing silver in the moonlight, now gleaming red from reflected flames, coiled together—down and up. They parted and engaged again, and parted when Vladimir slashed wide and left himself open to a cut.

Kirdy darted in and his curved blade grated against the mail under the Muscovite's kaftan. Vladimir, who had foreseen this, hacked down, his arm only moving from the elbow—a swift cut, impossible to parry.

Nor had Kirdy the fraction of a second to leap back. Instead he dropped to his knees, the prince's scimitar flashing in front of his eyes. Then, when Vladimir recovered and thrust swiftly, the young warrior leaped up as a wolf springs back. The two blades struck and sparks flew.

The flames crackled above them, lighting up the pallid, smiling face of the noble, the wild countenance of the boy. Their boots thudding through the smoking ashes of a fire, they changed ground, and Vladimir mustered his strength to attack for the last time, being certain now that his skill was greater than the warrior's.

Kirdy gave ground, but he threw aside all caution as well. Sweat dripped into his eyes and instead of parrying, he slashed with all the strength of his arm in each cut. A groaning shout came from his tense throat—

"*Ou-haa—ou-haa*!"

Vladimir now sought to engage the blades and lock hilts; his breath whistled from his lungs, and his teeth gleamed between his lips. The whirlwind of steel was about his head and he stepped back to gain a second's respite. Again—and he tossed up his scimitar.

The boy's heavy blade whistled in the air and struck full against his side. The keen edge snapped the links of the iron mail and the watchers saw Vladimir drop to one knee when Kirdy jerked his sword free. A rush of blood stained the girdle of the prince, and Vladimir raised his head slowly.

"Better," he gasped, "than rope—or flames."

The curved saber had penetrated far under his heart and the color was already draining from his lips.

Dazed with weariness the young warrior stood before him, scarcely hearing the *ghar-ghar—ghar* of the tribesmen who were beginning to shoot arrows at the Muscovites. Nor did he hear Khlit's shout—

"Well done, little *bogatyr*—by —— that was well done."

Ayub, on one good leg, had hobbled steadily toward the stables, beating down with his broadsword any Muscovite who rushed at him, but never swerving from his course. More than once he fell, and he had been cut with a pike over one ear and down one arm before he reached the carts and began to haul himself around toward the horses of the Muscovites.

For some time he sought among the oxen and the ponies of the boyars before he saw the small, black head and loose mane of the Kabarda tossing restlessly.

It was almost dark in the stable and he edged his way toward his horse, stumbling over packs and harness, heedless of what went on outside. When he laid hand on the stallion's sleek flank at last he breathed a sigh of relief. Then he bellowed with anger.

On the other side of the horse a man was quietly putting on a saddle. Reaching for the cinch, he had not seen Ayub. The light was behind him, and the astonished Zaporogian recognized the square shoulders and steel cap of Durak.

"Turtle-egg!" he shouted, fumbling for the hilt of his broadsword which he was dragging, sheathed, in his right hand to save his injured leg. "A dog fathered you, but now you disgrace your sire by horse stealing."

Durak reared up silently, and even in his blind rage Ayub remembered the great battle-ax. The Cossack leaned back and poised his massive sword as if it had been a javelin. Grunting he heaved it at Durak's head, putting all the strength of his ox-like shoulders into the cast. He heard the round silver ball of the pommel strike something with a dull thud.

Then he flung his arms over the stallion's back, praying that the ax of the Muscovite would not drop on the horse. The Kabarda, recognizing his master, did not kick out, but jerked its head, quivering with excitement.

For a moment Ayub held his breath, listening with all his ears. He heard only the muffled tumult outside, and judged that Durak lay where he had fallen, whether dead or nor he did not know.

Reaching under the horse he felt around in the straw until he grasped his scabbard with the sword in it. The silver ball on the hilt felt damp. Ayub strapped it on his back and satisfied himself that the snorting stallion had the bridle on, and the bit between his teeth.

"You little devilkin," he muttered when the bony muzzle smote his cheek. "Gerai Khan won't change his mind about you now. I saw him swallow a bullet the wrong way. As for that turtle-egg, it wasn't a knightly blow I struck him, but the son of a dog laid me down with a log. Now we must go and have a look at the battle. I didn't see Khlit or that bit of forked lightning, Kirdy—"

Mounting from the wrong side, to the utter astonishment of the stallion, he pushed his wounded leg into the stirrup with a grimace and wheeled out of the stable.

His first glance was at the tower, up which the flames were roaring, and he shook his head when he beheld the bodies heaped about the gate. No Muscovites were visible, but the Tatars were trotting about the blockhouse, bows in hand, sending arrows into every aperture. Only a few pistols answered them. The boyars had taken refuge in the blockhouse and the tribesmen held the palisade and the outer ground.

"If they don't sally out, they'll be smoked like hams in the penthouse," Ayub thought, "and if they do, they'll be cut open like fish in a boat. Hi, the *ataman* has a sober head at last."

Khlit had reined his pony in front of the closed gate of the blockhouse, holding up his hand without a weapon in it.

"Ho, within there!" His deep shout was heard above the roar of the flames in the towers. "Lay down your arms and come out. Your game is played."

There was silence for a time, while no pistols barked, and the tribesmen held their arrows on the string.

"Who speaks?" demanded a voice from the log castle.

"A Koshevoi Ataman of the Cossacks."

Other voices began to argue. The Muscovites had lost their leader; Barnetski and Durak were gone. Flight was impossible, and they could not hold the flames in check for long.

"What terms?" asked the first voice, not so arrogantly.

"Fair ransom for the boyars—slavery for their slaves," responded Khlit briefly.

"At your hands?"

"Nay, the Tatars."

"But you are taking the villagers safe across the frontier."

"No fault of yours. Open the door or that gold will be lost, and the Tatars will give you only their sword edges."

Almost at once the door was pulled back and some forty men including a half dozen nobles walked out, weaponless, many of them trying to bind up their wounds. When the last was out, the Nogais ran into the castle, seeking the bed of the prince and the chests that stood beside it.

Ayub trotted over to where Kirdy was kneeling by the dying lord of the Muscovites. Vladimir, propped up on one elbow, was trying to speak to the little priest who was shivering, his cope wrapped close about him.

"*Batko*," the hoarse voice of the prince forced out the words by an effort of will, "do not forget—the fifty-three souls to be prayed for. My estates—money will be given—and for the others, slain back there. For the boyars whose wife—ah, *batko* pray that God's mercy be not denied me. I sinned in leading my men here—stood by when the Tatars came the first time. They came back—the scourge of God." In spite of himself, looking into the haggard gray eyes, Ayub was moved.

"Faith, 'tis a sad thing to have a black spirit like that. Fall to your work, priest! Nay, Kirdy, don't sigh—you'll get used to things like this. Give him a sip of brandy and make the sign of the cross over him. If he lived like a devil, at least he turned up his toes like a man."

And the boy, rising from his knees, took the curved saber still stained with blood and swept it down and across the dying Muscovite.

By now the Tatars who had been guarding the captive villagers had hurried up, eager to take part in the pillaging, bringing with them Kuku-

benko and his people. The tavern-keeper, standing outside the gate with pale Galka beside him, stared dully at the flames devouring the castle. The events of the last hours were past his understanding, but his daughter was more quick-witted. She watched the Tatars herding the Muscovites down toward the river, and stripping the bodies of armor and weapons. When she saw Gerai Khan carried by, in a horse litter escorted by a dozen tribesmen, she knew that the Tatars were leaving and that the villagers had been exchanged for the Muscovites.

She tripped up to Ayub, caught his hand and pressed her fresh lips against it.

"Zaporogian, our hearts thank you. May the Father and Son bless you for this night's work!"

"Well, it was a small affair," responded Ayub, pleased. "You could hardly call it a battle, lass. Still, it was warm for us, for a moment."

He glanced at the spear points of the retreating Tatars, and was silent until they reached the river.

"I thought the Nogais would rub us out after everything was over. Then you'd have been no better off than before. But Gerai Khan had a bullet in his throat—can't speak for a while—and Khlit, the *ataman* yonder, had got over his drinking bout. He ordered them around in their own language, and when they looked at him they thought his eye was like a basilisk. So they kept their word and went off like lambs."

Only half understanding this, Galka smiled. She was scarcely a woman grown but she knew that she could persuade big Ayub to do what she wanted.

"And now, Zaporogian, out of your kindness you will take us back to the border where we can find Christians?"

"Aye, why not? This is no place for the likes of you. But first you'll have to bury your former masters. Can't leave them lying around like this."

"The men will see to it, noble knight. I'll tell Kukubenko at once, and he will get the priest. Indeed, you think of everything and I am sure that you are the finest *bogatyr* of all the Zaporogians."

Ayub stroked up his mustaches and glanced down at the slip of a girl feelingly, but he saw that she was watching Kirdy, who sat on a log, his head in his hands, the curved sword still across his knees.

"Nay," he said honestly, "there's the *bogatyr*. At least he'll be one if he keeps on like this. He won't look at you now, lass, because the fever of sword-strokes is still in his veins and his knightly spirit is intent on

Cossack glory. Tomorrow he'll strike up with the *bandura* and have you dance."

He stroked her head while the gray eyes looked up at him inscrutably, glowing with the thoughts that come to the young, and the veteran warrior could not read the message in them. Besides, his throat was dry and he had been hunting high and low for *gorilka* to drink.

Abandoning Galka, he continued his search until he halted by the two cannon in the entrance of the palisade. Sniffing strongly he peered to right and left and finally bent over the breech of one of the brass guns.

Thrusting an exploring finger into the tiny heap of powder over the touch-hole, he held it up to the light, then put it to his tongue. Without doubt the priming smelled strongly of corn brandy, and he wondered why. Picking up a blazing stick that had blown from one of the towers he laid it on the breech of the other cannon, to the consternation of the villagers who were in the gate.

"It's quite true," he muttered, "that the priming has been dampened and the guns won't go off."

Waxing curious, he called Kirdy over and explained what he had discovered. The young warrior considered a moment with bent head, and uttered an exclamation.

"When we came to the gate to arrange the ransom with Vladimir, Khlit drank deep from the *gorilka* cask. When all eyes were on the maiden Galka and the torch burned low I saw my grandfather stoop over each cannon. It is in my mind that he was not drunk at that time."

Ayub would have spoken, but then he sighted Khlit approaching. The old *ataman* swaggered in his walk, the silver heels of his boots striking the earth powerfully.

"Hey, Zaporogian," he cried, "I am too feeble to ride with the brotherhood again. I will not gird on the sword. But I have brought you an *oùchar*—a fledgling grandson who will lead men and whose name will yet be a terror among the Tatars and the Turks. This night he faced Gerai Khan boldly and cut down the Muscovite prince. Without aid from us he made a good plan."

"The sir brothers will bid him welcome," assented Ayub earnestly. "But when you say he did it without aid you lie, old dog. Was it not you who spat on the breeches of the Muscovite guns? The angels themselves must have put a turnip on Barnetski's face instead of a nose, that he did not smell the corn brandy when he examined the priming."

Khlit looked at him gravely from under shaggy brows.

"Not corn brandy," he growled. "In my day we had corn brandy. If you poured it on the breech of a cannon and put a match to it the powder would go off like mad. More than one cannon did we burst that way."

Ayub put both hands on his massive sides, and bowed to the girdle.

"Prince of liars and father of battles, I bid you welcome. Nay, you are Khlit."

White Falcon

About the White City are three walls.

Within the earth wall dwell the slaves—within the red wall the men-at-arms guard the palaces of the peers.

In the heart of the city within the white wall sleeps one who is master of all.

Yet his sleep is broken and he himself
is no more than a slave to Fear.

Chapter 1

Three Travelers Enter the Gate

The sentry at the Gora gate of the city of Moscow was a good soldier. He knew the four duties of the guard, because his sergeant had instructed him carefully and he had repeated them until he remembered them—

To bow the head before rank, to drive away vagabonds, to hand over any coin given him to his sergeant, and—unless some extraordinary event befell—on no account to call the captain of the guard who, at this hour of a cloudless Midsummer day, was asleep in the cool anteroom of the gate tower. The sergeant was not in evidence because he was making his rounds which led him, to the best of the sentry's belief, through several nearby taverns and took up a great deal of time.

So the sentry had the gate to himself. In the warlike days of the Tsar Ivan the Terrible this would not have been the case. But the new tsar, Boris Godunov, was a different sort. He cared more for the trade caravans that entered the gates of Moscow than for the warriors who guarded the gates.

Leaning on his halberd, the sentry watched a file of dusty ox-carts pass between the towers into the city. Some of the bales smelled deliciously of tea; the wooden casks reeked of oil or wine. God alone knew whence they came—perhaps from the land of the great Moghul, perhaps from Cathay—but the sentry knew they were going into the Kremyl of Boris Godunov.

Suddenly he stepped forward and lowered his weapon across the open half of the gate.

"Hi there, my fine fellows, just pull in your reins a moment!"

The last of the ox-carts had rumbled by and through the pall of dust three horsemen appeared, riding abreast. They looked, at first glance, like vagabonds.

Their sheepskin coats and embroidered linen shirts were rent and weather-stained. No baggage followed them in carts and no servants went before with staves.

One of them, with a good-humored, sunburned face, was the heaviest man the sentry had ever seen astride a horse. The rider in the center wore no sword and was very old; white mustaches hung down from lined, hollow cheeks. The youngest of the three was beautiful as a prince's son. The hilt of his sword was gold, with a circle of pearls on the pommel, and the sword curved like a bent bow.

This puzzled the sentry, because in Moscow such a sword would be worn by a high officer, not by a boy. And the boots of the three were of shining red morocco—their horses excellent and well cared for; they held their heads high—undoubtedly in some respects these men were like boyars—nobles.

"Come now," he said pacifically. "tell me your names and the mission upon which you ride."

Easing his weight from one stirrup to the other the stout rider considered him from restless black eyes. The sentry wore the long black coat with red facings of the Moscow *strelsui*, the town guard. His beard was cut as square as the toes of his cowhide shoes, and there was not too much rust on his iron morion or his halberd head.

"I am Ayub the Zaporogian," the big man said, "from the steppe—"

"What is that?" demanded the Muscovite alertly.

"Eh, Rusty, don't you know?" Ayub rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well, it's like this. The devil will not enter the lands of the good Muscovites, because you've built churches everywhere. But even the devil has to exercise his horses, so he made a great plain just beyond the frontier. He took away all the mountains so his stallions would not try to jump too high and he cut down all the trees, so the fire from their nostrils would not start a blaze. That's the steppe, and that's why you won't find anything there except a lot of wild horses and the Horned One himself, of nights."

In the opinion of the sentry the frontier of which Ayub spoke was a haunt of outlaws and evil spirits, with hordes of Tatars and Turks—what lay beyond the border he could not imagine. "What is your mission in Moscow?" he asked.

"We have come to holy mother Moscow of the white walls to see our brothers who are the best warriors of the tsar, because they are Cossacks like us."

Now the sentry had never set eves on a Cossack before, and knew of no such warriors in the service of Tsar Boris Godunov. And he could not decide whether to admit the three wanderers or bar them out. "How many brothers have you, good sir?" he pondered.

"Five hundred. They are the Donskoi—the Don men."

Upon further reflection the sentry decided to awaken his captain.

Bearded to the eyes, clumping along in clumsy boots the *starosta* of the guard emerged from one of the towers and yawned heartily. The three Cossacks took off their tall lambskin hats politely and he ceased yawning. Every head was shaved to the peak of the skull, from which dangled a long scalp lock.

"Oho," he said, "you are Cossacks from down below. What master do you serve?"

Seeing that Ayub was growing red with anger at the delay and questioning, the youngest reined his piebald pony forward and spoke respectfully—though he did not dismount to address the *starosta*.

"We serve no one. We seek permission to enter to rest our horses and refresh ourselves."

"Well, what regiment are you from? Are you from the light cavalry that has been scouring the Don river of its filth?"

"Captain, we come not from the emperor's service. Nor do we know where your cavalry has quested. For years we have been beyond the border at the courts of Eastern kings."

"What is your name, youngling?"

"Kirdy is my name. And this old one, my grandsire, is Khlit, who is a *bogatyr* of the border."

The officer of the guard put his hands on his hips and shook his head as the sentry had done. A *bogatyr* was a hero warrior, whose name was handed down in legends. Always the *bogatyri* had been princes of the throne, and the warrior with the thin, dark face and the white beard that fell to his chest was not even a noble. "Nay," he muttered, "I think you are lying—"

The oldest of the Cossacks—he called Khlit—urged his horse suddenly between the captain and Kirdy. A veined hand closed on the wrist of the

youth who had snatched at his sword hilt, his black eyes blazing. "This is a lofty threshold, my falcon," he growled in a speech the Muscovites did not understand. "Kabardar—walk your horses slowly here, looking to right and left, saying nothing without thinking three times."

The boy who wore the white camel's hide cloak dropped his eyes and took his hand from his sword, and after a moment Khlit turned to the officer. "You of the guard," he said bluntly, "be at peace. We wish to enter to speak with our brothers."

"Are they royalty?" The Muscovite essayed a jest.

"Aye, by —— they are!" cried Ayub. "They are the Donskoi—the Cossacks of the Don. Upon the road I heard that my brother-in-arms, Demid, is in Moscow. Even the tavern-keepers up this way have heard of his deeds because he is chief of the Don men. With five hundred of his falcons he is visiting Moscow, so we drew our reins hither. I have not drunk a cup with Demid for two harvests."

The eyes of the *starosta* changed and he glanced at the sentry who was staring, slack-jawed. "So, my masters, you wish to be quartered with the Donskoi?"

"Aye, where is their barrack? Do they serve the tsar?"

Until now Ayub had been doubtful whether they would find his friends in this gigantic city of the Muscovites. He did not understand why Demid, who had been a chief on the border, had taken service with the lord of Muscovy. But now the captain said it was so and he was relieved that his long ride had not been in vain. In another hour he would be drinking the health of his former companions, and not in mead but in fine sparkling wine or heady spirits.

"Well, my wanderers, if you are truly friends of the Donskoi you may enter," responded the officer readily. "All Moscow has heard of their deeds and every honest man has gone to look at the heroes. You will find them easily."

"I warrant they are quartered with the best of your warriors," granted Ayub.

"Aye, that is truth. Go to the gate of Saint Nicholas—pass through the red and the white walls, to the citadel, the Kremyl itself. Only ask for the Don Cossacks and you will be shown the way. They await the pleasure of the tsar's majesty."

"God be with you," said Ayub, mollified, "you have a civil tongue in a dog's face. I don't see why Demid wanted service with farmers, but he always was a devil for rooting into dark places."

When they trotted past, the florid cheeks of the *starosta* grew ruddier still and his beard twitched in a silent laugh. The halberdier, seeing the good humor of his officer, was gratified because he would not be flogged for waking up the captain.

The three Cossacks kept abreast as they entered the environs of the city, and gazed curiously at the scattered barracks of the militia amid the hovels of the peasantry. Here and there arose the walled pile of a monastery with only narrow embrasures to let in the light of day.

Within the Kitai-gorod with its red brick wall the wanderers found a different city. Here the houses formed irregular streets and foreign merchants hung out their signs. Covered stalls of harness makers and silver- and gold-smiths almost touched the flanks of their horses. But the street underfoot, even though timbers had been laid on it, was fetlock deep in mud, and the sun beat down on damp earth and piles of filth.

"Only look yonder," cried Ayub, "surely there is the father of all churches. How it shines!"

It was the great church of Vasili the Blest that had caught his eye—a bulbed spire rising from a nest of ten cupolas, all different and all resplendent in varying colors, red, gold and white.

They moved on, scattering the mob of beggars that clutched at their knees and the pack of dogs that snarled and fought at the heels of the beggars. The horses shied at a body that lay half buried in the mud—a mere skeleton of a man black with flies where the skin showed through the rags.

Ayub tossed a handful of silver among the mendicants, but the half-starved pack only clamored the more until a three-horse carriage of a noble trotted through the narrow street, with servants running before to clear the way. The Cossacks drew aside, taking note of the boyar's green kaftan trimmed with sables, of the silver eagle on his breast, and the fine belt of Siberian silver fox. He rested his hands on the gold hilt of a long sword and looked neither to right nor left.

As the carriage passed, an odor of amber and musk swept away for a moment the stench of drying mud and uncleansed human flesh.

"Is that one the tsar," Ayub asked the tavern woman who set brandy before them, "or one of his lord-colonels?"

The Cossacks had rubbed down their ponies and spread hay before them in the stable yard, and not until this was done had they hastened into the taproom.

"Nay, good sir, that is a member of the *okolnitchi*."

"Of what, lass?" demanded Ayub, draining his glass and sucking his mustache.

"The men who follow the tsar."

"Well, aren't they the greatest nobles in all this part of the world?" The big Cossack glanced around and beheld dark faces under spotless turbans—Armenian and Turkoman merchants quaffing forbidden wine in the city of infidels—broad white faces and drab velvets of traders from the north.

"Some are great nobles, some are different. All is otherwise now."

"How otherwise?" demanded the Zaporogian who was impatient of half-truths. "More brandy, wench—nay, bring the cask. Here are gold ducats. Bear a glass to everyone in this room. We are Cossacks and Satan himself never saw us drink in a corner."

Whether the sight of gold heartened her—who had been skeptical of their worn garments—or whether Ayub's ignorance reassured her, the thin-cheeked woman in the soiled kerchief set the spirits before him and bent close as if to wipe the table that bore no evidence of such care.

"The angels bless you, good sirs! Do you not know? Ever since the old tsar died and the new father sits in his place there has been a curse on the land."

"What curse?" Ayub asked, interested.

"Every year since *it* happened drought has destroyed the harvests, and we have had little food. Only today they carried out a hundred and five bodies in wagons to the burial ground."

Khlit's gray eyes searched the woman's face casually. He had noticed the cortege with its sad burden while Ayub was arguing with the guard at the gate. But famine stalked through more than one land in these evil times.

"Such things have happened before." The woman's tongue once loosened, must needs tell the full story of woe. "Yet here the black plague has been among us. They do say it is worst where the—the new tsar lies."

"Nay," muttered Ayub, fortified by his fourth glass, "even the Turks have the plague."

"Whenever the —— the wise tsar rides forth," went on the tavern-keeper, "they ring the bells, real fine. But it ain't a joyful sound the bells make. No matter how the monks pull the ropes, the sound always comes out the same. The bells ring a dirge. It's been like that since *it* happened."

"Eh, that's bad," nodded Ayub seriously. "That's an omen, wench, and not to be spit upon. When your horse stumbles, look out, because you'll meet woe. If you hear vampires crying in the trees a woman will steal your purse or Jews get you in debt. That's the way of it. Well, here's health to the tsar, Ivan the Terrible!"

Leaning closer, the tavern-keeper clutched at his glass. "Nay, where have you been, good sir, that you do not know? The great Ivan lies in his shroud these long years and Boris Godunov is tsar."

To Ayub who only knew the tsar as the ruler of the Northern folk—merchants, nobles, and soldiery—this mattered not at all. All his attention was centered in assuaging a month's old thirst, while his two companions were drinking sparingly. For years they had lived in the saddle on the steppes of Asia and they were wary of this great city with its triple walls, its caravan of the dead and its bells that only sounded a dirge, no matter how men pulled at the ropes.

"Ivan Grodznoi was the friend of the Don Cossacks," assented Ayub presently. "God grant that this son of his, Boris, be the same."

Hereat, the pinched lips of the woman opened in a sigh. "Along of the new tsar the curse came upon the land. I've heard tell that Boris is not the son of Ivan, only his councilor. Ivan was to him like a father. And then-the old Tsar Ivan *had* a son, my masters, a strong boy Dmitri. Now Boris Godunov sent the little Dmitri away to live on a distant estate and there a son of one of the *okolnitchi* slew the prince with a knife. Men say that the death of Dmitri lies at the door of Boris Godunov. But now *he* is tsar."

Behind the taproom a tumult arose, and the woman started in sudden dread that changed to relief when she heard snarling, snapping and yelping of dogs and the shouts of men. Ayub's curiosity was aroused and he ceased to think of tsars and the curse that was upon Muscovy. He was lurching to his feet when the woman whispered again:

"Ai-a, where are the noble lords going? Isn't the brandy good? Few taverns have such brandy, now. Besides, my daughter has not seen the noble lords. She's a fine girl, and I don't allow her to come down here for common folk to gaze on."

She could not take her eyes from the heavy pouch that swung at Ayub's girdle.

"Is she pretty, your daughter?" muttered the Zaporogian. "We'll come back and look at her then, the timid flower! Here!"

He tossed gold ducats down on the table, to the value of several casks of brandy, and strode out the door, his silver heels sinking deep into the sand, and promptly forgot all about the tavern-keeper's girl.

But the woman was before him at the door, bowing. "Ai-a, the noble princes are strangers—evil will assuredly happen to them if they go out in the streets. Thieves will take the splendid sword of the young hero."

"God be with you, little mother!" Ayub grinned at the thought of vagabonds attempting to take Kirdy's scimitar, and folded his arms to gaze at the spectacle in the courtyard.

A small black bear had been chained to a stake and a pack of dogs set on him. Behind the dogs, men lounged against the wagons, urging on the pack with cries, while the bear, growling deep in its throat, swayed from side to side, its muzzle foam-flecked and bloody. As the Cossacks watched, some soldiers appeared and one of them fired two pistols into the animal's head, while the others beat off the frantic dogs with cudgels and spear butts. Then they shouted for servants to skin the bear, and for the tavern people to start a fire going under the pot.

"These be strange folk," observed Kirdy in his slow fashion when they had left the scene of the bear baiting. "For they will eat what the dogs have touched."

"When you are made welcome among the Zaporogian Cossacks," growled Ayub, "you, too, will have a bear to deal with, little warrior. Every *oùchar*—every unfledged manling must do that. You will be given a wooden sword in place of that skull-smasher of yours. If you ask, the bear's claws will be clipped, but only the common sort ask that. You grasp your wooden saber and say a prayer and the bear is let loose. Then—cut, slash! You try to whack him where the spine joins the base of the skull; if you do, that lays him down; if you don't, your brother warriors pull you out feet first and no maiden will ever eat sunflower seeds with you again."

Kirdy's dark face was impassive. He had been told by his grandfather of the Cossack war camps, where the warriors gave one another nicknames and reveled day and night. There the chosen heroes of the border were to be found—men who had put aside their past and lived only for war, who thought no more of cattle or wives but only of that last inevitable embrace to be bestowed by Mother Death.

Eagerly he awaited the moment when he, who had been born in the steppes of Asia, could ride into the camp of his grandfather's people and try out his strength with the young warriors.

Khlit, too, looked forward to that moment with all the keen anxiety of the aged. Too old himself to draw his sword with the Cossack brotherhood or to go on the raids across the border, he longed to see Kirdy taken in by his former companions. He hoped that the boy who had in his veins the blood of Mongol khans of the line of the great Genghis would win honor. But of this he said nothing to Ayub, who was a brave and seasoned warrior in spite of his boasting. Only by deeds, not words, could a youth like Kirdy win a nickname and honor among Cossacks.

They had come north from the frontier at Ayub's request to greet the *ataman* Demid and his five hundred warriors of the Don. Khlit in his wisdom approved of this, because at Moscow was the tsar, and the Cossacks there might well be sent on an honorable mission, to make war on the Turks or Tatars across the border. And no Cossack youth would be received as an equal by the elder warriors until he had raided across the border.

"The devil take this city!" grumbled Ayub. "It has not one street but a hundred. Who ever saw such a city!"

Kirdy and Khlit, who had beheld the palaces of Herat and the great temples and crowded avenues of Delhi, nodded courteously and the three wandered on, going into more than one tavern and stopping before the doors of more than one church, but holding to their course until they came to a high wall of white stone with a serried summit. This they followed until a gate appeared and they learned that they were entering the Kremyl or citadel.

Here they found no more taverns—only the barred gates of the Court enclosures where soldiers of the Imperial Guard were posted and through which equerries, dragomans and foreign officers came and went. When they asked for the Don Cossacks they were directed to an open space under the white wall.

"Only think," Ayub grinned, "Demid, the falcon, is perched among the grandees."

He swaggered off, arm in arm with his companions, taking the center of the passageways and turning the corners wide. At the top of his voice he chanted his favorite catch:

Ho, my gretchen-girl!
Hi, my lass!
Ho, my Pretty pearl—
Hi—

He stopped abruptly, and Khlit grunted. They had rounded a turn and come full on the quarters of the Don Cossacks. In the trodden mud of an open square stakes had been driven to form three sides of an enclosure against the wall. The stakes were higher than a man could reach and a bare six inches apart. And the palisade lacked a roof, so that the sun beat down on the throng of men who were penned within it. Sentries bearing arquebuses paced outside the palisade.

Chapter 2
Demid's Men

It was true that the Tsar Ivan had taken the Don Cossacks under his protection and they had served well in his wars, though they admitted no chieftain except their own *ataman*. After Ivan's death the wars ceased and caravans began to appear, making their way beside the river Don to Astrakhan and the markets of Persia and Asia Minor. For a time the Donskoi tribesmen agreed to act as guards to these merchant caravans, but before long the unruly spirits of the Cossacks flared up, and fighting broke out between them and the Muscovites. An army was sent to discipline them and they made a stand against it, cutting up the Muscovites and driving them back.

Under Boris Godunov a second expedition of picked infantry was sent to the Don and the *ataman* and five hundred prisoners were brought to Moscow.

This was the story Demid told Ayub, hanging his head for shame that he, an *ataman* of the siech, should be penned with his men like captured beasts for the multitude to stare at.

"Not yours is the dishonor, Demid, *kunak moi*!" roared the big Zaporogian. "The dishonor is theirs who quartered you in mud where dogs would not lie down!"

Demid smiled quizzically, his gray eyes lighting up. He was slighter than the three wanderers, with a down-curved nose that had given him the nickname of The Falcon. One sleeve of his coat hung empty and his injured arm was strapped to his chest by his belt.

"Nay, do not bellow like a buffalo. In a fortnight my men are to be tortured and beheaded. I am to be hung up with the *kuren atamans* on hooks from a stake. The stake will be set on a raft and we will float on the river like condemned pirates."

"By whose command!"

"By order of Boris Godunov."

Ayub beat his fists against his temples and ground his teeth, cursing his drunkenness and his long wandering in the steppe that had kept him in ignorance of the fate of his dearest friend. Kirdy stared at the Donskoi with puzzled eagerness. They were slender men for the most part, taller than the Muscovites and more restless. Many of them were wounded and some lay on cots improvised out of coats slung between logs. Others had their heads bandaged, and the shirts that had been used for bandages were black with hardened blood and dirt.

But traces of plunder—whether from the caravans or across the border—were visible in their long green sashes, and the gold brocade and sable trimming of their coats. Two were casting dice between the outstretched legs of one of the sleepers on the cots, and another with a burned stick was tracing on the white wall the words *Tà nitchògo*—"It does not matter!"

Ayub sighed heavily and bethought him of Khlit. "Here is the Wolf, who was Koshevoi Ataman before our mothers suckled us, Demid. I came upon him in the steppe, and as God sees me, we came hither in a dark hour."

The wounded *ataman* flushed as he gripped Khlit's hand in the aperture between the stakes. "Health to you, brother," he said. "You can do no good here—though the minstrels have told many a time of the deeds you performed in other days. The tsar has ordered our death."

"It is not an honorable death," growled Khlit.

"We were born in pain," acknowledged Demid, "and we can face it again. But go hence with Ayub. You are not of the Donskoi, but you are a Cossack."

Khlit's gray eyes peered at Ayub under his thatch of heavy brows and the Zaporogian shook his head.

"That is impossible. You and the boy ride hence. I"—he thought for a moment with bent head—"I shall ask justice of the tsar."

"But the tsar has already given justice," said Demid quickly.

Ayub began to breathe heavily. "Then—the foul fiend take me—let us draw our blades and cut down the sentries."

The Don Cossacks who had pressed close to greet the wanderers and to listen, shook their heads although their eyes glistened. "No such thing, Ayub—Would you then cut down these stakes?—Will you give us wings to fly over the three walls?—Will you sing, so that the Muscovite soldiery will be enraptured and forget that you are a Cossack?"

"May the dogs bite you!" growled Ayub. "I've got out of worse places than this!"

"The forehead to you, Ayub!" laughed a warrior with only one good eye. "Then you must have changed into a snake and crawled out. Go and tell the tsar one of your tales and he won't know what is true and what is false any longer. Only bring us brandy, if you can. And look out or the sentries will have you on this side of the stakes."

In fact the arquebusiers were beginning to draw closer and an officer, aroused by the laughter, was approaching. The Don warrior who was writing on the wall, finished his *Tà nitchògo*, and turned to say farewell. "It doesn't matter, sir brothers. Go with God."

"With God!" echoed deep voices as the three wanderers made off before the Muscovites. They returned to the Kremyl gate and by mutual consent sought out the scanty plane trees of a monastery garden, deserted at this hour of sunset when the bells of Moscow echoed from the lofty towers. As the tavern woman had prophesied, the anthem of the bells was solemn, but they were not as grievous as the groans of the big Zaporogian.

Demid, he said, was the falcon of the Cossacks; the young *ataman* had performed many a deed of glory, and once he had led a raid across the Black Sea and had entered the castle of Aleppo, bearing away with him the treasure of a sultan. Suddenly he smote the jingling purse at his hip and whispered to Khlit. "We have some gold left, old wolf. Let us go with it to the castle of the tsar and make presents to the guards and the nobles. The Muscovites love gold as swine love corn—thus we may gain audience with Boris Godunov."

Hearing this, Kirdy glanced expectantly at his grandfather, who was no stranger to stratagems. The young warrior had nothing to propose himself. On the steppe, within sight of a foeman, his blood would quicken and his thoughts would be quick and keen; but he did not see how sword-strokes would avail to release the Don Cossacks, and he listened quietly to the discussion of the two older men.

For a moment Khlit occupied himself with his pipe and his tobacco pouch. "The Muscovites are not our people, Ayub," he said bluntly.

"But the gold—"

"Is not enough. I have watched men come to the seat of kings, and those who came to ask favors were given little, while others who came to offer service were made welcome."

"Devil take it! How could we serve this tsar?" Ayub had room in his mind for no more than one idea at a time.

"With kings, favor is to be gained by pleasing them," went on the old Cossack. "Torture is a hard death and this must be a stern king."

"What would you do?"

"Nay, what can be done? Demid and his men are doomed, and yet"—Khlit glanced at the white wall of the citadel, gleaming softly red with the failing light. "Never have I seen an *ataman* perish in such fashion. Divide the ducats, take half to the palace if you will but give me the other half for brandy."

For the next few hours Kirdy was left to himself and he squatted under the tree as motionless as one of the painted figures on the door of the monastery behind him. Hidden by the deep shadows of the garden, he watched the Muscovites change guard at the Kremyl gate. He saw the nobles come out, escorted by link-bearers and gaunt wolfhounds. He listened to the long-robed priests who, in their high hats, chatted and laughed very much as ordinary mortals after dinner. Kirdy had had no dinner, but his patience was limitless, and he felt more at ease out under the stars than penned within the walls of a building, for the Mongol strain in him made him shun houses.

It was long after evening prayer when Ayub appeared, snorting and muttering.

He had bribed a sentry at one of the entrances to let him inside the palace, only to find that he was in the kitchen. And he had handed over the rest of his gold to a man in a splendid uniform who proved to be a *heyduke* or officers' servant and had taunted him saying that all Cossacks were outlaws and masterless men and if one were found in the palace with a sword he would be chained to a stake; but in Ayub's case they would let him go free. And then the servants of the boyar had hustled him out.

"Where the —— is Khlit?" Ayub growled.

"After the candles were lighted he came back from the bazaar. He had a jug and a new white shirt with embroidery on it, and a fine sash as long as a lariat. He left his sheepskin here and took with him only the jug and a new satin cloak."

"Then the old dog has been drinking! He's been licking the jug as well as carrying it."

"His beard was combed," Kirdy reported, "and smelled of musk."

"He must be drunk. Some woman has been playing tricks with him. Well, no matter. The devil himself couldn't get into that palace through the chimney."

Thoroughly disgruntled, Ayub wrapped himself up in Khlit's *svitza* and sprawled out to sleep, while Kirdy kept his silent watch, poking the big Zaporogian when men passed near enough to hear the warrior's vibrating snores.

Chapter 3
The City on the Golden Sands

When the last guests had left the banquet hall of the Terem, Kholop the dwarf made the rounds of the tables, emptying down his capacious throat of the wine and mead that still remained in some of the goblets. More than once he stumbled over the form of a boyar who had rolled under the table, and then he bent down and grimaced until the servitors who lingered to watch him roared with laughter.

One, who had been on duty at the outer door, approached the dwarf and bowed gravely. "Long life to you, Prince Kholop. 'Tis a pity your serene mightiness must drink your own health. So, here is long life to you."

The palace attendant picked up a slender silver cup and tossed it off with a quirk of his lips, while the dwarf blinked at him.

"Nay, here is a riddle, O most wise Prince Kholop. A *batyushka*—a grandfather has been hanging around the door asking which of the storytellers and buffoons is closest to the heart of the tsar."

"I am!" replied Kholop instantly, straightening his white bearskin kaftan on his hunched shoulders, and spreading his stubby legs wide. "I am the favorite of Uncle Boris, and that is no riddle at all, but a fool's question."

The servant wiped his lips, glanced around, and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Nay, your Uncle Boris seldom crosses your palm with silver. But the grandfather will give you a gold ducat if you will let him look at you."

He did not add that he himself had been promised a full jug of brandy for his trouble. The dwarf followed him willingly enough and gazed expectantly at the tall man with the white beard who carried a staff as if more inclined to use it on other peoples' shoulders than to lean on it himself. "Now you've looked at me, grandfather, give me the ducat."

Khlit surveyed the favorite of the tsar grimly and fumbled in his girdle. "You can have another, cousin, if you take me to your master."

Kholop put his shaggy head on one side shrewdly and wrestled with temptation.

"You look like a minstrel, *batyushka*," he said in his shrill voice, "but you are not blind. Let me see the coin."

"Nay, I am no blind minstrel," Khlit muttered, "yet I have a tale to tell to your master."

When the dwarf had feasted his eyes on the ducat he made a sign for the Cossack to follow him and went off into the darkness hugging his bearskin about him. At a postern gate he paused to listen until he was satisfied that no guards were within; then he darted into a narrow stairway that led, Khlit thought, into a tower because it wound upward without the trace of a window.

Evidently Kholop was familiar with the way. He thrust open a narrow door boldly and Khlit followed him into a hall occupied only by a sentry who stood, halberd in hand, before a curtained door. Into this the dwarf disappeared, presently returning with a gentleman-in-waiting who frowned at the old Cossack and fingered his beard irresolutely.

"So you are a grandfather from the border? My master has a ready ear for vagabonds' tales, but if you are a magician he will have you set alive on a stake."

"Nay," growled Khlit, "I am no magician."

"It will go ill with you, if you are," insisted the noble, searching him for hidden weapons or evidence of the sorcerer's art. "Mind now, if you try to set a spell on his majesty, or to lift footprints, the dogs will have you."

He raised the curtain and Khlit and Kholop passed into a low chamber where, in spite of the heat, a fire smoldered. The walls were hung with silk tapestries and in one corner Khlit saw upon an ebony stand an ivory elephant with gleaming emerald eyes, and a howdah of wrought gold with its silver canopy.

In an armchair before the fire sat a man whose white skin shone from the mesh of a black beard, whose fine eyes wandered from the flames to the glimmering elephant and to the old Cossack who bowed deeply.

From behind the armchair advanced a *kambardnik*—a youthful boyar who wore jauntily his purple and gold kaftan, his brocade tunic with its gold eagle on the breast, and his purple kid boots with their gold spurs. One hand rested on the long butt of the pistol in his belt as he took station behind the Cossack.

"O great prince," Khlit voiced the customary phrase, "grant me to speak and live."

Boris Godunov made no response, except a gesture of a plump hand.

"Be your tale of Turagin the dragon or the falconship Potuik, speak, minstrel," whispered the boy behind him.

Khlit cleared his throat and leaned on his staff. Many a time had he heard the tales of the minstrels, but he did not know how to repeat them. He was a man of few words and the years had not made him talkative. But he knew what was in his mind.

"*Zdorovènky botùly O Kha Khan!* Health to you, White Lord," his deep voice rumbled. "This is truth! Beyond your kingdom, if you ride with the rising sun on your left hand, is the Blue Sea. Beyond that is the desert of gray salt. If you know where to seek you will find the round stones and sand of a river. No water flows in the river in these days, but once it was otherwise, for a city stands by these golden sands. The name of the city is Urgench, and it is the stronghold of the Turkoman khans."

The round head of Boris turned slowly toward the Cossack and Kholop began to look frightened, because Khlit was not speaking in the manner of the minstrels and the dwarf fancied that his reward would be not a ducat but a whipping.

"It is ten days' ride from the reeds of the Blue Sea to the city of Urgench and the lord of the city is Arap Muhammad Khan, a brave man and an experienced warrior. In his *terem*—his dwelling—the khan has gathered spoil from Khiva and Bokhara. I have seen in this place woven silks from Cathay, coral from the Indian Sea, and carved ivory finer than that elephant."

Khlit pointed his stick at the corner and folded his arms meditatively.

"Dog of the devil, but the treasure of the Turkoman khans is a good one. The best of it is jewels, rubies from Badakshan, and circlets of shining sapphires and a pair of emeralds as large as a man's eyes. These last I have not seen, but the Tatar khan who told me was not a liar."

The glance of Boris Godunov rested fleetingly on the green eyes of the elephant and he lifted his hand impatiently.

"What tale is this? Of Urgench have I heard, yet no *batyushka* ever wandered within sight of the Blue Sea. What man are you?"

"One who has seen Urgench and the riders of the Turkoman khans, O prince."

"What is that to me?"

"The spoil of Urgench is worth having."

Boris Godunov had an alert mind; he was ambitious, covetous perhaps, but wise beyond others in Muscovy. A hard man, who had held the reins of power during the bloody reign of Ivan the Terrible, he was clever enough to accomplish by scheming what another would have gained by sword-strokes. And he had strange fancies.

"Kholop," he said gravely, "would you ride beyond the border to the Blue Sea and bring me the spoils of Urgench?"

"Sire," the dwarf responded boldly, "White or Black, I fear me no sea, but this thing that lies in the desert I do fear. If a sea is in the desert some devil put it there for no good. Aye, and dried up the river into the bargain."

"I see you are a good councilor but a poor soldier, Kholop."

"Nay, Uncle Boris, I am a good soldier because I am better than the illustrious lord-colonel that went against the Don Cossacks."

"How so, *bogatyr*?"

"Because while I am a head shorter than other folk, he was shortened by a head."

While he had been teasing the dwarf the tsar had been thinking. It was a way of his to turn suddenly upon men, and so he spoke to Khlit.

"My regiments have never been able to come within sight of the Blue Sea."

Unperturbed, the old Cossack nodded agreement. "O Kha Khan, would you send a dog to rob an eagle's nest?"

"Speak, then. I give you leave. What is your thought?"

Khlit's answer came swiftly, and they who heard it knew that he was indeed no minstrel but one who had had men to his command. "Send the Don Cossacks to sack Urgench. They are steppe wolves; they can find the way. If you put them to death in Moscow, Sire, you will gain naught save the enmity of their fellows on the Don. Bloodshed and fire will repay their deaths."

"I would do well indeed, *batyushka*, to set loose five hundred devils along the border." Boris permitted himself a smile.

"They are Cossacks, Sire. If they give pledge to fare to Urgench they will keep their word. Your regiments are posted in their home villages, and their families are surety for their faith."

For a while Boris considered, and not even the *kambardnik* who was his bodyguard could read his thoughts in his face. "I am of two minds, concerning you, Cossack—for such I take you to be. What was your purpose in coming to me?"

"O Kha Khan, it is an evil fate to be hanged to hooks. The road to Urgench is a hard one and it may be that the Donskoi will not live to ride back upon it. But death in the saddle is honorable. Once in the time of the Tsar Ivan I was Koshevoi Ataman of all the Cossacks."

Chin on fist, Boris studied the old warrior, and spoke suddenly.

"And if I order you to lead the Don men to Urgench?"

Khlit stroked his mustache and his bleak eyes softened. "Hide of the devil, that is good hearing!"

"At least," Boris laughed, "you are no *okolnitchi*—no courtier. I begin to suspect that you are a magician." Swiftly his mood changed to the dark humor that so often fell upon him. "Take this wayfarer to the guards. Keep him under key"—he motioned impatiently to the nobleman who was in attendance, and Khlit was led away.

Left alone with the dwarf, Boris was silent. From the rank of a councilor he had risen to the eagle throne, by the murder of Ivan's son. He had planned well and yet he was not satisfied. Plague and famine had taken toll of the land; the border was rising against him; the far-lying empire of Ivan was dwindling. The Tatars from whom Ivan had taken Kazan and Astrakhan were in arms again.

Under the rule of the warrior Ivan a band of Cossacks headed by an adventurer, Irmak, had won Siberia for the tsar. What if the Don Cossacks brought him the treasure of Urgench!

Boris was a statesman rather than a soldier. If he could restore peace on the Don and strike a blow at the Turkoman khans it would be something gained. And the treasure?

He frowned at the fire reflectively. The southern border of the empire was the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus; to the east lay the caravan route to Cathay, passing through a desert that was without life—cosmographers at his court said that here was a hollow in the earth's surface, where the land lay below the level of the sea.

In the center of this desert traders had seen the Blue Sea* a month's ride from the frontier of Muscovy. And more often of late the caravans bearing his goods had been plundered near the Blue Sea by the Turkoman. Urgench, the city of the khans, was the stronghold of the raiders, and men said that gold was plentiful there as silver in Moscow.

*The Sea of Aral.

"Kholop," said the man in the chair, "bid the Tatar slaves come to me, armed. Send for the leader of the Don warriors."

On the following day from the windows of the Terem the Tsar Boris Godunov watched his officers cut down one of the stakes in the pen of the Don Cossacks. The captives poured through the opening, shouting, leaping and hugging one another. Bandages were torn off, and they rioted, mad with joy, until the guards led them away to be fed and quartered in the barracks of the *strelsui*.

Then command was given to ring the bells of the city, for Boris Godunov went forth with his high-born boyars and the councilors, to the throne in the Palace of Facets, where he was accustomed to receive envoys from other peoples. Seated upon the dais, his hands resting on the lion heads that formed the arms of the throne of Solomon, with two young *kambardniks* on his right and left he listened while a minister read aloud an agreement written upon parchment.

"By command of the most serene and most potent tsar, and Great Prince Boris Godunov by the grace of God emperor of the whole, Great, White and Little Russia, great Duke of Vladimir, Monarch of Moscow and Kiev, Tsar of Kazan, Tsar of Astrakhan, Tsar of Siberia, lord of many lands, commander of peoples extending east, west and north, the inheritance of his ancestors—

"Before all, with good intent and friendly desire and in accordance to our holy Christian faith—freedom of life and limb is granted to certain masterless men, the Cossacks of the Don, upon condition that they fare forth to the city of Urgench and there make war upon the Moslems and do not return to their own villages except by way of Kamushink upon the border, where they will deliver all spoils and gains from their adventure into the hands of the governor, to be conveyed to us. Written in our dominion in our palace and city of Moscow in the fourth year of our governance."

The eyes of the boyars rested upon Khlit and Demid, the chief of the Don Cossacks who stood before the dais between two guards armed with silver halberds.

"You have heard the command of his most Christian and most compassionate majesty," pursued the councilor who had read the ukase, "and now do you give oath that you will fulfill your part of the agreement—yourselves and your men."

"We swear it," said both Cossacks promptly, "by our Faith."

The chancellor seemed startled by this brief pledge, but before he could speak Demid advanced a pace and bowed to the girdle. His eyes were shining and he held his head high when he spoke.

"Great Prince, we have a long road before us and who knows what is at the end? Give us then weapons and horses."

"What will you need?" asked Boris.

"A thousand horses—fifty strong carts for baggage, grain and powder. Three hundred lances and two hundred firelocks, and sabers for all."

The tsar spoke with one of his officers, and nodded. "No more than five hundred horses can be spared, Cossack. These, with the lances, will be given to your regiment at Moscow. The other arms and the carts you will find at Kamushink, the frontier post on the Volga by which you are to leave and enter the empire."

"I thank you, and my men will also thank you."

"On your way to Kamushink two regiments of the boyars' cavalry will accompany your Cossacks."

Demid flushed and bowed again, silently.

"Consider this, warrior," went on Boris sternly. "My forces on the border are close to the villages of your people; if you play me false, or if you return to the empire without the spoils of Urgench your people will be the ones to suffer. You have lifted your hand against our rule, and our forbearance allows you to seek the ransom of your lives."

The young Cossack chief started as if his back had been stung by a whip, and this amused the boyars who were watching him curiously.

His life had begun on the prairies where there was no law except the old customs of the Cossacks, and no peace except that which could be won by the sword from the Tatar and the Turkish hordes. He did not understand the Muscovites, who built cities and sent caravans of merchants into the east, but he had seen their power. Their great churches filled him with awe and the sight of nobles buying and selling serfs aroused his contempt. His people—the rovers who lived on the fish in the rivers and the game in the forests—were being pressed back farther and farther into the steppe, and roads were being built over the virgin wilderness, roads that led to Moscow. All this Demid did not understand.

"Great Prince," he said after a moment's thought. "If we win gold and silks and jewels we will bring them to you as we have sworn, because of such things Cossacks have no need. We can take them from our enemies.

Our word is not smoke. If we do not stand before you in this place again it will be because our bodies lie in the desert."

"Well said, brother," muttered Khlit with satisfaction.

"Not long ago," went on the tsar coldly, "a masterless man, Irmak with his Cossacks who were brigands, fared into Siberia and took it from the Tatars. Their wrongs were pardoned them and they were honored by the Tsar Ivan."

Demid bent his head in assent. The blind minstrels had sung of Irmak who had left his body in a river in the East; but Ivan had been a warrior who led armies across the border, while Boris was intent on trade and intrigue.

"We will do what we may, O Tsar. We bow the head to you for your mercy, and ask leave to depart."

A shadow of suspicion touched the broad face of Boris, but it vanished in a ready smile and he rose from the throne. No sooner had he left the hall than he called Kholop to him and retired to his rooms unattended except by the dwarf and an old Tatar who had been present at the audience.

Throwing himself in his chair the tsar glanced at the native anxiously and spoke under his breath. "O Shamaki, you who have skill to read what is to be—you who have learned the secrets of Nasr-ed-din and the wise Ptolemy, can you tell me whether I shall gain riches in this venture."

Kholop, who had a healthy dread of the Tatar conjurer, squatted close to his master and watched while Shamaki, who seemed not at all surprised at the request of his master, drew from his girdle a wooden bowl and a sack. From the sack he poured a small torrent of millet seeds of different colors, and turned the bowl slowly in his withered hands.

Then, kneeling on the floor, he began to rock on his haunches, rumbling in his throat more like an animal than a man. To Boris and the dwarf it seemed as if the millet seeds were still whirling in the bowl, although the Tatar's fingers no longer moved.

Presently the magician bent his head to stare into the bowl and Boris moved restlessly in his chair, for in all his undertakings he never failed to consult this conjurer.

"Ai Kha Khan," croaked the old man, "I see bloodshed—the brown sands turn red. I see the black vultures dropping from the sky."

"What more?"

"I see the gray bones of death, and the white pearls of wealth."

"And what gain to me?"

The Tatar closed his eyes and shook his head slowly. "Only God knows, O Kha Khan."

When others had come into the room, Kholop sidled up to Shamaki and grimaced. "Fool—you could have had a silver coin if you had foretold gain to my master. If the men die how can they bring wealth?"

The bleared eyes of the Tatar turned on the dwarf and his thin lips parted, soundlessly. And Kholop was frightened by this silence of the old native who thought less of a silver rix-dollar than he did of millet seeds, red, white and black, running around in a bowl.

Chapter 4
Kamushink

The road through the forest is marked by verst posts; the trail over the prairies is known by the hay-ricks; but only the bones of the dead mark the path into the desert.

A month after the Tsar Boris gave out his ukase concerning the freedom of the five hundred Don Cossacks, the expedition arrived at the frontier post of Kamushink, having covered six hundred miles over a newly made highway through the forest belt and the steppe pastures to the southeast of Moscow. When the captain Van Elfsberg, the Swedish officer in command of the escort, saw the broad gray expanse of the Volga river between the mountain peaks that towered over the town, he sighed with relief.

An excellent soldier, Van Elfsberg, tall, with yellow mustaches that curled up to his eyes—a fine figure in hip boots, polished breastplate, fringed sash and broad lace collar. He served the Muscovite tsar for pay, which he seldom received, and he obeyed orders, of which there was no lack.

He had left the plague-ridden city of Moscow behind him with pleasure, but now the vast wilderness into which he had penetrated rather depressed him. For two hundred versts they had not seen a town, nor a tavern. Before him the rolling grassland had stretched endlessly, with its herds of wild horses, its diminutive marmots, and its clamorous flights of geese and cranes.

The road had been no more than vague tracks at the river fords and the ashes of former camp fires. Van Elfsberg found that, near the end of his journey to the frontier, instead of escorting the Cossacks, he was being guided by them.

They had been given poor horses in Moscow because the tsar's officers had been unwilling to spare good ones—horses, in any event, were scarce

in this time of famine. They had had no saddles at all; but by degrees, once they moved out on the steppe, the Cossacks became better mounted. Where they got the sturdy ponies that they now rode the Swedish captain did not know.

He suspected that marauding parties left the lines of the Donskoi after nightfall; several times he had seen Cossacks riding after the herds of wild horses with lariats made out of horsehair and cords begged from the wagon train.

His prisoners—according to his orders they were to be treated as such—had ridden from Moscow a regiment of skeletons. Now the flesh on their bones had grown firm, although the rations issued to them were scanty. They made themselves bows, and shot down wild duck. After they brought to his tent one evening the choice loin of a stag, Van Elfsberg permitted the Cossacks to go on hunting forays during the day's march.

The plain abounded in game and the Cossacks ran down the great herds of buffalo and roe deer.

Punctiliously every dawn Van Elfsberg had them mustered in squadrons and his officers called the roll. He found to his amazement that he now had more Cossacks than he had started with. Where the others came from he did not know, except that sentries reported riders appearing at night from out of the steppe, as wolves might slip from a forest. In fact he heard wolf-like howling beyond his lines in the darkness, and this howling was answered by the cries of panthers and the baying of dogs in the direction of the Cossacks' tents where there were neither dogs nor panthers.

Van Elfsberg saw that this wilderness, this barren sea of grass, supported human life, and he believed that the villages of the Don Cossacks could not be many days' ride distant. The tidings of his march had gone before him. Although he had good reason to be pleased with the successful end of his march he wondered if the invisible friends of the Donskoi were not preparing to rescue the captives at Kamushink—until he reflected that men who would be free in another day would not bring on a conflict with his men in order to leave him now.

The rising spirits of the Cossacks he attributed to this nearness to liberty, and he fully expected that once they were across the Volga with wagons and supplies and arms they would circle back somewhere and think no longer of their oath given to the tsar.

But at Kamushink trouble awaited him.

"Excellency," a sergeant of chasseurs—his own troop of armored cavalry—reported to Van Elfsberg one evening at his tent entrance, "the Cossack savages have broken bonds."

"How?" demanded the veteran captain.

"They are smashing the doors of the merchants' storehouses and rolling out barrels of brandy and wine. They are taking logs to build fires."

"Are they armed?"

That noon the distribution of the stores—barley, and wheat and powder and lead for bullets—had been made to the chief of the Cossacks. The two hundred firelocks had been counted over, with flints and slings for the powder charges; the wagons had been inspected and greased and oxen picked out to haul them. Five hundred sabers had been accepted and the Cossacks had set to work at once loading the wagons and sharpening the sabers. The work had been finished at sunset.

"Their lances are stacked, Excellency, but they wear the sabers. The firearms—the flintlocks—are in the wagons."

"The devil!" muttered Van Elfsberg. "They have waited until they are fitted out and now—send their captain to me, at once. Wait! Offer him my compliments and beg that he will speak with me at this tent."

"At command!"

The sergeant of chasseurs saluted, mounted, and galloped away. The quiet of the night was broken by shouting and hurrying footsteps, by the neighing of horses and the crackling of flames. Van Elfsberg sent his orderly to bid a squadron commander muster his men in readiness to mount, and to double the guards stationed at the cannon in the watchtowers of the town.

"The Cossacks act like men who expect a rescue," he muttered. "Well, they'll swallow bullets, that's all—ah, *ataman*!"

"Health to you, *sotnik*."

Demid cantered up on a horse that the Swede had never seen before. His arm had healed, and the blood coursed again in his cheeks. Van Elfsberg noticed that the scimitar at his belt was not the saber issued from the Muscovite stores. And the young Cossack did not dismount, which displeased the Swede, who was a stickler for discipline.

"Your men are rioting, *ataman*," he said curtly, "and by the devil, I think you have been drinking."

"Aye, captain," smiled Demid, "the warriors are playing a bit. There is no harm, in this hour."

An outburst of shots from the central square, near log shops of the town's merchants, interrupted them. Van Elfsberg's yellow mustache bristled and his long chin with its pointed beard thrust out as he looked down the street between the barracks. The light from the fires was growing stronger, and he saw the Don warriors in their long coats rolling out barrels.

"Order them to cease! Send them out of the gate—bind the leaders and stake them out."

Demid shook his head good-naturedly. "In this hour, captain, I have no authority."

"They are your men!"

Glancing at the chasseurs who were forming in front of the Muscovite barracks under a boyar ensign, Demid spoke more seriously.

"Keep your men out of ranks, commander, unless you want blows. Come with me, if you wish to see what is going on."

Suspicion grew in the officer, as he noticed newcomers in the increasing throng about the fires, and heard the thudding hoofs of a multitude of ponies outside the low mud wall of the town. Calling for his horse and orderly, he climbed into the saddle and looked toward the camp of the Donskoi which was between the town and the river. The long dark line of wagons was deserted, while Cossacks, visible in the glow of the watch fires, were crowding to look at groups of ponies—shaggy little animals from which boys and girls and old men were dismounting.

Evidently, if reinforcements were reaching the Don warriors, the newcomers were a poor sort. Van Elfsberg decided to look into the matter before making a show of force to stop the rioting. Taking only his orderly—he did not lack courage—and bidding the ensign await his command, he trotted beside Demid to the square and began to swear under his breath.

The stalls of the merchants had been torn up for fuel and the Muscovites had barred themselves in their log houses. Kegs and whole barrels of brandy and mead had been broached, and the warriors were swarming around these like bees, dipping in with their caps or cupped hands. In and out between the throngs bareheaded riders were passing at full gallop, avoiding, by what Van Elfsberg considered a miracle, running the drinkers down, and letting off muskets and pistols.

First one youth, then another, leaped in the air and began the wild *kosaka* dance, to the strumming of the balalaikas and the shouts of those who watched eagerly.

Among the dancers appeared Cossack girls in kerchiefs and loose smocks. Barefoot, they tossed back their long locks and advanced and retreated before the warriors, while the mutter of voices deepened into a roar.

"Ou-ha! Ou-ha!"

Too, among the revelers were to be seen more than a few green and white uniforms of Van Elfsberg's chasseurs and the somber coats of the *strelsui*—the guards of the Cossacks.

Winding in and out, a procession formed behind burly Ayub. The big Zaporogian had been given a standard—such a standard as the Swedish officer had never beheld before. A pole as long as a lance supported a pair of horns from which hung white buffalo tails. Above the horns shone the head of a white falcon.

"The standard of the Donskoi, captain," said Demid, who had followed his glance. "Only listen!"

Ayub's great voice rang out above the tumult.

Shall we sit idle?
Follow Death's dance!
Pick up your bridle,
Saddle and lance—
Brothers—advance!

At once the fiddles and guitars struck up the melody, and from somewhere a drum rumbled. A hundred voices chimed in—not the dragging chorus of a mob singing but the splendid harmony of trained voices—and the clear soprano of the young girls floated above the diapason of the men.

"*Ma foi*," muttered Van Elfsberg, "that is well done."

The song quickened into a wild surge of melody and ended on a single high note that seemed to echo in the air like the aftertone of a bell.

Though the dark Raider
Rob us of joy—
Death the invader
Come to destroy—
*Nitchògo—stoi!**

"What is it—that song?" asked the officer.

*"It does not matter."

"It is old," Demid hesitated. "It is called the march of the Donskoi."

"But where did all these people come from!" Van Elfsberg was trying to catch the eye of a lass in a white kerchief and cloth-of-silver cap who had left the circle of dancers and seemed to be searching for someone in the throng of warriors.

"From the villages along the Don," responded the Cossack curtly. "They brought my standard and baton—the Muscovites did not capture those. They brought the extra horses that we need. Look yonder, *sotnik*."

Turning in the saddle he swept his arm at the darkness through which the gray surface of the broad Volga gleamed. Kamushink, nestled between mountains, overlooked the rushes and the bare plain of the far bank.

"What is it?

"The desert. Of those who venture into it not many come back. Before setting out on such a road it is the custom of the Cossacks to frolic. Today they will drink and dance and burn powder; at dawn they will set out. But until then I, the *ataman*, have no orders to give—"

Van Elfsberg did not think that these revelers would assemble under arms at daybreak, or for many hours after; but just then one of the warriors sighted the two officers and caught up a high pewter tankard, dipping it full in the nearest brandy keg. Staggering, he approached the Swede and leaned against his horse.

"Health to you, Puss-in-Boots. Here's something to wet your whistle."

The officer sniffed, but he sniffed above the brimming tankard and, though he frowned, he took a long swallow of the burning spirits.

"Don't wet your bib!" said the Cossack gravely. He had been staring at the enormous red collar that hung down over the Swede's chest. Van Elfsberg lifted his whip angrily but the warrior, who had grasped the tankard again, was gulping down the brandy. To the officer's surprise he raised the jug higher and higher until the last drop had gone down his throat. Then he snorted, and turned slowly on his heels.

A rider cantered up from the gate and the drunken Cossack cast the heavy tankard at his head. The mounted warrior merely swerved his body and laughed, while his comrade after one or two attempts to walk back to the brandy barrel, stretched himself out on the ground heedless of horses and dancers alike.

Meanwhile the rider had reined his pony at a group of girls, drawing the beast back on its haunches so suddenly that gravel scattered over

the bright dresses. Leaning on one stirrup, he caught one of the young women around the waist, and lifted her, laughing and struggling, to his saddle peak.

"Nay," said Van Elfsberg. "Who will pay for all this?"

But Demid no longer gave him any attention; the *ataman* was going from group to group and the warriors roared greetings at him, calling him Falcon and Father and dog-brother.

Left to himself, Van Elfsberg looked after the young Cossack who had carried off the girl. In the red glow from the fires the lad's eyes shone, and surely there were tears in the eyes of the maid, and yet she was laughing. One of her dark tresses, escaping from her cloth-of-silver cap, wound around his throat when a wind gust whipped her garments, as if she were holding him to her and did not want to let him go.

"Plague take it!" said the officer heartily, when the two had passed beyond the circle of light. He felt vaguely dissatisfied and restless as if he had intruded into a place where he was not wanted. Presently he decided the best thing to do would be to go to his own quarters and wait for morning.

No sooner had he left the square than scores of his chasseurs appeared from the alleys where they had been in hiding and ran to the fires where they were soon drinking with the Cossacks.

Kirdy, all eyes and ears, wandered from circle to circle, listening to the singing and the stories of the *bandura* players, but he did not find Khlit for whom he was seeking, until he came to a fire over which a great pot was sizzling. The old Cossack was just chewing the last meat off a sheep's knuckle and when his grandson came up he gave the bone to a dog and wiped his hands on the dog's back.

"Eh, fledgling," he growled. "Have you eaten—have you drunk your fill of corn brandy? Good! Then listen to me."

He fumbled in his pouch and filled his short clay pipe, and Kirdy, pulling a burning stick from the fire, lighted it for him. Then he looked up at the stars. "My eyes are not young. I cannot see Aldebaran, but there's the Flying Geese. In another hour it will be cock crow and then the Don men will take their saddles."

Kirdy did not break his wonted silence. He knew that if his grandsire spoke so many words there was a message to be given. Not advice—for

Khlit never tried to give the young warrior counsel—but a warning or a question.

"*Oùchar*," he went on, in the Tatar in which they conversed, "we have been over the road to Urgench before, but we hid our swords and our faces. It is a long road and of those who set out not all will return. Some will be flayed alive; some will taste a stake. The Turkomans are wolves—wolves."

"*Yachim batyushka*—aye, little grandfather."

"You have seen the power of the tsar of Muscovy. He cannot protect his caravans from the Turkoman raiders. Eh, fledgling, we were drawing our reins toward the great war camp of the Cossacks. We can still go there; you will win a name and honor—I will drink with old friends again. We have been long on the trail."

"Aye, long."

"Or you can take service with the *khan bimbashi*, the captain of the Muscovites. But in the desert you will have only a drawn belly and wounds to lick."

Under grizzled brows the hard eyes of the old Cossack peered at the fine brown eyes beside him. "What is your choice, lad?"

"I will go with the Don Cossacks." As his grandfather was silent Kirdy wondered if he could be displeased, and he added, pondering his words. "Surely honor is to be found where the way is hardest."

Khlit knocked out his pipe and, having noticed that others of the Don warriors who understood the Tatar tongue were following the talk, added sternly, "Only listen, noble sirs, to the young son of a dog! He has not made a raid yet, and he presumes to give counsel like an *ataman*."

One of the warriors nodded politely. "Aye, little grandfather, he is young yet, and there is more milk than brandy on his lips but, by God, we will make an *ataman* out of him."

Saying that they were going to seek the standard, Khlit went off with the youth, but Kirdy thought that he was pleased by what had passed. Khlit did not speak again of turning back and Kirdy saw that the old man's blood was aroused by the revelry of the warriors, by the stories of the *bandura* players and the stir of the camp.

"We will find Demid," he grunted. "He's a falcon they say—a sword-slayer. He cut down a sultan with his own hand. Yet he thinks of everything—look at these horses he's brought up."

Swaggering among the knots of warriors, and scrutinizing those stretched out on the ground, Khlit led the way through the roisterers, harkening to the shrill cry of the fiddles. He paused by two big men who were pounding and tearing at each other, rolling over in clouds of dust and grunting.

When the stoutest of the two pinned the other between his knees they saw that the victor was Ayub. Hands clenched in his adversary's beard he was beating the unfortunate's head against the hard clay and swearing heartily. To his surprise, Kirdy recognized the *starosta* who had made game of them at the gate of Moscow.

The red facings were torn off the black coat of the Muscovite and blood trickled from his nose. Although several of his own men were standing near no one offered to go to his assistance and Kirdy expected to hear his skull crack when Ayub paused to draw breath.

"May the dogs bite you! The hangman will light your way because no one else will want to be seen with you. You are a hero when it comes to catching flies on a wall. At your own gate you bay like a dog, but on the trail I didn't hear you at all. You'll be a man of deeds if you can get your wife to listen to you, but not otherwise."

"You called us 'Devils in stinking sheepskins' *starosta*," grinned another Cossack. "All the same, you lap up our brandy."

"It's not yours, you thieving dogs," shouted the Muscovite.

"Call out the militia!"* gibed a thin warrior who wore a Turkish yataghan stuck through his sash. "Time to milk the cows."

"The forehead to you, *starosta*!" grinned one whose nose had been broken by a sword cut. "That's the way of it—if anything's stolen, the Cossacks are the thieves! But if there's a war the Cossacks are put in the van."

"I spit on you!" retorted the angered officer.

"You'll never spit on anything but your stomach," remarked Ayub. "By —— you'll sit in the sun here in Kamushink and make ox-eyes at the native women but you won't stir a hand toward them for fear they might box your ears. Then when we come back from Urgench with the treasure for your master you'll take it and lock it up, and start marching back with it to Moscow—one, two! Left, right! I know you Muscovites!"

"The forehead to you, Ayub!" shouted the warrior with the scar across his brow. "You fight well with words." He laughed, and as he had been drinking from his cap at the time, the brandy poured out of his nostrils.

*The *strelsui* were the Moscow militia.

Ayub had been preparing to batter the head of the Muscovite underofficer again, but at this remark he started up, snorting, his anger directed into a new channel.

"With words! Steel to you, Dog-Face!"

He whipped out his light saber, given him by the Muscovites—for he had hidden his own heavy broadsword in the wagons when the weapons were issued—and swung it over his head.

"To one death, to the other life!" howled the scarred Cossack, beside himself at sight of bare steel. He drew his own weapon and sprang at Ayub and no one interfered because to do so would have earned a slash from a saber and besides this was the affair of the two antagonists. Unnoticed, the *starosta* of the Moscow militia rolled away from the fire and made his escape into the darkness.

Then Kirdy realized for the first time Ayub's strength. The sabers whistled in the air, clashed together, and at the second cut the blade of the smaller Cossack sprang from the hilt. It whirred into the glowing embers of the fire, scattering sparks on all who stood near.

"Give him a saber, someone!" cried Ayub. "Impossible to cut down a brother without a blade in his hand."

Before anyone could reply Khlit spoke. He had been looking around on all sides, paying no attention to the quarreling. "Where is the standard? You had it in your fist, Ayub."

"The *buntchauk*? What standard? What in the fiend's name do we want with the standard when there is corn brandy yet in the casks!"

Meanwhile Kirdy, who had sighted the glimmer of the spreading horns near the gate, pointed it out to Khlit. Demid had it, in a circle of a half dozen Cossacks who were no longer drinking, and toward this group the old warrior strode. His grandson could not refrain from looking back at Ayub.

The warrior of the yataghan had made a song out of Ayub's haphazard words, and the revelers, forgetting all disputes, were chanting the chorus:

One, two! Left, right!
We know you, Muscovite!

They stamped on the hard earth with their silver heels at each beat, and drained their cups at the end. Other fires took it up. In a moment the whole square was vibrating to the "one, two."

The pulse throbbed in Kirdy's wrists and his heart hammered his ribs. He wanted to shout, at the shrill cry of the fiddles to leap into the dance. He stared boldly at his new comrades, at these men who had not a thought except the wild carouse of the moment, who sang like angels, who toasted no woman but lifted their cups to Mother Death.

Kirdy held his head high and tried to swagger like Khlit, and wished he had silver heels to stamp strongly on the earth. All at once a single desire flooded every part of his being. To find his horse, to mount and ride! Over the endless steppe, across rivers. To seek out foemen and cut at them with bare steel.

Instead, without feeling his limbs move, he found himself at Khlit's side in the ring of silent warriors by the standard. He heard their voices as if from far off, and noticed that Demid's head was steaming, and that the *ataman* had torn open his shirt to breathe the better, for he had drunk more than Ayub himself. His eyes were glowing, his white teeth shone under his mustache, and his splendidly molded countenance was dark.

"Sir brothers," he was saying "listen to my advice. Khlit, the Wolf, is wise in counsel; his head has grown white by reason of many battles. He has struck more blows than any of us, and moreover he has been Koshevoi Ataman* of all the Cossacks. And so I say to you, who are *kuren atamans*—take the Wolf for your leader on the journey to Urgench." He held out the ivory staff, the baton of the *ataman*, to Khlit. "Take it, sir brother!"

"Your advice is good," cried a handsome warrior in a fine red damask coat—one who was called Makshim by the others.

Khlit took off his black sheepskin hat and bowed. "I thank you, sir brothers, and you, Falcon. That's my first speech. Now harken to my second. I am oldest in years—that's a fact. But my eyes are not keen; I'm good only to sit at the fire and eat game that another man has killed. If you had any fault to find with Demid it would be different. He has raided Moslems many a time; he's a fine Cossack, your Falcon, your father. I say the baton is his."

At this the leader of the Donskoi bent his head in thought for a while. "You have spoken well, *koshevoi*," he responded. "Yet I have never carried the standard across the Volga, nor do I know the Turkoman khans. So I say to you, 'Give me counsel, and ride at my side.' I will keep the

*Koshevoi Ataman, commander of the *kosh*—camp. *Ataman*, leader, or colonel. Kuren Ataman, commander of a *kuren*, a barracks—captain.

baton, and the sir brothers will rejoice when they hear that the Wolf is with them."

"Aye," added Makshim. "He freed us from the stakes of the Muscovites."

"That is true," acknowledged Demid frankly. "We would have been given to the torture before now. We all bend the forehead to him for that deed."

Tall Makshim, who was bold of tongue, was not satisfied. "There is the *oùchar*, the fledgling grandson of Khlit. Surely he should be given a *kuren* to lead."

Hearing this, Khlit frowned. "Makshim has not spoken well. What does this puppy of mine know of Cossack warfare? He must scratch out his own bed."

Demid glanced at Kirdy appraisingly; they had talked together on the march and had hunted roe deer on the steppe. Now the chieftain looked at the youth with the eye of a leader, not a comrade—for the hour was at hand when Demid's word was to be law. He noticed that the boy's eves were cast down respectfully, and that he blushed at the attention of the elder warriors. He noticed, too, Kirdy's well knit shoulders and powerful hands, his wide, firm lips and high cheekbones, and the splendid sword girdled high against his chest, Moslem-fashion.

"Kirdy has been over the trail to Urgench," he observed slowly—he never spoke in haste. "I will give him ten other youths and they can go before us as scouts."

Flushing with pleasure, the boy bent his head, and sought for the right words to make response. "I am your servant, brothers, Cossacks," he said in Tatar, that was his native speech. "Only give me orders, for I am unskilled in war."

Demid smiled. "You, who have come hither from Cathay—what path have you followed, save that of war?" he answered in the same tongue. Then he glanced over his shoulder and held up his hand for silence. Out by the stables the first cocks were crowing, and upon the dark plain across the river there was a level streak of orange light.

"It is time!" he cried.

"Time!" echoed Khlit, stroking down his gray mustache.

"Are we agreed, my brothers?" went on Demid. "Then the council is at an end, and I will give the military command."

At these words he put his high *kalpak* on his head and thrust the baton into his girdle. Immediately the others doffed their hats and waited in attentive silence. During the imprisonment in Moscow and while they were under the orders of Van Elfsberg, and when the revelry was on, Demid had been no more than their nominal head—their adviser and friend.

Now that they were to march into Asia as a military unit, all authority rested in the *ataman*. From his commands there would be no appeal, unless circumstances should compel them to call another council. In his hand was life or death; the responsibility was his, and not even the outspoken Makshim would have presumed to question an order of the *ataman*.

"Goloto's *kuren* will yoke up the oxen," said Demid, "and assist the Tatar drivers. The two *kurens* with muskets will escort the wagons down to the river. Makshim, go in advance and see that the barges are ready with oars. The three squadrons of lancers will follow. Khlit, rouse up that drunken dog Ayub and bid him take the standard."

Seeing that he had not finished speaking, the Cossacks merely nodded understanding, glanced up at the stars and waited.

"Break the barrels—pour out any brandy that is left. If you find a warrior carrying off anything, set him on an ox and let the Tatars goad him. If, when we are across the Volga, any son of a dog is seen drinking, flay his feet and tie him to a wagon tail. On the march, do not let your horses be heated—change saddle to a spare mount instead. Load your weapons before mounting, and don't let any —— try to swim his horse across the Volga. It is too wide and beside, the river is in flood."

He glanced once more around the square with its maudlin throng and lifted his head. To Kirdy it seemed as if the young *ataman* grew taller and sterner.

"*Nà kòn!* To horse!"

The group of leaders scattered at once, and the nearest Cossacks stopped their song and looked at Demid. The command was repeated from crowd to crowd, and after a last hasty cup the warriors ran toward the gates, pausing to kick up their comrades who lay stretched on the ground. "Time to go!" they shouted, when the drunkards cursed and stumbled erect. Immediately these began to stagger after their mates, picking up their caps and tightening their belts. Some—Ayub among them—paused to thrust their heads under a water pump.

The more sober ones had smashed in the kegs and tossed blazing brands into the vodka casks, and now vivid blue flames leaped up like tortured

demons. In a few moments the square was deserted except for the reeling Muscovites who had stayed to the end. Ayub came up unsteadily, gripped the pole of the standard and leaned on it.

Kirdy sought first the stacked lances, then the horse lines. The darkness around him was filled with hurrying figures, yet surprisingly little noise was made. He heard saddles flung on ponies, and the brief jangle of bit chains, then the creak of leather and was aware of the black shapes of riders spurring in circles against the growing light in the east, lances projecting from their shoulders, their heads rising into the long sheepskin hats. When he was in the saddle of his piebald he looked for his other pony but found that the horse-tenders had driven it off with the remounts. A fresh, cool wind fanned the steam from his face, and he sniffed the odor of sheepskins and leather and horses.

The *kuren atamans* were calling out, low-voiced: "Goloto this way! Makshim this way!"

The lance points began to arrange themselves in ranks, and presently there was silence except for the stamp of a restless horse and the grunting of an ox. Kirdy had not been assigned to any *kuren* and for a moment he had the feeling of being astray, and that all the men were looking at him in the darkness. He edged over toward the wagon train and his stirrup struck against another. Someone swore at him softly and he tightened his rein, making up his mind to go where he could see the horns and the buffalo tails of the standard outlined over Ayub's great bulk.

As soon as he had reached his friend he heard Demid's voice.

"*Rishiy Marsh*! Trot!"

The wagons creaked, the oxen shuffled, and hoofs thudded on the earth. The squadrons moved toward the river.

"Smartly done and in the darkness, too," observed Van Elfsberg, who had gone to one of the towers at sunrise with the young boyar who was still yawning. "*Ma foi*, I thought we would have our hands full with the *sauvages* today."

"Ah, well, Excellency, they haven't any tents to strike or baggage to look after, and they are regular wizards with horses. Speaking of wizards, may the plague take me, but there's one on that List wagon."

"Where!" asked the officer idly.

"On that bearskin beside the hooded eagle. I'm ——if it isn't the Tatar from the palace—what's his name?"

"Shamaki?" Van Elfsberg shaded his eyes and gazed at the wagon which was rumbling down hill in a cloud of dust. "I believe you're right, *mon*

ami. But—if you will pardon a paradox so early in the morning, what do those devils of Cossacks want with a demon of a Tatar—and the tsar's familiar?"

"May the foul fiend take them all! They do not know he is anything but a wagoneer. Still—"

The boyar hesitated. Shamaki had the privilege of going and coming unannounced in the tsar's chambers, with Kholop the dwarf, and the boyar believed that the old conjurer knew a deal of what passed in the palace. He was just as pleased that Shamaki was going with the Cossacks and not remaining in Kamushink because he might be a spy.

"I'll lay you odds, my captain," he went on, "that those vagabonds only go a little way into the desert before they circle back to their villages."

Van Elfsberg glanced down to where the dismounted warriors were waiting patiently to cross in the barges. "Well," he shrugged, "I'll wager one thing—we'll have a long wait before they turn up, if they do, and damned little to drink in the meanwhile."

He pointed across the river. The sun had burned through the clouds and even now its touch was warm. It lighted the stretch of sandy hillocks and gray, lifeless reeds that extended as far as the eye could penetrate, to the dull wraith of mist on the horizon.

From the river's edge a snatch of song floated back to them:

Women and horses—
Singer and dancer—
Fall to the lancer!

Chapter 5
The Hawk

At first the younger warriors scoured the plain in pursuit of deer and wolves. They raced after the scattered bands of Tatars who appeared on the skyline, astonished at sight of the long wagon train moving steadily to the southeast away from the Volga. The Tatars were never overtaken because they wheeled away on their small ponies, darting into dense patches of thorn or leading the young warriors into sandy gullies where further pursuit was impossible.

The regiment was too strong for the nomads to attack and they knew better than to try to cut out the Cossacks' horses at night. They only rode up, often within bowshot, to stare at the wagons and at such times the

Donskoi shouted at them good-naturedly. "We are not going to slash you, brothers. We are after other game!'

Once a shrill voice screamed at the Tatars from a wagon in the rear and every tribesman reined in his pony to listen. After that they did not appear again and the Cossacks spent a moment or so in wondering what voice had cried out from among the wagoneers. As the days went on they were more careful of their horses, for the grazing was steadily growing worse.

Because Demid wished to reserve the strength of his animals the *tabor*, the long Cossack wagon train, pushed slowly across the dry plain. There was no trail, but Khlit said that they needed only to keep to the southeast until they reached the first rivers that ran down to the inland seas.

Yet they made time. Before dawn the *tabor* got under way, guarded by one *kuren*. Then followed the herd of led horses, wandering off to hillocks where the dry grass offered some sustenance, watched over by another *kuren*. The main body of riders brought up the rear, scattering to escape the dust clouds that sprang up under a hot wind.

Before noon the detachments would join where the *tabor* had made a halt, and here would be eaten the first meal of the day—mare's milk and barley cakes or cheese. After a rest the wagon train would push on to the spot Kirdy and the scouts had picked out for the night's camp. Fires were lighted, the oxen and horses cared for, guards told off and supper prepared—meat with perhaps a cup of brandy from the kegs on Demid's wagon.

Kirdy and the advance had little to do except to pick the easiest route for the oxen, and to wonder what lay beyond the unchanging skyline.

For, after the Tatars had left them, they had entered a land without rain or green growth, where the dew was light and the strong winds from the south were salty. Day by day they dropped lower and the heat haze closed in on them.

A fortnight after leaving the Volga Kirdy made out a line of small, dome-like hills through the haze, and saw that the ground was streaked with gray sand.

"Ride back to the *ataman*," he said to one of his companions as soon as he was certain that the hills were real and not a phantasm created by hanging dust clouds and haze, "and say that we can camp this night on the first river, the Jaick* if such is his will."

*The Ural River. The Cossacks must have crossed only two or three days' ride north of the Caspian Sea, where the Ural range sinks into the plain. They were already below sea level.

The ocher galloped off and returned presently with Makshim, leader of one of the best squadrons. Although among the Donskoi were men of many races—gypsies, Hungarians, and Poles and even descendants of Tatars (Kirdy's father had been a Mongol prince)—Makshim was different from the rest of the brotherhood. Though like many of his companions he had fled to the border to escape persecution or punishment as the case might be—no questions were asked among the Don men as to the reasons why strangers joined them—he alone was known to be able to read and write not only his name but whole letters. Some said he had been a priest once, others, a Polish noble, and still others that his parents had been Jews.

Whatever his past, Makshim was a bold leader. Kirdy had noticed that while the other squadron commanders did not bother their heads about the route, Makshim asked questions of him and did some scouting on his own account. He was a slender warrior, evil-tempered when aroused; the skin was drawn over his bones and his long red damask coat was faded by the sun.

When he and the young warrior had passed through the shallow ravines and halted on the far side of the low range, he surveyed the narrow strip of sedge grass and saw by the angle of the rushes that the current was moderately swift.

"It is a pistol shot across," he said, rubbing his saddle horn reflectively. "Do you know where to find a ford?"

Kirdy shook his head and answered respectfully. "Nay, sir brother, the river is deep because in the north where it begins the streams are still full."

"What do you know of northern rivers, fledgling!"

"Only a little. But all is known to my grandsire, who has crossed the roof of the world."

"The devil!" Makshim glanced at the youth from the corners of his eyes. "Just the same, the horses can swim this Jaick, but the wagons are a different affair. From this bank we could turn back to our villages, but once across only a magician can say what will be."

To this Kirdy made no answer. So far, all places were very much alike to him, who had been born in the Gobi and had straddled a horse in the year he had been weaned. In fact the silence of the many-colored desert was to him more of a welcome, as if to a homecoming than a hardship.

That evening Demid announced that they would camp for two days while they made the wagons ready for the crossing and the horses grazed. Makshim alone spoke up.

"All this is very well, but have you considered, *ataman*, that we will enter the lower desert in the time of greatest heat?"

"Then you'll sweat, Makshim," grunted Goloto, who was as ugly as Vulcan and never had a coat because his outer garments were sold, whenever he had them, for brandy or minstrels. "By the ten toes of St. Christopher, you'll shed your red coat."

So far the Cossacks had not given Makshim a nickname, because he held himself a little apart and would not take a jest, but the damask coat came in for more than one gibe.

Now he grew red and spoke to Goloto rather than Demid. "It is useless to push ahead into such a Satan's oven. Let us circle back to the Volga and await the rains and the cold. Then we can cross the gray desert more swiftly."

"Nay," said Demid at once, giving no reason.

"That is easy to say, *ataman*. But in your pledge to the tsar you did not agree to go over the desert in this month or the next."

Some of the Cossacks looked up at this, and Demid, chin on hand, pondered his reply until they who had been on the outskirts of the fire came closer to listen.

"That is not well said, Makshim," he observed. "There is a reason why we should press on at this time. You, sir brothers, are not falcons, to be kept hooded until the game is in sight. I have no secrets from you and this is the reason.

"Urgench lies a month's ride to the southeast, and when we cross the Jaick we will be in the lands of the desert khans. Their city is in a dead world—the river is dry, the mountains are bare. In other days it was not like this because there was water in the river, and grass on the plains. But the city of Urgench is holy to the dogs of Moslems. No infidels have ridden under its walls. The mosques have old treasures—the khan keeps his riches in the palace. And why is that, sir brothers?

"That is because they will not forsake the city that is holy since the time of their prophet—may jackals litter on his grave. In the season of greatest heat which begins now, the khan and his horde leave Urgench for a month or so and ride south to Khiva where water is in the river and their horses can graze. So at this time we can ride against the city and take it, but not in another season."

"I fear no khan!"

"Arap Muhammad Khan of Khiva has ten thousand riders in his horde. To the east are double that number of Turkomans. Not far to the south are hundreds of thousands of Moslem dogs in the valley of Bokhara and Samarkand. So Khlit, the Wolf, has said."

Goloto swore and others pulled at their mustaches reflectively. The blunt statement of the power of the Moslems with whom they were to cope served to remind them that this was not an idle march, or a small raid.

Although Makshim had nothing more to say, Demid turned to him. "You, *kuren ataman*, spoke of my pledge to the tsar. It was not mine alone. Before giving it all the sir brothers heard the conditions and agreed with one voice. You yourself approved."

"And my word is not smoke," said Makshim promptly.

"See to it."

"By —— in Moscow we were in bonds, now we are in the saddle," grunted Ayub. "What else matters?"

All spoke approvingly and that night there was singing until the fires had died to gray ashes. In the morning the Cossacks took axes from the wagons and combed the river bank for poplars which grew in the east slope of the hills. They carried to the camp also the dead trunks that lay, brittle and dry in the sand. The carpenters set to work binding the logs to the sides of the carts and when this was done the wagons were fastened together by ropes in threes and fours.

On the second day the strongest horses were hitched to the carts and driven to the water's edge. Several riders plunged in to lead the way and the ponies were whipped until the carts, fastened together like rafts, were afloat, the poplar trunks keeping them buoyant.

Other riders drove in the oxen and kept the frightened beasts headed across the stream. The weaker of the oxen were lost in this passage, but the Cossacks and their horses went over safely. They attached their saddle horns together with lariats, Tatar fashion, in groups of twenty or more, keeping the line athwart the current.

When they climbed the steep bank and wound into the clay gullies that twisted before them the Cossacks glanced back and wondered, perhaps, how long it would be before they crossed the Jaick again.

Kirdy was well pleased when instead of appointing an older Cossack in his place, the *ataman* named fifty warriors for the advance. Their labors doubled indeed, for now scouts were sent out on either flank to watch for

any sign of human beings. It was necessary to escape observation at this distance from Urgench, because even a Turkoman horseboy would have known that the Cossack *tabor* was not a merchant's caravan.

Moreover the nature of the land changed, and the Donskoi who had never been in such a desert before looked about curiously. The soil underfoot grew whiter, and the buttes that reared their heads above the gullies were sometimes red sandstone, sometimes white chalk. Kirdy had to ride in great circles to find water for the nightly camps.

They passed south of the blue crests of distant hills, and plunged still downward, still to the south and east. The only herbage here was a greenish-gray, almost the color of the sandy clay from which it grew and the ponies that ate of it grew weaker at once.

No longer did the Cossacks sing. They passed through ravines walled in with ridged sandstone that looked as if it had been carved by some gigantic hand in forgotten times; they plowed through lakes of sand, threaded with streams that were crusted with white salt, and the water, too, was unfit to drink.

No longer could they look for miles over a level steppe; they were walled in by fortresses and domes and castles—all uninhabited, all molded into grotesque shapes by the same unknown hand—soft rock that crumpled underfoot, or baked clay pinnacles or demonic pillars of sand.

"Aye," said the Cossack who was called Dog-Face, to Ayub, "you have said it. Foul fiends live in this place."

He jerked up his pony's muzzle from a pool of stagnant water and swore blackly. Dog-Face had stripped himself to the waist and revealed a trunk as splendidly formed as his face was grotesque—lithe muscles curving over bones as erect as pillars. The *kalpak* was thrust over one ear on the back of his head and stayed there by some unknown trick of adhesion. His sheepskin was bundled up on the crupper and the saddlebags were stuffed with hay he had cut a week ago, having emptied out cups, shirts, wax, and a remarkable lot of trinkets to make room for the hay.

"It is clearly to be seen," he went on. "The water poison, the grass is death to the beasts; rock slides apart like sand, and sand stands up like rock."

He spat to one side and wrenched the sweat off his eyes with a finger. "I have seen the shores of Charnomar,* and the venom-marshes of the

*The Black Sea

Pripet; I have seen the Dnieper flood its banks and trees stick up from the water like bristles on a pig, but the like of this I have not seen."

"Then you are easily frightened, like a nun," retorted Ayub who took the opposite side of the argument at once.

"How, frightened?"

"The Wolf, who has wisdom, says that all this spot was once the bottom of a sea. The little Blue Sea was part of it, and the salt lakes and streams. Now the great sea has gone but these mounds were islands once, and these gullies were channels. The salt and the chalk was left by the sea."

"But where did it go!"

Ayub thought for a moment and shook his head. "Well, perhaps it dried up like a fish in the sun. How should I know? But once ships were sailing about up there, over our heads."

Glancing up, Dog-Face pondered this. "I believe that you are lying. It is well known that you are a father of lies."

Thrusting out his lower lip, Ayub reined in his horse. "Then you are a fool if you don't know false from true."

By now the Cossack lancer had begun to snort. "I dare go beyond where you would set your foot. But to ride into a place accursed is another matter. I tell you Satan is near us."

"Then you should be glad," girded Ayub.

"Death to you!" growled the Cossack, reaching for his saber.

Not an instant behind him was Ayub, but before they could bare their weapons a brown stallion thrust between them and Demid glared from one to the other.

"Show steel and you will taste a bullet!"

Ayub's forehead went dark, and he breathed heavily, until his eyes opened and he folded his arms. "No harm in a quarrel between *kunaks*."

"No harm," assented Demid, "but it is against Cossack custom to draw steel on the march. Greeks and Tziganis use knives, and that is not our nature. Pound each other with fists after the halt tonight."

Kirdy, who overheard the dispute, observed as soon as the horses were tethered that evening Dog-Face sought out Ayub and they fell to blows while a ring of warriors looked on, with shouts of encouragement and advice. Nor was this the only grudge that was settled in this fashion.

After Ayub had knocked his antagonist senseless, the Zaporogian went off and returned with a goatskin of water which he poured over the prostrate Dog-Face, in spite of the fact that they had very little water.

The *tabor* pushed on slowly through the waste lands, as a panther, crouching close to the earth, pulls itself forward one leg at a time, waiting for the moment to launch its strength in a single spring.

They crossed another river. It was smaller than the Jaick and its current was sluggish, so that they were able to ford it and get the wagons across in one day. Here, too, they filled the water skins and the animals were able to graze.

Every evening the Cossacks gazed to the south for a sign of the inland sea beyond which Urgench lay, and they asked Kirdy if he had seen any glint of blue water. But the land was the same—the same gray clay and sand and the purple and red pinnacles that lined the way like watchtowers.

Some of them noticed, however, that they were ascending. The horizon was closer to them and they went up more often than down. A fitful breeze brushed the desert floor. More than once they saw herds of antelope and gazed longingly at the slender beasts that seemed to drift away from them rather than run. Some of the best-mounted Cossacks tried to ride down the antelope and were jeered at by their companions.

"If game is here," Demid pointed out, "we will soon meet men."

But Makshim and some others shook their heads, saying that no man could live in such a land.

"The Blue Sea is near," retorted Ayub, "and surely we will find fisherfolk on its shores. The *ataman* has spoken truly."

"And if there is no Blue Sea? What then is in store for us? No one has seen this sea."

Ayub had gained experience from his passage-at-arms with Dog-Face, and he had spent some time in questioning Khlit.

"There is a dark spirit in you, Makshim," he observed sagely. "No man from Christian lands has seen the Blue Sea—that is true. But no man of ours has been in this spot before now."

"Not in all the earth is there a sea in the desert."

"May the dogs bite you, Makshim! You have read a book and not one but many. And what is written in books is more lie than truth."

"How?" demanded the *kuren ataman*, frowning.

"Because that is how it is. Who writes in books? Priests, schoolmasters and councilors. What do they write? Only what is in their minds. And of what good is the mind of a Latin priest or a schoolmaster?"

"Better than the legends of the minstrels."

"Not so. The *bandura* players sing of what the knightly heroes have accomplished—their tales relate Cossack glory. Everyone knows that once Potuik, the falcon ship, sailed across dry land, and Helen the Fair fought with a wizard."

"You are a fool, Ayub. How could a ship sail on land?"

The big Zaporogian frowned because the tales of the minstrels were well liked by the men of the brotherhood. "Do you not know that Piotr the apostle once walked on the water? If a man can walk on water, a ship can pass over dry earth."

This unusual reasoning silenced Makshim for a moment. "Yet Piotr the apostle did not walk of his own strength on the water. Besides, he was a craven."

Ayub ransacked his memory for words he had heard spoken by the warrior-priests of the Cossacks. "Not so. For, when the Roman knights came to take the White Christ and deliver Him to the torture did not Piotr the blessed draw his saber at once? It was so! Truly he delivered a bad cut—only struck an ear off a Roman—but there is much good in a man who will draw his saber in defense of his Faith. And a craven is one who will forsake his brothers in need." And he looked keenly into the half-shut eyes of handsome Makshim.

"At least," smiled the *kuren ataman*, "you are no better than a hound that doubles on the trail it is following, Ayub, and runs down a cold scent instead of coming up with the quarry. Because what you now say you had from a book."

"Nay, I had it from the lips of the little father, and may a thousand fiends tear me, if he had it from a book, because he could read not a jot except the great gold letters that named the saints. Our little father had a fine throat for song and he swallowed more brandy than water. But read he could not. What he said of Piotr and the White Christ is a legend, told him by others, who had it from their fathers. And so it is true and not false and I will stretch out him that says otherwise."

"All your words, Ayub," put in another squadron commander who had been listening attentively, "do not reveal to us a trail that we can follow out of this accursed wilderness."

"Where lies this sea?" demanded a tall Cossack who seldom uttered a word. "As well hunt for a wind in the steppe!"

"Aye," said Makshim boldly, "even the Tatars know that Demid has lost his way. He goes ahead cautiously with the *tabor* and sends out scouts."

"It is true," quoth Goloto who had come up when he saw the squadron commanders in talk sitting their horses beside the wagon trail, "that the way is hard. We have lost a third of the oxen and many horses have made the vultures glad. But, listen to me, noble sirs, it is better to go where the *ataman* leads, quickly and with a good heart as is the Cossack custom."

"But we have no more fresh meat, except horse flesh at times."

"My *kuren* has barley only sufficient to keep the horses alive for ten days."

"It is clear," Makshim put in quickly, "that the Cossack brotherhood is not agreed. I ask that a council be called."

Goloto frowned and Ayub swore at this and the others were silent. Since his first speech to them Demid had said nothing of their journey and the hardships had grown upon them until tempers had become frayed.

"If we were marching upon a foe," vouchsafed the saturnine Cossack at last, "I would say to Goloto 'Sir brother, your words are truth, and the devil himself would not say otherwise.' But here it is different. Who knows whither we are marching, unless the *ataman*, and he will not speak?"

"Aye," nodded Makshim, spitting into the hot sand at which his pony was pawing restlessly. "We are no more than the ghosts of men marching no whither."

The others looked at Goloto, who pondered long, raising his shrewd eyes to the skyline. "If this were our own steppe or the shores of Charnomar or even Roum*—we would need no council. But here we have marched without a blow struck or a pistol fired, and it is evident that this is an abode of devils. So, sir brothers, it is my opinion that we should call a council and ask the *ataman* whether we are going against devils or men."

Hearing this Ayub wheeled his black stallion and rode away from the group. He was troubled because, unless in sight of the enemy or marching over hostile territory, three of the five *kuren atamans* had the right to call a council. Until now Makshim had been alone in his opinion that they were lost, but with Goloto and the other squadron commander on his side the council would be summoned that night and to the troubles of Demid who had all the responsibility of leading men and beasts across the desert would be added the hardship of dispute and dissension.

If Demid should order Makshim shot down, the Cossacks might divide into two factions and fall to blows; if the young *ataman* deprived the three

*Turkey.

squadron leaders of rank, their men would be angered and a sore would be opened that might never heal.

If on the other hand Demid did not deal with the objectors strongly and at once, the *ataman* might lose the baton because the Donskoi in their present mood would not have a leader who lacked a firm hand.

He found Demid at the rear of the wagon train deep in talk with an old Tatar who possessed a fine eagle—now hooded, and chained to a perch built upon the wagon.

"*Tchelom vam, chunk*," he grinned. "The forehead to you, brother! You will be in a hot kettle tonight, and I would not be in your skin for a dozen such golden eagles as that one."

Demid looked at his comrade inquiringly, and Ayub explained what had been discussed by the squadron leaders. "That —— Makshim is at the bottom of it. They all went off to talk to Khlit."

"What said the Wolf?"

"He said, 'Who is your *ataman*?' And they answered 'Demid, the Falcon. '"

"And then?"

"Khlit snarled at them. He is old, Demid, and quarrels weary him. But he called me back, and asked one thing of me. 'Who is Demid?' I said, 'He is my *kunak*!' He looked at me for a long time and then bade me tell you to put Makshim in Kirdy's place when all was done."

"He said that? Find him and bid him to me. Send a rider after Kirdy at once."

As if Ayub's message had not surprised him, Demid returned to his talk with the Tatar, and when Ayub reported that Khlit was not to be found in the *tabor* he was silent until Kirdy rode up on a sweating pony and dismounted to come to his leader's stirrup.

"Have you seen antelope, Kirdy? Near at hand? Good! Men say you have hunted with eagles."

"Aye, father."

"Here is one trained to stags. I think he will fasten upon antelope, because the Tatar has kept him underfed. Take him and—what is your name, Tatar?"

"Shamaki, O my khan."

"Well, I think you stole the golden eagle, Shamaki, because bringing down stags is not the sport of Muscovite slaves."

"*Yachim*—no, my khan."

"Take the pair of them, Kirdy; direct the *tabor* to where the antelope can be seen and show us sport. Wait! Take Goloto with you."

"At command, father."

Kirdy bade the Tatar follow while he changed to a fresh pony, and Shamaki hastily sought in the wagon for a scarred horsehide gauntlet that covered his arm to the elbow. When he had pulled this on he unchained the eagle and let it grip his wrist. This done he hurried after the young warrior, panting under the weight of the great bird. Without bidding he flung himself on the back of a pony in the remount herd and Kirdy smiled when he saw that Shamaki had picked out the second best of the nearest horses. He himself had the piebald pony, the best of the lot.

Goloto was well pleased to accompany them, because he loved hawking almost as much as the Tatar. And envious glances were cast at the three as they galloped off, Kirdy in the lead.

Meanwhile the *tabor* had turned aside from its course and headed toward a ridge that afforded a view of the plain on all sides. Before the nearest Cossacks had settled themselves in their saddles to watch, the three riders were a mile away drawing closer to the antelope herd that drifted slowly before them.

When Kirdy signed to him, the Tatar pulled the hood from the eagle and it darted up, its great wings threshing like wind-whipped banners. The three horsemen drew rein and watched.

At first the brown bird soared until it seemed to press against the clouds, then it circled over the antelope herd. And as if warned by some sixth sense of the shadow in the sky the herd made off—sweeping over the brown earth in a wide circle that took it clear around the hunters.

Swiftly as grains of dust pelting before a wind the antelope fled and the eagle swooped down behind the herd twice as swiftly. It alighted on the neck of one of the slender creatures and clung fast.

Maddened by pain—the sharp beak was goring the base of its skull—the antelope swerved and the herd darted away from it. The two Cossacks and the Tatar spurred after it. The antelope stumbled, lurched erect and went off in another direction, blinded by the wings that beat about its head. Kirdy quartered across its course and ran his spear into its flank. The antelope leaped forward and fell prone, while Shamaki dismounted to drag off the screaming eagle.

"That was well done," acknowledged Goloto. "My horse is not as good as yours, *oùchar*. Once, while visiting the Circassians in the Caucasus I hunted mountain sheep with the eagles. That was worthwhile."

Kirdy's eyes glistened as they made off after the herd. He brought down another antelope, held by the eagle, and Goloto roped a third and was well satisfied thereat. A fourth was killed by the bird before they could come up. By then the herd, which had been circling and darting about as if unable to judge where the danger lay, fled too far to be followed and the hunters rode in on tired ponies.

"The forehead to you, eagle!" cried the Cossacks who had been watching with keen eyes from the *tabor*. "You have shown us good sport and brought us fresh meat."

Although there was hardly more than a mouthful to a man, they roasted the antelope steaks that evening, kindling fires with difficulty from dried dung and the few tamarisk bushes that grew about the knoll—for other fuel there was none.

When they had eaten dinner they gathered to a man about the highest point in the ridge where Demid had flung his saddle on the ground and was sitting on it. A space about him was kept clear and in this space stood the five *kuren atamans*. Ayub and Kirdy, who had searched the camp in vain for Khlit—even looking through the wagons on the chance that he had crawled into one and had gone to sleep—were in the foremost rank of the warriors. For once no sentries were posted because all the Cossacks had thronged to the council and because in that barren land only the half-moon, peering through a cloud rift, looked out upon them.

When they had been in their places some time Demid rose and took his cap in his hand. "The brotherhood has asked the *ataman* to a council. I am listening. Who speaks?"

There was an uneasy silence because no one wished to be the first to raise his voice. The Don men were in a black mood, and restless under the monotony of the long march. They were in a mood to tear down leaders and set up new ones; and yet the Falcon was well loved. The man who spoke the wrong word might be slain by the hands of his comrades if anger were aroused.

"Speak, Ivan Aglau!" said Demid at length, passing over Makshim and picking out the leader of one of the lance squadrons—the gloomy Cossack who seldom raised his voice.

The tall warrior stepped out from his companions and folded his arms. "Greeting to you, *ataman*, and to you, noble sirs. It is well known that I can do more with a lance than with my tongue. I only see we are going

into a land where no man lives, so I say to the *ataman*, the Falcon—'Lead us where we can face men and draw our weapons in a good cause.' That is my speech, brothers."

"Well said, Ivan Aglau!" cried one. "The devil himself couldn't find a Turk here!" echoed another.

"Speak, Goloto!" Demid turned to the squat, pock-marked squadron leader. The veteran warrior hesitated. He was in a cheerful mood after the hunt, and he had a hearty respect for Demid.

"I have only this to say, sir brothers. Does the *ataman* know the road, or is he lost? Because if he knows the road there is nothing more to be said. But if the *tabor* is crawling like a snake without a head, then 'tis time for the wisest among us to deliberate."

"That, too, is true, Goloto!" they cried. "Where is the road?"

In turn Demid called upon the two squadron leaders who had not favored holding the council and they both explained promptly that they were not in the circle of their own will, and had no protest to make.

"Hedgehogs!" shouted a warrior. "You are trying to ride two horses at once."

Members of the two *kurens* in question took up the challenge instantly and hard words passed back and forth until the rising tumult was stilled by Demid's thundering: "Makshim!"

The *kuren ataman* in the red coat flung up his hand and faced the ring of bearded faces. "Sir brothers! You are hooded falcons. You are dead men wandering without graves! Once you were Cossacks, lords of the steppe, masters of the rivers. The minstrels sang of your deeds, and your sons looked about proudly. Then the Muscovite emperor came down from his forests, a torch in one hand, steel in the other, and your *ataman* bent the forehead to him, and you became prisoners."

Once more the murmur of many voices threatened to rise into a roar that would set passion loose. Makshim held up both arms.

"In Moscow you were to be put to death, it is true. What have you gained from the bargain made by your *ataman*? Torture! Death here where only the kites will be the gainers."

Certain now of the attention of the warriors, he folded his arms and spoke deliberately.

"Ivan Aglau spoke well when he asked to be led against living foes; brave Goloto said as wisely when be pointed out that you were wandering here without a road. What is my message to you, sir brothers? This:

in three days only a remnant of food will be left. If we turn back *now* we can regain the Jaick where we will find water, grazing land and game. In two days or three we cannot turn back.

"Go, now, and carry fire and steel against Kamushink—revenge yourselves on the Muscovites. They who die will have an honorable end; they who live will be victors."

A shrewd orator, he ceased with this word, and no answering shouts greeted his oration. The warriors were all staring at Demid, murmuring and shifting restlessly upon their feet; a vague anger was stirring in them, but at what they did not know.

Demid, who had allowed Makshim to speak after the other *kuren atamans* so that he would be able to answer at once, now waited until the muttering ceased. When all were quiet he put one hand on his sword hilt, the other on his hip. His splendid head, clear cut in the moonlight, turned slowly as if seeking certain warriors in the dense mass below him.

"Where are the brothers who went with me on Charnomar? Are any here?"

A few voices shouted response, although a hundred or more in the gathering had been with Demid on the Black Sea.

"And where are the brothers who rode to Aleppo and back again with the treasure of a pasha?"

"Here, *ataman*—we are here."

"Are any here who took by surprise the beacon tower of Roum, when the Turks fled without their trousers?"

A savage laugh greeted this, for the capture of the sultan's lighthouse on the Bosporus had been a notable exploit, and the blind *bandura* players had made a song of it.

"Then let these warriors speak," Demid cried. "Let them say whether at such times I was *ataman* of the Don men, or only headman of the council."

It was Ivan Aglau who took it upon himself to answer, his harsh features dark in the moonlight. "You were our *ataman*, our father. Speak to us now, because the Cossacks are troubled; there is a devil in them. Speak wise words, so that our spirits will be refreshed; otherwise only God knows what will become of us in this place."

The young leader advanced a pace so that all could see him and his voice was quiet, even drawling—Kirdy had heard Mongol khans address the council in such fashion.

"When the Muscovites marched against the Donskoi the second time and we were scattered in battle I surrendered to their chiefs—I gave you and myself up to them, when we could have fled deeper into the wilderness. But whither? To the Tatars? To the desert! We could not, with the women and children; if we had fled without them the villages would have been sacked by the Muscovites, our daughters dishonored and our sons made slaves.

"When Khlit, the Wolf, talked with Boris Godunov a choice was given us. The hangman would light our way or we could march upon Urgench armed and mounted, to live or die. I chose this. If any of the brotherhood would choose otherwise now, they may take their wagons and ponies and journey back to Moscow and give up their arms, saying 'Great Prince, we have come back without redeeming our pledge.'"

Although the Cossacks stirred uneasily, no one made answer and suddenly Demid flung back his head, his nostrils twitching.

"Are your spirits uneasy, my children? Nay, my heart burns. It is heavy—heavy. Once the Cossack was master of the Don; now he bows his head. The Muscovites have come forth from their cities; they build forts where the rivers join; they send barks where our boys fished in other days—caravans along the trails where the maidens used to drive out the cattle to pasture.

"Our steers are no longer ours. They must be sold to the Muscovites. We must give them horses. O my children, did we not welcome them to our bread and salt when they first appeared in our lands? We treated them not otherwise than as brothers, and drove the Tatar into the desert, the Turk into the sea at the wish of the Tsar Ivan who was a warrior.

"Now they say to us '*The land is not yours but ours*' and '*Your ataman is not a chief but a colonel of a regiment to serve us.*'"

He gripped his head in both hands and passion, so long held in iron restraint, set his body quivering. Kirdy had never seen Demid aroused before and he knew that the wrath of this man was terrible.

"How can I, your *ataman*, give comfort to your spirits? In the darkness the eyes of the dead *atamans*, the heroes, glare at me like wolves. Lordly Schah and Skal Osup gaze at me from the star world and shake their gray heads in reproach. In their day the whole world trembled when the Cossacks mounted into the saddle, and even a sultan did not sleep soundly of nights. In my day the hands of Muscovite merchants reach out to our daughters, and hired soldiers hold weapons at the heads of our sons. Darkness is before us, and how can life itself he endured?"

The warriors were breathing deeply, their heads hanging on their breasts, their hands gripped in girdle and belt.

"You have asked me to show you the road!" Demid's laugh was more like a bark, deep in his throat. "I know no road but one to Urgench. Have ye no eyes? The tsar seeks to make slaves or subjects of the Don people. And this is what I say to you, O my brothers, '*If the Donskoi yield to a master, you will have a new ataman, for Demid will not be among the living.*' And I say one thing more, '*Ride on to Urgench, bear off the spoil that is sought by the Muscovites—aye, ye few who will live—and you will be free men.*'

"That is the Cossack's road. No other can follow it. To live by the sword and die not otherwise, to endure torture, to make new paths into the wilderness. What is the reward? The minstrels will sing our names, the grandfathers in the villages will speak of our deeds, and children yet unborn will gather quietly to listen to the hero-tales. And that, my brothers, is Cossack glory!"

For several moments after he ceased no one spoke, and then the oldest of the warriors who had sailed with him on Charnomar and had reined their horses into the mosques of the Turks began to nod their heads and stroke down their mustaches. Others, eyes bent on the ground, felt shame at their own murmuring, and no one opened his lips until Ivan Aglau the silent lifted his head.

"Aye, father, you have spoken the word for which we were waiting. By it our spirits are comforted, our hearts no longer burn."

But the near-madness of that gathering of weary men, relieved in a measure by the passion of their leader, sought another outlet.

"Makshim is a traitor. Death to him!"

"Tie him to horses! Tear him"

Only the *kuren* of Makshim refrained from the outburst of anger, and the squadron leader became pale, although he did not move from his place or touch a weapon.

"Dogs! Men without faith! To your places!" Demid's thundering command checked the ring in its rush forward. "What is Makshim's crime? That he spoke boldly? That he advised otherwise than I?"

"Father," growled Goloto, "he called the council, and now we are ashamed, for we wish no other *ataman* than you."

"Because you are ashamed, you would cut down Makshim!" Demid gibed at him, thin lips smiling. "He is a brave man, and what was in his mind he has said freely. Is his fate in your hands or mine?"

"In yours!" Goloto cried, starting.

"I have no blame for him. Nay, tomorrow let him take his *kuren* and go in advance to point out the way to us."

"I thank you, *ataman*," Makshim responded slowly. "I will do what I may. But my mind is still the same. I think we are lost in this desert."

Demid glanced at him, sunken-eyed as if just awakening from sleep, and was aware of a commotion in the ring of warriors. The nearest man stepped aside and Khlit appeared beside the squadron commanders. He looked tousled and sleepy, but Demid noticed that his sheepskins were wet with sweat.

"What is the matter, noble sirs?" he growled. "I have been dozing, out where the horses are."

Laughter greeted this, while Ayub stared at Khlit in deep perplexity. He and Kirdy had ransacked the *tabor* for the old warrior without result.

"The matter is—we have lost the road," explained Makshim stubbornly.

"Nay, how could that be? I know the way. Before sunset tomorrow you will come to a village and from there you can see the Blue Sea."

Exclamations greeted this and the Cossacks flung their caps into the air. The *kurens* moved off, and before long the wailing of a fiddle was heard. Forgetting their hardships, and heedless once more of what the future would bring, the warriors settled down, some to sing, others to throw dice by the embers of the fire and others to sleep, stretched out as they were in the sand.

On the morrow with a dozen men Makshim struck ahead of the *tabor* and by noon came up to a cluster of clay huts. They were deserted, and the reason was apparent. The skeletons of men and women lay within and without. Except for a few water jars and iron pots the huts contained nothing. Near the skeletons lay arrows, broken for the most part, and some of the skulls had been crushed in.

"These are Turkoman shafts," announced Makshim, who had examined one. "And it seems to me that the riders from Urgench have been here before us. They have not left much."

Even the clothing was gone from the bodies, because what had not been carried off by the raiders had been destroyed by the crawling things that followed after the wolves and the kites. Makshim turned his attention to the trail of a horse that he had followed into the village. The tracks wound in and out among the huts and went off again to the northwest.

"That is a fresh trail," the *kuren ataman* said "It was not made more than a day ago. The pony was shod like ours."

"Perhaps a Turkoman has spied upon us, father," suggested a young warrior.

"Fool. Would one have lingered a year in this place? Nay, the rider came from the *tabor* and went back to it again." Suddenly he struck his thigh and swore blackly. "By the Horned One! That was Khlit. The old son of a dog did not know what lay ahead after all. He was lost like the rest of us, and he rode a horse into the ground to scout ahead. He came upon this place."

"But he said he had been asleep."

"Very likely. He can sleep in the saddle, and the pony would have headed back to the *tabor*." Makshim threw back his dark head and laughed. "Eh, we ghosts—we living dead—shall not want for a grave. Yonder is the gleam of water on the skyline."

At first Makshim thought of riding back to the *tabor* and telling the warriors that Khlit, like themselves, was guessing at the route over the desert—that he had gone ahead to spy out a landmark and had returned to describe it to them. But his own men looked at him askance, and if Demid had not taken his part he would have been torn to pieces at the council. He resolved to say nothing more against the *ataman* or Khlit. Because they had come out at last on the Blue Sea that Makshim had not thought to see.

"On, to the water!" he cried.

The following day the wagon train halted at the edge of the Blue Sea and the oxen bellowed piteously, smelling the water that was unfit to drink because it was salt. Even the streams that trickled down over the rock ridges and the gullies were salty, and the earth was no more than white crystals. Upon this expanse of vivid blue water and white sand the sun beat down relentlessly.

And now Demid gave the word to push ahead at the utmost speed. To escape the greatest heat he traveled by night, halting at dawn. Sick oxen were cut out of the *tabor*, and useless ponies were turned loose, to wander after the herd, neighing, until they fell and the lines of vultures that hovered behind the Cossacks settled down anew.

Emaciated shadows, they rode over a gray land under the moon's eye, and above the singing of the warriors could be heard the groaning of the maddened oxen.

"It is fitting," laughed Makshim, "that ghosts should ride at night."

Chapter 6
The Vision of the Plains

The astrologer sits on his carpet in the sun and between his knees is the sign of the zodiac. Looking upon the stars and the sign he says "This will be!"

The wise man listens to all things and looks in the faces of the chieftains, saying, "Who knows what will be?"

It was Kirdy who discovered the gateway by the spring of fresh water in a limestone formation, after the *tabor* had passed to the south of the Blue Sea. He told Demid of his find and several Cossacks went with the *ataman* to look at it and discuss what it might be. For once the oxen had drunk their fill and the horses were searching out a little grass.

The Cossacks found two pillars standing in a ravine whose walls were sheer rock. One of the pillars had fallen and they saw that the pieces were marble and the head of the column was ornamented with two short swords, crossed beneath a wreath of ivy—all carved in the marble.

"Camels have passed and repassed this ravine," Demid pointed out, "and this must be one of the caravan routes that go from the west to the east, to Cathay. Pagans live in this land, since they have built pillars in honor of their gods."

"Those swords are not of much account," Ayub objected. "They are shorter than a Circassian's knife—a scimitar could over-reach them easily."

"You are mistaken, Ayub," put in another Cossack, who was mild of speech and had once been a noble in Kiev. "Such swords once carved out an empire."

"Then the men of that empire must have been dwarfs." Ayub himself towered close to seven feet and carried a five-foot broadsword.

"They were Greeks, and the *bandura* players of Asia call their chieftain Iskander. The Latin priests say that he was Alexander."

"May the dogs bite you, Ivashko! Don't you know that Greeks could never conquer anything? A Jew or an Armenian may be trusted sometimes, but Greeks will sell even their wives."

"Just the same, Ayub," observed another warrior, "when I was a slave on a Turkish galley I saw columns like these in the temples of the Greeks that Turks used for bathhouses."

"Two thousand years ago," went on Ivashko, "the Greeks were otherwise. They raided boldly into Asia."

"Then," assented Demid, "their *ataman* Alexander must have been a splendid leader—if his enemies remembered his name for two thousand years."

"Aye," nodded Ayub admiringly, "that was a notable raid."

They made camp by the pool in the limestone cliffs, the warriors sleeping under the wagons or under their *svitzas* propped up on the lances. And Demid, who had talked with Khlit, announced in the evening that they would leave the wagon train in the camp by Alexander's pillars of victory.

The oxen were at the end of their strength and here was water and some grass. Lame and sickly ponies were also cut out of the herd, and Goloto with forty warriors was named to guard the *tabor* until the Cossacks returned. Since leaving the Blue Sea they had headed nearly due south and caravans had been seen on the skyline, and the villages were becoming thicker. Urgench could not lie many days' ride to the south, and if they were to escape observation they could not go on with the ox-carts. The warriors, well pleased with the change in affairs, selected the best of the horses and loaded fifty others with powder, barley and dried meat.

At sunset they set out, and Demid gave the experienced Goloto some wise advice. "Draw the wagons in a square, not on the skyline but in a place that can be defended. Throw out pickets and do not go after caravans, because you will break your teeth on them in this place. If you do not see us in a month, take the best horses and strike back to the Jaick."

"At command!" responded Goloto sadly, because he was to be left behind, and the separation from his brothers was not to his liking.

"I have given you forty good men and firelocks. Keep the wagon train safe."

"You will find it in readiness. Go with God!"

"With God!" repeated the Cossacks who had lingered to ride with the *ataman*.

They took leave of one another and looked back more than once at the familiar mass of horned oxen, and the gray wagons arranged in a solid breastwork about the water; then they spurred on, going swiftly now into the darkness before moonrise, for in this last dash into a hostile land speed was all-important.

At the end of the plain the sun was setting, and the sands gleamed yellow. Golden, too, was the dried bed of a great river sunk between purple rock ridges. It was like the sloughed skin of a snake, lying dry and brittle

and motionless upon the plain. And yellow were the domes and minarets of the city that crouched behind a high wall on the bank of the inanimate river.

Apart from the spear-like pinnacles of the mosques but within the wall projected the squat towers of a castle, built in the age when rock-casting machines and naphtha-throwers were to be feared in a siege. One by one stars shimmered forth in the purple haze above the towers. No men were to be seen on the walls or on the breast of the plain, but, as the sun touched the horizon, an impalpable veil seemed to rise from the ground and hang about the glowing domes.

Such was Urgench in the year of Bars, the Leopard, by the Tatar calendar.

The yellow haze was no more than the last level rays of sunset striking upon the particles of dust in the air, and the distance from the Cossacks to the wall was too great to permit them to see human figures, but the warriors were silent as they gazed on the desolation of the plain and the gleaming city behind the veil in the air.

They—the advance under Makshim and the leaders—were resting in the mouth of a ravine to the northwest of Urgench. On their left hand, an hour's ride, the riverbed wound toward the city; on their right the golden sands stretched into the eye of the sinking sun. Most of them were in shirtsleeves or stripped to the waist and their bodies shone red in the afterglow, so that even their eyes, tortured by the heat and the glare of the desert floor, were as scarlet as blood. So, too, was the head of the white falcon on the standard in Ayub's scarred fist.

Some of the warriors touched the small crosses on the hilts of their sabers, because Urgench, near sunset, appeared to be one of the substanceless cities that had taken form more than once when they were coming down over the salt plains, and which they fancied were the creation of Moslem magicians to lead travelers or enemies astray.

Others fell to questioning Kirdy, who had been stationed by the standard, and Ayub after he had yielded the command of the advance to Makshim.

"That is Urgench," he said stoutly. "I know the castle towers well. It is strong—the castle of the khan."

"But we see no men," put in another *oùchar*. "Here are no sheep herders driving their flocks toward that gate—no horses grazing."

Ayub, who had been struck by the same thing, mocked at the youthful warrior instantly, saying that at sundown the Moslems always gathered within walls to wash their hands and bow down to their prophet.

"That is true," assented Kirdy, "yet there is another reason. Here the desert reaches to the city wall; on the other three sides there are caravan roads and fruit trees, villages and herds.

Demid, who had been listening, turned his head and spoke quietly. "How high is the outer wall, *oùchar*?"

"Two lance lengths, father."

"And this gate, is it closed at night? Guarded?"

"The Bab el Mirza, the Gate of the Prince, is not closed at night because it faces the desert from which no enemies have come before now. But it is guarded because the khan is always at war with his brothers or the Tatars of the north or the Persians of the south."

"How strong is the guard?"

"Perhaps one ten, perhaps two. If Arap Muhammad Khan should be in Urgench with his riders there might be no more than one watcher, father."

The day before their scouts had brought in a few Moslem merchants, and these had sworn that the khan and his men were down the river. If the Turkoman horde had returned to the city Demid knew that his Cossacks might enter Urgench but they would never leave it alive. It was impossible to send spies into the city, or to scout near the walls. Before they could reach the vicinity the full moon would be up and they would be seen. They must make the attack blindly and trust to their luck for the rest.

But Demid saw to it that they made use of every advantage and he pondered a trick to play on the Turkomans. A daring swordsman, utterly reckless in battle, he was cautious in planning action and Kirdy knew that this forethought of their leader had brought them safely beyond the Blue Sea. He watched Demid eagerly, drinking in every slow-spoken word.

First the *ataman* asked the opinion of the squadron leaders. And both Ivan Aglau and Makshim agreed that they would be seen when they were a half mile distant from the gate.

"Nay," Demid said, "we can move down the riverbed to within musket shot unseen."

The Cossacks nodded ready assent, except for one who pointed out that the river bank was three musket shots from the gate, which could be closed before they reached it. Once the gates of Urgench were shut their

chance was lost, because they had no cannon to batter the wall, nor could they hope to starve out the inhabitants because Arap Muhammad Khan would be up in a week.

"Well said," agreed Demid. "What does the Wolf say—he who has clawed open many a wall before now?"

"*Ataman*," grumbled Khlit, "the dogs will see us in any case. Send men openly, therefore, but only a few—enough to hold the gate until the squadrons come up from the river."

"Good!" cried Demid. "If the Turkomans had wind of us, their riders would have been out on the plain. Now listen, my brothers, to the plan. Ivan Aglau will take his own squadron of lancers and the men of Goloto's squadron into the riverbed. Ride swiftly—the footing will be troublesome—and assemble under the bank nearest the wall by the first hour of the morning. The shadows will be deep at that time. When you hear a wolf howl thrice, rush your horses up and take possession of the gate."

"Aye," grunted Ivan Aglau, well pleased with his task.

"Khlit, you can speak with the dogs of Turkomans. Take five pack horses, well loaded, and a ten of warriors. When you are a mile from the gate dismount and walk forward with the pack animals. Hide your weapons until you are within reach of the Moslems then give the signal and hold the gate until Ivan Aglau comes up."

The old Cossack nodded understanding, and he asked only that Kirdy be allowed to go with him to see how such things were done.

"Aye," grunted Ayub who was ruffled because he had not been consulted. "I will take my *sablianka*—my little sword—and go before you." He patted the long hilt of his five-foot blade, and handed the standard to another Cossack. "Then all you will have to do is to howl like the wolf you are."

In a moment the two squadrons of lancers were moving past them and trotting out of the ravine, where Kirdy turned his pony to go back for the pack animals. As he did so he looked swiftly sidewise and his hand went to his saber hilt. Out of the near darkness in the ravine two eyes glared at him-two eyes that were almost luminous.

Bending forward, he peered at two shadows that stood against the black wall of rock, and made out that the eyes belonged to the golden eagle and that Shamaki was squatting among the boulders. The Tatar slave had volunteered to come with the Cossacks although his fellows had stayed at the wagon train. Khlit had taken a fancy to the eagle and Shamaki may have hoped for another chance to let it out after antelope.

So intent was he on the business in hand, Kirdy did not reflect until an hour afterward that Shamaki had no right to be at the head of the column where the leaders were talking.

The forms of the men in front of him were black and silver. A bell clanked on the neck of the leading pack horse, and Kirdy paced in time to it. At Khlit's suggestion the Cossacks of the advance party had loosened their girdles, letting the long sheepskin coats hang over the weapons on their hips. At the head of them Ayub's bulk was unmistakable—the Zaporogian strode on as if a thousand spears and not a dozen shambling tatterdemalions were at his back. His long sword remained where he always carried it, strapped to his shoulder so that only the hilt was visible from the front.

For once Ayub walked in silence and the others had hard work to keep up with him. Kirdy was quivering with excitement, and his ears were strained to catch the neigh of the horse from the riverbed close at hand, or a shout from the group of men who watched their approach in the open gate. But the warrior beside him hummed carelessly—

Left—right!
We know you, Muscovite!

Until Khlit growled a warning, and the song ceased. Ayub swore under his breath and Kirdy, who had been peering at the black shapes outlined against the white wall, saw that the Turkomans had prepared a welcome for travelers. A score of human heads looked down at the Cossacks from empty eye sockets. The heads had dark curling hair and beards and were set up on spear points on either side the gate.

Kirdy counted the men who lounged among the spearsmen who wore turbans bound around conical helmets and striped *khalats*. Seven—twelve—twenty in all. Since they were Turkomans, masters of the desert, they would be armed.

A clear voice greeted the wayfarers harshly. "Dogs of Armenians—what have you on the horses?"

"*Koumbouzi*—a gift for thee!" responded Khlit at once.

"Art weary of carrying thy nose, graybeard?" gibed another of the guards. "Then you are well come to the Bab el Mirza! Look!"

He pointed up at the dark heads on the spears and Kirdy saw that these trophies of a Turkoman raid had had the noses and ears cut off.

"Thou wilt rest with thy brothers, O Armenian!"

A roar from Ayub answered him. "It is you, dog-faiths, who will rest on spears and not us."

The Moslems who had been lounging in the sand sprang up, grasping at their weapons. In all their raids upon the Armenian villages no man had spoken to them in this fashion, and now they heard, from the clump of dark figures running toward them, a wolf's howl repeated thrice. Suspicion stirred in them and flamed high when they saw the newcomers pull sabers from beneath long coats.

They were surprised that these dozen should run at them, but—experienced warriors—they wasted no breath in shouting, and closed in on the Cossacks with a rush. Steel blades clanged and the Cossack beside Kirdy went down, groaning, his skull laid open by a blow from a razor-edged scimitar. The bearded Turkoman who had slain him sprang into the air, his blade whistling down at Kirdy.

The boy no longer quivered; the breath came evenly between his teeth and his whole body tingled with exhilaration. Instead of planting his feet and striking with all his strength like the other Cossacks, he met the leap of the Turkoman by throwing himself swiftly to the right. Before the descending arc of steel could follow him, his own sword flicked up—a snap of the wrist that passed the curved edge of his scimitar through the man's side under the ribs.

The Turkoman plunged full length into the sand, and Kirdy snatched up the sword that fell from his nerveless hand. Warding a cut from another Moslem with his new weapon, he plunged the point of his curved saber beneath the man's breastbone and twisted it back and down. The bearded warrior screamed once into his face and was dead before he fell to the earth.

Kirdy had learned swordsmanship in the skirmishes of the tribes, where death hovers close and no cry for quarter is heard. He made no feints, wasted no single motion, and to his mastery of the edged scimitar he had added thrusts with the point, taught him by Khlit. In the sword dance of the Afghans he had learned to wield two blades at once, and when on foot he liked to pick up another weapon if possible.

Now, gliding up to a second foeman, his weapons shone above his head—one silver in the moonlight, the other darkly gleaming. And these curved blades seemed no more than to flicker in the air before the Turkoman sank to his knees.

Ayub went about matters differently. Grasping his heavy straight sword in both hands he swung it in circles as another man might wield a broomstick. When he cut at a man, leather shields crumpled and bones snapped asunder. About these two swordsmen the hard-pressed Cossacks rallied with their war cry—

"Ou-ha-aa!"

But other Moslems were running up to the gate, pushing shut the two heavy doors in spite of the fact that their companions fought outside. Khlit, glancing over his shoulder, lifted his deep voice in a shout.

"Aside, brothers! Aside!"

The Cossacks heard the pelting of hoofs behind them and sprang out of the way, while the Turkomans hesitated, and ran back toward the gate. The foremost riders of Ivan Aglau's squadron struck them as they were trying to push through the closing barriers. More ponies hurtled up, to thrust flank and shoulder against the gates and under the weight of the horses the portals swung back. Fleeing before gleaming lance tips the Moslems darted into the nearest alleys and more Cossacks trotted through the Bab el Mirza, the last comers drawing rein to guard the gate and mock Ayub.

"Baba—old woman! Your tongue wags at both ends, it does. We heard you bellow like a buffalo, and it's ——'s mercy if Arap Muhammad Khan did not hear you, off there in Khiva."

"If the *ataman* doesn't pickle you, tongue and all, we'll make a mute of you."

But the big Zaporogian, who had been slashed across the arm, was good-humored again, and newcomers stopped to gaze at the rows of heads that lined the gateway, until Demid came up with the standard and the three squadrons at a hard trot. He had brought with him the horses turned loose by Khlit's party, and Kirdy climbed into the saddle of the piebald pony.

Sparing no more than a glance at the heads of the Armenians, he gave orders swiftly.

"Ivashko, fall out with fifty firelocks. Close and keep this gate. Let no one out. You"—he pointed out an *essaul*—"and you do likewise at the other gates. Makshim, take your squadron to the market place with the pack animals and hold it in reserve. Take the standard with you. One squadron with me to the castle—the rest clear the streets."

In bunches of twenty the lancers galloped off into the darkness, shouting and spurring their horses at the shadows that fled before them and

Demid swore under his breath. "They bay like dogs. The castle will be closed against us. *Sably vàn*—draw sabers! Trot!"

And in fact they found the one gate of the castle shut and barred. The squadron dismounted, ladders were brought and the Cossacks opened fire with matchlocks while the ladders were set in the dry ditch and warriors started to climb, holding the sabers over their heads to protect them against cuts.

They could not defend themselves against arrows that flicked down from the crenellated battlement and the tall forms of the Cossacks were seen dropping into the ditch. In the moonlight few of the bullets from the matchlocks struck the defenders of the wall, who were protected by helmets and mail.

"Cut—slash!" the warriors roared, crowding around the foot of the ladders, striving for a chance to get on the rungs. Ivan Aglau, the silent, led one band to a new spot and raised up a broad ladder, being the first to run up it.

No arrows struck him, but the men clustered below saw a glow appear on the battlement and an instant later an iron pot was tossed over, on the heads of the Cossacks. From this pot poured forth, smoking and gleaming, molten metal that overwhelmed the assailants as dry leaves are brushed before a torrent.

Others ran back to the ladder, while two *oùchars* dragged forth the dying Ivan Aglau. The iron had dropped through his cap, scarifying skull and breast and his eyes rolled in agony; but this man who had lived with firmly closed lips gave forth no moan when life was leaving him.

"*Stoy!*" Demid's clear voice soared through the tumult. "Halt!"

The warriors, drawing back reluctantly with their dead and wounded, found the Cossacks crowded into the cleared space that extended from the castle to the bazaar, clustered around Demid who was talking swiftly with Shamaki. The old Tatar had come with the warriors into the city and had dogged Demid persistently.

"O my khan," he said eagerly, "there is another way into the *kurgan*. In former days I was a captive in this place."

"What way?" demanded the *ataman*.

"Under the earth. It leads from a garden to cellars where honey and grain are stored against a siege."

"A passage? Have you been through it?"

"Aye, my khan, in other years. Perhaps it is no longer used, but the Turkoman khans are foxes with more than one hole to their burrow."

"Father," spoke up one of the Cossacks, "this Tatar is also a fox. Let us go upon the ladders again."

But Demid shook his head, considering the lined face of Shamaki in the moonlight. He ordered half the warriors to stay before the gate and to burn powder in their matchlocks until he returned. Then, followed by a strong band, he strode beside the squat Tatar through deserted alleys, down into covered runways that smelled of hides and unwashed cloth, through an unguarded gate into a grove of plane trees.

Here the moon was obscured, and they could see nothing of their surroundings. The garden was deserted and Shamaki pushed ahead without hesitation until the branches thinned overhead and they paused at the gleaming surface of a pool, where the white pillars of a kiosk reared among the trees.

"*Shali-mar el khanum*," grunted the Tatar. "The woman's garden. Come!"

He entered the kiosk and disappeared from view, first his body, then his head with its lynx skin cap. Demid, following close on his heels with drawn sword, found that steps led down in one corner of the pleasure house. This stairway turned upon itself until the warriors stood in a dark space, cool and damp from the water of the pool.

"A light!" the *ataman* ordered, and two Cossacks who had provided themselves with bundles of dry rushes fell to striking steel against flint until the sparks caught in strands of twisted hemp. Then the reeds were kindled and Demid saw that they stood in a stone chamber from which a single passageway opened.

Into this the Cossacks filed, those in the rear grasping the belts of the men in front of them, their silver heels clattering on the stones. The passage led down, then up and as nearly as Demid could judge in the direction of the castle, until further progress was barred by an iron gate.

It was a heavy affair, built by artisans of an older day, because the scrolls were worked into the forms of serpents, twining together, and the uprights were spears, and all was deep with rust. After studying it a moment he called back for Ayub and three others.

Four giants swaggered out of the line and ran forward, and Ayub ranged his companions two abreast, himself in the front, a few paces from the

gate. With a shout the four hurled themselves at the barrier—a thousand pounds of bone and muscle meeting iron. The bars bent and the lock snapped and something else cracked.

Ayub's lips twisted savagely, and his left arm swayed limp from the shoulder. The bone in the forearm had been broken.

"Well, you have still your sword hand," muttered his companions as they pressed forward.

The iron gate proved to be the only barrier, for they filed out into an arched chamber filled with heaps of grain and with casks of honey. Shamaki croaked triumphantly, hearing the distant thudding of muskets, and Demid led them up into a tiled hall where flickering candles sent their shadows dancing up and down the alabaster walls. Here he waited until the last man had come up, while Kirdy and some of the *oùchars* took possession of the entrances.

In one of the corridors an armed Turkoman appeared, thrusting arrows into the quiver at his girdle. When he saw the detachment of Cossacks his jaw dropped and he flung up lean arms.

"*Ma'shallah!*"

He fled and when one of the young warriors leveled a pistol at him, Demid struck up the weapon and sprang after the Turkoman as a wolfhound leaps at a stag. They darted up a flight of marble steps to a broad gallery where some forty Moslems were clustered around a closed door.

From out the Turkomans advanced a tall warrior with a silver boss on his shield and a heron's plume in his helmet. He spoke only one swift word to his men, and his eyes changed not at all as he dressed his round shield, crying at the Cossacks—

"Arap Muhammad Khan will take many a head from thee for mine. Is there a dog among ye who will stand against me?"

Then Kirdy saw Demid wield a sword for the first time. When the Don men crowded forward eagerly at the challenge of the Turkoman chief, the *ataman* thrust them back.

"Aside!"

His brows drew down and his gray eyes gleamed. He leaped forward, and his saber whistled down at the Turkoman's shield. In midair it checked and swept sidewise and in—and the Moslem's parry saved his life. In the same instant Demid's blade engaged the other and the hilts locked. The two weapons that had been sweeping circles of silver, now rose quivering

above the heads of the warriors—the Turkoman striving to free his blade while Demid lifted it higher.

The men of either party stood back, their eyes glued on the interlocked swords. Suddenly Demid laughed and sprang back, having measured the strength of his foe. In a fury, the Turkoman chief slashed at his head, but the scimitar dropped from his fingers. Demid's saber had bitten through the side of his throat and grated on the chest bones.

The knees of the Moslem bent and his body curled downward slowly, as if making an unwilling salaam, when Demid's saber lashed out and the chief's head, severed from the spine, struck the tiles of the floor before his body.

Then the young *ataman* hurled himself at the throng of Turkoman warriors and the Cossacks were not slow to follow. Kirdy heard the Moslems chanting—a panting ululation. No one cried out for quarter—they sold their lives dearly, snarling until the last warrior went down with a saber through his throat.

No sooner had the clanging of the steel blades ceased than boots were heard thudding in the lower hall. Some of Demid's warriors had cut their way to the gate in the courtyard wall, and opened it, admitting the arquebusiers who were waiting outside.

The *mirza* in command of the castle lay headless beneath their feet, already shrill cries of despair were going up from the inner corridors, and the Moslems on the outer wall, taken in front and rear, sprang from the battlements or were cut down in groups.

Silence fell upon the castle, and when Demid and Kirdy made their way to one of the towers their heels echoed through deserted halls and up empty stairs. For a while Demid gazed out into the haze of moonlight, listening to what went on in the town beneath them.

Kirdy, too, strained his ears, trying to judge from the confused sounds what was taking place. The Cossack patrols were no longer trotting; they walked their horses and some of the warriors were singing. Pistols flashed at intervals, and ponies rushed fleeing Moslems to earth in an alley or doorway. In the market square torches blazed where Makshim and his hundred stood at ease.

From time to time could be heard the shouted challenge of the guards holding the gates in the city wall, and the mocking answer of Cossack patrols. If any Turkomans still bore arms in Urgench they were within doors, and the city was in the hands of the Cossacks.

Chapter 7
Light of the World

Demid, leaning his bare arms on the battlement, let the light wind cool the sweat on his forehead, while the boy, rejoicing in the nearness of his leader, did not venture to disturb his thoughts with a word. A spear tip had ripped through the flesh on the side of Kirdy's chest and blood dropped steadily on the stones.

The fever of the fighting was still in Kirdy's veins; he wanted to laugh, to seek his horse and ride through the streets with his hand on his hip, to meet his companion *oùchars* and listen to their boasts, to go and hunt for horses—he knew the breed of Turkoman stallions that were fleeter of foot than the Cossack ponies.

He was very thirsty and above all he wanted to empty many cups of wine, to take the fever out of his veins. Finally he dared to speak, in the Tatar that Demid understood.

"There is light in the east, O my khan, but the caller-to-prayer will not cry from these towers."

"In the east there is light," repeated the *ataman* slowly. "But what light to guide us, O youth?"

Kirdy was surprised that Demid should be moody when the long march across the desert had ended and they were masters of a rich city.

"Once," went on the *ataman*, "a jackal, being weary and belly-drawn with hunger, entered the den of a tiger. His hunger he satisfied on the bones of a sheep slain by the tiger, and his weariness by sleep. Was he master of the tiger's lair?"

"Nay," responded the boy.

When Demid said nothing more, he pondered the words of his leader and understood that the *ataman* could have little joy in the taking of Urgench. He had won success; his responsibility was the greater. He was pondering the future, just as he was peering into the silvery haze, to learn what his men must face. And Kirdy, thinking of these things, felt that he would never live to be a leader like Khlit or Demid.

"Father," he said shyly, "it is in my mind that a spy has followed us from Moscow."

Demid turned so that he could look into the boy's eyes but asked no question.

"It is Shamaki, the Tatar," went on Kirdy. "He says that he was once a slave of the Turkoman khans, yet he is a Moslem and they do not hold

their fellows as slaves. He says he is a slave of the Muscovite khan, but he handles an eagle like a chief. And when you were giving orders to attack the gate he crept close to hear what was said."

"Did Khlit call Shamaki a spy?"

"Nay, father. That is no more than my thought."

"Then do not speak it. It was Khlit who brought Shamaki from the *tabor* to Urgench."

Bending his head in assent, the boy wondered why Khlit had spoken so often with the Tatar, and why, if Shamaki were the Wolf's friend, Demid trusted the Tatar—for no other reason than that.

The gray eyes of the *ataman* seemed to read his thoughts. "Many times," observed he, "you will make friends who will stand at your side when weapons are drawn; and some who will dismount and put you upon their saddles if you are wounded in battle. But there are few who can read men's souls. When they speak men listen with bowed heads. Khlit is such a one."

"How?"

A smile touched Demid's wide, thin lips. "How? That is hard to say, little brother. Perhaps, looking into a warrior's eyes he can see treachery or faith. He praises no one—his words are hard; yet it is well known that he has never broken faith, nor turned aside from peril. I have seen men go to sit by him when he slept."

Kirdy lifted his head with an answering smile, because the *ataman* had called him little brother and not fledgling. He was proud that Demid should speak to him as to an older warrior, and if at that moment the chieftain had asked Kirdy to leap from the tower to the stones of the courtyard a hundred feet below he would have done so.

"Put cobwebs on that cut in your side," Demid added, "and put powder in a cup of spirits—quaff it off and the wound will not trouble you. Come, the brothers are knocking at that door."

They found a score of Cossacks led by Ivashko and Dog-Face, at work with sledge hammers and iron bars on the heavy door before which the Moslem *mirza* had been cut down. The warriors had ransacked all the castle and had piled heaps of shimmering silk and fine ivory and some gold plate in the gallery; but they had not been able to find any other entrance into the chambers behind the portal.

When Demid came up the work went on briskly and the massive teak soon splintered. They kicked it apart and strode inside. A light gate of

carved sandalwood that stood midway down the hall was smashed in by the sledges and someone cried out—

"The women's quarters!"

Guided by flaring torches—for the corridors were still dark—they entered a wide room opening through arched window niches upon a balcony facing the east. Here a fountain cooled the air with its spray, and great cushions rested upon the rugs by the walls.

In one corner knelt a group of shivering eunuchs in high, black velvet hats and long robes. Paying no attention to these, the Cossacks stared at the mistress of the harem.

She was veiled—an almost transparent white cloth hung from pearl clasps over her ears—but brown eyes were eloquent of anger. A band of emeralds, cut square, sparkled on her forehead. A breath of air, coming through the arches, stirred the black silk cloak she had drawn close to her shoulders, and Kirdy was aware of an elusive scent, resembling crushed rose leaves.

Her black hair, escaping from the ceinture of emeralds, fell down her back in long waves. Although she was straight as a willow on tiny slippered feet, the curve of arm and cheek was a thing to marvel at. Quite evidently she was unafraid and angry.

"*Alacha*—slayers—dogs—offspring of the devil! Nay, ye are ghosts—living dead men. When Arap Muhammad Khan learns that his threshold has been crossed, ye will beg to die."

The swift words in Turkish were understood by Demid. "And thou, O *khanum*—what is thy name?"

"Nur-ed-din, O captain of thieves."

Stepping forward he pulled the veil from its clasps, and Kirdy who had never seen a Moslem woman unveiled, was astonished at the transparent skin, the tiny, crimson mouth and the wide, kohl darkened eves.

"Art thou slave or wife, Nur-ed-din?"

"Slave, as thou wilt be!"

"Nay," the young *ataman* laughed. "Does he cherish thee so little that he leaves thee to beguile the castle guards?"

The eyes of Nur-ed-din sparkled dangerously and for once she did not answer.

"Or art thou the treasure of Urgench, so greatly to be cherished that Arap Muhammad Khan cages thee in his castle when he rides afield with his horde?"

This time he was answered. The eyes of the Moslem slave closed and opened again and the glare was gone from their tawny depths. Softly they gleamed, and words dripped like honey from her supple lips. "Ai-a! Wisdom is thine, O Commander of Swords, O Lion of the Desert." She swayed nearer and laid a tiny hand on his forearm. "Am I not Nur-ed-din, Light of the World? Send thy men from the room, O *mirza*. It is the law of Islam that a woman's face shall not be seen by other eyes than her master's."

The Cossacks who understood the slave looked expectantly at their leader, to learn whether Demid wanted them to go away so that he could play with this beautiful Persian, or whether he would end the matter by striking her down with the sword.

"Then," Demid said thoughtfully, "Arap Muhammad Khan hath taken hence the treasure of Urgench—the emeralds?"

"Save for these!" She stripped the bracelets from her arms and the circlet from her forehead and laid them on the carpet at his feet. With a sharp cry she clapped her hands and women attendants came out of corners and niches, to disappear into an inner room and return with inlaid sandalwood boxes. Submissively Nur-ed-din placed these before Demid, opening each one to reveal its contents of jade bangles, ropes of pearls, and ornaments of coral and silver.

Demid signed for Ivashko to take them up, and Nur-ed-din straightened, standing before him as obediently as a girl who has had her whipping.

"These were thine, Light of the World," observed the *ataman*. "Is there no more?"

"Nay, by Allah and the Ninety-and-Nine holy names! By my mother's grave, there is no more."

Dog-Face and some of the other Cossacks muttered at this, for they had heard the tale of the treasure guarded in the castle of Urgench.

"*B'ilmaïda*," cried Demid, his gray eyes bleak. "Brothers, seize the eunuchs. Burn the soles of their feet in braziers. Before their feet are black they will tell where Arap Muhammad Khan keeps his plunder."

The creatures in the long robes who huddled in the corner threw themselves on the tiles, wailing. But not one of them begged for mercy.

Demid, however, had been watching Nur-ed-din, and had seen her lips twist in helpless rage for a fleeting second. "Stop!" he commanded the Cossacks who were advancing gleefully on the attendants. "Those yonder would lie to you. But the face of this slave woman does not lie. There is more to be found, and to my thinking within these rooms."

Nor did he look again at the woman who watched silently while the warriors went about their work of destruction, guided now by the first flame of day in the east. With hammer, ax and iron bar they smashed the tiles on the floors, the fretted stonework of the walls, and—going through the corridors—even the columns that held up the roof.

It was Ivashko who sank the head of a bar through the dried clay of the wall above Nur-ed-din's couch, and his shout brought up warriors with hammers who laid bare a compartment in the wall. They pulled out ivory caskets and blocks of carved jade, milky-green in color or white with red veins—jade that held the eyes like crystal, and was soft as wax to the touch of fingers—jade that would have fetched a prince's ransom for each piece in the markets of Cathay.

Among the precious stones that the caskets yielded up were matched emeralds of a size that made the Cossacks stare and shake their heads. Two of them were as large as a man's thumb, doubled.

"Nay, whoever saw the like!" muttered Dog-Face. "Here are the eyes of Arap Muhammad. Only look at the wench!"

And they who turned at his word saw that the eyes of Nur-ed-din glowed with a tawny light that was not gold or green but like the gleam of a panther's eyes when danger is at hand.

Chapter 8
The Pigeon

Light of the World did not fasten the veil again above her ears although it was broad day. Moving quietly amid the wreckage of her chambers, she seemed to be stunned by misfortune and heedless of what befell.

No *muezzin* dared to cry the summons to prayer. From the arches of the gallery she looked down on bodies lying in courtyard and alley—huddles of striped cloth, heaps from which bare legs and disordered turbans emerged. Hundreds of Turkomans had been slain in the streets during the night and the Cossacks had tossed their weapons into piles.

But no ululation of lament was to be heard. The doors of house walls were closed and within them ten thousand Moslems, men, women and children, awaited with the savage resignation of their race whatever fate would hold in store. Resistance had ceased, because the Turk, once defeated, is abject until the tables are turned. The fronts of the rug sellers' and the goldsmiths' stalls were open and the long coats and the red-topped *kalpaks* of the Christian warriors were to be seen passing into the shops and coming out laden with plunder.

No more than a hundred Cossacks kept the saddle, but this hundred, riding through the streets, mocked at the concealed ten thousand, calling on them in vain to come forth with weapons.

Light of the World was not a Turk but a Persian—mistress of wiles and beguilement, child of passion—one of the favorite slaves of mighty Arap Muhammad Khan, who trusted her so fully that he left her to watch over the treasure, the fruits of years of plundering, the earnings of his sword. Arap Muhammad Khan had taken all his six sons to Khiva, and his *mirzas* and begs to watch over them, to be very sure that they did not set about raising hordes of their own and slaying him.

To have taken his treasure with him to the lower river would have been to tempt his chiefs and his sons too greatly. And then, too, if he had been called upon to mount the saddle of war and strike into the desert to punish or to pillage the roving Tatar khans or the cities of the Persians, he would have had no place to leave his treasure.

And the riches hidden in the ivory caskets were as his sword-arm to Arap Muhammad Khan, Lion of Islam, the Glory and Protection of the Faithful, the Jewel in the Shield of Allah and many other things.

The fortress of Urgench had never been taken by the foes of the Turkoman khans. Moreover the khan had left Nur-ed-din to guard his hoard and he trusted her; the *mirza* in command he trusted less—he of the heron feather—but Arap Muhammad Khan held the only son of the *mirza* hostage in his own tent.

All these matters passed through the agile mind of Nur-ed-din as she moved about the fountain room, like a woman bereft of all thought, taking up a wooden henna pencil, and making marks on a bit of rice paper no larger than her tinted thumb-nail.

She made red scrolls and curlicues that looked aimless but were Turkish words. Tossing away the pointed stick, she crumpled the scrap of paper in her small fist and groaned.

Dog-Face and Kirdy and a Cossack who had been nicknamed Witless had lingered to look out on the streets. Feeling thirsty, Dog-Face thrust his head into the fountain and drank. His eye lighting on a discarded hammer, he smashed the delicate marble figure of the fountain, and when Nur-ed-din groaned, he stared at her, at first savagely, then admiringly. Demid and the leaders had gone off with the treasure, and Dog-Face was minded to amuse himself. Witless was casting his lariat at the heads of the eunuchs, chuckling when their enormous, high hats fell off.

"Can you speak with this tiger-eyed lass, Kirdy?" he asked. "Good! Then bid her wait on me, *oùchar*. Bid her to bring wine at once."

Nur-ed-din spoke to a woman, and the wine was brought in generous jugs. Dog-Face sniffed at it tentatively.

"Well, the little father said we were not to guzzle while we were on the march. Devil take me, we've been on the *dorogou*, on the road for two months." He poured a little expertly into the palm of a callused hand and tried it. "May the dogs bite me if it isn't wine of Shiraz. It's against the law of these accursed Moslems to drink such—the book of their prophet forbids them to take a drop of it. And the sons of jackals pour out a drop from a jug and pour the rest down their gullets saying, by ——, they are not drinking a drop but a jug."

Witless came over, drawing his cup out of his girdle bag and wiping his mustaches. They drank each other's health, and other toasts until the jar was empty to the dregs. Then, when Dog-Face called for more, Nur-ed-din spoke swiftly.

"So she will pay us to turn her loose!" muttered the short Cossack, when Kirdy translated. "Well, let's see what she has hidden away first."

Although she was venturing from the women's quarters, Light of the World did not put on her veil. She led the three Cossacks down to a small court shaded by pomegranate trees and lined with wicker cages and dove cotes.

At her approach the pigeons fluttered up and circled around her head, and Kirdy saw that they knew her. Going to one of the wicker cages she opened the narrow door and thrust in her arm while Dog-Face and his mate came closer to stare curiously.

Suddenly drawing out her hand she tossed a splendid blue pigeon into the air. It darted above the trees, circled once, and shot away to the south.

And as Kirdy watched it, he cried out. "That is a messenger pigeon, sir brothers!"

"A dove is not a hawk," growled Dog-Face. "What message can it give?"

At the court of the Moghul Kirdy had seen strong-winged pigeons bred in one place and then carried many days' ride in such wicker cages, and he knew that tiny bits of paper were put into silver tubes on the claws of the birds, so that when they flew back to their home the written message went with them.

The blue pigeon had darted away toward Khiva and he remembered now that Nur-ed-din had written on paper with a henna pencil.

When he explained this to Dog-Face the Cossack scratched his head. "What harm, *oùchar*? Arap Muhammad Khan will know in any case that his nest has been shaken down."

"Nay, the harm is this. Khiva lies three days' ride to the south. We have guarded the gates and the wall. Some Turkomans have escaped on foot, no doubt. But three or four days must pass before they could reach the khan. This bird will come to earth at Khiva before the sun goes down this day."

The veteran Cossack was silent a moment; then he groaned and beat clenched fists against his head. "Allah! Then we have but four days and not seven before the Turkomans ride up."

Kirdy grasped the woman's wrist, and the beat of her pulse was steady under his fingers.

"Did the pigeon carry thy message, O light-of-tongue?"

Her shrill laugh taunted him. "Nay, call it back and learn for thyself, O slow-of-wit!"

For a while Kirdy watched the sky, hoping vainly that the pigeon might circle back to the castle. Dog-Face bowed his head in thought, his gnarled hands gripped in the breast of his coat.

"Where is the treasure the woman promised us?" asked Witless, who had been wandering around the court.

"Come!" cried Dog-Face harshly, catching him by the sleeve. "The brothers did not name me well. They should have given me your name. We must go and beat the forehead before the little father."

"But father Demid has no treasure for us."

Dog-Face stared at the stupid warrior grimly. "He will have presents for us, no doubt of that. If he does not sharpen a stake he will give us ropes and horses to pull our bones loose. Allah! Nay, do not come with us, Kirdy. This was none of your doing—watch that she-djinn, so that she makes no more enchantment."

Nur-ed-din saw him point at her and guessed at what he had said. When the older warriors stamped out of the courtyard with the swaying gait of riders more at home in the saddle than on the earth, she came close to Kirdy and smiled up at him.

"*Tamen shad*! So it is thy task to take the life of Nur-ed-din?"

For the youth had drawn the heavy curved blade given him by Khlit, and his lips and eyes were resolute.

"Is there faith in thee, O warrior of two swords?"

"Aye," he muttered, stepping back, "Cossack faith, which binds brother to brother, and casts out the traitor and the coward. That is our faith."

"Surely thou art the son of a chief. Grant to Nur-ed-din a moment for prayer and the last ablution, required by the faithful of Islam."

"A moment—aye."

The woman glanced at the courtyard wall where no water jar or even sand was to be found. Obediently she knelt and went through the motions of washing her hands and head—even drawing off her slippers to run her fingers over the slim white feet.

The sunlight, striking through the trees on her arms, dazzled him as he followed the swift and supple movements. The growing warmth made him conscious of the rose scent in the woman's mass of dark hair. When her arms fell to her sides and she straightened on her knees the sword trembled in his hand.

"Strike swiftly, O chief's son," she whispered. "Nay, shall I close my eyes—so?"

Not without a purpose had Nur-ed-din discarded her veil, and now the long lashes fell on silken cheeks. The black robe had dropped from her shoulders and under the tight velvet vest her breast swelled and sank. Her lips drooped pitifully.

Kirdy raised the sword that seemed heavy as an iron sledge. Then he thought that if he closed his eyes it would be easier to strike the steel into her. But with his eyes shut he could not use the point of his sword, and the edge might maim instead of killing her—

Through long lashes the eyes of Nur-ed-din fastened to his tense face, and now she held her breath, white teeth sunk in a crimson lip.

"Nay," he cried hoarsely, "I have never slain a woman. I—"

Unsteadily, he sheathed his sword and led her into the castle, seeking until he found a tower room that had a door with a lock and a key in the lock. Thrusting her within, he turned the key and put it in his girdle, and as he strode away, angry with himself, he heard Nur-ed-din weeping, whimpering softly like a child that has been harshly used.

Without heeding the growing stiffness in his side, Kirdy hastened to the courtyard and the main gate where the Cossacks on guard could tell him

nothing of Demid except that the *ataman* was in the saddle. Here he found Dog-Face and Witless awaiting the return of their leader and fortifying themselves with a wine jar against the hour of confession.

"The little father will be wild," they cried. "Eh, it will go bad with us. We were set as a guard over that houri and she treated us as a fox treats dogs."

They were fast becoming maudlin, and might fall asleep any moment. They had been without sleep for forty-two hours as had Kirdy himself and he could not remember when Demid had been in his blankets last. So Kirdy resolved to find the *ataman* and tell him of the message Nur-ed-din had sent.

He asked for Khlit, and was told that the old Cossack had raided the castle stable and led out three of the khan's best horses. Arabs crossed with the hardy Turkoman stock—desert beasts, fit for a prince! He had been seen at dawn riding out of the southern gate with Shamaki.

Wandering downhill, Kirdy entered the widest street that ran through the bazaar quarter, and halted at sight of an imposing entourage moving toward him. Four negroes trudged under the burden of an open litter, over which two Moslem slaves held a splendid canopy fringed with peacock plumes. Behind it, their long skirts trailing in the dust, followed two palace eunuchs bearing a mighty sword.

In the litter on cloth-of-silver pillows reclined Ayub, and Kirdy, in spite of his anxiety, grinned at the sight.

"What do you say?" growled the big Zaporogian when the boy hastened to tell him of the carrier pigeon and the word that must have gone to Arap Muhammad Khan. "Well, so much the better. Let the khan come—we will cut him open like a hare. His fine horses won't leap these walls."

More than one cup had Ayub kissed that morning, but in reality he was quite indifferent to the danger from the horde at Khiva, nor did he pause to consider that there were hundreds of armed Moslems within Urgench as well as without.

"Kirdy, my lad," he said gravely, "they who take up the sword will perish by the sword."

He did consent to go in search of the *ataman* but he would not part with his miniature court. Sighting two scowling Usbeks in a gateway, he impressed them as cup-bearers and sent the eunuchs for jars of red wine for them to carry. This accomplished, it suited his pleasure to stop every Moslem he met and force him to drink a cup. Ayub was suffering a bit

from his arm, which had been set and bound roughly in splints, but he was bent on enjoying himself.

"Only listen!" He halted his bearers at the steps of a mosque and nudged Kirdy. "May the dogs bite me if the sir brothers aren't dancing in there. 'Ahoun!" He shouted at his followers to enter the mosque and they did so with an ill grace but with sufficient respect for the brace of long pistols that the Cossack had placed beside him on the litter, ready primed.

The pillared outer court was empty but in the central chamber a fire had been kindled from the leaves of the reader's Koran, and the carved wooden stand that held it. Around this fire were dancing men who moved clumsily enough until spurred on by a snap of a long Cossack riding whip. They were the Moslem imams or elders, and they were being taught to dance the *kosaka*.

"Hi, *kunaks*," shouted Ayub, well pleased. "Lay on with the whips! Wait, give the old gamesters a chance to wet down their gullets."

"It's Ayub, the Zaporogian," the warriors exclaimed, and bade the one who held a balalaika cease playing. The tired elders rolled their eyes but Kirdy did not think they were loath to empty the cups that the Usbeks passed around to them.

"We won't drink with the prophet's dogs!" cried the warriors. "But we'll drink to Ayub and Kirdy. Health to you, *kunaks*!"

They seized the jars and took long gulps, and, forgetting their victims, fell to discussing the treasure that had been found in the castle, and to relating their deeds in the assault while Kirdy paced by the entrance restlessly, looking at the towering marble walls, the mosaic dome, and the gold lettering that ran around the base of the dome—at the artistry and splendor of Islam which the other warriors heeded as little as the smoke-blackened wool of a Tatar tent.

"God knows where the *ataman* is," an *essaul* assured him, "but I saw Makshim in the *hammam*."

"In the bath?" Ayub laughed. "That will be worth seeing. Come, ye tigers of Urgench—to the *hammam*!"

Here in a building not less splendid than the mosque, they searched through vacant, tiled chambers, until the air grew suddenly warmer and they came upon the shirt of the *kuren ataman* hung up to dry, and a moment later Makshim himself seated on a stone bench in a marble room where a tank of warm water gleamed under a lofty dome of colored glass.

The squadron leader was stripped except for a single towel and he held his sword across his knees. Behind him a Cossack warrior leaned on a lance, looking disgusted with the proceedings.

A black slave was shaving the *kuren ataman*, while another washed his feet in an alabaster basin. Both were trembling, and Kirdy saw under the clear water of the tank the body of a third.

When they had exchanged greetings, Ayub asked how Makshim liked the bath—whether it had been painful or pleasant.

"Both, Ayub. I have not their speech, so I made signs that they should do with me as with the Turkish princes who come to this place. These black dogs took off my clothes and one washed my shirt, which was all very well. They poured jars of hot and cold water over me, and then the one that lies down there took my arms and legs and cracked the joints. Hai-a—I swore at him but he did not understand. He stretched me out on the marble and, by the saints, he began to dance on me with his bare feet. The jackal, here, pushed him into the pool with a spear. But for the rest, 'tis pleasant enough."

"Hard to believe!" Ayub shook his head in wonderment. "That the dogs of Moslems wash their skins in a place finer than the church of Saint Vasili the Blessed. That their princes permit these slaves to stamp on them. But put on your shirt, Makshim. A plunge in a foaming river is a bath good enough even for the *ataman* of all the Cossacks—and you ought to go and find Demid. Kirdy has some news for him."

"A carrier pigeon was tossed up from the castle and flew south at dawn!" cried the young warrior.

Makshim's brows drew down and he gripped his sword tightly. "Then we have not a day to waste!" He shrugged powerful shoulders and the familiar, mocking smile touched his lips. "Eh, fledgling, my counsel was best, after all. We are trapped in Urgench."

He pointed his sword tip at the black body under the green water. "Soon we shall be no more than *that*. Why is it so? Nay, the Donskoi are reveling—they have not their fill of spoil—and two days must pass before they are ready for the road, or the horses are fit to go into the desert."

"*Yei Bogu*," grunted the big Zaporogian, "by —— the brothers will not flee from any khan."

Makshim merely raised his dark brows, and began to hum a Polish love song under his breath.

From the bath Kirdy ran to the castle, the blood throbbing in his temples from weariness. The Cossacks on guard told him that Demid had just come in and had thrown himself down to sleep at once. Kirdy pushed past them and found the young *ataman* stretched out in his shirtsleeves on a tiger skin under a round window where a breath of air relieved the intolerable heat between walls.

Demid opened his eyes when the boy knelt beside him, and listened without change of expression while Kirdy poured out the story of the pigeon.

"No blame to you," he said at last. "The other two had orders to guard the woman."

"Nay, they knew not that carrier pigeons could bear a message from the castle."

Locking his hands beneath his head, Demid smiled and his gray eyes were friendly. "And did they know the trickery that lies in a woman's tongue? Did you? What now?"

"Little father, I am troubled. The *kuren ataman*, Makshim, said that two days must pass before the Cossacks and their horses can take the road. We will be caught in Urgench, and the Moslems within the walls will rise against us—"

Demid ceased smiling and looked at the boy gravely. "Some day, little brother, you will be the leader, not of a squadron but of a horde. You are fearless and your thoughts go out to the dangers that lie ahead. But before that day comes you will see many things. Now, sleep!"

He turned on his side, adding: "Khlit is in command of the outposts; his quarters are in the red stone house nearest the bazaar gate. Ivashka watches the treasure—go there."

With the last word he was breathing deeply again, and Kirdy felt that his trouble had been lightened. Moving away quietly he walked through the torrid glare of the street to the small house where he saw some fine black ponies tethered and Ivashko with several others sitting smoking.

By then his feet lagged and his head drooped. He stretched himself out on his *svitza* and fell asleep almost at once.

It did not seem any time before someone came and pulled the shirt from his shoulder to look at his wound. He was conscious of an odor of burning oil from the lantern beside him and of leather and sweat-soaked sheepskins. He looked up into the deep-set eyes of the Wolf.

Other hands washed the hardened blood from his side and bound the torn flesh with mud, held in place by a turban cloth. The touch of the mud cooled his veins and he became drowsy again, though he was aware that two men were squatting over the lantern.

"O father of battles," a voice began in Tatar gutturals, "I have looked upon the millet seeds again and they are red—red."

Kirdy peered over his shoulder and recognized the lined face of Shamaki, ruddy in the glow from the oil lamp.

"Some have died but it is written that the graves of many lie not far from here," the voice went on. "It is time that your servant goes to his own place."

"You have been paid," Khlit's growl made answer.

The twain were silent and Kirdy closed his eyes. The sleep that had come upon him was the first in fifty hours and it held him like iron fetters.

"Listen to me, O *bahadur*," the voice of Shamaki began again, persuasively, "do not scorn the shadow snakes in a swamp. Take your men and go. Y'allah! Was your servant not once a khan? It is true. Some honor I had—my herds grazed on the Jaick. The Turkomans came—may dogs litter on their graves—they took my herds and my children they slew with the sword. I was their slave.

"In time I went north and west to the land of the Aga Padishah, of the White Emperor of the Muscovites, knowing well that he had more spears to his command than Arap Muhammad Khan. Many times I told him of the jewels in Urgench. He listened and he asked tidings of the caravan trade. What do I know of merchants—I who have hunted with eagles in the *Ak-Tagh*?"

The old Tatar paused as if gathering to himself the memories of the past.

"To everything there is an end. You spoke to me in a *serai* of the City of the White Walls, and it was agreed between us that if you could enter the presence of the White Emperor, I would add my word to yours. So you gained the freedom of these five hundred—and I came likewise, being weary of the court of the emperor. Ai-a, I have seen the Turkomans rub their beards in the dust. I have spoken."

There was a jangling of chains, a scraping, and ruffling of feathers, a brief word from Khlit, and Shamaki passed out of the room taking with him the great golden eagle.

Drowsily Kirdy opened his eyes and beheld Khlit occupied with a strange task. He was filling two saddlebags with millet, which he poured in a cupful at a time. And with each cup he took up a precious stone from the caskets that lay open under the lantern. Now the yellow light gleamed on the shadowy surface of jade, now it sparkled fiercely on a many-faced diamond, or lurked in the depths of the great emeralds.

When the bags were filled, Khlit laced them up and strapped them together. Then he blew out the light and the boy sank again into the coma of exhaustion.

Gray dawn was stealing through the round window and the room was empty when he sat up, wide awake. Men were talking in the courtyard and he heard the stamping of hoofs and snorting of restive horses.

He was very hungry and the first thing he did was to fill a bowl with gruel from the pot that had been cooked by the warriors on guard. Then he broke away the dried mud from his side and found that the bleeding had stopped. At first he listened idly to the talk of Ivashko and the Cossacks, then he became curious and saw that they had placed the articles taken from the castle in packs and the packs were being roped on Turkoman ponies.

"Eh," Ivashko was saying, "at the council of the squadron leaders in the afternoon Demid told them. It was like a flea in the ear. All night they searched for their men and horses."

"It is time," someone grumbled. "Three days have passed since the castle was taken."

"How, three days?" demanded Kirdy, looking up from his bowl. "It is not yet two."

Ivashko laughed. "Harken to the *oùchar*! He has slept for ten watches. The first night I dressed his wound, and the second Khlit and Shamaki woke him up, but he has made up for lost time."

Kirdy sprang up, and caught the *essaul*'s arm. "Is this the third day?"

"Aye, and Arap Muhammad Khan will be here before it is past. The *ataman* says a pigeon was loosed from the castle with a message for Khiva."

"And the Cossacks—"

"Take the road within the hour."

Running into the street Kirdy saw that the squadrons were forming in the cleared space that stretched down to the bazaar; wagons, loaded

with grain and piled high with plunder, were being drawn into line by Dog-Face and Witless who were quite sober and intent on the work in hand—certainly they had not been planted on stakes by the *ataman*, or drawn by horses.

Where, two days ago, all had been drunken disorder, a common purpose now reigned. The *kuren atamans* were taking position at the head of their detachments, and one of Makshim's lancers had raised the standard of the white falcon. Dog-Face, catching sight of the boy, called out cheerfully:

"Time to take the road, lad. *Nà kòn*—the order has been given. Arap Muhammad Khan must be drawing near by now and we will give him a taste of Cossack steel."

From the flat roofs and mat-covered alleys of the bazaar dense curls of smoke were rising into the morning mist, and, struck by a sudden fear, Kirdy looked back at the castle. A red tongue of flame licked out of the gallery where Nur-ed-din's quarters had been. The Cossacks had fired both the castle and the bazaar.

Striding back into the house, the boy caught up his saddle and sought out the piebald pony in Khlit's string of captured Arabs. Jerking the girth savagely he cantered into the courtyard of the khan's dwelling and dismounted. The Cossacks had withdrawn from the place and smoke was thickening in the mist overhead. In a tower room Kirdy had locked Nur-ed-din and if no one had freed the woman she would be burned to death.

It would be a simple matter to leave her where she was, but Kirdy felt as if her dark eyes were fixed upon him, and her lips were praying to him. He could not ride away and leave a woman to be burned.

Threading his way through the corridors, he felt his way up through the stinging smoke in the garden tower and came to the door of Nur-ed-din's prison. He could hear nothing except the snapping of flames below him, but, pushing open the door he saw the slave of Arap Muhammad Khan standing facing him, her eyes wide with hope that faded as soon as she recognized the young Cossack. She was veiled and she followed obediently when he took her by the hand and led her down the dark stair into the clearer air of the courtyard.

He could feel the pulse throbbing in her fingers, but his fingers did not tremble. The witchery of her beauty cast no spell over him and he looked upon her only as a Moslem slave, sullen with anger. Then he dropped her hand as if it had been a nettle.

Sitting a gray Arab stallion beside his pony, Khlit was looking at him grimly, half shrouded by the drifting smoke.

"Eh, you puppy," the old Cossack growled, "what good is there in you? First you sleep like a peasant for two days; then you sneak off with a woman. What horses or weapons have you taken in Urgench? None."

Kirdy hung his head, not justifying himself with words because he understood that his grandsire was very angry, or amused at him, and Khlit, bending down, recognized Nur-ed-din with a grunt.

"Is it clear to you, Kirdy," he observed after a moment, "that it is easier to play with serpents than to meddle with such beauties as this?"

"Aye, Khlit."

"Then give Nur-ed-din this gift."

A tiny roll of paper fell into Kirdy's hand, and he started. Spreading it out eagerly, he stared at the square of rice paper no larger than his thumbnail, and at the scrolls and curlicues that were Turkish words written with a henna pencil. A gasp from Nur-ed-din showed that she had recognized her missive, sent on the carrier pigeon.

"How"—he cried and fell silent, because Khlit did not love useless questioning. After a moment he handed the paper to Nur-ed-din and said slowly: "Was it the golden eagle of Shamaki that brought down the pigeon, when you, Khlit, and the Tatar were on outpost, that morning? Then you must have been to the south of Urgench."

"Aye, the golden eagle. It was a fine sight."

Kirdy reflected. Khlit must have sighted the pigeon heading south in the clear sky of early sunrise—the eyes of the old Cossack were keener than he chose to admit—and he would have suspected that a message had been sent in this fashion from the town. So Shamaki had loosed the eagle. When they rode back to the Cossack lines Dog-Face had told them about the trick played by Nur-ed-din.

"You did well," Khlit conceded, "to take her from the fire, for the slave does not lack courage. We were well served by thee," he added to the woman, "because the Cossack brothers had need of a spur. It is our nature, O Light of the World, to revel overmuch when we have come in from the road. Were it not for thy missive, the warriors would still be frolicking in Urgench, and so—farewell to thee."

Nur-ed-din threw the crumpled paper on the ground and spat at them. Tearing at her hair, she cried shrilly—anger drawing from her the lamentation that fear had not inspired. And the roar of flames behind her accompanied her cries.

But Kirdy was in the saddle of the piebald pony, riding like one possessed down the column to take his place by the standard. He was clear of blame, and he had made a raid across the border. No longer would the warriors call him *oùchar*. He was a Cossack.

Drawing rein sharply he made his pony rear and swerve into position between Ayub and the new standard-bearer. He thrust his *kalpak* well back on his shaven head and, putting his left hand on his hip—wound or no wound—joined in the song that began as the first squadron started forward—

Shall we sit idle?
Follow Death's dance!
Pick up your bridle,
Saddle and lance—
Brothers, advance!

Chapter 9
Demid Turns North

Where a city is, there are no wolves; where peace exists, no Turkomans are to be found.

Proverb of the Trans-Caspia

The column of smoke that hung over Urgench became smaller and smaller. Twenty miles distant, it could still be seen. And the first night a red eye of fire glowed under the smoke, following the Don Cossacks in their flight northward over the gray breast of the dry lands. At noon they had halted, to sleep under their *svitzas* propped up on the lances. When the sun grew red at the horizon's edge they resumed their march, changing saddles to the rangy Turkoman ponies, pushing these hardy beasts through the night.

At sunrise the column halted without a command being given and every rider eased himself in the saddle to gaze attentively into the south.

Even the most experienced among them—they whose eyes were the keenest—could detect no sign of pursuit. Certain that the back trail was clear for ten miles at least, they looked to the north and the youngest warriors shouted in amazement.

By now they should have been close to a line of high bluffs. Demid had marked the position of this ridge in his mind as a possible refuge on the return journey and had headed toward the only pass that would admit wagons through the bluffs.

Nothing was to be seen of the heights. Instead, lines of black Turkoman tents took shape on the horizon. Among the tents were dark herds of horses, and here and there strings of laden camels could be seen moving—caravans bound across the desert.

The void of the plain had been peopled with a multitude, silent and threatening. Strangely enough, the men of this encampment did not look toward the Cossacks, nor did the caravans cease from aimless wandering among the black tents.

"Arap Muhammad Khan has camped in our path!" cried one of the Donskoi. "That is the Turkoman horde!"

Shading his eyes with his good hand—his broken arm was strapped to his side—Ayub the Zaporogian shook his head. "'Nay, it is otherwise. When did Turkomans let laden camels pass, without taking their pick of the spoil? When did merchant caravans seek the black tents—or goats run into a Tiger's lair? Yonder is witchcraft at work."

In fact as the sun gained strength, the mirage faded, disclosing the purple buttes for which they had been looking. On their way to Urgench the Cossacks had seen more than once the domes and minarets of great cities lying near at hand—until the visions faded like this one. It was palpable magic, they thought—Moslem trickery, intended to lead them astray. But what was the meaning of the encampment of the black tents?

"'Tis an omen," hazarded the one who had first cried out, seeking to justify himself.

"Then the omen is a good one," retorted Ayub. "And why is that, sir brothers? First the way was barred to us, and peril, like an eagle, hovered over us. Now the way lies open—we have water in casks on the camels, and grain and good *kuniaki*, war ponies. Urgench was a rich city and we have its treasure here in these six carts. May the devil clip the ears of him that says otherwise!"

The scalp locked heads of the listening Cossacks nodded agreement, and word was passed from squadron to squadron that the magic encampment had been an omen and a good one. Meanwhile—for Demid had called a halt to allow the men to eat a little and the horses to roll—the warriors crowded around the six carts and fell to speculating as to the value of the treasure. Some felt of the burlap rolls that contained fine silks and damasks, others told of the many gold cups, and chains and ornaments they had seen packed into the wolf skin sacks. No silver had been taken, owing to its greater weight.

Ayub pointed out a chest bound with tarred ropes and covered with horse cloths on the top of the leading wagon.

"This chest, sir brothers, is worth more than all the rest. Within it are the precious stones of Arap Muhammad Khan, the pearls and the emeralds and the green jadestone that the Cathayans covet."

"But, noble sirs," ventured Witless who had been cogitating, "is the treasure enough? Will it buy back our lives from the Muscovite tsar?"

"May the dogs bite you!" cried the young Cossack. "Can't you understand what is outside your own belt? The tsar, Boris Godunov, swore to give us life if we brought him the treasure of Urgench. It is here, and if we give it to him, he must keep his word."

"*Allah birdui*," murmured Witless, who was accustomed to be mocked whenever he spoke. "God gives! Only this was my thought, my brothers: if our father Demid had said, 'I will set you free,' that would be the end of the matter. If Khlit, who was *koshevoi* of the Cossacks, had made a promise, no one could doubt the promise would be kept. But this Muscovite prince is a horse of another hide. God alone knows whether he will keep an oath."

"That is well said, Witless!" cried Dog-Face, who was the brother-in-arms of the stupid Cossack. "Is not Boris Godunov a merchant? And is it not well known, sir brothers, that a merchant thinks only of profit and not of honor at all?"

"But he swore the oath before all the lords of Muscovy."

"Well, that is true. And yet, devil take him, he murdered a fledgling boy so that the path to his throne should be clear."

The warriors were troubled by these words and the hungriest ceased eating to turn to Makshim, who had just come up from the rear. The hawk-faced squadron leader was ready of tongue and they looked to him to settle the question.

"Hai, it is clear enough," he said, throwing one leg over his saddle horn. "The tsar will keep his oath if it pleases him, not otherwise. He is a prince, not a merchant. It suited him to give you weapons and send you against Arap Muhammad Khan. When he has the treasure in his hands he may change his mind about making the Donskoi brotherhood free men."

"Then what is the best path for us to follow?" asked Dog-Face, wrinkling his broken nose.

Makshim laughed. "Why, you have weapons, horses, riches! Seize the land at the river Jaick where the desert ends—take Moslem women for

wives—breed sons and train them to steal from the caravans. Then ye will be free men—not otherwise!"

Several grunted approval, but Ayub, who was in charge of the treasure, did not relish the mockery of the man who had been a noble before he joined the brotherhood of the Don.

"Nay, sir brothers," he put in, "this one chest is sufficient to ransom us. So Khlit said, and his wisdom is greater than Makshim's."

"Did the Wolf say that?"

"Aye, he swore that Boris Godunov would leap from his chair when he saw what is in this little chest. Khlit had the precious stones in his care, so he has been able to judge them."

The kettle drums by the standard beat the summons to horse at this point and the Cossacks about the treasure wagons scattered to their various *kurens*. But Kirdy went with Makshim and the advance of twenty lancers, and remained buried in thought until the detachment had entered the boulders of the narrow pass between the buttes.

"Is it true, Makshim," he asked, "that you would form a new tribe?"

"In the desert?" The handsome Cossack smiled. "Nay, the river Don is far, very far from my home. Once in Kiev"—he broke off with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "Perhaps I am different, Kirdy, from the Donskoi, and you, too, are unlike them. But we will do one thing together. We will take the treasure to Moscow to the tsar and in all the world it will be said our word is not smoke."

So he boasted and Kirdy began to understand a little of this man's nature. Makshim had once been a leader of men, perhaps khan of a tribe—for Kirdy knew nothing of the Christian peoples or their lords, except what Khlit had told him, which was very little. This vast steppe that stretched immeasurable distances to the east was his home.

"Rein in!" said the boy under his breath.

When Makshim halted his charger, the detachment stopped, the experienced Cossacks becoming quiet on the instant. Kirdy dismounted and searched the bed of the ravine for tracks without finding any. His glance ran along the heights, topped by a gray fringe of tamarisk. And he even crouched down to put his ear to the ground.

"What did you hear?" asked Makshim with some amusement, because the boy's face had grown bleak with sudden concentration.

"Nothing, *ataman*—but look at the birds!"

Glancing up at a flight of rooks at the gully's edge, Makshim shook his head carelessly. "A hawk has stirred them up. *Rishiy marsh!*"

The Cossacks gathered up their reins and Kirdy heard something flick past his head. The *essaul* behind Makshim flung up both his arms and slipped to the ground, one foot still caught in a stirrup. A long arrow had pierced him under the heart.

"A Turkoman arrow!" cried Kirdy, and as he spoke, unseen bows snapped and other shafts flew down from the heights.

"God aid us, sir brothers!" groaned a warrior who had been struck in the stomach. The horses snorted, and the underbrush crackled on both sides as the hidden archers plied their shafts. Kirdy beheld, from between rocks and the mesh of tamarisk, gigantic black lambskin hats atop lean and scowling faces darkened by the sun almost to the hue of the *kalpaks*. Still on foot but with the reins of the piebald tight in his hand, he looked expectantly at Makshim, who gave an order calmly.

"Take up the wounded! Rush to the knoll up there"—pointing to a place where the gorge widened and a high nest of rock and thorn stood in the center of its bed. "Kirdy—back to the *ataman*! Back—I order it!"

The last was flung over his shoulder as he started up the gorge with the dozen survivors of the detachment. Kirdy hesitated for no more than a second. Makshim meant to hold the knoll until aid came up and had sent him to fetch it. An arrow glanced from his saddle as he jerked his pony around and mounted with a leap, whipping the swift-footed beast into a headlong gallop, swerving around boulders and scuttling through gravel beds.

In another moment he swung over to his right stirrup, gripping the piebald's mane, his own head pressed against the horse's neck. From the other side of the ravine arrows flicked down at him, but only at intervals. Evidently watchers had been posted here and, luckily for the boy, seemed so confident in their aim that they shot for the man instead of the horse.

Kirdy had time to reflect that an ambush had been set, and that the behavior of the Cossacks, when he dismounted to look for tracks, had made the Turkomans open fire before the time agreed on—or else the tribesman who killed the *essaul* had been unable to resist temptation when his shaft was drawn on so fair a mark.

Where the sides of the gorge fell away Kirdy met Demid and Ivashko at the head of a squadron of lancers already entering the shadow of the pass. He reined in, saluting, and told the *ataman* of the ambush.

"How many?" demanded Demid, thrusting his baton into his belt.

"Scores. I think more lie in wait above, father."

"You think—why?"

"Because they did not shout. They aimed at men, not beasts. They meant to kill off the advance so that more Cossacks would enter the trap."

"Well said! Makshim must be brought out."

He lifted his voice in a long shout. "Ivashko's *kuren* with me. At a gallop! Kirdy, bring up the next *kuren* with matchlocks."

Angry because be was being sent farther to the rear, Kirdy trotted on, while Ivashko—who had succeeded the slain Ivan Aglau—passed with his men. The aspect of the Cossacks changed in an instant. They unslung their lances, and gripped tight with their knees; the ponies, sensing the feeling of the riders, neighed, and the song that had drifted up from the squadrons in the rear changed to a deep shout—"Ou-ha-aa!"

They began to smile and to joke with one another, well pleased at the prospect of fighting ahead of them.

"Are the Turkomans really there, little brother?" they asked Kirdy. "Or did the djinn of the gorge cast a spell on you? Make haste, brothers, or our little father Demid will scatter all the Turkomans!"

Pressing forward on the heels of the lancers, the matchlock men began to light their long fuses from a pot of fire that was carried near their officer. Charges and bullets were already rammed home. Kirdy went with them, because no more orders had been given him, and the rearmost squadrons already had the news and were forming around the wagons.

"There are the Turkomans right enough!" exclaimed the *ataman* of the *kuren*, a merry-eyed, pockmarked Cossack who was a famous drinker. "Only listen to their love song!"

In fact the ululation of the Mohammedans now echoed from rock to rock, answered by the defiant war cry of the Donskoi. Kirdy reflected that the assailants were standing their ground, and so must be in force. Demid was dealing with no small raiding party. And he felt that the ambush had been well chosen.

The low walls of the ravine were too steep for a horse to climb except with difficulty in certain places. The jumble of rocks and underbrush was well suited to the bows of the Turkomans, and hindered the Cossacks. He wondered if Makshim had acted wisely in seizing the knoll instead of riding back, or if Demid had not been reckless in plunging into the ravine with his lances. And he wondered how the Turkomans had come there at all—whether a band had managed to find horses in Urgench and had cir-

cled ahead of them in order to hold the ravine against them if possible, or whether another tribe had come in from the desert and had sought to waylay the Cossacks.

Reaching the spot where the body of the *essaul* lay, he found that Demid and Ivashko had taken possession of the knoll, and the greater part of the lancers were scattered over the slope on the left, riding from cover to cover and driving the Moslem bowmen before them.

At a word of command from the pockmarked Cossack, those with firelocks dismounted and took open order on either side, loosing their pieces whenever the striped *khalats* or dark sheepskins of a Turkoman showed against the gray rocks and tamarisks. White smoke from the firearms billowed around the warriors and the reports thundered back from the far side of the ravine.

"Eh, little brother," said one who had been left to watch the ponies of the dismounted *kuren*, "those bees yonder can sting. Their shafts took the life out of Makshim, and only two were alive on the knoll when Demid came up."

On his way to join Demid, the boy came upon the body of Makshim lying propped against a boulder. The *kuren ataman* had been shot through the throat—his teeth showed under the dark mustache and the faded red coat that had been his pride was now stained a darker hue. The same crimson stain covered his bare chest and the ebony cross that he always wore around his throat. Bending closer, Kirdy saw that one side of the cross was set with precious stones in the Polish fashion, with some words inlaid in gold. This side of his cross Makshim had kept hidden always. It meant that he had been a nobleman, and though his coat was ragged, Makshim had never parted with these pearls and sapphires.

Valuable as the cross was, Kirdy did not take it. He thought of the words Makshim had uttered so often, mockingly: "*Ye are dead men, going whither?*"

And he wondered fleetingly whither the spirit that had been in the body of the *ataman* had gone.

"Kirdy," the voice of his commander reached him, "the sixty lancers of Goloto's *kuren* are coming up. Take them and clear the height on the right. Hold your ground there, and do not pursue."

Running back to his pony, Kirdy saw that a group of Turkomans on lean and long-legged horses had appeared on the edge of the slope and were shooting from their bows at the Cossacks with matchlocks below. A sin-

gle rider would discharge a half dozen shafts while one of the clumsy firelocks was being loaded, and though the Moslems in full sunlight offered good marks, they kept their horses in motion so that it was hard to aim at them.

In the saddle again, he trotted up to the lancers who had been checked by the horses of the other squadrons and were looking around eagerly for Demid.

"Follow me," he said to the *essaul* in command, rejoicing that he had not been sent to bid them to do something, but to lead them himself.

"At command!" responded the sergeant, a wild-looking Cossack from the Terek.

Kirdy had noticed that at one point a little distance back the edge of the height receded and bushes grew clear to the top of the slope. In the underbrush, he knew, the ponies would find better footing than in the loose shale and treacherous stones.

And he hoped that if he turned back to this place his movements would not be observed as quickly as if he were to try to scale the height in the midst of the fighting.

Under Demid's eye he rather desired than avoided risk, but he thought that no sixty men could climb such a distance under the arrows of the mob of Turkomans. He had seen something of the work of those arrows.

Turning the half-squadron, he led it to the opening and, plying his whip, rushed the slope. His piebald snorted and started up, smashing through the network of tamarisk and often stumbling in the sandy clay. Behind him and on either side he heard the lancers snapping their long *nagaika* whips and muttering at their horses beseechingly.

They were out in the sunlight now, and shouts on their left told them that the riders on the summit had seen them and guessed their purpose. Kirdy's eyes were glued to the fringe of bushes that marked the top of the rise, and he expected every second to see a score of arrows flash down into his men. Then he thought they would have to dismount, which would be almost as bad.

He plunged up into a strip of sand, and out of the corner of his eye, saw the *essaul*'s pony go down, the Cossack leaping clear. Somewhere above him hoofs pounded on hard clay, and he remembered that he had not given command to draw sabers—remembered in the same instant that his men could not handle lance or sword in taking such a slope. Makshim's dark face with its questioning eyes flashed through his mind's vision—

Then his pony plunged up suddenly and came out on firm footing. Two Turkomans, in full gallop, were within stone's throw of him. The foremost on a bay horse was bareheaded, his skull shaven. Instead of boots he wore cotton shoes, the toes turned up, and his small eyes slanted like a Mongol's. A goatskin cloak floated from his bare shoulders and his mouth was open as if he were laughing.

All these details became clear to Kirdy in the second that the Turkoman drew back his arm and launched a javelin at him. In the same second Kirdy saw that the weapon would miss him. Mechanically he drew the curved saber on his left side, and the fever of uncertainty left him as it always did when he came to sword strokes. The prickling up and down his scalp ceased and he drew a long breath.

The Turkoman had whipped out a yataghan and bent low in the saddle. Kirdy reined his pony to one side, parried the slash of the twisted blade and struck down and back as his adversary went by. He felt his steel bite into the base of the man's skull and wrenched it clear.

The second rider had no javelin—for which Kirdy was thankful—and rose in his stirrups to cut down at him. Their swords clanged together and Kirdy edged the piebald closer, shortening his stroke as he did so, because he saw others coming up. Letting the Moslem's scimitar slide off his saber, he struck his hilt between the man's eyes—a trick he had learned from Khlit.

The Turkoman reeled in the saddle and a Cossack, coming up behind Kirdy, cut him down.

Kirdy did not see this, because a third Moslem attacked him, appearing suddenly on his left side. Lacking time to turn his pony, the boy tossed his saber from the right to the left hand and as the two horses came together, struck down the other's scimitar. The Turkoman—a lean, stoop-shouldered warrior in polished mail who crouched behind a round leather shield—shouted in astonishment and dismay.

Running his blade up to the other's handguard, Kirdy pressed the scimitar down. Feeling the strength of the young Cossack, the tribesman let go his scimitar and clutched at one of the half dozen daggers in his girdle. Kirdy was waiting for this, and caught the man's beard in his right hand. At the same instant he clapped heels into the piebald's flanks.

When the Turkoman struck with his dagger the blade met only empty air. He was pulled over the crupper of his saddle to the ground, where

mail and shield availed him nothing under the lances of the oncoming Cossacks.

Meanwhile the *essaul* had caught the best of the three riderless ponies and was in the saddle, while enough Cossacks had climbed out on the summit of the rise to stem the rush of the Turkoman bowmen who came up in straggling order.

Their charge broken, the Turkomans wheeled and fled. But now the long lances and sabers of the Cossacks served them well and they followed Kirdy among the scattered Moslems, stabbing and slashing and shouting.

Swiftly as they pressed on they could not overtake Kirdy. The boy crouched in the saddle, his saber arm swinging at his side and as often as a tribesman, hearing the thudding of hoofs, turned, snarling with hate, to match strength with him, Kirdy left a riderless horse.

The air rushed past his ears, and his eyes were quick and alert. The blood hummed through his veins, and though he would have liked to shout aloud, no sound came from his closed lips. For this work he was fitted. He was a master of the sword.

He had been following a warrior on a black pony, up a long slope, through a mass of boulders. Suddenly the Turkoman seemed to drop into the earth and Kirdy drew rein in astonishment. A wide gully opened out before him and down the nearer slope of this gully the black horse was leaping from ledge to ledge like a mountain sheep.

Kirdy was tempted to urge his piebald after the black until he looked around. During the pursuit he had climbed a wide stretch of rising ground, until he gained a small plateau—one of the highest points among the buttes. Shading his eyes from the glare of the sun he looked into the main ravine on his left. It was filled with Turkoman riders.

Others were in the gully beneath, that must run into the gorge where the main battle was still going on. He looked to the right and saw that most of the Turkomans had turned off in this direction and were being pursued hotly by his Cossacks who were drawing farther away every moment.

"*Stoy!*" He remembered Demid's caution about pursuing too far, and called them back. They came obediently, albeit reluctantly, and when they had reached the top of the plateau, gazed curiously at the groups of Turkomans visible from time to time in the ravines to the north—and the wilderness of gray and purple buttes that stretched away from them on all sides.

"Eh, little father," the *essaul* looked up from a fine yataghan that he had brought back with him. "'Tis a hard country and there will be hard blows struck before we win free of it."

He was smiling and the men of the half squadron were in excellent humor after their brush with the Turkomans—just such a skirmish as the warriors relished. Kirdy heard the sergeant relate how he had cut down three riders when he first came out of the ravine.

"Listen, my brothers! The first one our young *ataman* dealt with by a backhand stroke. The second he played with, and then pounded between the eyes and left him for you to finish. I was close behind him and I saw it all. The third was a regular fox—wary and keen to bite. Eh, he took that one by the beard and pulled him out of the saddle. That was the way of it—out of the saddle just as peas are shelled from a pod."

"By the beard?" laughed another who was binding up a cut on the arm.

"As God is my witness. He is a falcon."

"We will not lack for saber work if he is to be our leader."

Kirdy was pleased by these words, because he felt himself that he knew little of the duties of an *ataman*. But the skirmish had given him confidence in himself and the Cossack lancers grinned when their eyes met his.

"*Essaul*," he observed after thinking a moment, "send a rider down to father Demid with this word: The Turkomans have a strong force in reserve in the gorge and others are coming up all the time."

"At once!" And the old Cossack added ingratiatingly, "My name is Kobita. I was with little father Demid in Aleppo. That was a raid, but in ten generations the dogs of Turkomans will not forget this one."

Kirdy nodded and went to the edge of the gorge to see what was going on below.

The Cossacks had advanced up the gorge a half mile or so, and the firelock men were scattered over both slopes, their position marked by the plumes of white smoke. A squadron of lancers had cleared the bed of the gorge and in the rear the wagons and camels and the throng of wounded men were visible in the deep shadow of the ravine.

But the Turkomans were fighting every foot of the way. They held the edge of the far slope in force and their arrows flew down without ceasing. At times they rolled great boulders down the slope, and these had done more than a little damage to the lead horses and wagons of the Cossacks.

Kirdy realized that the Cossacks were outnumbered, two to one—that they could not win through the ravines to the open plain beyond before darkness set in. Already the sun was nearing the pinnacles in the west.

After a while Khlit rode up, his heavy saddlebags still in place and his pipe smoking. He studied the country on all sides and made a signal that was answered by a shout from below.

First one squadron then another moved up to the height beside Kirdy—the wounded men and the sacks of gold from the treasure wagons appeared, with the bodies of the Cossacks slain in the gorge—and finally Demid and Ayub with the last of the firelock men.

They moved into position around him, and Kirdy saw that they were going to spend the night on the plateau. To remain in the gorge was not to be thought of. They had left the injured horses and the silk and heavier articles of the treasure perforce in the wagons which could not be hauled up the steep slope.

At this hour when the sun was setting, the cliff on the far side of the ravine was lined with Turkomans. Kirdy saw a tall man in a tiger skin cloak with a narrow black beard hanging down from the point of his chin. The level rays of the sun struck upon gleaming gold in the hilts of weapons in his girdle, and shone upon the white Arab he bestrode. He alone wore a green turban.

For several moments he gazed at the Cossacks and then wheeled away, followed by a score of riders.

"That would be their leader," Kirdy hazarded to Khlit.

"Aye, that is Arap Muhammad Khan, and there are worse leaders than he."

"The khan! How comes he ahead of us?"

"By luck and by good horse flesh." The Wolf glanced at his grandson from beneath shaggy brows. "A wounded Turkoman was minded to mock us, and from his lips we learned that Arap Muhammad Khan was not at Khiva when we took Urgench. He was hunting upon a small river to the west with his emirs and a thousand of the horde. That was luck, good or ill. When a rider reached him from Urgench, he turned north—"

"There were no tracks in advance of us in the ravine—no fresh tracks."

"Eh, the khan knows this country as a tiger its lair. He must have entered the heights with his thousand by another path before the last sunrise."

"Then Demid did ill to ride into the gorge when he might have found another way through the ridges."

Khlit leaned on his saddle horn and fingered the leather thong that held his saddlebags in place. "Little grandson," he grumbled, "it is a simple matter to say of a leader 'He chose the wrong path.' Could Demid leave Makshim and his Cossacks to the arrows of the Turkomans? You have been put in command of a half squadron. See to it that your men loosen their saddle girths and eat; then come to the council at the standard."

The *kuren atamans* and Khlit and Ayub gathered around the pole of the standard of the white falcon in the second hour of the night when Kirdy who had been posting sentries rode up and dismounted. The bivouac of the Cossacks was quiet, except for the grating of the spades that were digging shallow graves, and the restless movements of the horses.

Down in the maw of the gorge the Turkomans could be heard moving about, seeking plunder; but they had not ventured to attack the plateau.

Ivashko was speaking as Kirdy squatted down behind the ring of Cossacks.

"—And we have lost forty-seven in the ravine. We have no horses to spare: The water will be gone at noon tomorrow. Hai, it has gone hard with us."

"It will be better for us in the open country," said another.

"To go back is not to be thought of; to go ahead will cost many Cossack lives."

"The dogs of Turkomans are rolling heavy stones down below; it is plain they are blocking the ravine."

"Good!" cried Demid so unexpectedly that the *kuren atamans* were silent. "If they are at work in the gorge they will not look for us elsewhere."

"How, elsewhere?"

"The way we entered," hazarded Ayub's voice from the outskirts of the circle. "That is open."

Demid's short laugh was like a bark. "Aye, open. Go thither and before the shadows are short we will meet with the Moslems coming up from Urgench."

It was Ayub's turn to be silent and probably he was thinking of the palanquin and his cup-bearers of three days ago, because he chuckled. "Eh, we frolicked in Urgench! Khlit, old wolf, what way does your nose point? What plan have you?"

"Dog of the devil!" grunted Khlit. "If your *ataman* had no plan, it would be time for me to speak, sir brothers. He has a plan and so it is fitting that we should listen instead of baying like hounds when the scent is lost."

Hearing this the Cossacks crowded closer and held their breaths to hear what the young leader should say.

"The Moslem horde is gathering, and Arap Muhammad Khan is closing the passes. We must go forward before the next sunrise. We must join Goloto and the wagon train, a day's ride from this place. The Turkomans expect us to ride through the gorge where Makshim was slain. But on our right—see, as I sit here, on my right hand—a pass leads to the north."

Kirdy remembered that the bowmen he had scattered had fled down this gully, that twisted among buttresses of rock until it was lost to sight.

"In this ravine is the dry bed of a stream, and a stream would flow to the plain. So it my thought that the gully will lead us out of these hills. It may be blind, or it may end in a precipice—God alone knows. But it offers a way out, my brothers, and thither we will ride at the end of the third watch."

"And we will leave the Turkomans rolling boulders," laughed Ayub.

"Perhaps," responded Demid dryly. "I will take the lead with Makshim's lancers. And now, to your men. See that the horses are fed and rubbed down with grass."

As they left the circle, Ayub sought out Kirdy and put his good arm over the boy's shoulders. They walked past the men who were digging graves and the big Zaporogian recognized the white-topped *kalpaks* of Makshim's squadron.

"Aye," he muttered, "the lads will be burying their father so that the jackals will not get at his body. Well, he was outspoken and if he was bold with his tongue he was no less so with his sword—a good Cossack, and I would stretch out him that says otherwise. Will his spirit mount a stallion and ride with us on the morrow? Nay, Kirdy, he ever loved good sport, and it would go hard with him to lie pent down under rocks."

Crossing himself, the warrior sighed and then yawned heavily because he was weary. At the standard they parted, Ayub to roll himself up in his *svitza* and sleep and Kirdy to find his men and give them the news of the morning's march.

But of that march, begun before the first streak of light in the east, Kirdy saw little and knew less.

Kobita woke him with the whispered announcement that an *essaul* had come up from the standard with orders for the half squadron to take the rear of the column. By the time the men were in the saddle and assembled, the leading squadron under Demid struck the Turkomans who had been left to guard the shallow ravine on the right.

The slight stir of the moving horses had attracted the notice of Moslem outposts halfway up the plateau, but these, believing that the Cossacks would not advance until daylight—and then on the main gorge—merely fell back on their comrades by the boulder barrier.

And Demid's lancers must have surprised the guard in the other ravine, because when Kirdy passed the spot where the fight had been he heard only riderless horses plunging about the hillside, and the groans of wounded men.

He advanced into the utter blackness of the ravine and trusted to the piebald pony to keep its feet. Hoofs clattering in advance and the distant creaking of saddles guided him, yet there was no risk of losing the way because rock walls hemmed him in. They went forward at a round trot, and though Kirdy drew rein many times to listen and peer into the void behind him, he could hear no sound of pursuit.

A cold wind whipped through the narrow gully, and into the teeth of this they pressed, taking comfort with each moment of quiet, until the stars paled overhead and they could make out the familiar gray rock ridges on either hand—empty of life.

The gully grew wider, and for a while they halted, perforce. The column had stopped and the Cossacks of the squadron next in front of them were sitting their horses, listening to the clash of steel and shouting ahead.

Kirdy faced his men about as soon as he knew that Demid had been checked by a strong party of the enemy, and for an anxious half hour he and Kobita watched the gully in the rear grow lighter until the red showed in the limestone and the horses began to graze on the dry grass.

The veteran sergeant was clawing at his unruly beard, glancing anxiously into the eyes of his young leader. It was then that the boy realized that keeping the rear of a column in retreat was no simple matter. He tried to think how long it would take Arap Muhammad Khan to find out that the Cossacks had left the plateau and how long it would be before the Turkoman horde came up with them.

"Glory to the Father and the Son!" muttered Kobita thankfully when they heard the *kuren ataman* of the next squadron give the word to advance.

The sunlight was gleaming on the spear points of the column when Kirdy came to an open stretch. Here a strong detachment of Moslem had camped for the night—he counted the ashes of a dozen fires. Here, too, saddle-cloths, *khalats* and weapons strewed the ground and a half-hundred bodies of Cossacks and tribesmen lay in the sandy depressions and among the rocks. The Moslems were not Turkomans, because they were broad, stalwart men with full beards and small turbans knotted over one ear.

Many of them wore mail, and the weapons scattered among the bodies were scimitars and light spears—not the yataghans of the khan's followers. Kobita and his mates had never seen such warriors, but Kirdy enlightened them.

"These be Usbeks," he said gravely, "from the east. Some of them are from the cities under the roof of the world."

"Two hundred made camp here, little father," assented Kobita, "and it is in my mind that they used their weapons well. How come they here?"

"Pigeons."

The Cossacks nodded understanding, and some who had thought that Kirdy was over-young to command them now were pleased that the grandson of Khlit should be able to tell them such things. As for Kirdy, he reflected that the Moslems from the surrounding districts were rallying to Arap Muhammad Khan and each hour increased the peril of the Cossack column.

In the early hours of the morning they passed from the ravine to an open slope that led them down to the northern plain in which Goloto and the wagon train awaited them.

Chapter 10
The Tabor

They left the hills, no more than four hundred strong and many sorely wounded; and in the darkness the pack horses bearing the gold had been lost during the fighting, so that the iron-bound chest alone remained of the treasure of Urgench, but this to their thinking was the best part and by then the lack of water weighed on them more than the loss of the gold. At noon the last goatskin of water was given to the wounded.

Whether Arap Muhammad Khan followed them closely they did not know, because a haze was in the air—fine sand stirred up by the bleak wind. The wind and the haze obscured their trail and they had some hope of throwing off pursuit; but it was no easy matter, now that the sun was

obscured, to keep direction, and the most experienced Cossacks, casting ahead and to the flanks, were often at fault until they heard musket shots afar off.

"Goloto must be signaling to us," remarked Witless who—the pack animal train being a thing of the past—had been riding at Kirdy's stirrup.

"Eh, your stallion has more wisdom than you," cried Dog-Face, who was never parted from the tall Cossack. "How could Goloto be signaling when he knows not if we be in Urgench or on the devil's gridiron. The *kuren ataman* is not a *koldun*, a magician."

"Nay, brother," Witless vouchsafed after long cogitation. "But Shamaki is a *koldun*, and you know the Tatar magician left Urgench the night before we took to the road."

"Only listen to him!" Dog-Face shook his head apologetically, but his comrade's remark seemed to stick in his head, because he muttered, "You have at least as much sense as a horse, and some men are only to be compared to camels and asses. Nevertheless, Goloto is an experienced leader and he would not burn powder unless he had to."

Dog-Face proved to be in the right, as they discovered when they headed toward the sound of firing. At sunset the air cleared and they could see the wagon train. It was drawn up in a hollow square with the horses within, and from the carts puffs of white smoke darted out, drifting away toward the heights.

Around the carts, as gulls flutter about a stranded ship, tribesmen circled, loosing their arrows and sweeping in—only to wheel away when the matchlocks barked in their faces. They numbered close to two hundred and when Demid's column neared the square of the *tabor*, Demid saw that the foemen were men in soiled sheepskins with enormous sleeves hanging to their boots.

They wore black lambskin hats even larger than the Turkomans'—were armed with a beggar's arsenal—and looked for all the world like dogs worrying a carcass. And like dogs they drew off snarling, to higher ground, there to squat and watch with insatiable eagerness. Kirdy knew that they were Kara Kalpaks—Black Hats, inveterate robbers but lacking both the cruelty and courage of the Turkomans—jackals who followed a wolfpack.

The Cossack horses were too weary for pursuit. And indeed to pursue the Kara Kalpaks would have been more difficult than to track down the wind itself in these gullies.

Goloto strode out of the *tabor* and held Demid's stirrup while his forty men tossed their hats in the air and rained greetings on the dust-coated and tired squadrons.

"Health to you, *ataman*, and to you, sir brothers!"

"God be with you, Goloto! You have not been idle, I see."

"Nay, these vultures have been sitting up with us. May bullets strike them!"

When the wagons had been drawn into a larger circle, and men and horses had had a little water—for the spring was small and there was need of filling goatskins and buckets against the next march—Demid sought out Khlit, who was sharing a barley cake with Kirdy by the fire.

"O father of battles," the young *ataman* said softly in Tatar, "tell me one thing. The horses are spent, the men sleep in their saddles. It is true that Goloto's oxen and horses are fresh, but that is not enough. To take the road now would be to waste strength in the darkness. I shall let my men sleep and move with the carts in the morning. Is this a good thing?"

Khlit chewed his gray mustache and looked for a long time into the fire before he answered.

"When there is little hope, the boldest course is best."

Demid inclined his head. "Yet Arap Muhammad Khan will be up, with dawn."

"Well, do not trust his promises."

And with dawn Arap Muhammad Khan came up to the *tabor*. It was a shining day, clear and windswept, and from Alexander's pillars of victory to the open plain a solid mass of Moslems surrounded the circle of wagons. Against the mauve and gray of the clay slopes fluttered the striped *khalats* of the Turkomans, and the long white coats of the Usbeks. Farther away the Black Hats hovered on skeleton horses, and the level rays of the rising sun glittered on spear point and sword hilt and the silver headbands of the ponies.

Standing in the wagons, the Cossacks counted three thousand tribesmen.

They had not long to wait. Kettledrums sounded in the Turkoman horde, and a young warrior trotted out mounted on a black stallion holding his right hand empty above his head. He was allowed to come within speaking distance of the *tabor* although more than one Cossack, matchlock in band, eyed the horse longingly.

"O caphars," the Turkoman cried, "O unbelievers, are ye weary of life? Harken, then! I am Ilbars Sultan, son of the khan, and by my mouth Arap Muhammad, Khan of Khiva, lord of Urgench and Kharesmia, Shield of the Faithful, Lion of Islam, Jewel in the Shield of Allah, bids ye lay down your weapons, O ye Urusses.* Submit and your lives will be spared!"

"Nay," Demid answered at once.

The small head of Ilbars Sultan turned toward the chieftain disdainfully, and after a moment the Turkoman spoke again.

"Harken, O Ye Urusses—give to my father the leather-covered chest that is bound with iron, leave the wagons and oxen and ye will be free to ride to the north, weapons in hand."

Some of the Cossacks laughed and before Demid could make response, the wagon in which he was standing lurched, as Ayub climbed up beside him. "The forehead to you, Demid. Allow me to answer the young cock. I know what you would say but I have finer words in my head."

Filling his lungs he shouted so that the nearest Moslems could hear plainly: "Say to Arap Muhammad Khan, the slave galley cook of the Blue Sea, swineherd of Urgench, Jackal of Islam, Flea in the Bed-Sheet of Allah—the Cossacks will take care of their lives, and thank him for the hospitality of his castle."

Ilbars Sultan started as if stung and seemed to strangle in the effort to find words. His rage was not improved by a roar of laughter that went up from the Cossacks—followed by a second shout when those who did not understand Turki had Ayub's response explained to them. The slim Turkoman spat towards the *tabor* and wheeled his horse without touching the reins, muttering something about "dogs of Urusses" as he galloped back to the khan, who was easily distinguished in the circle of emirs by his green turban.

A buzzing as of innumerable bees went up from the Moslem lines and in a moment the Turkoman horde, shields on arm, javelins and yataghans flashing, galloped down on the wooden fortress of the Cossacks.

A flight of arrows rattled harmlessly among the carts and when the foremost Moslems were fifty paces distant two hundred matchlocks blazed and roared. For a few seconds dense smoke covered the broken array of

*Urusses—Russians. The Central Asia tribes until now had met only the Cossacks and believed them to be the same as the Muscovites.

riders, and when it cleared the Turkomans were seen trotting back with several score empty saddles among them.

"Well done, sir brothers," bellowed Ayub. "We have singed their beards for them, the traitors. That is the way to answer when they try to trick you with words."

The volley fired by the arquebuses affected the Moslems profoundly; the Turkomans had encountered firearms before now in the hands of the Persians and during the fight in the gorge the Cossacks had been able to do little damage to the agile bowmen; but now, entrenched behind the *tabor*, they fired with deadly aim and the Turkomans were dismayed by the devastation wrought by the single volley.

And the Usbeks and Kara Kalpaks, who knew little of arquebuses, were profoundly depressed. It was an hour before Arap Muhammad Khan mustered his men for a second charge. This time the kettledrums sounded and the cymbals clashed, and the riders began to shout in chorus as they put their ponies to a trot. Instead of coming down in a single mass they separated into detachments of a hundred and began circling the *tabor*, sweeping in and out, to draw the fire of the Cossacks, stirring themselves into frenzy with their chant:

"*Yak hai-Y'Allah, il allah!*"

An experienced chieftain, the khan knew that once the arquebuses were discharged, a half minute must elapse before they could fire again. If the Cossacks loosed another volley, he meant to strike in at once with his detachments and be upon the carts before a second volley could be fired. Meanwhile the drums and the shrill ululation spurred on his warriors and even the stolid Usbeks on the hillside began to chant and finger their weapons.

The hour of grace had been put to good account by Demid. The young leader rearranged his forces. Bidding the *kuren atamans* select the seventy best marksmen, he placed every man in a separate cart on the whole circumference of the circle. With the marksmen he put two other warriors with arquebuses, giving them orders not to fire but to load the weapons of the first Cossack and pass them forward to him.

The sacks of grain, bales of hay and other baggage were piled on the outer side of the cart, to form a breastwork, and between the wagons stood dismounted Cossacks with lances. The ponies were strongly tethered and the oxen yoked in a solid mass so that they could not break loose. He kept no warriors in reserve because he had none to spare, and because he

counted on holding the line of the wagons, placed with the ends of their poles tied to the outer wheel of the cart in front.

So the Turkomans found that instead of holding their fire, the Cossacks began to pick off riders as soon as they came within bowshot; moreover, no sooner had a Cossack discharged his piece than another arquebus blazed in his hands.

Firing in this fashion, the smoke clouds did not hide the Turkomans from view—the wind whipped the long coils of white smoke away. And the riders could not come near enough to use their bows, with effect.

But the Moslems were now in no mood to withdraw, and in spite of empty saddles and plunging ponies, swept in nearer. The arquebuses began to bellow in earnest, and suddenly a roar went up from the mass around the khan.

"*Hour—roumm!*"

With answering cries the bodies of horsemen turned in to the *tabor* and the Cossacks dropped the empty firelocks for sabers and lances. The clattering of steel blades began here and there, and rose to a din of maddened steel; horses screamed, lances cracked and the hoarse voices of struggling men swelled into a continuous monotone.

In this tumult, above the bellowing of the uneasy oxen, could be heard the battle cry of the Donskoi—

"*Garda-bei!*"

Here and there Turkomans jumped their horses over the wagon poles, but found no men on foot within the ring of the *tabor*. All the Cossacks were in the carts, and matchlocks and lances took toll of the riders who had broken the circle. Those on the outside fared even worse. They launched their javelins, and made their ponies rear against the carts, only to be pierced by the long lances, or beaten down by clubbed arquebuses.

For generations the Cossacks had been bred to the defense of the *tabor*, and squadron leader fought beside warrior, untiring and unbroken.

Seeing that the matter had come to hand blows, the Usbeks came down to the aid of their allies, and, fearing that the *tabor* was being carried and they would have no hand in the plundering, the Black Hats swarmed after.

Now the ululation of the Moslems drowned the shouts of the Cossacks, and dust swirled up in great gusts that writhed around the motionless wagons and the struggling men. The numbers of horses, moving haphazard about the *tabor*, handicapped the attackers who would have fared better dismounted. Some indeed jumped from the saddle and crawled

under the wagons, only to find that the resourceful Cossacks had established a reserve.

Wounded men had taken to horse, armed with lance or saber, and patrolled the space within the circle, leaving the wagons clear for their able-bodied companions. These riders made shift to pick off the Moslems who gained the cleared space.

Arap Muhammad Khan with his six sons led a band against the wagon where Demid stood under the standard of the white falcon. Here they met the pick of the Cossack swordsmen, and the long sabers of Demid and Kirdy and Kobita licked out and down, slitting the leather bucklers and slashing aside the lighter blades of the furious tribesmen. Here the wise and gentle Ivashko died, a javelin buried in his throat, and here the raging Ayub was stunned by a battle hammer.

Kirdy, ripping the scimitar from his right scabbard, held his ground against the press of Moslems. His lips close clamped, his eyes shining, he parried and cut with his two swords, slashing off now the forearm of a yelling Turkoman, now sending a *tulwar* or yataghan clashing to the earth.

In his shirt sleeves, spotted with blood, Demid fought in different but no less deadly fashion. Leaping back, and swaying first to one side then the other, his eyes roved ceaselessly over the pack in front of him, and he used now the point, now the edge of his blade.

So perfect was his judgment, so flawless his control of the steel blade that be seemed to glide along the rail of the wagon, unhurried and smiling. Not so Kobita. The sweat poured from the sergeant's brow and blood ran from his mustache where the corner of his jaw had been lopped off. An arrow had struck him in the side and he had broken off the projecting end, and he groaned and howled when he moved.

All at once, he flung back his head with a savage shout:

"Once my mother bore me. I will die, sir brothers!"

He climbed to the rail and leaped outward, falling sword in hand on a giant Turkoman who was shield-bearer to Arap Muhammad Khan. The weight and fury of the Cossack bore the tribesman from the saddle and they vanished under the pounding hoofs of the horses.

Now shouts were to be heard behind the wagon of the standard. Khlit had seen the struggle around the white falcon and had rallied a dozen of the least wounded from within the *tabor*. Climbing over the side of the cart these bleeding and gaunt warriors fell upon the Turkomans, snarling and roaring their battle cry.

"*Garda-bei!*"

Khlit had picked up a saber from somewhere, and—gray mustaches bristling and eyes smoldering—he struck steel against steel, and those who saw him in the press knew that if his lean old arm lacked strength, his cunning was as great as ever.

The Turkomans gave ground, and a strident voice cried out.

"*Shaitani*—they are devils!"

Arap Muhammad Khan and his sons and emirs drew back, and they were the last to leave the side of the *tabor*. The riders of Turan and Iran reined back to the hillsides, licking their wounds, and they left six hundred dead behind them.

That night the khan held a council, in which voices were raised and black rage unleashed. Yussuf Ghazi Khan, chief of the Usbeks, asked pointedly where was the spoil that the Turkomans had promised him and the Bij'aul of the Black Hats swore by the breath of Allah that the Urusses were both devils and evil spirits. How else could four hundred men have withstood three thousand?

To all these the shrewd Turkoman made one answer.

"Wait."

During the night more tribesmen from the Caspian region came up to the siege of the *tabor*, and a few Persians from down the Amu River. Under their escort came Nur-ed-din, to throw herself at the feet of Arap Muhammad Khan, and to point out to him five hundred of his own men, survivors of Urgench.

So that, in the morning, the hillside was covered with Moslems and Arap Muhammad Khan pitched his tent, there to sit and nurse his revenge against the day when arrows and wounds and lack of food should deliver the Cossacks into his hand.

And, in the morning, the Moslems saw a strange thing. They saw the *tabor* get up and move away.

Chapter 11
The Tabor Moves

Death in the company of friends is like unto a feast.

Mongol proverb

What happened was simply this. Without changing the position of the carts, the Cossacks yoked up the oxen, using the spare horses where oxen

were lacking; then the carts at the north sector of the circle were half turned and the beasts prodded into motion. The east and west portions of the circle merely moved ahead, and the wagons to the south closed in the gap, forming the rear.

The circle in this fashion became a hollow square that plodded steadily to the north. In front and rear, ten wagons were abreast—and twenty-five on each side. Within the *tabor* the horses that had not been hitched to the carts were crowded together. The wounded men were placed in the carts, and Cossacks with arquebuses and lighted matches stood beside them.

At first the Moslems thought that the *tabor* was changing ground. But by midday it was several miles on its road and they understood that the Urusses were attempting to fight their way in this fashion through the desert to the north.

Arap Muhammad Khan followed with his horde, and it was the second day before his men had recovered sufficient zeal to attack the moving *tabor*.

This onset was led by the Usbeks who had heavier bows than the Turkomans and were perhaps a little ashamed of their consternation of two days ago. They sent their shafts at the exposed oxen and horses and brought down a good many. They suffered, too, from the fire of the Cossack marksmen and the chief gain of their efforts was to delay the wagon train.

Meanwhile the Kara Kalpaks, who had lingered at the spring by Alexander's pillars of victory to dig up the graves left by the Cossacks and to mutilate the bodies, had rejoined the khan and it was decided that evening to attempt an attack in the hours of darkness.

They observed that the Cossacks formed the circle of carts again when they halted at sunset, herding the animals within the barrier, and it seemed an easy matter to the tribesmen to crawl up to the carts in the night and break through the line of defenders.

A thousand picked warriors made the attack, without sounding the kettledrums or cymbals.

And they discovered speedily that it was one thing to overrun a camp of tents in the darkness and quite another to break a line of wagons lashed together and manned by desperate fighters who were not to be surprised. It was a clear night and the movements of the attackers were visible to the warriors who crouched behind the bulwark of sacks and bales. The matchlocks roared, and the cry of the Cossacks rose steadily above the confusion.

"*Garda-bei!*"

Moslem tribesmen never relished a night affray very keenly and when the old moon, wan as a silver scimitar, broke through the clouds, they scattered and ran from the *tabor* and many were the tales they told of fire-breathing demons they had faced and evil spirits that rose up from the ground to seize them by the throats.

The next morning the *tabor* plodded on, leaving a score of graves on the site of the fight, and Arap Muhammad Khan, who had counted his own slain, looked grim. The Usbeks took to their bows again, and many oxen lay outstretched on the plain. The Cossacks were more sparing of their powder, the khan noticed, and the next day the *tabor* moved very slowly, like a wounded panther crawling back to its lair.

But the Blue Sea was only a few hours away. Already they could feel the chill, salty, winds that swept over it.

The scimitar of the moon was far in the west when Demid called the surviving *kuren atamans* to the standard. Besides Khlit and Kirdy only two leaders came—Goloto and another.

"It is time, noble sirs," the young *ataman* said quietly—"time that we must part and go upon different paths."

They uncovered their heads and stood in a circle around him, the fever of thirst in their veins. For a day and a night they had had no water; the goatskins had been squeezed to the last drop and many of the warriors had begun to open veins in the horses and to drink blood. And the horses themselves had become almost unmanageable. At first a few oxen and then many had begun to bellow, and the Cossacks knew that the wagons could not be drawn much farther.

"Listen then, *kunaks*," said Demid in the same drawling voice, "to the military command. We will divide, it is true, and for this reason. We will form in three squadrons, eighty men in each. I will take one and strike out through the Moslem dogs to the west; you, Goloto, will take your *kuren* and strike to the north; you, Khlit, will take those who are left from Makshim's squadron and Ivan Aglau's, and you will go with Ostap to the east. Two hundred and forty horses remain to us. You will seek whatever road offers to safety—each for himself."

When the leaders heard this they sighed and were silent for a long time. Finally old Goloto raised his voice.

"If the *tabor* is to be abandoned, why do we not mount and ride in one body upon the dogs of Moslems?"

"Nay, Goloto. The tribesmen are five thousand strong. If we rode together, some of us might win through, but the Moslems would not be cast off the scent. They would follow, and they have good horses. In the end, none of us would live. That is the truth."

All realized this and they waited for him to say more.

"By dividing into three bands we will confuse the Moslems and one band or perhaps two might escape. I will take the standard with me; let the men choose what leader they will follow."

Some of the Cossacks departed to spread the tidings among the warriors; others went to saddle the horses. But Khlit remained at Demid's side, deep in thought.

"The treasure of Arap Muhammad Khan," the old Cossack grumbled.

"Let it stay where it is," said Demid at once. "Who knows what is before us! If the jewels reach the border they must be given to the Muscovite tsar because we pledged it."

Khlit seated himself on a dead horse, the curved saber that had once been Kaidu's, that he had cherished for many years, across his knees, and this served to steady his knees that quivered at times from weariness and the chill wind. This stiffness of the legs troubled Khlit, on the road, and when he was not in the saddle, he sat or lay near the fire to keep off the night cold; but for three nights there had been no fire. That night Kirdy had insisted on giving back to his grandsire the curved saber, saying that he could not use two blades in the saddle.

"Old wolf," Demid resumed slowly, "you are wiser than I. Many times have you crossed these gray sands that lead to the roof of the world. I think that if any of the brotherhood win through to the border it will be your squadron. For this reason I have given you good men. Take also the Zaporogian, Ayub. When the road is hard and foes press he is worth a score. Take Kirdy—the youth is a warrior born, out of the loins of chieftains; the day will come when the *bandura* players will sing his name, and a myriad sabers will follow him."

"I thank you, *ataman*, for that word." Khlit stroked down his mustaches and nodded, well pleased at the praise of his grandson. "But it cannot be that way. The order was that all should choose which way they will go—with you, or with Ostap and me, or with brave Goloto. So must Kirdy and Ayub choose."

"Let it be so."

They listened for a space to the sounds of preparation, almost drowned by the deep bellowing of the oxen. In the Turkish lines, two musket shots away, the sentries heard only this monotone of the beasts, but the experienced chieftains caught the creaking of saddles, muttered whispers and the slight *clink* of scabbard against stirrup that showed the Cossacks were mounting and arranging themselves in three groups.

And the minds of the two warriors dwelt upon other camps, where the mighty array of Cossackdom had held the border against the hordes of Moslems; their mind's eye beheld the horned standards carried from village to village and the laughing throngs of youths and maidens that crowded to see the gathering of the warriors. They saw great herds of horses grazing on the open steppe and the smoke of chimneys, hidden in the hollows by watercourses, rising into the air.

In this hour of quiet they wished to speak only of matters that had brought honor to the brotherhood, because they did not know when they would speak together again.

"With Schah," muttered Khlit, stretching first one leg and then the other, "I went against the Golden Horde, and the Tatars cast the saddles from their ponies to flee the faster. That was the day the last of the Tatars withdrew from Christendom. Dog of the devil, is it not still a feast day in the churches? I have been in Cathay, and at the court of the Moghul of Ind—"

Demid glanced at him keenly for this was the first time that Khlit had been inclined to say so many words all at once, and he bent his head to listen attentively.

"In other lands," resumed Khlit after a moment of thought, "you meet with men who are bold and not lacking in love or daring. They are shaped like ourselves; they have children that they cherish and it cannot be said that they lack for wars. But in one respect they are different. They have no brotherhood. Gold, and the embraces of young and white-breasted women are the things their hearts covet. You speak to them but they give you no word of heartfelt fellowship."

He glanced up at the stars, listened for a while to the quiet movements of the warriors and went on:

"Nay, only men such as these"—he nodded at the shadows that passed and repassed the standard—"can enter into a fellowship where all is given and nothing is sought. Nothing is sought save the honor of the brotherhood.

Is it not so? *Ataman*, it is so. I, who have lived two lifetimes beyond the border, have seen it. I have had other comrades, but none like these."

Thoughtfully he shook his head, not sorrowfully, but gravely, as a man who weighs all things. And Demid listened attentively, because the speaker was one who had been through the ceaseless toil of war, who had endured all suffering, and had gleaned the wisdom of hard years.

"And it has not failed them," the low voice of the old warrior went on, "the Cossack spirit. Not their minds, not ambition or the love of praise, sustain them—only the Cossack spirit is within them."

Demid lifted his hand. "I have failed them."

Again Khlit shook his head. "*Ataman*, not yours is the fault. The fault is the emperor's—who would sacrifice brotherhood to ambition. You have buffeted the Moslems, your strength has not failed; you have availed yourself of every expedient. And I, who rode at their side, say this: if the ancient *atamans*, Rurik and Schah and Skal Osup, could shout down to us now, they would put down their drinking cups up yonder at the table of the White Christ, and say 'Well done, *ataman*! Cossack honor has not suffered at your hands.'"

"I thank you, Koshevoi Ataman, for that word!" Demid cried, and when Khlit stood up stiffly they put their hands on each other's shoulders. Their talk had ended, and Ayub and Kirdy loomed up, already mounted.

"May the dogs bite me, Demid," grumbled the big Zaporogian. "What are the *kunaks* saying? I will ride hence with no one but you."

He swore under his breath because thirst always tormented him more than wounds, and he was ready to pick a quarrel at once. But Demid, having said that the Cossacks were all free to choose their party, said nothing.

"And Kirdy," grunted Khlit, "will go with the standard."

Demid would have objected instantly to taking the youth from his grandfather, but the old warrior turned away impatiently. Khlit had suspected for some time that the best Cossacks were drawing up around Demid's standard and it was clear to him that Kirdy would have more chance to reach the border with the *ataman.*

"Enough said," he growled. "Go with God!"

"With God!" The others repeated the farewell, and sought their horses. For a while these whispered words of leave-taking passed between the shadowy groups, and then the standard was lifted by a powerful Cossack. Sabers were drawn silently, the leaders took their places, and with-

out any spoken command, reined their horses through the gaps that had been opened in the wagon ring.

Chapter 12
The Sword Slayers

Kirdy had taken his place on the left hand and slightly behind the young *ataman*, and the standard with its guard of a dozen warriors was so near that the stirrup of the standard-bearer struck against the flank of the piebald pony. Behind them some ninety warriors rode in a close mass without thought of formation.

When the last were free of the wagons, Demid put his horse to a trot, and at once a challenge rang in the darkness ahead of them. Voices cried out, and Kirdy saw the red embers of the camp fires drawing closer to them. Demid gave no single word of command, but kneed his horse into a gallop; he swerved a little to one side and his saber whistled through the air. From somewhere on the far side of the abandoned *tabor* came the "*Garda-bei!*" of the other Cossacks. Kirdy heard Demid's blade thud into something and a man screamed.

Then the black mass of picketed horses loomed up under their noses and the *ataman* turned to the left. Bows snapped at their flanks and near at hand the kettledrums of the Moslems clamored.

Swinging away from the drums, to the right, they raced past a line of black hummocks that proved to be tents. Moslem warriors emerged from them, half clad, and were run down by the horses. Only one foeman appeared on horseback and he made straight at Demid, who rose in his stirrups with a laugh.

Kirdy reined in, as the two sabers struck sparks in the black void. A second time the blades clashed, and again Demid laughed under his breath.

"You are brave, my brother!"

The Moslem toppled from the saddle, and Kirdy, bending far down as he trotted past, saw the thick beard and the white turban set with jewels of Yussuf Ghazi, chief of the Usbeks. The stars shone from a clear sky and now he could make out something of the ground in front of him.

It rose steadily, and he knew from the gait of the piebald that they were climbing a steep slope. No more arrows whistled past him and he looked back. The group of Cossacks was at his heels, the standard of the white falcon in the hand of the big warrior.

"Eh, little brother," the man grinned at him, "steel is still in our hands; we are still in the saddles—we have not yielded."

They scattered a mounted patrol that mistook them for Turkomans, and topped the rise that had held them back. Demid reined in for a moment to listen to the uproar in the Moslem camp. They were through the Turkomans and the Usbeks and the open plain stretched away on three sides.

With a glance at the stars, the *ataman* turned sharply and headed north. The standard-bearer lowered the long pole with its horned crest and the warriors bent forward, their heads against the manes of the horses. Kirdy, breathing heavily, counted off a hundred paces, when he saw Demid rise in the stirrups and then settle himself in the saddle.

The horses snorted as a shadow drifted under their noses from left to right. It was a wolf, and instead of fleeing from them the animal had crossed their path. Kirdy, peering to the left, made out what seemed to be a mass of bushes on the plain. In the half-light of the stars and the pallid scimitar of the moon all objects were vague and unreal—the wolf a shadow, the tamarisks might have been mounted men.

From the dark mass he heard a rustling as if the wind were sweeping through dry grass, and he bent toward Demid.

"Yonder are men in the saddle, little father. I think they are Kara Kalpaks, and no patrol but a whole tribe."

"Aye," said Demid quietly, "ride on!"

The Cossacks urged on their ponies silently, needing no warning of this new danger, trusting only that the tribesmen were bound for the camp, where the drums still muttered. Kirdy remembered that the Kara Kalpaks had always withdrawn for the night into the hills or the plain, to plunder or carouse.

And surely the Kara Kalpaks had the eyes of panthers that see in the dark, because presently a long drawn howl went up from the moving mass of them. They started in pursuit and the Cossacks saw at once that the Moslems' horses were both fresh and swift. They drew abreast of Kirdy and arrows began to whistle.

The piebald stumbled heavily and the boy was nearly thrown. But the pony recovered and sped on, tossing its head, and passing Demid's big bay. Again the *ataman* rose in the stirrups, and laughed under his breath.

"It is a race, little brother."

Wind whipped past Kirdy's ears; the howling of the Black Hats grew fainter. He touched the neck of his pony and found it slippery with hot

sweat. At the touch the piebald seemed to gather itself for a plunging rush that ended in another stumble.

And then Demid reined in with an exclamation. They had drawn a little ahead of the remaining Cossacks, and the Kara Kalpaks had swerved in between the squadron and its leaders. At the first clash of sabers, Demid jerked his bay around and headed back toward his Cossacks. When Kirdy tried to turn the piebald, the sturdy pony staggered and fell, the boy jumping clear. The horse had been struck by an arrow and it did not rise.

Kirdy began to run back toward the fight. And now the plain seemed to be filled with galloping horses. He peered into the murk, seeking for one with an empty saddle. Demid had vanished, and the night was filled with the clashing of weapons and shouting. Three riders rushed past him—a single Cossack pursued on each flank by a tribesman.

Hoofs thudded behind the boy and as he turned with upflung blade his skull seemed to split in twain. Instead of the tumult, a roaring filled his ears and the murk of the night became red as flame. The sea of red swept over him and he felt himself fall into its depths.

Kirdy opened his eyes, and became aware that the sun was shining. He lay on his back in sand and though his limbs felt icy cold, the sand was warm. After a while he tried to turn his head, and thought that it must be held by something because he could not move it.

Blood had stiffened on his scalp, but when he explored his head slowly with his fingers he found that the bleeding had stopped. By and by he was able to turn his head and the first thing he saw was his hat, one side slashed open. It was clear to him that a weapon had struck his head and that the thick sheepskin hat had saved his life.

The second thing he saw was a group of Kara Kalpaks moving on foot toward the body of a Cossack a stone's throw away. If the tribesman were dismounted, and the sun above the horizon, the fight must be over. That was all his mind could manage to grasp. He closed his eyes, so that the oncoming men would not see that he was alive.

He felt no pain, his head seemed to have no weight at all, and he was satisfied that the fighting should be at an end. It seemed to Kirdy that he had been struggling against foemen for many years and he was too weary to think about it any longer.

When he did not hear the Kara Kalpak's passing after several moments he opened his eyes gradually.

The tribesmen were occupied in stripping the garments, stained with blood, from the Cossack, who groaned a little at times. They were quarreling about the boots, which were good ones of soft deerskin. One of them pressed his spear point several times into the chest of the wounded man, and the groaning ceased. The Cossack stretched his legs out and lay quiet.

Then those of the tribesmen who had not secured anything of the dead man glanced at Kirdy and walked toward him, talking. The boy did not see any use in feigning death, because in a moment he would be dead in reality. He did not feel any fear, but thought it would be better to stand up.

So he raised himself to an elbow and somehow got on his feet, staggering to keep his balance. The plain and the approaching men went around before his eyes in swift circles, and he beheld vultures drawing nearer in the sky. They came slowly as if they had already fed.

Hands gripped his arms and his white camel's skin *svitza* was pulled off roughly. Then he was knocked down by the blow of a fist and his red morocco boots were taken from his feet.

A stab of agony went through his skull and words came to his tongue.

"It is good that I gave the curved sword to Khlit," he said weakly, "because it is a fine weapon and once belonged to Kaidu."

Murmurs of surprise greeted this; he had spoken in Tatar which some of the hillmen understood.

They talked together, but the boy did not know what they said. He was only glad that Khlit had the curved saber and that by no fault of his would the weapon fall into the hands of thieves.

Presently they took him by the arms and he walked some distance, his head growing warmer and throbbing. His thoughts cleared at the same time, and he saw that he was being led into a large group of warriors, some Turkomans among them. Young Ilbars Sultan the boy recognized by his small white turban with a heron's feather held by an emerald clasp.

The chieftain was looking at a body, and Kirdy saw that this was Demid.

It was hard to tell how the *ataman* of the Donskoi had been slain because he had been slashed in so many places. His chest was cut open and his forehead had been split. Kirdy counted the bodies of five Kara Kalpaks around and beneath Demid. They had all been slashed once on the side of the head or the throat.

Ilbars Sultan was warning the Kara Kalpaks not to touch the garments of the fallen *ataman*. He himself had picked up Demid's sword and was looking at it curiously.

"Eh, brother," said a Cossack voice, "the little father was hard pressed. Look, he used the edge only, and not the point at all. That shows he was hard pressed."

The speaker was Witless, stripped to his shirt, standing between two Turkomans.

"Demid might have ridden free," muttered the boy. "Yet he turned back."

"He turned back!" echoed the thin warrior, and all at once tears began to run out of his eyes. Shaking his head he wept quietly. "May the Father and Son receive him!"

Rousing from his stupor, Kirdy turned to Ilbars Sultan and said in fluent Turki: "Do not strip this body. He is the chieftain and by the same sword Yussuf Ghazi fell."

The young Turkoman uttered an exclamation, and when he had looked at Kirdy, said to those around him: "Take these two warriors to the khan, my father. He will question them and after that they can be tortured."

A half dozen of the Kara Kalpaks moved off with the two captives and Kirdy stepped to the side of the stupid Cossack.

"Did any of the Cossacks break through?" he asked.

Witless gazed around at the Moslems who were plundering the dead, and at the vultures in the sky.

"How could any escape, little brother," he said plaintively, "when they all lie here on the plain? It would be better for us if we had not escaped."

And Kirdy thought that this was the truth.

Chapter 13
The Leather Chest

Two days passed before Kirdy and Witless were led into the presence of Arap Muhammad Khan. During that time the position of the Turkoman camp had not changed, and the Cossacks gleaned some hope from the fact that most of the tribesmen were absent from the camp. On the third day the warriors who guarded them bound their wrists in front of them.

They were taken past the deserted *tabor* to a knoll where the Moslem emirs were gathering around the black tent of the khan. And the first thing they saw was the head of Goloto, with the nose and the ears cut away, fas-

tened on the point of a spear. Only by the familiar scar did the two Cossacks recognize the head of the *kuren ataman*, on this spear that held up the outer edge of the canopy under which the khan sat, on a silk rug.

By the side of Arap Muhammad Khan was the slender form of Nur-ed-din, veiled to the eyes, and by a flicker of the brows and a flash of the brown eyes Kirdy saw that she recognized him. Before the knees of the Turkoman chief rested the leather chest, evidently locked, because two warriors were prying open the lid with spear points.

"Aye, Kirdy," said the thin Cossack when they were struck down to their knees beside the chest, "the sir brothers did not yield. They took many of the infidels with them out of the world."

In fact the eyes of Arap Muhammad Khan were moody as they surveyed the chest and a small pile of weapons cast down near it. His riders had brought back little spoil and hundreds of them had not come back to the camp. Many riderless horses, it is true, were gathered in the *tabor*—but these had belonged to his own tribesmen or to the men of Urgench. All at once his hands gripped his knees and he leaned forward with an exclamation.

The lid of the chest had come off and he could look into it and see plainly that it contained a generous amount of sand and pebbles.

"*Y'Allah!*" he breathed, and the tribesmen who had brought in the chest fell back in dismay.

A tall man was Arap Muhammad Khan, and he seemed taller than he was by reason of the voluminous striped *khalat* wrapped around his broad shoulders; his head, too small for his body, was dwarfed by a high turban of green silk, loosely knotted over his left ear. But his black eyes, set close to the beak of a nose, flamed with rage as he looked from his men to the Cossack prisoners.

Then, fingering the tuft of beard—both sides of his jaw were shaven—he turned to Nur-ed-din.

"From thy lips, O Light of the World, I learned that the precious stones, the amber, the pearl strings and the emeralds were placed within this chest by the dogs of Urusses."

The beautiful Persian bent her head. "By the Kaaba I swear that this is true, O lord of my life—O conqueror"—submissively she spread out both hands. "My servants watched the little house by the *kurgan* gate, whither the Nazarene unbelievers took the wealth of thy dwelling. The bulkier part was loaded into wagons and this chest was carried out with

care and bound into place and guarded straitly. All has been found save this alone."

"Aye, by the beard and the teeth of Ali—all but this!" He glowered at her and flung a command at the anxious warriors. "Torture the Franks with fire and stay not until they tell of the hiding of the treasure!"

"Yet," cried the woman, "leave me the young warrior. I will try him with words," she whispered eagerly, "and by favor of the All-Wise may I prevail with him."

Some of the talk Kirdy had caught, and he put his hand on the shoulder of Witless. "They will torture you, sir brother. If I live, they will remember your death."

Moslem spearmen jerked the tall warrior to his feet, and Witless lifted his head to look at them with dignity. "I thank you, *kunak*," he said slowly, "and even if I am not so wise as other knights, I shall not yield to them—they will learn that a Cossack does not fear torment." He sighed, clasping his hands. "If you would ask them to give me a cup of wine. I am very thirsty and Dog-Face drank up the last skin we had between us four nights since."

In the best Turki he could muster Kirdy made the request, and the tribesmen mocked at him, one of them taking the trouble to spit into Witless' face. Then Kirdy's companion was led away, sighing, but with head high and shoulders squared.

Before his guards could prevent, Kirdy sprang to his feet and cried out, to Arap Muhammad Khan. "That is ill done, O lord of the Turkomans. *Yah ahmak*—the man is afflicted in the brain and by the law of your prophet such are spared pain."

"Hai—he can tell us of the hiding of the treasure."

"Not he!"

A slow smile stirred the thin lips of the khan, as he studied the boy's tense face. "If not he, then thou."

Kirdy kept silent. Khlit had arranged the packing of the spoil in Urgench, and the boy remembered that he had seen the old warrior place the finest emeralds and precious stones in the millet that he carried in his saddlebags. The leather chest had been no more than a blind—a safeguard against thieves who might steal into the Cossack camp. Even Ayub had not known that the chest he watched over so carefully held no more than sand and stones.

It was like the Wolf to hide away his spoil where no one would look for it, and where it would be under his eye. Khlit, too, had appropriated the three best Kabarda stallions of the khan's stables. It was possible that he had won clear of the Turkomans, for many of the bands were still absent from the camp.

Kirdy was nerving himself to face the torture when Nur-ed-din slipped to her feet and came to him.

"Oh, chief's son," she whispered, "I have begged a boon of the khan and that boon is thy life. Aforetime thou didst spare me when command was given to slay and we of Islam remember more than our wrongs."

Many of the emirs and warriors in attendance had left to watch the fate of Witless and at a sign from Arap Muhammad Khan the others went away from the knoll, except the spearman who stood behind the boy and the sword-bearer of the chieftain. Even when she is veiled a devout Moslem does not care for his sons and officers to gaze at one of his women when she steps from his tent.

The voice of Nur-ed-din was soft and swift as running water, and her full, dark eyes were innocent of guile. "One price the khan must have for thy life. He must know where the jewels of Urgench lie hid."

"I know not."

For a second she hesitated, her glance full on him. Perhaps she could read more than a little of his thoughts, but surely she could read his face, and she knew that there was more he could tell.

"Thou art brave, my warrior! Think! Alone of the Urusses"—she paused to glance fleetingly up the hillside where the scattered bodies still lay unburied, but attended by kites and a multitude of jackals—"thou art living. None can hear thy words. What reason, then, to play the fool? Arms, a horse and honor await thee in the brotherhood of true believers. And what is faith—save the mumbling of priests, and the saying of prayer?"

"This," said the boy sturdily, "is our faith. We gave pledge to the Muscovite khan that we would bring him the jewels of Urgench. These others have kept faith. Shall I betray them?"

He spoke out of a full heart, but the shrewd Persian took his words to mean that he had some knowledge of the khan's treasure.

"Think!" she whispered again. "What avails it, to keep silence now? The emeralds will never leave the Turkoman land."

To this he nodded assent, but when he said nothing more she frowned.

"There are tidings I can give thee. Consider this, O youth of the Urusses. My eyes are quick, my memory is long. In the courtyard of Urgench I saw thee ride away with an old man. Today I have seen that same warrior."

"Nay," Kirdy laughed, "that is surely a lie."

"I knew him by the Kabarda he was leading—a favorite of my lord. Aye, swift as the black storm wind and sure of foot is the gray stallion. The old man no longer had his coat, and a Kirghiz shawl was wrapped over his shoulders, one corner upon his head—he looked like a Kurd who had been plundering in the upper valleys. At first I did not think he was a Cossack, but now I remember him."

"And now?"

"Now he will be searched out and cut down like a jackal unless we find the treasure. And as for thee"—she smiled, pointing to a dense crowd of Turkomans. From within the throng rose slender wisps of smoke. Yet Kirdy heard no outcry from the place where Witless was being tortured by fire.

That Nur-ed-din had seen Khlit he doubted. It was impossible to tell when the woman was speaking the truth.

"He was searching among the bodies," she added quickly, her eyes fast on his, "turning them over to look at the faces, and *that* was not like a Kurd, who would have looked only for spoil. I saw him last near the horse herd, in the *araba* ring."

She indicated the *tabor*, and Kirdy felt his heart sink. It would be like Khlit, who was utterly reckless of his own life, to come back to seek out his body. The old Cossack did not look like one of the Donskoi and from boots to girdle he had been clad in a haphazard fashion of his own. Nur-ed-din's description of him was apt enough.

He dared not ask if Khlit still had the saddlebags, and a quick scrutiny of the camp and the ridges beyond it failed to reveal a trace of his grandsire. But if Khlit still had the jewels, Kirdy knew that they could not buy their lives. He had seen the sullen, brooding eyes of Arap Muhammad Khan.

"I know naught of jewels or of a hiding-place," he said.

Nur-ed-din glanced over her shoulder at her master and then at the throng around Witless that had begun to scatter. One of them shouted something and Kirdy understood that Witless had died.

"Fool!" cried Nur-ed-din. "To be torn like that great buffalo over there!" Biting her lips she stared at him, at the taut muscles of his bare arms, the

pulse throbbing in his brown throat, at the dark circles under his quiet eyes.

No longer was the woman mocking him; anger and regret struggled within her, and she sought in vain for words. Against the barrier of the youth's silence she could find no weapon; nor could she break this quietude in which he mustered his strength to meet the torture.

"*Y'Allah*," cried the khan. "What is this?"

One of the wagons in the *tabor* ring had been moved out of place and through this opening the horses were streaming. Both the Turkoman and the Cossack knew that they were being driven, but not by the horse guards who were running and shouting, trying to head off the leaders. The half-wild ponies separated and plunged through the camp while others poured from the wagons.

Some of the horses raced past the knoll and for an instant Kirdy wondered if Khlit had turned them loose to divert attention from his own movements. But Khlit was not to be seen within the *tabor* or near it—only yawning Turkomans rolled out of their blankets or crawled from their half-tents to see what the shouting was about.

It was the first hour of the afternoon and most of the warriors had sought shelter from the heat of the sun.

And then above the drumming of hoofs the boy heard Khlit's voice.

"*Nà kòn*! To horse!"

At the same time he saw the old Cossack trot from between two of the black tents. Khlit was riding one of the Kabardas and beside him the gray stallion tugged at its rein and reared, excited by the tumult and obviously unwilling to play the part of a led-horse. Kirdy realized two things—he must act instantly and he must reach the gray horse.

Arap Muhammad Khan and Nur-ed-din could not see Khlit, but the guard at the boy's back had half turned to glance down at the two splendid ponies. It flashed through Kirdy's mind that the Turkoman had heard the khan say he was to be tortured, and so would hesitate before cutting him down.

Without moving his feet he leaped back and the spearman staggered. The boy darted past him and sped down the sharp slope of the knoll. He had a fleeting glimpse of Arap Muhammad Khan springing to his feet, and the nearest emir drawing a scimitar from his girdle.

A dozen paces and he knew the Turkoman guard had not cast the spear. Then he heard the man's feet pounding behind him.

Khlit urged on his horse and when Kirdy raced down upon him, dropped the rein of the gray. Groping under his shawl the old warrior pulled out the long curved saber and Kirdy heard it whistle over his head—heard, too, the thud of steel against bone, and the heavy fall of the Turkoman who had pursued him.

The gray stallion reared and Kirdy reached for his mane. The leather thongs on his wrist had half numbed his fingers, but the plunge down the knoll had set the blood moving through his hands again and he leaped into the saddle. He thrust his bare feet into the short Turkoman stirrups as the horse started after Khlit's pony.

Behind him he heard a long drawn shout from the knoll—"*Yah hai, Y'Allah, il allah!*"

A glance over his shoulder showed him the Turkomans running for their horse, and Nur-ed-din standing like a statue before the deserted tent of the khan. Another moment and the two Cossacks had put the *tabor* between them and the knoll and the riderless ponies from the herd were thick around them.

Out of one of the wagons crawled a wizened figure that sped to a thin and mean-looking pony that was grazing patiently near them. By his wide-brimmed black hat and greasy sheepskins Kirdy recognized Shamaki, and thought that the *koldun* must have started the stampede of the ponies.

Khlit leaned over and drew the blade of the saber across the cords on Kirdy's wrists without troubling whether or not he cut through the boy's skin. It took two good hands to manage the restless stallion that neighed with upflung head and was more than willing to run down any riderless pony that ventured too near.

For a while the horse engaged all the boy's attention. He was aware of warriors who stared in bewilderment at the old Tatar and the gray-haired rider who looked like a Kurd and the young rider without cloak or boots or weapon. By the time the band that had started in pursuit came up with the watchers, the Cossacks had passed the fallen pillar that marked the entrance to the gorge through which ran the caravan track.

They had a start of five hundred yards, and Kirdy laughed exultingly as he realized that the splendid Kabardas were fresh.

They thundered by scattered fires of the Kara Kalpaks, and Providence so far aided them that they met no parties of tribesmen returning to camp through the ravine. When they came out on the plain beyond the ridges, they saw that the pursuers had lost a little ground.

Then the three steadied the horses and settled down to a long gallop, their eyes on the heights to the north that formed the barrier around the Blue Sea.

When darkness clouded the plain a few Turkomans had drawn up to within two bowshots of Kirdy and his companions. Glancing over his shoulder from time to time Khlit waited until the glow in the west had faded from orange to a deep scarlet.

With a word to the others, he took his whip and snapped it down the flank of his bay pony, and the gray stallion quickened his pace, unwilling to be left behind. The matchless Kabardas had been held in until now, and after five hours they still had a race left in them. Shamaki had been using his whip for the last hour but the gray stallion was only sweating under the saddle and flanks.

They entered a network of gullies, and the Tatar took the lead. Kirdy had heard the Cossacks say that the conjurer could see in the dark. If this were not true, Shamaki knew the country well. He turned up a steep trail that led through a mass of boulders, and turned again sharply into a sandy ravine where the horses moved silently. Here he halted to breathe the ponies and listen with his ear to the ground.

"Come," he grunted after a while, "we must be in the saddle. The *kibitka* is far from here."

When they moved on, guided by the Tatar, Khlit told the boy what had happened in the last days.

The column led by Ostap and himself had been fortunate. It had penetrated the Turkoman lines, losing only a score of men. Evidently the tribesmen were not so numerous on that side, and the Cossacks had reached these same heights, where Ostap and Khlit were at some pains to hide their trail. The next day they had come out on the shore of the Blue Sea. They worked to the east until they found a bay where fresh water appeared in a spring among the rocks. This bay was sheltered, and here they decided to rest the exhausted horses and themselves.

They did not know on what point of the sea they had come out, and to ride farther along the edge of it would bring them inevitably into contact with the bands of tribesmen searching for them. They had wiped out their trail in the water and posted sentries on the ridges around their camp.

For food they were able to catch plenty of fish in the shallow bay. Khlit had found Shamaki quartered in a hut a couple of miles from the camp.

The Tatar, who had been traveling two days in advance of the Cossacks, had seen them riding in the water and had come to meet Khlit.

Shamaki had heard from passing tribesmen of the fate of Demid and his men, and that Goloto been cut off in the hills. Together the old warriors turned back to search for Kirdy's body. How Khlit had persuaded Shamaki to accompany him he did not say; but the boy fancied that the Tatar was more afraid of the Wolf than he was of the Turkomans.

It was Shamaki who learned that Kirdy was a prisoner with Witless on that last day and when Khlit saw the Cossack led out for torture he sent the Tatar into the *tabor* to stampede the horses while he worked nearer the tent of the khan with the gray stallion.

Chapter 14
Ayub

> *When a Cossack is born a sword is placed at his side; by it he lives and dies. By the cross in the hilt he prays and by the shining blade he takes oath. When the Blue Sea dries up and the Roof of the World is level with the plain—then the Cossack will ride over the steppes without a sword.*

When the wind began to bite with a damp, chill touch and they heard the murmur of a swell on a wide shore close to them Shamaki dismounted and led his horse into a stand of dead poplars. Here was his *kibitka*, an abandoned wattle hut in which he had taken shelter. By the strong smell of wet rushes Kirdy knew that they were almost on the beach.

The wind rustled the brittle limbs of the poplars, and the sedge growth beneath, but a louder rustling made the boy's skin crawl. Shamaki, too, halted as if puzzled, and they listened in silence.

By now the hut was visible—a black bulk in the gray trunks—and from it came the flapping of wings and a man's voice in a continuous groan. Khlit and Shamaki left the horses standing and circled the hut while Kirdy walked to the opening.

There was only one voice, and it seemed to excite the eagle that Shamaki had left chained in the shack to a kind of frenzy—until man and bird became quiet.

"Spawn of the Horned One," there came a roar in broken Tatar, "the devil knows who you are, but I'll send you to greet him. Just bend your heads and enter—"

"Ayub!" cried the boy.

"Stand back!" growled the Zaporogian. "That is Kirdy's voice, but are you in your body? Are you spirit or are you human?"

"Nay, here is Khlit and the *koldun*, Shamaki. That is his eagle in the *choutar*."

A towering form staggered through the entrance and a massive hand gripped the boy's shoulder, and through the shirt Kirdy could feel the heat of fever. "*Plitzy Boga s Vamy!* May God send you joy! Hi, old Wolf—Hi, you dog of a Tatar! Truly the Father and Son have saved you, for otherwise it is not possible that you could be alive."

"How came you here?" cried Kirdy joyfully, because he had thought Ayub slain, and could not understand how the big Zaporogian had come through the Moslems with a broken arm. He knew Ayub too well to think that he would have left Demid of his own will.

"By the *buntchauk*, the standard, little brother. Only look!" Ayub reached into the hut and pulled out the cross piece of the Donskoi standard, with its white falcon's head and flowing buffalo tails. The pole had been broken off close to the end and Kirdy uttered an exclamation of delight. For weeks he had watched the white standard advancing at the head of the column and he was glad that it had not fallen into the hands of the Moslems. He remembered that he had not seen it at the feet of Arap Muhammad Khan in the black tent.

A grim word of praise from the darkness showed that Khlit, too, had recognized the standard—what was left of it.

"It was this way, my falcons," rumbled Ayub, his ready tongue spurred by the fever. "The bearer of the standard was slain by an arrow of the Kara Kalpaks and fell underfoot. God never meant that the dogs of Turkomans should put their claws on the *buntchauk*. I dismounted, and cut loose the pole with my saber, so that I could thrust it under my leg. But when I was in the saddle again, the saber work was going on all around and I could not find Demid. I heard the war cry of some of the brothers and reined toward them, but they were Goloto's men."

He paused to sigh and moisten dry lips. "I rode with Goloto into the hills and only half his men were left in the saddle. There I parted with him, and the black devils were all around. I slew a score on my way to this place—may the grass grow over them! I thought I saw some of the brothers riding along this shore. Then I came upon a boat. My horse had broken its foreleg and I cut its throat with my saber. It was clear to me that

God did not mean that the Turkomans should cut off my head, because I found the skiff hidden in the rushes, with a mast and sail in it. A fox's hole smells sweeter than that fisherman's boat but it is sound, I think. I was weary and could not move it into the water, but now that I have slept—where is Demid?"

Kirdy glanced at Khlit and after a moment the old warrior spoke gently. "Ayub, Demid had a hero's death under the swords of the Turkoman horde."

Ayub bent his head to peer at them. "How—what is that? The Turkoman horde—they could not take the Falcon."

"They could not take him," assented Kirdy quickly, "he was through their lines when he turned back to aid his men. He is dead."

For a moment Ayub was motionless and then he did not cry out. With his good hand he tore at his hair and ripped the sling from his broken arm. Drawing long, panting breaths, he clawed at the stiffened muscles of his left arm. "Give me the reins of a horse!"

In his overwhelming grief the big warrior wished to mount into a saddle and ride headlong, wherever the horse would take him. When he began to run toward the ponies, Kirdy and Khlit caught him by the shoulders and, for all their strength, were knocked aside like children. Then the Wolf tripped Ayub and Kirdy threw himself on the Zaporogian, throttling him until he grew weaker, and Shamaki, who had seen him in a fury before, came up from the beach with a hatful of water, dashing it into his face.

The fitful strength of the fever ebbed and Kirdy rose, leaving Ayub stretched out on the ground, groaning.

"*Ai-a, moi sokoli!* Here am I—dog, clown, boaster—I live and Demid, the Falcon, is slain. Grant me death, sir brothers."

"It is not far away," growled Shamaki, who had been looking around for Khlit vainly.

"He pulled me out of the water by the scalp lock! He took all the gold out of the castle to ransom me when I was put in the stocks. Of all that he had, he never took anything for himself—his word was without blemish, like clean steel. Never did a finer *ataman* come to the side of the White Christ. All the elder heroes will greet him, and make way for him at once—they will bid him to their bread and salt."

He ceased speaking only when Khlit trudged up, bearing a heavy burden that proved to be the two saddlebags. He had hidden them in the sand

a short distance from the hut, and investigation proved that the jewels were still safe.

Then, glancing at the stars, he said that they must join Ostap's Cossacks in the bay nearby.

"Wait, *koshevoi*!" Ayub held up his hand and sighed. "Are any left from Demid's command!"

"Only Kirdy."

"Hai—it has gone hard with the Donskoi. If we must join Ostap and his men I will not hang back. But not a Cossack is alive in their camp yonder. The Turkomans are swarming over it like bees. Two thousand of them surrounded the camp and I saw the last of the brothers cut down on the beach when I was searching for them."

Khlit sat down on one of the saddlebags and pondered. "Then it is clear that we must bear the jewels of Urgench to the Muscovite tsar. We, three."

"May the black pest take the Muscovite tsar!" muttered Ayub, shaking his head. "Nay, there is a devil of sickness in me, sir brothers, my arm is broken—you have only two horses. Ride on and leave me here. I do not wish to go from this place."

Khlit and Shamaki talked together for a while, and then the Wolf turned to his companions. "We cannot reach the Jaick river in the saddle. If Ostap and his men have been wiped out, the Moslems are on all sides of us."

"They will feel our bite before they cut us down," snarled the Zaporogian.

"This is what we must do," Khlit responded thoughtfully. "The last of the Donskoi are slain—but their word to the tsar is still to be made good, their pledge must be redeemed. We must take the jewels to Moscow, because we alone know what befell Demid and our words must clear him of all blame. Can you sail a boat, Ayub?"

The Zaporogian nodded. He had been born on the shore of the Black Sea, and many were the raids he had made on Turkish craft in the long Cossack skiffs.

"Shamaki will give us food for our horses," Khlit went on. "He will not betray us. But you must go with us, Ayub, because without you we could not make the boat trot forward, nor could we rein it back when it was time to halt."

The Wolf and Kirdy had been bred on the steppes, and even in crossing rivers they had seldom set foot in a vessel. Kirdy, indeed, had the Mongol's dislike of the water.

Ayub paid attention at last, and a fresh notion seemed to strike him because he assured them that he would handle the boat. Until the stars faded and gray light crept among the dead poplars they sat almost in silence, grieving for Demid and the brothers who had gone out of the world before them.

It was noon before they pushed the boat through the rushes and wet clay into the water. During the morning Ayub and Kirdy slept in the hut, but Khlit was otherwise occupied. He drove a bargain with Shamaki, taking care to get from the Tatar the things the Cossacks needed, but not so much as to make Shamaki less than well pleased.

In exchange for the two horses and the saddles ornamented with pearls and painted leather cloths, Khlit obtained half of the tribesman's stock of barley, a goatskin for water, a small bow and a half dozen arrows and all the dried meat that Shamaki had salted down and kept soft between his saddle and the skin of his horse.

Then Shamaki explained to the old Cossack the extent of the Blue Sea, which he called the Sea of Crows, and the position of numerous islands within it, and where the Tatar yurtas or wandering villages to the north of it might be found.

"The Mankats and Kara Kalpaks are thieves without honor; they have no tents except wolf skins—do not go to them. The Kirghiz have round felt tents that are sometimes placed on wagons. Go at once into their *kibitka*, and you will be well treated. But when you have left the limit of their village look carefully on all sides, because when you are no longer their guests they may decide to rob you. *Ahatou, youldash*—farewell, my comrade."

"May your trail be open—may your hunting be good!" growled Khlit.

He watched Shamaki put his packs on the flea-bitten pony and mount the gray stallion. The Tatar was glowing with inward satisfaction; he had run grave risks on Khlit's behalf, but he had been well rewarded. If Khlit had driven a hard bargain with Shamaki the Cossack would have done well to slay the tribesman, or the Tatar might take it into his head to betray them to the Turkomans.

"I go to the mountains of the eagles," muttered Shamaki, "and you, my friend—your path lies over the sea of the crows. *Kai*, it is a hard road."

And Khlit knew that the old man was homesick for the high steppes where he could hunt the herds of wild horses and gather cattle and women about him and sit in the smoke of his own fire. Khlit, too, would have liked to go with Shamaki and winter in the Airak range. He did not relish the thought of returning to Moscow. But there was the treasure and there was Kirdy. The old Cossack had resolved that Kirdy should win honor among Christians, and now he saw how this might be done.

"Aye, a hard road—in Moscow," he answered and Shamaki clucked understanding, riding off on the splendid stallion with the golden eagle perched on the crupper.

Then Khlit carried the saddlebags and the articles he had bought down to the place where Ayub had said the skiff was to be found. It was clear to him when he saw it that the fishermen who lived in the hut had run off when the warriors began to come to the edge of the Blue Sea. Fish scales, not altogether dried up, stuck to the sides of the boat, and the rushes in the bottom were still damp.

It was rudely made—some fifteen feet in length, with a mast as long as a lance lying in it, and a rolled-up felt sail, patched and tattered.

He filled the goatskin with water and waited until a fresh breeze began to hum in the rushes before waking the boy and the Zaporogian. Kirdy eyed the boat with little enthusiasm, and Khlit knew that he would rather have kept to the saddle, be the chance of safety however slight.

"Kirdy," he remarked, "the slain brothers have named you Cossack. You have learned many things. But in a boat you have little wisdom. Now we are going on the blue water, and until we set foot on earth again, Ayub is to give orders in all things."

So the Wolf said, and almost at once he had reason to regret it. But he had seen that Ayub was in a black mood, troubled by sorrow and the devil of illness and it was impossible for the Zaporogian to mount a horse and ride it off. It was better to let him have his way unquestioned in the boat than to dispute among themselves as to what should be done.

Ayub glanced at the sky and said promptly that they must push the skiff into the water. After two days of watching from the heights he was certain that there were very few vessels at this end of the Blue Sea—only fishing craft like this—and nothing was more certain than that the desert-bred Turkomans would never venture into a boat. Moreover the wind served the purpose he had in mind.

So they ran the skiff down the salt-streaked strand until, still hemmed in by the mesh of tossing green growth, it floated and Ayub climbed in, to thrust with the oar until they came out into the clear water where a slight swell ran. Here he took up the bar of the standard that he had carried down from the hut and lashed it near the top of the mast with rushes. Then he set the small yard of the sail on the pegs below it, and, assisted by Kirdy, stepped the mast in place.

The felt sail flapped around them until Ayub showed the boy how, by pulling on the ropes at the corners, the yard could be turned to one side so that the wind filled the square sail. He himself thrust the one oar into a crotch at the stem and steered away from the coast.

Khlit, who was watching for signs of Turkomans, saw that Ayub did not head out into the sea, but laid a course that would take them just clear of the headland that formed one arm of the bay where Ostap and his men had taken refuge.

The wind was freshening gradually and white water showed here and there. Still Ayub kept on, until the rocks of the point were hard on their bow. Khlit saw several riders moving out toward them, but these were lost to sight when they rounded the headland and the half-moon of the bay opened out.

Here, on the upper sands, hundreds of the Turkomans were camped. At first they paid no attention to the boat. But when Ayub swung on the oar and the skiff pointed in to the beach they began to shout and run down to the water's edge, having seen the white falcon and the streaming buffalo tails at the masthead.

Still Ayub steered toward the sands, and Kirdy glanced at Khlit. Surely, the boy thought, the Zaporogian was out of his head with the fever and the gnawing of grief. Ayub's full face was flushed and his teeth gleamed through his heavy mustache.

Alert and restless, Khlit studied his comrade's face, glanced at the shore and the figures of the Moslem warriors that were growing larger each minute.

"Let be!" he growled at Kirdy, and sat back, tugging at his mustache. It was clear to the boy that Khlit did not know what Ayub meant to do, but was not willing to interfere with his plan.

The boat began to turn a little more, and presently they could see even the eyes of the tribesmen and the steel points of the shafts they were fitting

to their bows. Then Ayub ordered Kirdy to drop the rope. The skiff veered, and Ayub thrust the oar around until the bow came into the wind.

Seizing the two heavy saddlebags that Khlit had placed under the stern seat, he held them up, and called to Kirdy over his shoulder.

"Tell the sons of jackals what these be!"

Kirdy stood up, laughing, and steadied himself against the mast.

"Look well, O dogs of Urgench. Here is treasure of thy master, O slaves!"

Not content with this, Ayub fished in a bag until be felt a long rope of pearls and lifted it in his two hands for all the shore to see. A shout of rage proved that the tribesmen had grasped his meaning, and fifty bows were loosed. Some of the arrows hissed into the water near them, and two struck in the skiff. These Kirdy afterward cut out with care and added to their scanty stock. By then Ayub was willing to adjust the sail and head off on a long tack that took them clear of the headlands.

Khlit made no comment except to fill and light his pipe, and by this token the boy knew that he rather approved of Ayub's reckless venture. At least the mocking of the Turkomans seemed to physic Ayub's sickness, because his fever mended that night, although it was many days before the swelling in his arm went down and many more before the bone was sound.

During that night, while he lay on his back looking up at the glittering firmament of the stars, Kirdy fell to wondering how they would fare if the wind should cease for several days. They were out of sight of land and the skiff was moving sluggishly over the swell—or so it seemed to Kirdy, who did not know that with the wind over the stern the little vessel was making good speed. He put the question to Ayub, who answered that it was the equinox, the season of storms.

In fact the wind did not fail them, though it proved both fitful and treacherous. Ayub showed Kirdy how to tie the ropes that trimmed the sail, and how to steer at night by the stars, picking out the eye of the Great Bear—as Khlit had so often done at night on the steppe.

The breath of the wind became colder, and Ayub roused himself on the third night to make Kirdy take his *svitza* for covering when he felt the boy shivering at the steering oar.

"God made me like a *medvied*, a mountain bear," he argued. "There is so much fat on my bones that even a saber cannot cut to my vitals. Take

the coat because I have no need of it. Ai-a, many's the time I put it over Demid, the *bogatyr*, when he was asleep in the snow. In shape and in voice you are like him, and you are a master of the sword as he was."

Kirdy sometimes wished that Khlit and Ayub would unpack the saddlebags and show him the precious stones of the treasure, but they never seemed to think of the bags. Once Ayub put his foot on them and began to sigh.

"What is the good of such things, Kirdy? They are not weapons, they are not food. The tsar will give the best to his women or put them on his collar or girdle. Then he will shine, it is true. But that will bring him no glory. God alone knows what is the good of a treasure."

"It is in my mind," observed Khlit, who had been listening, "that the Tsar Boris seeks to gain more than a treasure from our venture."

"How, more?" demanded Ayub, but the old Cossack would not say.

On the next day the wind bore them close to a clump of islands—gray and ridged with rock and without vegetation of any kind. Multitudes of birds clouded the rocks and rose with clamorous discord when they drew near.

Ayub took this to be an unfavorable omen and would not try to land on the islands, saying that they would find no water there.

"Yet," Kirdy reminded him, "the omen is not bad. Ravens do not venture far from the land."

"If you are so wise," retorted the Zaporogian, "tell me where the mainland is."

"It lies over there," Khlit said promptly, pointing to the northwest, and Ayub, who did not know that the old warrior had been told of this by Shamaki, grunted in surprise.

And, as Khlit maintained, the line of a high, rocky coast rose out of the sea. They landed that day on a narrow beach under a sheer cliff, and ran the skiff into a nest of boulders. Removing the mast, they covered the boat as well as they could with stones and the rushes taken from it so that wandering tribesmen would not see it from the heights.

Before this they had removed the millet from the saddlebags and bound up the jewels in two smaller sacks that were nevertheless as heavy as two long muskets. Their dwindling stock of food and the goatskin made a third bundle that Khlit took on his shoulders. Kirdy carried the bow and went ahead, seeking a path up the cliff, his feet bound in strips torn from the felt

sail. He had made himself a cloak out of the felt, and the remaining portions Khlit put in his pack—for which they had reason to be thankful.

The standard Ayub took on his shoulder and though he complained of many things before they came out of the dry lands, he would not let the others relieve him of its weight.

"In time, little brother," he laughed at Kirdy, "they will make you a *buntchauk ataman* and you will ride under a standard like this, but that time is not yet."

But once on shore he was content to have Kirdy take the lead. From what Shamaki had told them they thought they had come to the extreme north of the Blue Sea, and so must be several hundred leagues to the east of the route they had taken to Urgench. It was a gray land, under a gray sky, and already the Autumn frost was in the ground. Far to the northwest a range of peaks was visible, with snow on the caps, and they decided to strike toward these mountains where they might expect to find some of the Kirghiz nomads taking shelter with their herds in the valleys.

It was Kirdy who led them to water on the second day, and who waited by the well until he had stalked and brought down with an arrow a strange-looking beast, fat and fleet of foot with long ears and the vestige of stripes on its skin. Ayub had never seen such a thing before, but Kirdy assured him it was a *kulan*, a wild ass. They passed many herds of shaggy horses with bloodshot eyes—too timid to be approached within arrow shot. These were the wild horses of the steppe, and Ayub lamented greatly that he must needs walk on his feet with hundreds of ponies keeping him company.

They found at first no trace of men, and this vast plain rising to the snow range, so different from his own fertile steppe, filled him with uneasiness, that did not diminish when Khlit remarked that the roof of the world was not far away on their right hand.

For two weeks they moved over the plain toward the range that seemed to recede before them, and at the end of that time they came upon human beings who had never heard of Muscovite, Cossack or Turkoman.

Chapter 15
The White World

The Cossacks had seen no animals—not so much as a marmot diving into its hole—for a whole day, and the leaden sky concealed the nearby mountain range when they climbed a ridge and beheld a line of men and beasts moving on the far slope. They lay down at once on their bellies and watched.

Gray as the cloud wrack were these new people of the waste land—long gray skirts flapping against their boots, high black hats with turned-up brims bent against the gusts of wind. It was hard to tell men from women—except that the women carried both babies and loads while the men stalked ahead, spears over their arms, leading laden ponies.

"No Kirghiz these," growled Khlit. "Nay, they be shamanists, devil worshipers from under the roof of the world. They bow down to fire and the blood that feeds their bodies."

"Well," rumbled Ayub, "they are looking for a place to camp. We can go to them and ask for a place at their fire. A dog would not be turned away at such a time on the steppe."

"This is not the steppe," Khlit answered him and shook his head. "The devil people have pointed teeth, like the wolf's. And you are fat as a mountain bear."

"*They* know that snow is coming," said Kirdy, who had been sniffing the cold air. "Wait!"

For a while the Cossacks followed the gray caravan, keeping out of sight behind the ridge, and when the tribesmen halted in a blind gully to make a fire Khlit took out the piece of felt that was left from the sail and gave it to Kirdy. Then he sat down with his back to the wind. When the first hailstones rattled around them, Ayub missed Kirdy and the length of gray felt—which he could have used very well just then. As the boy had said, it grew darker and the air became bitterly cold and the hail ceased. Flakes of snow swirled down, at first a flurry and then a driving mass that hid their surroundings from view.

"It is wet and heavy," Khlit pointed out, "and the storm will not last."

Ayub was too uncomfortable to consider this, until a hideous clamor broke out in the direction of the camp, and resolved itself into shouting that came nearer and wandered off into the storm. Hoofs pounded on the frozen earth and a pony trotted up without bridle or bit, ridden by a man who was a shapeless bulk of gray and headless.

With his mind on devils, Ayub lifted the hilt of his saber, presenting the cross on the pommel to the strange rider and was greatly relieved to see Kirdy's brown face appear when the felt cloth was tossed from his shoulders. The boy had driven up two other ponies and these Khlit had gone to catch.

Kirdy wasted no breath in explanation but Ayub knew that he had stolen up on the tethered horses of the tribesmen in the storm and had set loose others than the three he brought back with him.

And he had made a discovery. The shamanists were following an old trail that led toward the mountains—a trail made by people with camels, who carried their packs on long poles trailing behind the animals. These, Khlit said, would be Kirghiz, seeking shelter in the upper valleys.

After making halters out of the leather cords Kirdy had brought back with him, the Cossacks mounted the short-legged, shaggy ponies and set out into the driving snow, resolved to put as much distance between themselves and the devil worshipers as possible. Only for a short way were they able to follow the trail left by the Kirghiz, but the next day was clear and they found themselves fairly at the entrance of a wide basin through which a river wound, under the fir-clad shoulders of the heights that rose in successive ridges to the black granite slopes and the glittering snow-caps above the timber line. Here they met animal life again—deer drifting along the river's edge, and hares scurrying through the underbrush.

By the river they came on the yurta of the Kirghiz—round-faced, smiling people as plump as the fat-tailed sheep that crowded the fold in the center of the dome-like felt tents.

As a matter of course the Kirghiz killed a sheep in honor of the wanderers. They were grateful for the warning that shamanists were not far away on their trail, but were in no great hurry to forsake their comfortable quarters. For days the Cossacks slept by the yurta fires, keeping the saddlebags under their heads and the splendid curved saber out of sight.

"Those yonder were jackals," Kirdy explained to Ayub, "and these be sheep that wander where the pastures lie."

He questioned the *atabeg* of the tribe as to the mountain range, and learned no more than that the highest peak—the one that had guided them for the past week—was Airuk, the Mountain of the Eagles. The Kirghiz merely shook their heads at mention of the Jaick and Volga and Muscovy. God had made many rivers flow from these heights, they said, and if such a plain as the Cossack steppe existed, it must be at the end of a long journey from their place.

Kirdy thought that they must keep due west, under the setting sun, and pass through the heart of the mountains. Ayub, who was amazed at the longhaired Bactrians of the tribesmen, and at the size of the towering firs and silver birch that sheltered the valley, believed that they had come out in another quarter of the earth and would never find their way back.

But Khlit merely grinned and went about bargaining with the Kirghiz. He had stripped Ayub of everything of value—a leather girdle ornamented with pearls and scroll-work of gold, a red silk neckcloth that the Zaporogian prized greatly, and a few silver images of fantastic beasts—unicorns, sea cows and dog-headed snakes—that he wore about his throat. To these things Khlit added a handful of silver coins he had brought from Moscow, and the three ponies.

He and the atabeg negotiated for three days, and when Khlit found that the wife and daughter of the chief coveted the string of silver beasts, he made a good trade. The Cossacks were given three stronger ponies with small quilts for saddles, and three enormous sheepskin *khalats* that reached from chin to ankle and covered the tips of their fingers. Two quivers of arrows were added and enough cheese and barley to last for a long time.

"Look here," Ayub complained when he surveyed the goods they had bought, "let us give them a string of pearls from the saddlebags, and then they will let us have a pair of camels and a yurta."

"Nay," Khlit objected, "if we let them see we have jewels hidden they will suspect we have more and will rob us when we leave this place. Besides, we cannot take one jewel from the hoard because they are not ours."

"That is so," Ayub agreed. "They are the ransom of the Donskoi."

"We need nothing more," put in Kirdy, who had been bred in such country as this. "Game is on every hand, wood is plentiful, and no enemies are on the trail."

"Aye, no enemies but wolves, Tatars and the *ak-buran*, the white blizzard."

"These," muttered Khlit, "are less to be feared than the man who sits in the Kremyl at Moscow."

So they took to saddle again, under the Mountain of the Eagles, and Khlit and Kirdy proved to be in the right, for two months later the three riders drifted in the teeth of a snow storm across the frozen Volga and entered the gate of Kamushink which was unguarded except by a white mound over the sentry box.

When they had stabled their horses they made their way to the house of the commandant, the Swedish captain Van Elfsberg and, having bowed to him, took their seats on the stove at once, their padded coats steaming and reeking of mutton and horses.

All they would vouchsafe in answer to his questions was that they had come back from Urgench alone, and were ready to be taken to the tsar. Nor would they speak of the treasure.

The Swedish captain Van Elfsberg was accustomed to obey orders without question. The tsar had instructed him to wait at Kamushink until the Cossacks returned and then to escort them to Moscow and to take charge of whatever spoil they brought back, placing the royal seals upon it.

Van Elfsberg was heartily weary of Kamushink, and decided to set out at once in three sleighs, taking only his orderly and the Tatar drivers. It was impossible to move his two companies over the snowbound steppe. And, besides, he had only the three wanderers to guard. He did not think that the Cossacks would have journeyed three thousand miles over the desert and the Blue Sea, to run away from him now. As to the treasure that was to ransom them—that was their own affair.

On the second day out he was surprised and displeased to discover that, although the Cossacks had not escaped him, they had run away with him.

They had been talking to the Tatar postilions and the sleighs were flying over the white plain toward the southwest instead of to the northwest.

"Eh, captain," Khlit said indifferently, when Van Elfsberg complained, "all that is true. But tonight we will come to a river, and upon the ice of the river we will make up for these two days."

"What is this river, old man?"

"The Don."

"*Mort de ma vie!* Are you taking me to the villages of the Donskoi? We will have a hard welcome there, after what has happened."

"Nay, we will have a royal welcome."

"But your dark-faced chieftain and all his men—are dead."

"And in the villages of his people the story must be told; the *bandura* players, who are our minstrels, must hear of his deeds—aye, and the children of the slain heroes will know of it all."

Van Elfsberg considered this, with some doubt. "The devil! Cannot that wait until you have presented yourselves before the tsar?"

Khlit shook his head. Before going there the *buntchauk* must be returned to the Cossack elders who had given it to Demid on his setting forth from Kamushink, and—most important of all to the old warrior—the elders of the Donskoi must hear of the deeds of Kirdy. If so, they might give him a Cossack name, by which he would be known to all men.

Meanwhile Ayub had seen the perplexity of the Swede, and leaned forward to clap him on the knee—the three of them were in the first sleigh.

"*Allah birdui, sotnik!* Are we to go into the presence of the Muscovite emperor clad in this fashion with fleas and rags and sheep's grease? They would loose the dogs on us. You, who are an officer, know that we ought to wear the regalia of our rank."

This impressed the punctilious captain rather favorably, and he only asked of Khlit, "You will certainly appear with me in Moscow?"

He was the more resigned when they entered the first clay huts of a large village, and Khlit led him to quarters in a tavern and, with a word to the Cossack innkeeper, left him to his own devices. The mead was excellent, the spirits heady, and the soup and sausages and little cheese cakes struck the captain as far superior to the Muscovite fare in Kamushink. He ate heartily, drank and slept the sleep of a self-possessed man who does not quarrel with circumstances.

During the next day he rather expected to encounter a deal of weeping among the women and angry recrimination from the few warriors and the old men of the *stanitza*. He was aware that riders were coming in continually from the steppe—that candles were carried to the white clay church with the painted door, and that groups of men went from door to door. Apparently Demid's people did not sleep at all that night.

Van Elfsberg was more struck by the fact that his bed had linen sheets as white and soft as those of Sweden, and the hour was late when he rose and went down to breakfast, brushing his tawny mustaches, adjusting his cloak to fall over the tip of his long scabbard and putting his hand on the polished steel sword hilt.

He breakfasted as well as he had dined in a room filled with old Cossacks and young, who wore low Turkish boots and scimitars, who smoked short clay pipes and greeted him with grave courtesy, doffing their caps when he pulled off his plumed hat and bowed.

"*Chlieb sol*," they said—"Our house is your house."

Although he listened to their talk, he could make out only that they spoke of the *atamans* and a certain Ak-Sokol who appeared to be a stranger in the village.

Once he ventured to address in his broken Russian a youth that he thought he had seen in Kamushink when the Donskoi set into the desert.

"Eh, *batyushka*—it was unlucky, that raid of your regiment."

The young Cossack turned and bowed. "With the forehead, captain. God gives!" He thought for a moment. "But the jewels are splendid—how they shine! The emeralds are as large as your thumb."

Van Elfsberg checked the cup be was raising to his lips, and frowned. The Cossack was unwilling to say anything more, and the officer observed to himself: "Well, it is clear that Boris will have to whistle for his treasure, and that won't help my career at the Muscovite court."

If the three Cossacks had brought jewels from Urgench across the border, in their heavy coats, or saddlebags—the devil knew how—he did not think the court at Moscow would ever see those jewels, and he decided that it would be best for him to say nothing at all about it.

When he walked from the tavern he heard singing in the church, and the women who passed him in the street were not weeping. Their faces were pale and shadows were under their eyes, as if an internal fire had left its ashes visible. Van Elfsberg was glad to find Khlit and his two companions ready for the road. He stopped in his tracks when he saw them.

"The devil!"

Khlit's spare form was clad in a sable *svitza*; his new boots were blackened with tar, and his green sash spotted with it. His *kalpak* was gray lambskin, and he held in his hand an ivory baton, the image of St. George carved in the tip.

"What is that uniform?" Van Elfsberg stopped a passing Cossack to ask.

"That, captain, is the regalia of a Koshevoi Ataman of the siech, which is the war encampment of all the Cossacks."

A second glance was necessary to identify Kirdy. His cap was of white lambskin, the top red velvet, his boots were red calfskin, shining with gold varnish. The Swedish captain gasped when he studied the boy's *svitza*. It was pure ermine, girdled with a green sash, wound around and around his slim hips, and embroidered with gold. He, too, held an ivory baton without ornament.

"And that, your Excellency," said the Donskoi, noticing his glance, "is the regalia of a *buntchauk ataman* of the Don Cossacks. We have just given Ak-Sokol the baton."

Van Elfsberg saw that the splendid head of the boy, thinned by hardships and suffering, was flushed and his black eyes gleamed joyfully.

"But that is Kirdy, the grandson of Khlit," he objected.

"Aye, *sotnik*," the Cossack at his side nodded good-naturedly. "Yet now he is Ak-Sokol, the White Falcon. It is our custom to give to every man a name, when he has performed some deed. Since he was the last to stand at the side of Demid, our Falcon, and since by his daring the standard of

the Donskoi was brought back to us, it is right that we should name him Ak-Sokol. Now he is going to Moscow to tell the tsar of the deeds of our *ataman* and our brothers."

In the chronicles of the reign of Boris Godunov it is related that three masterless Cossacks from the border were summoned to dine with his majesty in the Terem one afternoon and there did relate how Urgench was captured.

It was the White Falcon who told the story, stepping into the clear space between the tables, facing the tsar who sat alone, a golden flagon in his hand and a pet gyrfalcon on its perch near his shoulder, and the dwarf Kholop crouched at his feet and grimacing. But on either side the tsar were ranged the *kambardniks* with their silver axes, and the eyes of Boris Godunov crept without ceasing from the faces of his chancellors and officers to the throng of the courtiers and ambassadors seated at the lower tables.

He seemed not to listen to the narrative of the boy, yet from time to time he threw at him a keen question, as to the number of caravans in the desert, the strength of the Turkomans and the battle that had endured for a week.

Often he drank from the cup and when he did so the throng in the low dining hall with the carved and gilded wooden rafters rose to its feet, and Kirdy was silent, until Boris Godunov signed for him to continue. And the eyes of the tsar were quick to see who, among his court, were ready to pay him this respect and who lagged in obedience.

But by degrees he hung upon the words of the White Falcon, and even the minstrels who sat against the wall, *teorban* and fiddle in hand, leaned closer, because the story of the battle was one to stir the blood when Kirdy told how each leader of the Cossacks had met his end. When he had done the tsar sat in thought for a minute and then motioned for one of his boyars to fill the gold cup and offer it in turn to the three Cossacks, who bowed to him before they drank and gave thanks after their fashion.

And Boris Godunov drank deep of wine and spirits, because the shadow that lay over Muscovy was mirrored in his broad, lined face, and he had come to his throne by the murder of a boy younger than Kirdy.

"Out of the five hundred, only three returned," he said, looking at Kholop.

"Aye, lord," responded Kirdy.

"It was prophesied that the venture would end in achievement, and also in bloodshed," the tsar meditated aloud, recalling the words of Shamaki, who had fled from his court.

"Aye, lord."

"Yet you have brought me no treasure."

At this Khlit rose and left the dining hall, back almost at once with a slave bearing his two saddlebags. When he reached Kirdy's side, he cut the lashings and poured out on the tiled floor streams of millet in which glittered many-colored precious stones and clear amber and gray-green jade, and softly resplendent pearls.

Seeking for a moment, he picked out a great emerald and placed it on the table before the tsar.

"Lord prince," he said, "here be the jewels of Urgench, and the word of the Donskoi is made good."

Boris Godunov scrutinized the emerald between thumb and forefinger without change of expression.

"It is strange," he remarked. "So the matter was foretold—achievement and death have come to pass at the same time. Yet it puzzles me. Your grandson has said that you lacked for money among the Tatars and sold your girdles and neckcloths. Why did you not take one such stone and buy camels and horses?"

"The ransom was not ours. It was gained by Demid and the sir brothers."

"By the apostles—they were dead!"

When Khlit remained silent, the tsar considered them, frowning, and signed to Van Elfsberg, among his officers, to approach. When the captain bowed at his ear, the emperor spoke to him in Latin. "*Sic itur ad astra*—such is the rise to fame. I did not think these savages would prevail."

The Swedish officer bowed, well pleased at the success of the mission—seeing that Boris Godunov was satisfied.

"These men would not understand," went on the tsar. "I care little for this." He touched the glowing emerald lightly with his plump finger. "The wealth of Muscovy must be gleaned from its trade. A route must be opened for our goods, to Cathay and to India. These men have dealt a blow to the robbers who have hindered the trade of my merchants. *Summum bonum*—that is the true gain."

"The wisdom of your majesty is the blessing of the people."

"But what shall I do with these three? They must he rewarded."

Van Elfsberg pondered a moment, and smiled. "If your majesty pleases—they would make excellent irregular cavalry."

Boris Godunov was searching with his eyes the heaps of millet, and the facets of the jewels that winked back at the candles on the tables. Of the warriors who served him he knew little and cared less—it was all in the hands of the boyars and the foreign officers. But it occurred to him that men who had brought him such a treasure could be trusted near his person—could guard him from assassins.

"Your services," he assured Khlit and Kirdy, who waited patiently before his table, "are such that we offer you posts in this our palace. The youth, although not a boyar's son, may serve as *kambardnik*. The old man may take his place among the minstrels—food and wine will be his as long as he lives."

So said the tsar to the chancellor who sat nearest, but it was Kirdy who responded without receiving an invitation to speak. He looked once at the boys who stood, silver pike in white-gloved hand, motionless as statues behind the chair of Boris Godunov.

"Great prince, it was your pledge that we should ride free. Aye, and the villages of the Donskoi should be free. We are little accustomed to a court, and we seek to go our own way."

"Well said," muttered Khlit, under his breath, as he scanned the line of musicians, buffoons and jesters that the dwarf Kholop was mustering in readiness for the entertainment of his master. There was a stir among the courtiers and Ayub thrust his great bulk into the cleared space, his brown face rife with anxiety.

"Since you have reminded us of our pledge," said the tsar, frowning, "it is not needful"—he signed to the chancellor, who rose and bowed profoundly.

"The pledge given by the high emperor of all Muscovy is not to be called into question. You are free to go when and whither you will.

"And yet," pursued Boris Godunov, "the stout warrior appears to desire mead and reward from us. To him we offer a command in the Moscow *strelsui*."

A glance passed among the Cossacks, who had been growing more and more restless, and they bowed to the girdle, their scalp locks falling upon their shoulders. "Nay, lord prince!" they cried. "'Tis time to go for those who have the road before them."

A thing unheard of, at the court of Muscovy—the warriors turned and left the Terem before the repast in the presence of the tsar had come to an end. Without a word they hastened to the stables and amazed the grooms by leading out their horses although the early twilight was falling over the narrow streets blanketed with snow.

And the wan afterglow of a Winter's sunset found them plying whip and spur as they approached the river gate, where heavily cloaked halberdiers of the *strelsui* shivered and beat their arms to keep warm in the sentry boxes.

Nor did Ayub pause this time for any badinage. A musket shot beyond the walls, they reined in to look back at the domes and pinnacles in the dusk, and the White Falcon shook his head gravely. "It is hard to believe, my brothers. Surely we brought the treasure in our hands to the great prince, and yet—he sought to make me a slave, to hold a silver axe. And he would have set the Koshevoi Ataman of all the Cossacks to eat among the fiddlers."

Khlit glanced at Ayub and a smile twitched his gray mustache. "Eh, he would have made Ayub a sergeant of the town militia."

The Winged Rider

Whoever draws a sword and sheathes it without having used it will taste shame; whoever lets a blade rust in the scabbard will know death. Nay, let thy weapon be bright and clean as thine honor, but use it not until there is need.

Proverb of the Afghans

Upon a day early in the seventeenth century three Cossacks trotted south on the snow road that ran beside the river. They were in no haste because they had far to go and this portion of the steppe was unknown to them.

In the vast plain that stretched from the forests of the north to the deserts of Central Asia they might have pressed on for a month without coming upon any landmark in the white sea of snow under the gray clouds.

The inhabitants of the steppe, men and beasts, were in Winter quarters; the herds of half-wild cattle and horses that grazed in the rich grass during the brief Summer were penned up; the fields of corn and wheat that gave sustenance to the isolated villages were invisible; the wagon tents of roving Tatars had gone elsewhere; even the river Volga was icebound—no merchant barks appeared within its reaches and the songs of the boatmen were no longer heard.

It was a time of hunger, when the starving preyed on the full-fed, and the wolfpacks ran lean.

The three Cossacks who followed the narrow trail had a sufficiency of food in their saddlebags, and they were not the sort of men to lose their way. Only, hereabouts, they must turn to the right and leave the river. They were on a broad bend of the Volga and some twenty miles to the west the river Don made a similar bend toward them. At this point merchants bound for the Black Sea landed their goods and carried them over

to the Don. And pirates, tired of one river, would work their skiffs overland to the other. All that day the three warriors had been looking for traces of the portage.

When they found it they meant to make camp, reaching the frozen Don the next day, and striking due west until they gained the shelter of the siech—the war encampment of the Zaporogian Cossacks, their destination. Moreover, on the portage they expected to find the hut of an Armenian trader, or a wayside tavern that would give them some protection against the storm that all three knew to be coming down the Volga at their heels.

The youngest warrior, a remarkably fine-looking man, rode in advance, watching the ominous wrack of clouds that hid the sun, studying the surface of the snow on his right, picking out the tracks of a wandering wolf. The wolf had been following the slot of an antelope without much hope because he had turned aside to try for a hare—vainly. So much the young Cossack read in a flurry of marks in the snow.

He was Kirdy, called the White Falcon by his comrades; and now he was white indeed, for his slender shoulders were wrapped in a *svitza* of splendid ermine, gift of the great Muscovite tsar whom he had well served. But his face was brown and merry, and he rode as a nomad rides, crouching in short stirrups.

The heaviest of the Cossacks, Ayub, the Oak—a man six feet and a half in height, armed with a gigantic broadsword that he carried slung to his shoulders—glanced at the youngster admiringly.

"Eh, how is that?" he cried. "You say Kirdy is not in every way a warrior. Then something is biting you, because as —— lives he is a regular *bogatyr*—a hero."

Khlit, surnamed the Wolf, a gaunt figure in gray sheepskins, did not look up or answer.

"He's your grandson, you old dog!" resumed Ayub earnestly. "He's a master hand with the saber, by ——! Once he clipped my mustache for me, and I've never taken grass in my teeth for any other dog-brother. That's the truth."

Khlit nodded gravely and Ayub glanced at the aged Cossack suspiciously.

"Umpff!" he grunted. "And here's something else. Kirdy can lead men. Because he's not afraid of a vampire or the archfiend himself, men will follow him anywhere. Isn't that the truth?"

"*Ay-a tak*," assented Khlit. "Aye so."

"Then why is he not a warrior in all things?"

Ayub, usually careless and good-natured, was puzzled and a little angry. At first with tolerance, then with joy, he had watched Kirdy. On the road, in the press of battle, and at the Muscovite court, he had seen this youth, who had emerged from the depths of Central Asia, bear himself bravely and modestly. He knew that Khlit's grandson was wiser than other boys. And he looked forward to the moment when Kirdy would be brought before the *atamans* of the Cossacks of the siech. This moment, Khlit had said, was not at hand because the young warrior was lacking in one way.

"Kirdy," Khlit made answer, "is blind."

Ayub stared and then scratched his ear.

"Blind? Only look at him. If he is blind, my mother was a sow."

"His eyes have not been opened."

"*Ekh-ma!* It may be that he has few hairs in his mustache, and that he's drunk more milk than corn brandy. He blushes when he looks at a fair maiden. But he can search out an ambush like an old Zaporogian."

Again Khlit nodded seriously. "An ambush but not a soul."

"How, a soul?"

Gloved hands clasped on his saddle horn, the old leader ruminated. Ayub, his *kunak*—comrade-was a warrior of few ideas. Since Khlit had said that Kirdy was lacking in one way, Ayub would decide that the young warrior was a coward or a weakling or a fool. And Kirdy most certainly was none of that. So Ayub must be made to understand what was in Khlit's mind.

"It is true," he growled, "that the suckling pig yonder is a swordsman." Although Kirdy had been honored by the Don Cossacks, it was not for Khlit, his grandfather, to praise him to another Cossack. "Yet what sword stroke can parry treachery? *Hai*, the boy is still blind in this way: He has not learned to see what lies in another man's soul—treachery or good faith."

"Well, that's easily seen," argued Ayub the Zaporogian. "When a man draws steel on you he is a foe, right enough; if he spreads his legs under the same table and drinks from the same keg he is a comrade."

"Not always."

This ability in Khlit to read men's hearts—to scent danger and to strike before he was overcome—had kept life in the old Cossack's scarred body in a place where most men died swiftly and violently almost before they had sons of their own. He wanted to live until he could bring Kirdy to his

old companions of the Zaporogian Siech, who were the chosen warriors of the Cossacks. That the youth was a redoubtable warrior and would soon be a leader of the Cossacks, he knew—provided he could give to Kirdy this last bit of wisdom, the fruit of his long years of strife.

"This young dog," he explained, "was weaned in the tents of the Mongol khans beyond the roof of the world. There, in a man's yurta, a wanderer is safe from treachery. If friendship is pledged, friendship is kept. Aye so. Even among the Afghans a foe rides boldly, his weapon drawn in his hand. Only here"—with the stem of his short clay pipe he pointed at the dark mists that ran around the edge of the horizon at their backs—"in the cities where Christian men gather together will a man hold out his hand to you and stab you, to take your horse."

"Aye, or your wallet, if it clinks of silver," assented the big Zaporogian reminiscently. "Only in the camps of the *bratzi Kasaki*, of the brother Cossacks, is your back safe from the knife or your purse from a thief's fingers."

"We are not there yet. Kirdy, the young son of a jackal, cannot see treachery. Yet in the yurtas of Christendom he will meet treachery. Only one thing is more to be guarded against than the faithlessness of the men of Frankistan.*

"What is that?"

Ayub's mind ran on vampires, and fiends that, in the likeness of men, climbed up behind a rider and sucked the blood from his neck. The big warrior feared spirits heartily.

"Women." Smoldering fires of memory quickened the gray eyes under shaggy brows.

Ayub stroked down his mustaches to hide a grin. A woman—so long as she be not a witch—he did not fear at all. Yet he stood in awe of Khlit, who had emerged from the unknown world that lay to the east of the Volga. Behind the silence of the wanderer and his grandson lay tales of mighty battles, of the courts of strange kings, and the arts of the magicians of Cathay. "*Ekh-ma*," he muttered. "And how will you teach him to read souls?"

But Khlit, having made Ayub understand what was in his mind, was well content to hold his peace.

"Brothers," Kirdy's clear voice hailed them, "here is the trail."

*Frankistan—land of the Franks, Europe.

The trail was no more than a track left by a single horse, winding up over hillocks, bare except for a fringe of sedge tips and scrub oak. The track, plowing through a foot of snow, had been made by a small pony, heavily laden, whose rider did not trouble himself to dismount and break the crust for the horse. So much the Cossacks saw at a glance.

They would have doubted that this was the portage leading to the Don, but for a building ahead of them—a dot of black in the gray sea that stretched away under the darkening mantle of clouds.

And the track of the pony led past this habitation—neither blockhouse nor tavern. It was a tiny wooden tower with thatched roof, large enough to shelter only one man. And a human being did emerge from it—a serf in greasy sheepskins and leg wrappings who held out an open pouch to them.

Ayub had reached into his wallet for a silver coin when the occupant of the tower croaked at him: "Toll, wanderer—toll for three. Aye, three silver rubles it will be."

This he repeated in a kind of hoarse singsong and the Zaporogian, who had taken him to be a beggar, withdrew his hand from the wallet empty.

"*Hai*, animal—what was that?"

"Three silver rubles it will be."

"May the foul fiend take you and your three rubles! Here is no bridge or gate, and you talk of toll to Cossacks on the steppe."

The keeper of the tiny tower merely held out the sack, pointing his finger at them in turn, his lips moving as he counted three. Through his long, tangled hair his small eyes peered at them fiercely.

"Now by the emperor of —— and his dam!" cried Ayub, who was growing angry. "If you had ten men to back you with halberds you'd not smell a Cossack kopek. We'd toll you with sword edges!"

Rising in the stirrups, he looked around for any sign of another dwelling or a trace of smoke against the leaden sky. The steppe appeared deserted except for the shaggy man of the tower—and this tower was too small to admit the giant Zaporogian. It was in fact, very much like the sentry boxes he had seen at Moscow.

"Well, brothers," he growled, "it is clear that this fellow is mad. And it is a sin to draw weapon on a witless wight."

Khlit, who had been watching the keeper of the tower, reined forward and took the leather pouch from the serf, shaking out a single silver coin.

"*Hai*," he said, "the rider who passed before us has paid tribute. You of the tower, tell me what he was like, this rider."

The deep voice of the old *ataman* stirred the wells of speech in the keeper.

"*V zid*."

"A Jew!" Ayub chuckled. "No blood is to be seen on the snow and so this dog-face is liar as well as madman, because it is well known that a Jew will not part with silver without shedding tears of blood—"

"What master do you serve?" Khlit asked the serf.

"Erlik Khan."

The Cossacks exchanged glances. The name was not Muscovite; in fact, it had a Tatar ring and meant Lord of the Dead. "And where is he?" asked Ayub, amused.

"Where else but in his hall of Tor?" The keeper of the tower, having retrieved his ruble, still held out the pouch expectantly.

"In Péristán—in fairyland mayhap," smiled Kirdy, breathing on chilled fingers.

"Nay, good sir," the serf made answer literally, "in the forest."

"What forest?" Khlit perceived that the stranger was capable of explaining only one fact at a time.

"Where else but to the north, Uncle, an hour's ride."

Here indeed a dark line of timber stretched along the horizon, barely visible in the wan light.

"And do Jews pay tribute to Erlik Khan, who sits in this forest hall?" Ayub put in, to discover to what flights the mad brain of the toll man would wander.

"Nay, all men pay, who pass along the *dorogou*. Give three silver rubles and no harm will overtake ye, my lords."

There was something stolid and sensible in his insistence that made the big Zaporogian thoughtful.

"And if we do not pay?"

"Do ye not know? It will happen that ye will lose all things—gold, horses, weapons—when the riders of Erlik Khan overtake ye."

"Come!" said Khlit, gathering up reins.

The tower would not shelter all of them, not to mention the horses. So he pressed on at a trot over the trail broken by the Jew without further thought of toll or gatherer.

Close at his heels Ayub was muttering to himself.

"Aye, I mind the place now. Here between the rivers it was, in another age. A great duke built himself a hall as great, and filled it with men-at-arms. They had long swords, those *pani*—perhaps even as long as mine. That was before the name of the Lord Christ was known in this land—"

He paused to ransack his memory and stare again at the darkness in the north.

"Well, brothers, here's the tale. This duke, being a dour man, crucified a priest or stewed him in a caldron. I think the priest had built him a church near the hall. No matter—as soon as life left the priest and his lungs fell in, the hall of the pagan duke, with every soul in it, sank beneath the earth. And there it has been ever since. Only at times the bell that the priest put in his church tower is heard chiming, down there beneath. That's all true, brothers, because otherwise how could bells be heard in such a place as this?"

Reaching over his shoulder, he touched the cross on the pommel of his sword. Khlit listened with only half an ear, because Ayub was superstitious to the marrow of his big bones. Khlit cared neither one way nor the other—he had seen magicians, it is true, but they had died like human beings.

As for Kirdy, that youngster hailed from the desert where *ghils* were known to take human form and slay unwary riders. He believed that the scions of Péristán were thick upon the earth but he feared them not a jot.

Rounding a rocky hillock, they came upon the Jew, a shivering figure bundled up in seemingly limitless wrappings, topped by an enormously long woolen cap. On the rump of his weary pony rested a heavy bundle that clattered when the horse stumbled.

"*Ai-ee*, most noble *pani*," cried he the instant he set eyes on them, "I have nothing upon me but some dirty garments—not a kopek, nor a single dinar. This horse was broken in the wind—not fit for such illustrious knights to trouble themselves about, I swear—"

"How are you called, Jew?" growled Khlit.

"Shmel is my name, brave Cossacks—Zaporogians, I swear by all that is holy! Surely in all the world such noble lords were never before seen! I thank the fortune that sends such splendid warriors and not brigands who would strip me like a peeled turnip. Not that I have aught of value—"

Even while he spoke he kept an arm upon the bundle, and his keen, dark eyes were mirrors of his fear.

"Shmel, do you know this trail? Is there a tavern near at hand?"

The Jew drew his shoulders up to his ears and shook his head so that the tip of his long cap danced about like a wayward imp. There was, he swore, not so much as a hut on the trail this side the river Don.

"Then whither do you draw your reins, jackal?"

Shmel burst into a torrent of self-pity. A storm was threatening—the noble lords must know that—and his pony had gone lame. He had intended to camp on the Don but now that was out of the question. It was cold—he did not know what he would do.

In fact, the bitter wind was whipping up tiny spirals of the fine snow. Somewhere the sun had set, and the air was growing chill. The Cossacks availed themselves of the last of the gray twilight to make camp in the lee of the rocky eminence, gathering the dry tops of the bushes and the debris of a dead oak, clearing a space for a fire. They took off the saddles and the experienced ponies began to dig with their hoofs to get at the grass under the snow.

Khlit kindled flame and started a small fire over which Kirdy roasted a quarter of lamb while Ayub heated brandy in a small pot that he always carried. They had slept out a night's storm before this, and if a *buran*—a long blizzard—should catch them here they could always gain the shelter of the woods an hour's ride distant.

Torn between discomfort and fear of the Cossacks, Shmel lingered on the outskirts of the fire after tethering his horse, dining on some indistinguishable food that he drew out of a bag a fistful at a time covertly. When he saw them lie back on the saddle-cloths and light their pipes, he ventured to draw near and warm himself, his bundle in his arms.

This brought him again to the attention of Ayub, who had been discoursing on the village that had been buried under the earth.

"*Hai, zida!* How came you to part with a ruble to the mad beggar in the tower? Is he your brother?"

"Nay, noble lord, he is the toll gatherer. In Summer there are many to take the toll—a whole regiment of armed men. That is when merchants pass over this road. Now that the Volga is frozen few come this way."

In the midst of a cavernous yawn the big Zaporogian grunted and terrified Shmel by frowning.

"You lie, you dog! If you do not tell the truth I will beat you. Who takes toll on the snow road?"

He had no intention of beating Shmel, but he knew the best way to get at what puzzled him.

"*Ekh panzirniky!*" The Jew glanced appealingly at Kirdy, who seemed to be the mildest of the three. "No doubt you are mighty lords in the siech or somewhere, but it is evident that you are strangers here. Do you not know that Erlik Khan is master of Tor? He sits in the castle back yonder in the forest and a hundred of the very finest warriors eat at his table from heavy silver plates. Aye, he has more slaves than I have ko—than a dog has fleas."

"In that case why are you shivering here in the steppe instead of toasting your toes in this castle—Tor?"

Shmel smiled at them all uneasily and took off his long hat, disclosing the black skullcap beneath.

"No one takes the road to Tor who is not a captive."

"Why not?"

"Because Erlik Khan is a *koldun*."

"A magician? —— take you, Shmel. No magician was ever served by knights and slaves."

"*Ai-ee!* Erlik Khan is not as others. He is more to be feared even than a Zaporogian. By spells he draws warriors to him and once they have dwelt in Tor they have no desire to go elsewhere. May I burn if that is a lie. He has white eyes that can see at night. At his table a drink is served—a drink that renders his warriors braver than other men."

"Have you ever seen his castle?"

Again Shmel hunched his thin shoulders and smiled.

"Am I a *litzar*—a noble knight? Nay, I have seen his riders. Such horses were never known before—"

"Is Erlik Khan a Tatar?"

"No more than a Muscovite or Frank. Some say he is a Persian and can turn himself into the semblance of a beautiful woman—others hold he is a dwarf."

Ayub crossed himself and glanced at his companions—at Khlit who was dozing close to the fire and the boy who was polishing the bright, bluish blade of the curved sword, the gift of his grandsire. And then the hair stirred on his scalp, under the stout Cossack cap.

From near at hand came the sound of a bell—clearly chiming above the whisper of the wind and the snuffling of the horses. More and more loudly it tolled, until Ayub could have sworn that a church must be within musket shot of them.

Snow was falling, the first white flakes rushing out of the upper darkness into the circle of firelight. The voice of the wind became strident. Kirdy asked if they should not saddle up and seek the protection of the wood. But Ayub, seizing the pot of warm brandy and emptying the last of it down his throat, shook his head.

"Look here, *kunaks*. First a serf, a very animal, dares to out-face three warriors; then a Jew gives a silver coin without being compelled. And now a bell tolls, under the earth, as —— lives. Here be three miracles, and yonder wood is a *prokliatoo miesto*—an unhallowed spot."

"Nay, the wind is apt to twist sounds, making them seem far and then near," put in Kirdy.

"The serf," growled Khlit, "was not mad. He was sure that he would not be harmed. And the Jew was sure that he would be harmed if he did not pay."

"And the bell?" demanded the Zaporogian doubtfully. Khlit mused for a moment.

"*Hai*, it must be in the tower."

"Oh! Noble lords!"

From his corner under the rocks Shmel sprang up in sudden consternation.

"Did you *refuse to pay toll?*" He read their faces at once and groaned, clutching at his long ear-locks that projected from under the skullcap. "What a pity. What a splendid ermine coat the young warrior wears! I would have given thirty shekels of full weight for it. And that belt, surely it must be six feet in length and would make two with a little cutting."

He was staring at Ayub's girdle, a matter of some pride to the Zaporogian, being gold-embroidered on damask and sewn with pearls. He even looked at their boots, of red and green morocco, with high silver heels, shaking his head the while.

"What do you mean, Jew?"

"It is a pity that such noble garments should go to the men of Tor. Always when toll is not paid on this road, men are slain. That is the law of Erlik Khan. Put on your saddles, my lords, and ply your whips. Go—go at once. Already it is a long time since the bell tolled."

Irresolutely Ayub rose, certain now that Shmel was speaking the truth and fearing greatly the invisible powers of Tor. But Khlit, who had been looking beyond the light of the fire, spoke up gruffly.

"The clouds are breaking and the wind is going down. Devil or brigand, we will not show him our backs."

Shmel, who was thinking of himself, wrung his hands, went off to hide his precious bundle, and ran back to argue with the old warrior.

"By all that is holy, the *ataman* is brave as a lion; yet in what way can he strive against a magician? The law of Erlik Khan has been broken. Always he leads forth his riders, because if he did not attend to it, the law would not be obeyed and he would not be wealthy as a baron from the toll money. *Ekh*, of what use are your weapons?"

"Enough!" Khlit stowed his short clay pipe carefully in his belt. "Enough of words. In this snow men cannot find us. If the people of Tor be spirits and not men, what would it avail us to mount and take the road again?"

This silenced Ayub, who went and squatted by the glowing embers that sizzled as the damp drift struck them.

Around the dying fire the three Cossacks clustered, turning up the high collars of their *svitzas*, setting their backs to the wind. Their dark faces, thoughtful and expectant, fascinated Shmel, who could not refrain from estimating the many yards of wool and fur in the Zaporogian's gigantic garments. Every now and then he shook his head, exclaiming: "A pity. Such a notable sword!"

He could not understand why the Cossacks had not paid toll to Erlik Khan; nor could the warriors comprehend why the Jew was shivering, although by his own account his skin was safe enough.

When, somewhere overhead, the sky lightened and wan moonlight struck through the falling snow, Khlit reached out with his foot and covered the last smoking embers. Kirdy lifted his head, turning it slowly from side to side; then he rose and glided away without a sound to where the ponies were pawing and crunching at the dead grass. Ayub reached over his shoulder and eased the five-foot broadsword from its sheath, to the annoyance of Shmel who perceived something vaguely alarming in the movements of the warriors. He noticed that the horses made no more noise.

"Shmel," whispered Ayub hoarsely, "if a sound comes out of your body you will no longer carry your pack—you will find yourself on the road to purgatory and you will be carrying your head."

Holding it in one hand, he swung the tip of the great sword under Shmel's chin, and the little merchant began to shiver more violently than ever. All his senses became acute, and his heart began to pound against the bottom of his throat. And he began to hear other things than the whistle of the wind.

Not far away a horse snorted, and a bit jangled. In another direction iron clanked dully; then a voice called out and another answered. The Cossacks, outlined in the silvery glow from the sky, peered from right to left without moving from where they squatted.

A horse stumbled and a curse rang out clearly; saddles creaked—beyond the white, transparent curtain of the snow shadowy objects moved.

A greater fear drove from the agitated mind of the Jew the memory of the sword blade hovering near his throat.

"Oh!" he screamed. "Noble riders of Erlik Khan, I have paid the piece of silver. I have—"

He yelled frantically and fell over backward as Ayub lashed at him savagely. Then, although he was unharmed, he continued to groan, until out of the drifting curtain horsemen appeared.

They were powerful men on black horses, and they wore chain armor covered by leather cloaks. It seemed to Shmel that they filled the whole steppe. One of them laughed and spurred at Ayub, who rose to meet him, heaving up the broadsword. The rider half turned and struck down with a scimitar. Ayub stepped aside and the man's laugh ended in a gasp as his ribs were crushed in by the impact of the long blade that shattered his light shield and smashed the iron links of his armor.

"*Ai-ee!*" wailed Shmel.

Other horsemen pressed up, shouting, and he heard the clang of steel upon steel. Sparks sprang up from the huddle of shadows. Then two pistols bellowed together, a man cried out hoarsely, and when the dark smoke cleared away Shmel could no longer see the three Cossacks. Instead the riders plunged here and there in the drifts, thrusting up with their lances and shouting.

It became apparent to Shmel that the fight was by no means ended. He peered down, and then up, and saw Ayub's bulk on the summit of the ten-foot boulders that had given them shelter against the wind. They had abandoned their horses and taken to the ridge of rock, holding it against the onset of the horsemen.

Shmel was knocked hither and yon by the plunging ponies, and he breathed a prayer of relief when the clashing of weapons ceased and a clear high voice cried out in the drifting snow: "Yield, *Kosaki*—we have bows."

Instantly Kirdy responded from above.

"And we have swords. The Wolf does not yield—the White Falcon does not yield to any man."

A moment of silence and the voice proclaimed, vibrant with mirth: "What cares Erlik Khan for swords? Nay, are you truly the Cossack twain, Khlit and Kirdy?"

Shmel, protecting his eyes from the drift with his hand, peered at the speaker and saw something that gave him no comfort—a rider no more than half the stature of the Cossacks, sitting on a huge white horse. A warrior, apparently no larger than a child, wearing a silver helmet and bearing upon his back a pair of eagle's wings, which closed and opened when the rider moved.

"*Sokol moi ridníy*," mocked the voice. "Falcon, my dear, by what token are you Kirdy?"

"Count your empty saddles and ask again," responded that youngster grimly.

Other horsemen reined up to the winged rider and Shmel heard their low whispers urging that a rush be made upon the three wanderers. But the leader shook off the whisperers impatiently and urged the white horse closer to the rocks, until its steaming breath beat against the neck of Shmel, who dared not move. No slightest attention was paid him.

Leaning upon his broadsword, Ayub was clearly to be seen, but the winged rider stared at Kirdy, standing a little apart in his white ermine *svitza*, the curved sword in his hand.

"Cossacks," cried the chieftain of the horsemen, "you have spoiled three of my warriors. I shall take you with me to Tor in their stead."

"Are you he called Erlik Khan?" Khlit's deep voice questioned.

"Aye, so."

Shmel groaned and mustered courage to look over his shoulder. The long cloak hid the figure of the chieftain, as the nasal piece, and bars running down from the light silver basinet, hid his features. But in the face of the master of Tor there was a pallor and a strangeness that surprised Shmel. The rider's eyes were closed.

"Yield yourselves," he said softly, "to me, for I am a *koldun* and not a man."

"Nay," said Khlit and Kirdy together.

Again the winged chieftain laughed.

"Who shall say to me nay? I have need of you, Cossacks, and because of that need I will spare you. Yield not—keep your weapons. Ride with me to Tor."

In the silence of the three warriors there was no hint of consent. And the master of Tor seemed to understand their thoughts.

"Here is no treachery, my falcons. Erlik Khan pledges you safety of life and limb, and freedom to go hence again, if you will. If not, I will waste no more souls upon your weapons but will drive off your horses—even this nag of the Jew's-and then you may face the storm on foot. *Ohai*, upon the next day or the next I will ride again forth to look at your bodies, stiff and dark."

So proclaimed Erlik Khan, looking at the silent Kirdy. But it was Khlit who stepped forward to peer at the winged rider.

"Draw back then, Erlik Khan," he growled, "until we are in the saddle. We will sheathe our weapons. Look to yours."

Only Shmel heard the amused laugh of the winged rider, as the white horse wheeled away through the veil of snow and the others followed. He was not surprised, then, that the Cossacks should leap down and fling their saddles on the ponies that had remained as they had been trained to do where they had been grazing. He knew that such warriors dreaded nothing so much as to be left afoot. And if the storm developed into a blizzard they were indeed lost, dismounted in the steppe.

At once the riders from Tor closed in again, their swords sheathed, their bows in the cases. A word of command was spoken and the Cossacks trotted off with them, leaving Shmel staring at three bodies already whitening under the falling flakes.

He ran to the fire and found it beyond repair. The moon was no longer visible.

The wind was eating into his very bones, and he was torn by a threefold fear—dread of the dead men, of the cold, and of the warriors. With numbed fingers, he roped his bundle to his saddle and set out, in a kind of dogged desperation, on the broad track left by the riders of Tor.

II

Strength bends a crossbow with ease; but only Wisdom knows the moment to release the trigger.

Maxims of Sun Tsu

A great fire roared upon the hearth of Erlik Khan. Candles gleamed on the pine tables of the long, low hall. And serfs hurried hither and yon bearing platters of wild boar flesh, ducks, and sturgeon, to feed the warriors

who crowded the benches and laughed at sight of steaming food and fragrant wine.

Although the tables were bare wood, the dishes were silver and of massive weight; the goblets and pitchers of the wine service were gold, and the wines themselves—*gorilka*, brandy, white spirits, spiced red vintages from the south. The log walls, cemented with mud and clay, were concealed by draperies of Chinese silk.

On one side of the fireplace was a stand of falcons—small peregrine falcons resting on rings, and the great brown *bouragut* or golden eagles used for deer and wolves. On the other side, brightly lighted, stood a raised space filled with a teak table and Venetian chairs of ebony inlaid with ivory. This was the *krasnoi miesto*, the honored guests' place, and here at ease sat the three Cossacks and the two captains of Erlik Khan.

Save for these five no one in the hall wore any weapon, except the girdle knife they used to cut meat. Such was the law of Erlik Khan.

Swords, pistols, and battle bludgeons had been left in the quarters of the warriors on either side the hall. So too they had stripped themselves of steel shirts and breastplates. The serfs of course carried no arms.

Ayub had noticed this at once, and had seen that only one door beside the chimney opened upon the guest dais. Weapon in hand, the three Cossacks could have inflicted bitter harm on the men of Tor if attacked. He placed himself so that he could watch the narrow door at his side, and loosed the broadsword, laying it against the table within reach—convinced that, for the moment at least, no treachery was intended.

Moreover, the officers of the khan filled him with curiosity rather than misgivings. One, a tall man, his sallow face clean-shaven, would drink no wine. His garments were—to Ayub's thinking—outlandish, being black velvet, with white lace at the collar and cuffs.

"I am called," said the tall captain, "Giovanni, at your service, my lords. I am of Genoa."

His eyes, amber-colored, dwelt on Ayub reflectively as he leaned forward to breathe deeply of the pungent incense. "Genoa?" Ayub frowned. "Where on the Volga is that?"

The tall captain did not smile. Having appraised the big Zaporogian, he glanced at Khlit. "It is a city in Frankistan where—no matter, my lords. Permit me of your courtesy—which of you is leader?"

When Ayub would have answered that Khlit, a Koshevoi Ataman of the Cossacks, was assuredly their leader, the old warrior forestalled him.

"The White Falcon is our *hetman*. We twain are no more than wanderers, journeying in his company."

Ayub gaped and would have denied this, if Khlit had not touched his knee under the table. Messer Giovanni seemed to be in two minds about this, but he bowed and waved a slender hand toward his companion.

"Call him Jean, messers. He also is a wanderer, from France."

Jean the Frenchman lifted his goblet to the three with a smile. A short man, too stout perhaps—as one who has fared well after long starvation—his red cheeks, carefully trimmed beard, and moist dark eyes all bespoke good humor.

"*A vous*, messieurs!"

"Pan Giovanni," said Kirdy, "surely you have rank, and more of a name?"

The Genoese glanced at the door and shrugged.

"Here, I am Giovanni, no more. For the rest, it is better to forget. You, messer, from this night will be known as the White Falcon."

He spoke in the clear, precise voice of one who knows his own mind and is accustomed to addressing inferiors. His words were softened by a careless courtesy, as if he were communing with himself, yet aware that others heard him.

"From this night?" Kirdy's dark brows drew together. "Nay, we shall not hang our saddles for long in the stables of Tor."

"Ah. I fear me the storm will close the road for more than one night."

"And then?"

"Then, my White Falcon, you are quite free to mount and go—if you will."

When Ayub would have spoken out bluntly, Kirdy silenced him again with a touch. "And you, my lord," the youth asked quietly, "are you captive to Erlik Khan? Is the road open to you, or closed?"

And again Giovanni leaned forward to breathe deep of the fumes from the incense jar.

"I am free," he answered indifferently. "While the devils of frost hold the steppe, it is comfortable enough here. When the steppe is green again, I may go."

The behavior of the two captains from Frankistan puzzled the young Cossack, because they seemed eager and at the same time drowsy. The man called Jean was drinking heavily without livening up. His boots were wet, and Kirdy thought that he had been out on the night expedi-

tion, while his comrade had not left the shelter of the manor house, the *ousadba* of Erlik Khan.

"Look," exclaimed Ayub in what passed for a whisper with the giant, "at the horde."

Kirdy looked and became thoughtful. The men lining the tables of the great hall might have been gathered from the corners of the earth. Broad-faced, clear-eyed Tatars sat beside slender Circassians from the southern mountains; red-cheeked, bearded Muscovites thumped on the pine boards for mead to refill their glasses and were cursed by thin, pallid Poles who were casting dice—and an unmistakable Turk snarled at a Greek who sprawled too near him. The place reeked of sweat-soaked sheepskins, of musk and oil and damp leather—silk-clad shoulders rubbed against rags, and the babble of voices in twenty languages drowned the rattle of goblets. Here were cropped ears and slit noses, and here too were manly heads scarred by battle strokes. Erlik Khan had acted wisely in forbidding weapons within the hall.

But, though he rose and searched the shadows with keen eyes, he saw no one who at all resembled the winged chieftain.

Then the door upon the dais opened and the man called Jean sprang to his feet, with a low bow. Kirdy's hand dropped to the hilt of his sword, but shifted at once to his hip and he bowed in Cossack fashion, to the girdle, to hide the rush of blood that darkened his face. A young girl had entered bearing a tray upon which, in goblets of Venetian glass, wine sparkled.

Although her head came no higher than Kirdy's shoulder she appeared tall in her long *sarafan* of white silk bordered with dark sable, in the shining headcover of silk embroidered with silver and emeralds, with two strings of glowing pearls reaching to her slender waist.

Unlike the Muscovite women, this girl bore no paint upon her cheeks. Nor did she need kohl to darken eyelids and brows that were blacker than the sable. The brilliance of her soft eyes and hair, the grave dignity of her bearing, stirred the heart of the young Cossack, who could appreciate both beauty and pride. At sight of him, her eyes half closed and she paused as though held back by an invisible hand. Ignoring Ayub and Khlit, she presented her tray to Kirdy with a low-voiced welcome—

"*Volni Kasai dom moi, vash dom*. Noble Cossacks, my house is your house."

In turn the five men took a goblet and bowed again, tossing off the wine. Jean's moist eyes sparkled with admiration, and Giovanni roused from his reverie. Ayub, speechless, held his breath and put down the fragile glass as if afraid it would break in his massive fingers.

In the lower hall the tumult dwindled to silence and men rose from their seats, shouting—"*Boyaríshna*—the lady!"

She inclined her head and turned her back on the revelers to look again at Kirdy.

"Honored guest, a chamber has been prepared for the three heroes. Command Ibrahim, chief of the slaves, in all things. And," she added, almost in a whisper, "may no harm come to you under this roof."

"May harm never come near you, my lady!" Kirdy smiled, white teeth flashing under his dark, drooping mustache.

The firelight gleaming on his open, brown countenance showed an instant boyish delight in the beauty of the woman who had tendered him the greetings of the mansion.

When Jean would have detained her with blundering words, she slipped past the Frenchman and Kirdy was at the door, bowing as she passed. He had a fleeting glimpse of soft lights and veiled women slaves, and the door was drawn shut. He heard an iron bar drop into place.

"Gentlemen," remarked Giovanni, "you have seen Ivga, the bride of Erlik Khan."

"Messieurs," cried Jean, "*la belle* Ivga—a diamond under the hoof of a wild boar. Come, let us drink again."

When they were seated, and Ibrahim—a Muhammadan *kayia*, in a black robe bearing the wand of his office—had brought them fresh wine, Giovanni picked up an empty goblet, watching the play of the flames in the colored glass.

"True—a diamond never loses its brilliance. Did you mark, messers, that the *boyaríshna* touches neither skin nor hair with color. She does not need to. I have been at Tor four years, and Ibrahim twice that time. Yet she was here before him. Do you think the *koldun* can preserve by his arts the beauty of this girl unmarred by time?"

"Aye, so," cried Ayub. "He did a harder thing than that when he found us in the storm, and brought this wildcat, Kirdy, to heel."

Giovanni shook his head.

"A mighty man with his hands was Skal. His favorite weapon an iron mace studded with massive steel points; the pirate boasted that he was

invincible in single combat and few knights denied that his boast was true.

"While Erlik Khan lurked in his forest, secure in his own peculiar powers, Skal sailed the river with his *burlaki*, pillaging the ships of merchants, selling his captives as slaves to the Moslems, slaying as a panther strikes. Around him gathered the outlaw of the frontier, men who had been hunted out of hope. And they were many.

"The Volga was his, between the Kama and the portage, and the rivermen had joined his bands; on the boats that came out of Asia he levied toll as Erlik Khan did on the trail between the rivers. One day Skal swore in a drunken humor that he would pass over the portage without paying silver to Tor, and in due course he came striding along the trail, a mob at his heels, roaring the song of the Volga *burlaki*.

"Fate ordained that on that particular day Ivga the wife of Erlik Khan should be hunting a stag, and that Skal should meet her face to face on the trail. There were Tatars with her, who could use their bows, and she was in the saddle of a swift-footed pony. So she escaped the hands of Skal and the Volga men, but the pirate had looked into her eyes and vowed that when Winter came he would seek out the lair of Erlik Khan and burn his *ousadba* and carry off his wife Ivga."

So said Giovanni, in his dry, precise voice.

"And, messers, it is true that the brigand of the Volga has kept his word. He comes, Skal and his mob, from the Kama through the forest. While the storm holds the steppe he must lie in camp. Then, in four days—perhaps three—he will be at Tor with the *burlaki*, river-men. Erlik Khan will not give up the *boyaríshna*. We will see whether the arts of the khan will overthrow the power of Skal."

Kirdy nodded. In the world of the steppe, far from any Christian court, men must take service with such chieftains or lose lives and goods. For a thousand miles the Cossacks had seen no walled town; the authority of the Muscovite tsar was here no more than a shadow, the Church a memory. The soil of Tor was still Asia.

"Skal," murmured Giovanni, "has performed the devil's mass. He fears neither man nor magician. Satan, it seems, looks after his own."

Again Kirdy nodded. He had heard tales of Skal's power, though the Volga pirates had not molested the Cossacks.

"Erlik Khan," went on the Genoese, "seeks the aid of your swords in the battle. He knows well that the White Falcon is worth fifty men-at-

arms. No constraint is put upon you, sir knight, to serve him. You are free to draw your reins from Tor when you will; but it is my hope that you will draw your sword on behalf of the lady Ivga. Give me an answer on the morrow. Permit that I summon Ibrahim and wish you, nobles all, a good night."

Stretched luxuriously on the tiger skin of his pallet, Ayub surveyed the unwonted comforts of the guest chamber of Tor with an indulgent eye, and pulled the taboret bearing a goblet of spiced wine nearer to his hand. He admired the soft carpets of Bokhara and the damask hangings that covered the whitewashed walls, and the collection of yataghans and oriental daggers about the fireplace. After waiting upon them courteously, Ibrahim the *kayia* had withdrawn and Khlit had dropped the solid bar into place upon the door. The narrow, high windows of stained glass shivered under the buffets of the rising wind, and the heavy fumes of incense swirled about Ayub's eyes in bewildering fashion.

"*Ekh*, brothers," he muttered, "I have slept within the walls of Bagche Serai, and in the Kreyml itself, but this place is as fine as any. The wine goes to the head at once, there's gold and silver and slaves enough for a palace, and nothing's grudged. Only one thing is lacking—no holy pictures anywhere, not even an icon in the guest room."

Kirdy glanced up in his quiet way. It was true. The walls, save for the weapons and hangings, were bare. He had not seen a priest in the throng in the hall.

"As for the wine," said Khlit suddenly, in Tatar, "I have tasted its like before now in the hills of Mazanderan. It is tainted with bhang."

"And in the braziers," added Kirdy, sniffing, "hemp is burning."

A delicious drowsiness was enveloping the big Zaporogian; he pulled off his boots and contemplated them with pleasure, thinking that they had never looked so bright and red before.

"Well, brothers," rumbled Ayub, wrapping the tiger's paws about his big body, "what are we to do? We are in a wizard's *ousadba*, no help for that. I'd rather go against Skal than Erlik Khan. That's the truth. We'll have hard work with the pirates, but there are worse things than that—" He yawned heavily and fell asleep almost with the last word.

Khlit stared at the fire in silence for a long time. Then he sighed, shook himself, and placed his boots under his head for a pillow. His eyes closed as if in spite of his will.

"Kirdy," he said, "little *bogatyr*, my eyes are old—they cannot see in the night. There is darkness here and our way is not clear. Ayub has a stout hand but a weak wit. You must choose the road we will take, and answer the people of Tor."

Turning on his side, he coughed and went to sleep. Left to his own devices, the young warrior picked up the incense stand and tossed it into the fire. At the court of the Moghul of Ind he had seen the effects of burning hemp.

Listening to the heavy breathing of the older men, he paced up and down the guest chamber. To be penned within solid walls always made him restless, and this north wind was howling around the corners like a fiend

At one of the walls he stopped, his ear pressed against the damask. Above the roar of the storm and the crackling of the flames, he heard a girl's voice clear as the chime of the bell over the frozen steppe

It was Ivga, singing to a balalaika:

Ai-a—gallop away
From the earth, to the threshold of day! Away! Turn again,
O my warrior, from the earth and its men.

Kirdy was afoot early the next morning, before sunrise. The sky had cleared and the old moon was a gray wisp in the west; the breath of the forest was bitter cold and snow had drifted waist-high. He reflected that they would have fared badly in the open steppe that night, and he wondered how Shmel had managed to weather the storm, until he came face to face with the Jew at the stockade gate.

"The forehead—the forehead to you, noble lord. See, here are fine flints and bullet molds—belt buckles and powder flasks of the newest fashion. I have all things a noble knight can desire for an expedition. Or does your honor wish ribbons to adorn a pretty girl's shoulder? You will not buy them cheaper anywhere. And it's a fact that I have a certain powder, got from a wise woman on the Kama, that, when mixed with the wine a maiden drinks, will inspire her with everlasting love for the noble lord—"

"What price do you set on your own hide, Shmel? If Erlik Khan finds you, unbidden, within his gate—" Kirdy smiled a little at the thought of the merchant selling love potions in the mansion of a magician.

The Jew had arranged a rude stall out of the wrappings of his bundle and a plank or two and was setting out an array of goods.

"Isn't it true that the warriors of Tor are setting out on an expedition, your magnificence? At such times they must need flints and powder."

"You have long ears—beware lest Erlik Khan crop them!"

Shmel wriggled and ran around the stall to grasp the Cossack's long coat.

"Harken, young lord! Is it not true that Erlik Khan has shown you honor? Take me under your protection, O most illustrious of chieftains, and I will repay you well. Before God, I know that which will open your eyes. Last night on the steppe I saw—"

But Kirdy, impatient of such talk, moved away toward the gate. He could not understand the merchant, who had no thought for his own honor, yet would risk torture for the sake of selling his trinkets at many times the price he had paid for them.

As for Shmel, he lifted his hands in amazement at the man who would not stop to listen to a message that might mean life or death to him. He watched the warrior stride through the snow to the gate, where the Tatar guards bent the forehead to him respectfully. Kirdy said nothing to them but surveyed the defenses of Tor with a critical eye.

The *ousadba* was strong—the outer palisade, twelve feet in height, of heavy fir logs sunk upright in the ground, surrounded even the low thatched stables and serfs' quarters. The upper ends of the logs were sharpened to a long point and a narrow platform on the inner side permitted the defenders to stand and shoot down over the top. At the corners towers projected beyond the line of the palisade. These had narrow loopholes through which the defenders could shoot down assailants who ran to the foot of the stockade. And for an arrow's flight outside, the fringe of the forest had been cleared away.

The enclosure was more than a castle—it was a dominion within walls. A granary and meat house occupied the side across from the stables and cattle sheds; behind the manor house a windmill creaked irresolutely, and the *ousadba* itself, built of squared logs chinked with clay, could have stood a siege.

Covered ways led from it to the outbuildings, so that the serfs could come and go, no matter how deep the snow lay in the enclosure, and a square tower with a roofed-in summit rose out of the mass of the structure, like the head of a serpent, raised to strike from its coils.

Since the *ousadba* stood on the crest of a long slope, the tower must overlook the countryside. Probably in the first place it had been one of

the strongholds built by the Tatars of Tamerlane, generations ago. Was Erlik Khan a Tatar?

Thoughtfully, Kirdy made his way to the stables, rubbed down and watered the three shaggy ponies of the Cossacks, and gave them their oats. One had lost its leather shoe on the off forefoot and this pony Kirdy led to the shed where he had seen thick oxhides and tools. Taking off his *svitza*, he set to work cutting a strip that was almost as hard as iron, shaping it to the horse's hoof, talking to the beast under his breath as he worked, taking no heed of the damage done his clothing.

While he was pounding in the nails a shadow darkened the shed and he glanced over his shoulder. Ivga, wrapped in a marten skin *khalat*, stood watching him, Ibrahim beside her.

"O honored guest," she said quickly, "the stable knaves will attend to your horse. Giovanni awaits you at breakfast."

Kirdy, his mouth full of nails, shook his head. The Cossacks were accustomed to look to saddle girths and hoofs themselves—a loose girth or snow balling in a pony's hoof and hardening to ice might mean a fall or a lame mount at a critical moment.

Turning to Ibrahim, the mistress of Tor ordered him to explain to the captain Giovanni that Kirdy would join the others presently. The *kayia* hesitated, then took himself off.

"Erlik Khan has made a prophecy!" Ivga cried softly. "Last night he talked with the *vurdalaks* of the storm. He said to me, 'The three warriors will abide at Tor; yet the hour of their going will be terrible. Then the wolves will come out of the forest and the vultures will darken the sky.'"

Kirdy drove a last nail and released the pony, which trotted off to its stall.

"Eh, *boyaríshna*," he said, "what do you say?"

"I?" That the Cossack should spare her a thought seemed to astonish the girl.

Her eyes brightened and the color flooded her cheeks. "I would have you—stay."

"Surely, my lady, Erlik Khan can beat off the Volga men."

"He fears Skal. He seeks the aid of your swords."

His eyes on hers, the young hero mused. "And yet the prophecy of the *koldun* foretells evil out of our visit."

"Evil?" Her lips trembled. "Nay, Tor itself is evil. In all the manor you will not find the cross of God. Nay, they will not give me one little image to wear over my heart."

Hands clasped upon her throat, her dark eyes grief-stricken, she stirred the spirit of the young Cossack to its depths.

"Eh, *boyaríshna*, how is that to be endured? Is Erlik Khan truly a magician with powers more than human?"

She nodded mutely.

"It is easier to enter the gate of Tor than to leave. But the face of Erlik Khan you will not see, unless—" She caught her breath as if beholding something unexpected and welcome. "Nay, he does not like to be seen because he is no more than half a man. He is no larger than a child."

Kirdy thought of the winged rider; if Erlik Khan were in truth small in body, he had the clear voice and quick wit of a leader of men.

"Yet he commands his warriors when they are mounted for war."

"Aye, in his cloak and armor he will do so, because in the saddle—"

"He bears himself well."

"And in the *ousadba* he keeps to his own chambers, which are in the *vyzga*, the tower. My room is next to his and at all hours he comes to me with orders or questions, or summons Ibrahim, who bears his wishes to the captains of the men-at-arms."

"And you are his wife?" asked the blunt Kirdy.

"Aye, so. Ten years ago when I was a child I was taken captive on the road between the rivers. My father, who was on his way from Moscow to Astrakhan, was slain by the robbers. Because I was fair they let me live among the women and in time Erlik Khan made me his wife."

"*Ekh*," Kirdy mused aloud, "I would like well to see this magician."

She looked at him, wide-eyed.

"You do not fear him?"

"Not in his hall nor on the steppe."

"And you would see his face?"

"Aye."

She bent her head in thought, her hands still clasped against the white throat that nestled in the furs.

"Tonight, late, when the hall is quiet, come into the passage by the guest room. At the far end I will be, and if Erlik Khan is sleeping you may see his face."

Kirdy smiled, bending closer to catch her whispered words. "Why should he sleep? Let him await me in the *vyzga* with candles."

"That he would never do. Is it the tower at night you fear?" The young Cossack shook his head impatiently, and then added swiftly, "Then it is agreed."

At the door of the *ousadba* he left her and was hastening to the hall when a growling voice arrested him in his stride. Turning aside into the guest room, he found Khlit holding Ayub down upon the pallet by his shoulders. The big Zaporogian was cursing and reaching vainly for his sword, the veins knotted on his forehead, his eyes staring.

"You dog-brother," he roared at Kirdy, "where were you at sunup? It is not your fault I am here, and not paring the devil's hoofs. Brothers, let us to saddle! Wolves may fare well in this place but the souls will go out of men. Khlit, you old *chakali*, let me gird on my sword."

Evidently he was still the worse for wine, and frightened, which was unusual.

"He's been dreaming of Satan," muttered Khlit, thrusting his knee down on the Zaporogian's throat.

"*Ugh-a!* Out of the way! If I was dreaming then you are a bathhouse-tender. As God lives, I had wakened—my eyes were open and I was looking at the door because it was swinging slowly. Then in the dark passage I saw it, the *vurdalak*, the vampire. It was no bigger than a child, though its head was the size of mine. Ugh—take your fist out of my hair. By the good Saint Nicholas, its skin was white and shining and its eyes glowed like fire. It was a hungry vampire, and I said to myself, `It has carried off Kirdy and now comes looking for me!' As soon as I touched the cross on the hilt of my sword it vanished."

"Did you see this?" Kirdy asked Khlit.

The old warrior shook his head.

"I heard Ayub howl, and the fiend may have entered him, because now he is out of hand."

"Give him wine."

A pitcher of the spiced vintage tossed down his throat calmed the giant and Khlit allowed him to take his broadsword in his fist. He sighed and drew on his boots hastily. Although still confused in his wits, he was by no means drunk, and he announced his intention of getting to horse and quitting Tor at once.

"Brothers," he said, "I will go against Skal and the Volga men, but I will not linger where vampires come in at daybreak."

"And you?" Khlit asked his grandson.

"I have decided, *ataman*. Cossack honor does not permit that we ride from Tor the day before it is besieged. I will draw my sword for the *boyarishna*."

Ayub groaned and clutched his head.

"And I will not stay. Ivga is fair as a lily, and I would like to cross swords with the Volga chieftain—"

"So you will, Ayub," Kirdy assured him. "One night and no more we will abide at Tor."

"How—"

"Giovanni awaits me. I must not keep him."

Khlit looked after the young warrior anxiously. There were questions he would have liked to ask, and he would have warned the White Falcon not to put himself under the orders of a captain of Tor; but Kirdy, he saw, had decided what to do and Khlit had no love of advice, given or offered.

"I did not dream, old Wolf," Ayub muttered. "It is the truth that the *vurdalak* turned his eyes on me and looked right through me."

"Enough!" said Khlit curtly.

Yet in his thoughts he compared the dwarf that Ayub had seen in the first light of that day with the rider who wore wings and called himself Erlik Khan. It was quite possible that the khan had looked into their room after Kirdy had left it. If they were to stay and aid the people of Tor, sooner or later they must speak with the master of the house. And there was Ivga. Khlit suspected that if the mistress of Tor had not been beautiful Kirdy would not have decided to stay. And this troubled him.

At the table by the fireplace Kirdy found Giovanni alone, and the Genoese raised his brows at sight of the young Cossack.

"I had looked for your comrades, my lord."

"And they," Kirdy smiled, "have looked too long on the cup. I am here in their stead."

Giovanni had heard something of the uproar made by the Zaporogian, and he nodded without comment. Jean the Frenchman, too, was the worse for wine, and many others. But Kirdy's eyes were clear, and his step assured.

"Your decision, my Cossack?"

"We will go against Skal, on one condition."

"And that?"

"We shall have command of the men-at-arms for Tor."

A moment's silence while the Genoese struggled with surprise. "Odd's life! You to command in Tor! I dare not bear such tidings to Erlik Khan. Have you taken leave of your wits?"

"Nay, Pan Giovanni, by this token. The old Cossack is a Koshevoi Ataman—they two have led thousands into battle; they will aid you, but will not serve under a—*koldun*."

"Erlik Khan is no simpleton when it comes to an affray, as you should know well."

Kirdy bowed his head, but answered with pride.

"If the magician is able to deal with Skal, let him do so. If he seeks our aid—"

"He asks it."

"Then we cannot serve under a *koldun*."

A flush darkened the Italian's forehead, and his fingers twitched toward the rapier hilt at his side. "Sant' Maria! Such words are to be answered with steel. I serve under Erlik Khan!"

"Answer as you will," responded Kirdy calmly, "but think of the *boyaríshna*. We would keep her from the hands of Skal and his men. For Erlik Khan I care nought."

Giovanni's hand rose to the table irresolutely, and he smothered an oath.

"So soon? Jean is mad, by her beauty. He dreams of the lady Ivga and he is not the only one. They are all her slaves, the men of Tor."

"If they would guard her from Skal they must leave Tor and seek the Volga men in the forest."

This time Giovanni could smile.

"You Cossacks love horses overmuch. Leave Tor? Nay, it is clearly to be seen that you know little of warfare on the frontier, if you bid us leave the walls."

To this Kirdy made no response, busying himself with the meat and barley cakes put before him by the serfs.

"Eh, my Cossack knight, I have seen a battle or two in my time. The walls of the stockade cannot be pulled down, and Skal's horde will not be able to assault them in the teeth of our muskets and pikes. The Volga *burlaki* are best at hand-to-hand fighting—yet you advise going to meet them in the forest where even your horses will be of little use."

Kirdy nodded, plying his knife with relish.

"And why?" persisted Giovanni.

"Because Skal would not come against Tor unless he could deal with your walls. He can."

"Pray, how?"

"With cannon."

This gave the Genoese food for contemplation. He had thought that the transport of cannon during the Winter was impossible.

"Nay," the Cossack assured him, "among his baggage sleds Skal has two that bear brass guns, covered with furs."

Messer Giovanni permitted himself a smile.

"Eh, are you too a wizard—that you can see twenty miles through the forest?"

"Three days ago, my lord, we passed Skal and his train, turning into the forest from the Volga trail. I saw the cannon then and counted four hundred warriors, well armed. It needs not a wizard to prophesy that he will surround you in Tor. Then the cannon will growl and your gates will go down before your men can fire a shot from their muskets; then the *burlaki* will cry 'Up, lads!' and will slash the lives out of you."

Messer Giovanni found no comfort in this. Biting his fingernails he stared at the table, with covert glances at the young warrior.

"*Matia Bogun*!" he whispered. "Four hundred! And cannon—the odds lie against us." Presently he roused, as if he saw his way clear. "Young sir, I deemed your years too few for such knowledge of war. Permit me to inquire how you would move against Skal?"

Kirdy shook his head.

"The Wolf has said; an *ataman* must not disclose his plan to his men."

"Ah. Hannibal was not more discreet. At least, confirm me in this—you are confident of victory in the forest?"

"Nay, only if God sends victory will we overthrow the Volga men."

The swarthy face of the Genoese darkened and his fingers tapped rapidly on the table.

"——poor jest—it likes me not. Messer Kirdy, there is about you a taint of the stables and cowsheds."

He filliped a scented handkerchief before his nostrils, staring openly at the garments of the young warrior, soiled in the morning's labor.

Now, Kirdy had spoken quite seriously. He had thought out a way to attack Skal in the forest. Knowing something of the fighting qualities of the Volga pirates, he was not sure of the issue. God gave victory and defeat, when men had done their utmost.

"Enough of words," he smiled. "We Cossacks do not scorn horses—or swords."

"Or women," Giovanni added lightly, and Kirdy felt anger flash upon him suddenly.

"Death to you!" he cried, his hot temper flaring.

The thin nostrils of the Genoese expanded and he had gripped at his sword hilt, when a dark figure stepped silently from the door beside them and bowed with folded arms.

"Effendi," said Ibrahim, soft-voiced, "Erlik Khan bids the falcon of the Cossacks command the men of Tor. He has heard your talk and he also bids the two lords of Frankistan keep their swords sheathed, according to his order."

During that day Kirdy did not open his lips again. Giovanni had postponed the sword duel until Kirdy should take his departure from the *ousadba*, and they waited for word from the Tatar riders who were searching for the Volga men in the forest. But the young warrior did not bother his head about Skal as yet.

He was puzzled by the strange behavior of the people of Tor, the evil temper of Giovanni, the silence of Khlit, and the savage ill nature of Ayub, who was enjoying the aftermath of his drinking bout. Usually the Zaporogian was the best-natured of men. He thought more often of Ivga, pitying her plight and admiring her beauty. And above all things he wondered why in this manor house filled with costly objects, with furs and gold and all that men could desire, foreboding lay like a cloud upon the souls of its people.

When he watched the warriors in the hall he fancied that they moved about like men whose limbs were chained—as if their spirits were asleep. And this, he decided, must be some wizardry on the part of Erlik Khan.

He was glad that he would meet the Khan face to face that night.

III

When you go into battle—string your bows, temper your spear points, sharpen your swords, but pay no heed to the words of the soothsayers.

Proverb of Old Cathay

Never, to Kirdy's eyes, had the *boyaríshna* appeared more lovely than that night when she awaited him at the end of the passage, a candle dimmed by a night shade in her hand. Her hair, dark as the mane of a black stallion, flooded her slender shoulders. It was pushed back from her smooth

forehead and from it came a scent more elusive than dried rose leaves or the dust of jasmine petals. Her lips, parted in a half smile, gave him welcome in a voiceless whisper.

Kirdy, standing erect, his Cossack hat in his hand on one hip, his other hand on his sword hilt, bowed respectfully.

"Come," she breathed, her eyes seeking his.

She was indifferent to cold, heedless of the dark and the danger of that moment. To Kirdy she seemed as a *divchína*, a maiden without fear or evil thought—one who went, candle in hand, to pray in some dim and deserted chapel, and at that instant he could not think of anything more to be desired than the lady Ivga.

They passed through her sleeping chamber, her light feet tripping over the soft silk carpets and white bearskins soundlessly. And the room itself gleamed with white damask hangings, even the canopy of the carved cedar bed. A gray wolfhound, Ivga's pet, raised its head but did not growl at the young Cossack. Only in the chamber Kirdy did not see any icon or prayer stand and he remembered what she had said, that such things were not allowed her.

A narrow door set in a heavy log wall admitted them to a bare compartment without windows or hearth, and Kirdy, who had an accurate sense of direction, thought that they were now within the base of the square tower. He looked around swiftly for other doors, but saw none—only rows of powder casks.

"The *koldun*," Ivga whispered, "lies asleep above us. If you find him terrible, make no sound. *You must not wake him.*"

She glanced up at him beseechingly, and Kirdy nodded understanding. Holding the candle close to her breast to shield it from the eddies of the outer wind that swept through cracks in the upper wall, Ivga ascended a narrow stair that ran around the walls and disappeared in the shadows far over her head, as a path clings to the side of a precipice.

The wind snatched at her light garments, causing the flame of the candle to sink to a pin point and then leap up madly.

Somewhere in the height above him timbers creaked, and he stopped instinctively.

Ivga laughed under her breath and passed through a small opening in the floor above, leaving him in near darkness. The wooden steps whined under his weight and he held his breath to listen—hearing nothing but the high whimper of the wind outside the *ousadba*. It needed courage to

thrust his head through the aperture into the chamber of Erlik Khan, but Kirdy appeared beside Ivga so silently that she smiled approval and took his fingers in her warm hand.

Kirdy moved on his toes, so that his silver heels should not grate on the rough timbers. He was more than a little fearful for Ivga's sake—if the khan should awake and see that she had brought an armed warrior to his side, there would indeed be terror and the *boyaríshna* must suffer. But above all things Kirdy felt the need of seeing the face of the winged rider who had offered him terms on the steppe. Otherwise how could he take command with Erlik Khan at his stirrup, when all their lives must be put to hazard in the forest?

His first glance assured him that the room behind him was empty, except for bundles of valuable furs piled in the corners. There were chests ranged around the wall, and he half glimpsed a ladder that must lead to the tower summit.

As quietly as he could he followed Ivga to the far side, where a shelter of hides had been arranged roughly on stacked spears, Tatar fashion, to shield a cot from the blasts of the outer air. One side—the side toward them—was open, and, bending closer to the cot, Kirdy beheld a small figure curled up in a black bearskin.

The thing was no larger than a dwarf, and the head was shaggy as the bear's fell. The face that he saw in the flow from the shaded candle was colorless except for the veins in the heavy brow—a pallid, twisted face, without vitality.

It was, in truth, a dwarf. An old man, judging by the gray streaks in the coarse black hair, and the lines about the closed eyes. Kirdy had seen such stunted beings at the court of kings and boyars—garbed in rags and oriental finery, jesters whose pranks and sharp words caused their masters to laugh.

"Come," Ivga pressed close to his shoulder, her cheek brushing his mustache, to whisper almost inaudibly, "you have seen Erlik Khan, the *koldun*. He is restless, and if he should open his eyes—"

She tugged gently at his fingers. Erlik Khan, in fact, was moving uneasily under the bearskin. Then Ivga bent her head swiftly and blew out the candle, drawing Kirdy to one side.

The dwarf had sighed and lifted his head. A square embrasure by the ladder admitted moonlight into the tower, and by good fortune the sil-

very rays fell squarely upon the cot and the dwarf, so that Ivga and Kirdy stood in shadow.

As quickly as a snake coils when a step strikes the ground, the *koldun* turned, crouching, his short arms braced on the side of the pallet. He had seen or heard something that startled him. Powerless to prevent it, Kirdy noticed a thin wisp of smoke drift from the candle wick into the square of moonlight.

Kirdy's right hand gripped the ivory hilt of his sword suddenly. He could see the shaggy head of the dwarf distinctly and the eyes, now wide open. The pupils of the eyes shone in a peculiar fashion, and the Cossack, staring at them in fascination, knew that they were white.

His fingers closed around the cross on his sword hilt and his lips formed a prayer to the Father and Son. Erlik Khan did not quiver or shrink at this invocation, fearful to evil spirits. Instead, the translucent eyes roved around the chamber in a ghastly manner as if seeking in the shadows that which had aroused his anger.

"*Ai-a*!" the girl breathed. "Strike with your sword before—strike now."

But Kirdy, intent on the dwarf, did not move.

"He sees us. Draw and strike while you have your strength."

A moment passed, and Kirdy bent his head until his lips touched Ivga's hair. "Nay, he sees us not. He is blind."

The woman beside him trembled with eagerness that was like a fever.

"Blind—yet he has the power of sight within him. His anger is growing. See!"

The head of the dwarf was moving from side to side, even while his eyes swept aimlessly from the floor to the ceiling; it seemed as if he had heard their light whispers above the creaking of the tower. His long teeth were visible through the tangle of his beard, and he resembled so much an animal drawing up its sinews to spring that Kirdy slipped the curved saber halfway from the scabbard. Ivga watched him with silent eagerness.

Kirdy knew that he could step forward and slash open the skull of the man on the pallet before Erlik Khan could harm him—unless the dwarf were indeed a *koldun* with power to shatter the steel blade. But the Cossack had named the Father and Son and the dwarf did not even spit, as a *koldun* might be expected to do.

Surely the master of Tor deserved death, because he had slain innocent men without cause. And with Erlik Khan dead, would not Ivga be freed from her tormentor? Still, he could not step forward and strike. He wondered if Erlik Khan had, in truth, cast a spell upon him.

Abruptly, he slapped the sword back, and the dwarf started as if stung, peering at the darkness in which the woman and the Cossack stood. Kirdy had realized that this was not the winged rider. The dwarf had a beard that hung nearly to his hips. Unless Erlik Khan could change his shape, like a witch—Kirdy, heedless of Ivga's impatience, fell to wondering.

"Erlik Khan," he said quietly, "by Ibrahim you named me *ataman* of the men of Tor, so that I might lead them against Skal. From your lips I would hear that promise."

The face of the dwarf changed instantly; the snarling intentness fell away, to be replaced by bewilderment. He squatted back in his lair, fingering his beard.

"Skal? Who is he? Nay, I am Erlik Khan. I speak with the *vurdalaks* of the storm—I ride the white horse of nights. What do you seek with me?"

Again came the woman's insistent whisper at his ear: "He can appear like this if he wills. He is afraid of you. Come, let us go while we may."

But the young Cossack shook his head impatiently.

"Nay, grandfather, you lie. You did not ride the white stallion last night, or wear the armor with wings. Your voice is not *his*."

"Good youth, what are these words? Where is the *boyaríshna*? Who is near me?"

"The Cossack, the White Falcon. I have said that you lied."

Kirdy strode forward then and seated himself on the side of the pallet, pulling the dwarf forth from his lair of shadow by the beard. The old man was very uneasy and kept calling out for the *boyaríshna*, who, however, maintained utter silence.

"*Ekh batyúshka*—eh, grandfather, it was you who looked in at the Cossack Ayub, and raised the hair on his head."

Scrabbling at his beard, the dwarf tried to get beyond reach of the young warrior's hand.

"*Ai-trzei!* Noble sir, I meant no harm. How could I, when God has darkened my eyes? I heard one of the noble lords breathing like a horse and I opened the door to listen."

"And you listened at the door of the *krasno miesto* this morning while I talked with the captain Giovanni."

The old man mumbled and wriggled, swearing that this was not so.

"The hall is not a fit place for such as I. When other men behold me they go away—such is my ugliness. Only the *boyaríshna* is kind."

"Kind?"

"As a mother of saints. She has given me this bed and coverlet—"

A sudden movement on the part of Ivga made him lift his head and listen.

"That was like her step. Why do you not go away from me, cousin Cossack? Aye, Ivga brings me bread and at times a shank bone of mutton. When she rides from the tower she only locks the lower door."

"And Ibrahim?"

"*Ai-trzei!* He binds me and beats me sometimes because he is a Mohammedan."

"Are you, grandfather?"

The dwarf shook his head vaguely.

"Do not mock me, cousin Cossack. I think you have come from afar. I do not make the five prayers, and I eat unclean meats."

"Nay, you are Erlik Khan!"

The twisted face brightened and the dwarf started to his feet.

"Aye, Erlik Khan they have named me. I listen to the *vurdalaks* flying about the tower. When the storm spirits cry out like dead souls, I dance. *Hai*, Cossack!"

In clumsy cowhide boots the dwarf began to caper on the echoing planks, grinning like the fiends he had invoked. He flung his short arms about.

"There are many dead souls in Tor. I hear them wailing, below." And he began to sing in a hoarse high voice, while Kirdy watched, grave-eyed, his chin on his hand. He could see clearly now the white cataracts over the pupils of the old man's eyes, and the pallor that came from age and confinement.

"Enough!" he cried suddenly. "Back to your nest, little grandfather."

He felt a twinge of pity as the dwarf darted to the pallet and rolled up in the bearskin, like a dog that has been caught in some mischief and rushes to its corner to escape the wrath of its master. Then Kirdy went down the dark stair very quietly. He had seen Ivga slip away and he did not know what he might find below.

He had been born in the Gobi where the night has its tasks and struggles as well as the day, and he knew that he was alone in the lower cham-

ber where the powder casks were stored. Soundlessly he moved to the door, and after listening a moment pushed it open.

The *boyaríshna* was sitting on a cushioned bench, near the fire, one hand on the neck of the wolfhound, her eyes on the face of the young warrior. He went to the hearth and gazed about the room, the blood warming his cheeks as he realized that it was Ivga's sleeping chamber, and that he was standing in his boots on a small silk prayer rug of Bokhara.

"This night," he said, "I sought for speech with Erlik Khan, and now the moment has come."

From under lowered lids she studied the lean face of the warrior, the thin nostrils, the wide, firm lips, and the level brows, now darkened with anger. Kirdy was standing with his cap at his hip and his hand on his sword hilt as if facing an enemy.

And Ivga felt in her heart that she loved the Cossack, even while she told herself she hated him.

"Aye," she said, in her clear young voice, "they named you well, White Falcon. Truly you have the eyes of a falcon. I *did* ride the white stallion last night, and wear the cape and helmet—but how did you know?"

"*Boyaríshna*, your voice is not like another's."

"Still, you were not sure until you talked with—the dwarf. Riding so, in the night, the men-at-arms knew me not. If they thought a woman led them, they would not obey."

"Not so—they worship you, my lady."

She looked up at him quickly.

"They may think so of Ivga, the captive-wife of Erlik Khan. But would they be loyal to Ivga, the rider of the white horse, the mistress of Tor?"

When Kirdy remained silent, she stared upon the fire musingly for a space and then tossed back the dark tangle of her hair as if casting off thongs that bound her.

"It's true, *bratik*—my brother. Your Cossacks would not follow a woman to battle. They think we are all witches."

A little smile touched her dark lips, though her eyes were somber.

"Harken, White Falcon—once I tricked you and lied to you. There is no Erlik Khan. In other years my father, journeying from Persia, was slain by a few bold robbers on this trail that leads from the Volga to the Don. All our servants except two were cut to pieces. I was brought to this *ousadba*, then a small hold. One of the two servants, Ibrahim, was able to put the white dust—bhang—into the flagon of wine the dog-souls, the robbers,

were drinking from that night. Their senses were dulled and some of them Ibrahim slew with his knife. He freed me, and I put on the mail and small helmet that I found in the plunder gathered by the outlaws. Those who survived were savage men without wit, and they thought that the dwarf, Erlik, had got the better of them because he was a *koldun*, a wizard."

Kirdy nodded understanding. In appearance Erlik was awesome enough.

"Who was there to tell me what to do—I, a maiden untaught? Ibrahim would have gone back to the towns of Islam. But we were no more than three, with my father's goods and the gold and weapons the robbers had got together in Tor. In Muscovy I had no friends. So we strengthened Tor, and in time other outlaws took refuge here. Knights, passing along the road between the rivers, chose to stay and serve me and to them I said that the dwarf was truly a *koldun* and that I was his wife."

Her slender fingers caught in the shaggy coat of the wolfhound and she laughed, a chiming bell-note that caused the dog to lift its head to her knee.

"*Ai-a!* At times the knights fought among themselves on my account, and a few prayed me to flee with them into the steppe. Why should I? There is a legend related of this place that once a pagan duke lived here with all his court. So did I set up my kingdom, and even the Tatars came to abide at my house, for dread of the *koldun*, Erlik Khan. I sent them here and there into the world, and they brought me tidings swiftly—so that men thought I had eyes and ears to perceive what came to pass in the steppe and the forest. Because I rode from the *ousadba* usually at night, they said that I could see in the dark, like a vampire."

"The prophecy," said Kirdy thoughtfully, "you related to me in the stable—whence did it come?"

Ivga shook her dark head.

"My lord Cossack, it was from the lips of Erlik, the dwarf. He has a whim of strange sayings. 'When they ride forth from Tor,' he proclaimed, 'the wolves will come from the forest and the vultures from the sky.'"

"*Ekh-ma*, that may well be a true saying, if Skal comes against Tor. Tell me this, *boyaríshna*: We have made a bargain, that I was to have command over your men. I will release you from the bargain, if that is your desire—"

"And why, Sir Cossack?"

"Because if I command at Tor, all things must be in my hands. The Volga men are not hedgehogs—we cannot play with them."

Ivga smiled suddenly and clapped her hands. Before she could summon him again the outer door opened and Ibrahim appeared, very much surprised at beholding the young warrior in the room of his mistress.

"Tell me, O *kayia*, what word has been brought by our riders." Ibrahim made answer in Persian.

"*Ak Begum*—Flower Princess—the Tatars know that Skal is no more than two days' march distant."

Ivga dismissed the chief of the slaves as if well satisfied with what she heard.

"White Falcon, the Tatars also brought to me tales of your daring. When we met on the steppe, they pointed you out to me, and I thought that God had sent to me a sword to strike down the outlaw Skal. My thought is not otherwise now—I bid you take command of my men."

"Has Giovanni told you that I will lead them into the forest?"

"A bold stroke. It likes me well."

"Then we mount before dawn, and I ask you to remain at Tor."

Ivga stretched out lithe arms to the fire and threw back her head, her eyes half closed.

"Nay, Sir Warrior—I will ride with you."

"It will not be a falcon hunt, this. When a hundred rush upon four hundred in the deep snow only God knows where the victory will lie, my lady. Abide at Tor and if we are beaten you may still escape alive."

"What is life?" Ivga rose and placed a hand upon his shoulder. "Who knows what lies at the end of the road? I will ride with you, my lord, and if we find death, then surely the tale of it will be on the lips of men and minstrels for the ages of ages."

Looking down into the beautiful eyes, sensing the impetuous spirit of the *divchína*, Kirdy felt the spell that had been laid upon the men of Tor, who loved Ivga.

"Eh, you are brave, my lady." Glancing at the stained glass of the window, he added, "Sleep now, if you can. It is near cock-crow."

Ivga laughed.

"On such a night, who could sleep?" And, when she had searched his face with a swift glance, "Send Ibrahim to me, if you will, with my sword and armor."

In the guest room of Tor, Khlit, the Wolf, had been sleeping soundly in spite of the clatter of cups and the hum of voices from the revelers in the hall, until a song in the high voice of the Frenchman, Jean, awakened him and he noticed Kirdy sitting on a bench by the candle that Ayub had lighted as a protection against further visits of the apparition with the white eyes. The young Cossack was gripping his head with both hands and groaning.

After watching him for a moment Khlit growled, "Have you been hunting devils?"

"Fire burns me, little grandfather! I have seen treachery and evil! Where now is Cossack honor? It is dark, the road."

Khlit did not go to sleep again. Aware by some sixth sense that the dawn was at hand, he yawned, scratched his head and felt for his boots. "She is a beautiful witch—devil take her," he said to himself. But to Kirdy he said nothing, only watched his grandson with troubled eyes.

IV

In open country, do not try to bar your enemy's way; on dangerous ground, press ahead quickly; on desperate ground—fight.

Maxim of Sun Tsu

Both Khlit and Ayub eyed Kirdy expectantly when he rode out in front of the Tor men, an hour later. Ivga's warriors had spent the night over the wine cup and many of them had heated their brains with bhang. They were loud-tongued and quarrelsome—a few singing, others savagely silent. Giovanni, morose at the selection of the young Cossack as leader, was not inclined to give Kirdy any help.

It was a wild and orderless array, each man armed to his own choice; but armed they were, and the veteran Cossacks saw that the horses were good ones.

"These sons of dogs will give a good account of themselves if cornered," Ayub remarked to Khlit, "but it remains to be seen what they will do in the open field!"

They quieted down the moment Ivga appeared on her white horse. Every man noticed that the supposed *koldun* did not wear the eagle's wings, and this was taken as a portent of something unusual. Ivga had worn the wings the better to disguise her figure and to increase the awe in which

the men held the rider of the white horse. Perhaps now she felt they would be in the way, or she discarded them on a whim.

In fact, everything that Ivga did sprang from a whim; for two years she had been absolute lord of slaves, captives, and men-at-arms, and she had become a little satiated with the taste of power, in ruling Tor. She longed for new fields, for greater homage. In the wilderness of the border, she saw herself a queen riding to conquest—with Kirdy at her side.

Until the White Falcon had come to Tor, the maiden Ivga had not known the meaning of love, and perhaps her heart went out to Kirdy because in no way would he submit to her. Until Skal and his horde moved against her, she had met no worthy rival.

Now, in the bleak hour before dawn, in the glow of spluttering torches, facing lines of armed men, Ivga was thoroughly happy.

Twenty warriors—and Kirdy selected those who carried arquebuses—were told off to garrison Tor under Ibrahim's orders, and then the Cossack rode down the ranks, searching every man for pistols, and giving all that he found to Ibrahim, taking no heed of the barbed oaths of the owners.

Then he kneed his pony up to Ivga without taking off his *kalpak*.

"*Boyaríshna*, there is yet time to gather your treasure on pack horses and escape to the Don country."

"Go, White Falcon mine—go, if you fear! You have my leave to fly!"

And a little laugh fluttered in her throat as she watched his face. He drew the rein against the pony's neck and turned away.

"*Shagom marsh!*" he called out in Muscovite speech. "Forward, slowly."

But when he passed the dark group of Tatar riders at the gate, his lips parted in explosive gutturals: "*Ahatou ashanga, yarou! Yaubou boumbi!*"

And the men of Tatary, the Tcheremisse and the Kitans, drew in their breath sibilantly, and every gnomelike head turned toward Kirdy expectantly. He had addressed them in their own speech, in pure Mongol, which these inveterate wanderers had not heard for many Winters. Their homeland was the Gobi and there Kirdy had been born and weaned. He spoke as a Mongol khan, with authority and understanding: "Brothers of the winged rider, take heed! Show the road without haste."

They closed around him and Ivga, astonished and silent, waiting patiently for daylight so that they could look more closely at Kirdy. Ivga's curiosity took fire at once.

"What did you say to them?"

"They are your best men." He did not answer her question. "It is well that you have thirty such and that you wore the eagle's wings formerly when you took to the saddle."

"And why, my Cossack?"

Among the Mongol tribes a chieftain wears an eagle's feather, white or black, and the term *ashanga*—winged rider—was an expression of highest praise. The matter-of-fact Tatars held Ivga in awe, the more so as she was quite fearless. Their eyes, keen to see in the darkness, had made out that she was a woman. Believing implicitly in magicians, they assured themselves that she was a *shaytán epereke*—a particularly potent forest goblin, appearing sometimes as an old man, sometimes as a young maiden. The *shaytán epereké* was known to spring up behind a rider and drive the horse over a precipice. All this Kirdy, whose thoughts were otherwise occupied, did not see fit to confide in Ivga.

In fact, he became utterly silent and would not reply to her questions, and the Tatars, who missed nothing of all this, remarked that the White Falcon had no fear of the magician.

Two abreast, the horsemen filed into the trail behind the Tatars, Khlit and Ayub bringing up the rear. They had barely passed the gate when Khlit looked back. A pony was galloping after them, bearing a rider who wore no sword, carried no spear.

"It's the Jew," Khlit muttered and moved on again.

Shmel had no sooner drawn abreast of them than he began to wag his tongue, his head, and his legs all at once.

"Hi, noble lords, I will tend your horses; I have some fine *gorilka* in my flask, and anything you tell me to do, I will obey faithfully. Only let me stay near your horses' tails and do not drive me away."

The Cossacks, who looked after their own mounts and did not drink on the road, paid no attention to him, until Ayub grunted: "It is a wonderful thing that you are not lying on your Jew's quilt at Tor, where there is gold and silver and a fire. Why do you take the snow road this night?"

"Because it is safer by the swords of such kingly warriors than in Tor."

"How, safer?"

"Because the *boyaríshna* and her knights are less to be feared than the dwarf and that pagan with the dark face—Abraham, as they call him, blasphemously."

Ayub yawned, drew the collar of his *svitza* tighter, and regarded Shmel without favor.

"You have lapped up too much *gorilka*. The lady is sleeping at Tor and Erlik Khan rides at the head of the column."

"If the noble lord will forgive me, it is otherwise."

Bending down from his high saddle, the big Zaporogian stared into the thin face of the merchant until he could see the flickering and restless eyes.

"Do you desire to feed the kites, that you say a Cossack is drunk on the march?"

"As God lives, worthy colonel, I did not say that. I swear by all that's holy, yesterday morning I tried to warn the young *ataman* that the lady Ivga was the one who took you prisoner—"

"Death to you! We yielded to no one! The lady Ivga is a gentlewoman, though married to a dog-souled magician."

Seeing Ayub reach over his shoulder, toward the projecting hilt of the broadsword, Shmel groaned.

"Harken only one little moment, illustrious lord, and then do as you like with me. That night on the steppe when you dealt such a blow with the sword—I swear never was such a blow seen before—I was so near the winged rider that the horse snuffled on my neck. My soul sat on my shoulders from fear but I looked around and through the bars of the helmet I saw that the eyes of the rider were dark. Close at hand I heard her voice—a woman's voice. The captain Giovanni knows this secret, though he keeps his own counsel—"

"The Jew speaks the truth," growled Khlit suddenly, because Shmel was raising his voice and the nearest men-at-arms were looking around.

Ayub stared at his friend and scratched his ear.

"What do you know of this, old wolf?"

"Last night Kirdy said he was going to speak with Erlik Khan, but at cockcrow his Cossack soul was troubled and he knew not what to do. A woman had talked to him."

Forgetting Shmel, Ayub pondered and presently gathered up his reins.

"Where are you going?" Khlit asked quickly.

"To warn Kirdy."

"Of what?"

"Of the rider on the white horse. If the dwarf is not a *koldun*, then she is a witch or vampire. If Kirdy's spirit is dark, I'll eat grass but she has laid a spell on him. He will not speak to us. At the first cliff she may jump up behind him and drive his horse over to death."

"She may do worse," muttered Khlit, who kept his hand on the Zaporogian's reins. "Nay, do not go. Are you his friend?"

"In all things."

"Then wait. He has taken the bit in his teeth; he has chosen the path he will follow."

Ayub considered this for a moment.

"*Ay-a tak*. It is in my mind, old wolf, that you are testing Kirdy."

"Nay," said Khlit grimly. "He is making a trial of himself."

"Well, brother, it is true that every warrior finds himself someday in the arms of a beautiful woman who would put a spell on him. And it is also true that we have agreed to help the people of Tor. And yet—"

Tugging at the ends of his long mustache with both fists, he frowned heavily, glancing now and then at the impassive Khlit. Shmel, well satisfied to be ignored, followed out of reach but within earshot, venturing from time to time a remark that if the Cossack colonels took rich spoil from the Volga men they would find no one ready to give them half the value that he would give.

"Allah!" said the Zaporogian at length, half to himself, "the horses are snorting—that means either a vampire is near, or a good omen. The —— only knows which it is. But to send our falcon against Skal and his horde with only a hundred of such tavern sweepings! And with a beautiful witch whispering in his ear. May the dogs bite you, Khlit! It is all very well to make a test of a youngster, but a hare does not jump over a wolf to test its legs."

And he reached up to make certain that his sword was loose in the scabbard.

Throughout the day Kirdy led them without a halt except to breathe the horses, and the Tatars twisted and turned so often that the men of Tor had no very good idea where they were when they dismounted at sunset in a mass of immense firs. They only knew that they had climbed from the scattered groves around the *ousadba* to a higher region where the forest was unbroken, and the tree trunks rose far above their spear tips before branches began to spread out into the network that made the forest bed

a labyrinth of darkness. Here the snow was only a few inches deep, and they could make out a multitude of tracks left by men on horses and sleds. And here Kirdy dismounted, bidding the men eat what was in their saddlebags, and sending off the ponies in charge of five Tatars armed with bows. Only Ivga kept her white stallion, and this seemed natural enough to the men of Tor, who had never seen Erlik Khan out of the saddle. They were too hungry to wonder much, and when they had finished eating Kirdy had disappeared in the darkness with his guides.

Their bellies filled, they began to gather in groups and speculate in a dozen languages as to what was going to happen. They could light no fire—Kirdy had forbidden that—and they began to be cold and to complain. They had neither brandy nor vodka nor any understanding of what was going on and their mood was like the maw of the forest. Then the moon rose somewhere and its rays filtering through the mesh of firs outlined patches of snow.

By its light Giovanni was able to search out Ayub and to ask a question.

"Where is your White Falcon? Why does he wait for moonrise?"

"*Ekh*," said the Zaporogian, who was none too pleased at being dismounted, "he waits so your soul will have light to find its way out of the world after your body is cut open." And he added under his breath, "May it roost in purgatory!"

But Kirdy himself came striding through the patches of moonlight, his white *svitza* blending with the snow carpet, giving out orders as a wind-whipped torch looses sparks.

"Are your bowstrings dry in the pouches? The bows oiled? Good. String your bows—ye who have them—shift your quivers and form behind the captain Giovanni. Yonder."

It was no idle question he asked because the very trunks of the trees were damp and a wet bowstring is only a little more useful than wet powder. Surprised, the men who had bows obeyed. And before the others could grumble, Kirdy had them in charge of Jean the Frenchman. The Tatars he left with Khlit, who alone—excepting himself—could hold them in hand.

Standing in the center of the three groups, hand on hip, he was silent for a moment, paying no attention to the white stallion that paced out of the shadows and halted at his shoulder. But the men-at-arms saw and crossed themselves or bowed as the mood struck them.

"O ye men of Tor!" Kirdy's words rang out with the hard echo of striking steel. "Ye are doomed men. Too often have you raided the trails. Your sword edges are dull from striking down cattle. You have lived like dogs. What honor have ye—what courage?"

Men held their breath, watching to see the rider of the white horse strike down the young Cossack. But something like a laugh came from between the bars of the helmet that hid Ivga's face.

"Hide of ——!" whispered Ayub hoarsely. "The fledgling is mad. They will claw him!"

A growl went up from the assembled warriors. Among them were bold spirits, enthralled by Ivga's beauty, and souls were not lacking that had once held honor dear. Then too, there was stealthy fumbling for throwing daggers and fitting of arrows to strings. The men of Tor were in no mood to suffer abuse.

"Is there any," pursued Kirdy without moving, "who fears not to draw steel when he is named a dog?"

"I—horns and hoofs of Satan, I—I will!"

Three tall men stepped out from the groups, sword in hand. Giovanni, gnawing thin lips, was not among them—he was staring at the rider of the white horse.

Kirdy's laugh was short and savage. "Good! Ye are the three I shall take. Ayub, you too, stand with these."

Surprised at being singled out in this fashion, the three warriors waited to hear what more the Cossack would say, and the giant Zaporogian joined them.

"We five," said Kirdy, smiling, "will strike for the tent of Skal. We will bring him to earth early in the fight. For an hour I watched his camp, and his tent is in the center of the fires. He is as tall as Ayub, here, with yellow boots—a bearskin on his shoulders."

They listened now attentively, and he laughed at the two groups behind the captains. Jean the Frenchman had stepped forward with the three boldest spirits, but Kirdy had waved him back, saying that his work was elsewhere.

"Ye are doomed," he cried, "and lost indeed if you do not overthrow the Volga men. Their camp is between you and Tor. In the day we circled it, and now you must fight your way back or wander without food in the forest. The horses have been driven back along our trail and the horse-herders have orders to greet with arrows any who run after them."

A hoarse roar of anger went up at this—even Ayub grumbling aloud that his horse should have been taken from him without his knowledge. Only the three that had been chosen out of the ninety-five kept silence, knowing from their own experience that Kirdy had more to say.

"Skal's *kibitka* lies half a league from here," went on the White Falcon calmly, "and many of his horde are awake around the fires. He has stationed sentries in pairs in eight spots a bowshot from the fires. Our Tatars can deal with them, with the lassos. Giovanni's detachment will go to the right, to a knoll where the underbrush is thick, and will shoot from their bows when the first blow is struck."

He glanced at the Genoese, who nodded understanding. Greatly as Giovanni disliked Kirdy, the hazard was too instant to think of his own quarrel.

"The captain Jean will work toward the left, and rush in on the side when the first arrows fly."

"And you, Cossack?" The rider of the white horse spoke, low-voiced.

"Skal sleeps. His men obey him like slaves; without him, half their strength is lost. With these four, I will be the first to enter his camp lines, and one of us must bring him down. Then, not knowing our numbers, the Volga men will yield. But as long as Skal remains on his feet it will go hard with us."

He turned impatiently to the listening throng. "The moon will set in three hours. Will ye go forward to fight or run off to die like jackals?"

"Monsieur," observed the captain Jean, "such words are not to be endured. If both of us come out of this, it must be that we measure swords."

"Well said," laughed the White Falcon.

The men-at-arms growled assent, and Ivga answered for them. "Lead on, my Cossack, to Skal or the ——."

Hidden in the shadows with his Tatars, Khlit looked around for Shmel, chuckling. He was beholding the fruit of the years when he had fostered Kirdy. He alone had read what was in the young warrior's mind. The firearms had been left behind so that no premature alarm should be given. The men of Tor had been led around behind the Volga band so that they must fight if they hoped to behold Tor again. The horses had been sent away to prevent any from attempting to flee if the fight went against them at first. Without their being aware of his plan Kirdy had deliberately cornered his followers, and such men fought best if they were desperate.

Only—Khlit knew that Kirdy should have kept five horses for himself and those who were to try to pick the Volga chieftain from the midst of the pirates. Kirdy had not done so because it must inevitably have aroused suspicion among the men left on foot.

"Shmel," he growled, when he had found the Jew. "Once you cackled when the Tor riders were seeking us out in the steppe, and gave us away. This time you will not be with us. Go—nay, back along the trail. So!"

He caught the trader as if to thrust him in the right direction, and whispered swiftly in his ear. Shmel departed, his thin legs and his cap flying as if, Ayub observed, his soul had come out of his wallet and sat on his shoulders again.

V

If they are desperate, men will fight to win or die; at such a time they will not draw back or flee—officers and warriors will be in accord and all orders will be obeyed.

Maxim of Sun Tsu

Skal did not sleep for long. He crawled out of his felt tent and came to squat by the largest of the fires—his heavy shoulders drooping, his long arms crossed on his bare knees.

He had the broad, stooped head of a Kalmuk, and black eyes that shifted constantly, from the embers at his toes, to one of his lieutenants who was cleaning a pistol in the clear moonlight, to a dark body that lay stretched out in the form of a cross in the snow. This was a woodsman, one of the serfs of Tor, whom Skal had captured that day and had staked out on the ground, to torture until he wrung from the serf's lips certain things he desired to know about Tor.

His long, greasy hair lay heavy on the bear's hide that covered gigantic shoulders. He listened idly to the rattle of dice on a wagon board, to an angry mutter of quarreling men, and the movements of the oxen penned behind the sledges.

Skal had chosen his camp shrewdly, in a clearing hidden from sight by surrounding ridges, where fuel could be gathered without felling any of the tall firs that screened him. The sledges—the largest of them bearing two brass ship's cannon—and the oxen protected the two sides of the camp toward Tor, and he knew that his outposts were alert. Skal had a

way of enforcing obedience among the escaped serfs, the deserters, and the gallows birds that had rallied to him on the Volga.

From the dead woodsman he had learned how few were the men-at-arms of Erlik Khan, and he did not look to be attacked.

Although his keen senses sampled the sounds and smells of the night, he was thinking of the face and slender body of Ivga, and of his purpose to take her for himself.

"*Ekh-ma-a*, father," grunted the man who was charging a pistol. "Such a moon—like a sun, it is."

Skal lifted his dark face toward the sky, and his lip twisted away from his teeth.

"Yonder the kites rise up. They have sighted this." And he spat on the body beside him, but his restless eyes took account of the crows circling over the pines.

The lieutenant—he had a thin red beard and a skin so pitted with smallpox it resembled carved wood—glanced sidewise at his leader without raising his eyes. It was not good, to his thinking, to look upon the full moon.

"Aye, Skal, there will be vultures and wolves aplenty at Tor, come another night."

The shaggy giant was wholly intent on the forest wall beneath the wheeling crows.

"*Sloo-ou—chay-y!*"

Beyond the wagons the sentinels raised their routine cry, but their mates on the other side did not echo it. Skal gripped hard upon the *kisten* in his fists—the long iron mace ending in a knobbed boss, which was heavier than a broadsword. A clumsy weapon in ordinary hands, but in Skal's grasp a thing more dangerous than any sword because he could wield it as lightly as a wooden cudgel.

"*Mátka Bozka schotzé driasnúlo!* Mother of ——, what was that noise?"

The man with the red beard raised his head but heard nothing except the rattling of the oxen's chains and the soughing wind above him.

Without a sound Skal sprang to his feet as a wolf stirs up, alert, with blazing eyes. He strode from the fire, away from the wagons, and stopped as suddenly as if he had scented danger under his nose. Throwing back his great head, he laughed deep in his throat and roared, "Up lads—weapons in hand!"

From the nearby edge of shadow he had seen five men walking toward the camp, and still no cry from his sentinels. He saw in a glance that the foremost wore a pure white *svitza* and Cossack *kalpak*, and the second was as large in stature as Skal himself.

Kicking at the nearest of the sleepers, Skal started toward the intruders; the dicers left their board, drawing their short, straight swords, and everywhere the Volga men began to roll out of their sheepskins.

The Cossack leader whipped out his saber and howled like a wolf. Instantly arrows flicked from the overhanging ridge and several of the pirates stumbled to their knees. The red lieutenant leveled his freshly charged pistol, and shot down one of the five, who were now running within spear cast of the Volga chief.

"Up!" roared Skal. "Close up, dogs! Steel to them."

His left hand jerked a small ax from his belt—a weapon that he could throw, splitting open the head of a foeman at ten paces. But a knot of his men gathered in front of him, and others, running up, formed a thin line on either hand. Of these the speeding arrows of the hidden bowmen took heavy toll.

The man nearest Skal groaned and stepped back, a shaft embedded under his heart. The Volga chieftain dropped his ax long enough to rip the arrow from the dying pirate and stare at its smoking point.

"Tatars and Cossack thieves!" he roared. "Drive them back to their holes."

This loosed Ayub's tongue.

"You lie, dog-face!" he cried. "Here are Zaporogian swords that have made Satan glad before now."

At his cry the Volga men hung back, but, urged by Skal and seeing no more than the four in front of them, five warriors ran at Kirdy. He sprang forward to meet them, caught one blade under the edge of his saber and passed the point through the man's throat. Stepping quickly to one side, he parried another's slash and, laughing, smote the pirate in the forehead with his hilt. Stunned, the man was cut down by one of Ivga's champions.

Meanwhile Ayub had run forward, cutting savagely to left and right with his two-handed sword, so that only one of the five *burlaki* remained afoot. He was engaged by the other swordsman, while Ayub and Kirdy pressed forward, their shoulders touching, to reach Skal.

They had failed in the attempt to surprise the shrewd chieftain and both of them knew that if they could not slay Skal quickly they would be

surrounded and borne down by numbers. Giovanni was slow in advancing to aid them.

But on their left Jean the Frenchman was running into the camp followed by his three dozen, and the Volga men on this side were facing about to form against the newcomers, whose number in that uncertain light was unknowable. So that, for a moment, only a few men stood around Skal.

The Cossacks drove in. Kirdy found himself opposed by the lieutenant, who hurled his empty pistol and crouched as Kirdy cut at his head. The heavy saber of the Volga man parried the first cut, and, stepping forward, he locked blades. Instantly his left arm flung out and he gripped Kirdy's weapon in his hand, drawing his own blade free with a shout of triumph.

Before he could bring down his saber the Cossack had caught and held his right wrist. At the same time Kirdy twisted his blade, pulling it back sharply, and the red-beard screamed when his fingers came off under the razor edge of the curved sword. Kirdy thrust him through, pushed him aside, and ran on.

Skal had gone back into the center of his camp to rally his followers. On either side men were fighting in groups or singly. The clatter of steel grew louder, the mutter of voices swelled to a roar.

"*Ou-ha-a!*"

Kirdy heard Ayub's shout and saw the big Zaporogian running after Skal, accompanied only by one of the Tor men. Behind him Khlit's Tatars were coming forward, plying their bows.

But the young Cossack saw that on all sides the attack had been checked. Men were falling to the bloodstained snow. The armored knights of Tor were pressing in savagely, but the greater number of the wild *burlaki* was beginning to tell. All this he noticed as he sped after Ayub.

Skal turned, at the glowing embers of the large fire, and, while his men ran toward him, hurled his ax. It struck fair the forehead of the remaining warrior beside Ayub and split his skull, so that he dropped where he was hit and lay motionless.

"Satan looks after his own!" laughed Ayub. "Greet him well, ye!"

Before Kirdy could reach him, the broadsword and *kisten* had clashed, bright sparks shooting forth into the haze of moonlight. "Death to you!" howled Skal.

For a moment it seemed as if the long iron *kisten* would shiver the broad blade of the Cossack. Once the knobbed end of the mace swept off his *kalpak*, drawing blood from his shaven brow.

"Back, brother," Kirdy pleaded, "or he will beat you down."

The heavy *kisten*, swung with all the strength of the Volga chieftain, seemed on the point of smashing in Ayub's skull like a melon. At such close quarters, the big Zaporogian had neither time nor room to swing his broadsword; all he could do was to parry the stunning blows of the mace.

"I'll give ground to no man," he panted, and suddenly dropped his sword. The Volga men, seeing this combat of the two giants, hung back expectantly, and Skal, beholding Ayub defenseless before him, shouted aloud and swung the kisten high.

As he did so Ayub hit out unexpectedly with his right fist and toppled the chieftain back. Before Skal could regain his footing and strike, Ayub had seized him around the ribs.

Skal beat at the Cossack's head, then gripped Ayub's throat in both hands, letting fall the *kisten*. They swayed and trampled back and forth, their heads growing darker with congested blood.

Ayub had locked his chin on his foeman's shoulder, and for a space the chieftain could not crush in his neck muscles.

Both men were gasping, their sinews cracking. They swerved into the fire and out again, their blackened boots smoking in the snow. Then Skal grunted. One of his ribs had broken. Ayub, grimly silent, tightened the grip of his steel-like arms.

Skal's twisted face grew black and he screamed suddenly, choking as the breath was driven from his lungs. His arms went limp and he lay in Ayub's grasp, his ribs cracked, his back broken.

The *burlaki* stared, not believing that Skal could be dead. But Tatar arrows smote them and those who had watched the fight turned to flee, crying that they were dealing not with men but with demons. Others joined them in seeking the safety of the forest. Kirdy, standing vigilant beside the wearied Ayub, saw that half the Volga men had abandoned the camp.

"*Umpf*," the Zaporogian grunted, picking up his sword and leaning on it while he got his breath back. "It was said he held mass for Satan. That did him little good."

"Come," said Kirdy impatiently, and they plunged into the thick of the fighting, leaving, as they pressed on, a trail of the dead behind them. As flames soar up when fresh wood is cast on a fire, the struggle about the Cossacks grew more intense—no longer were the voices of men to be heard, only the clang of weapons, the splintering of wood, and the bellowing of the frightened oxen.

On the outskirts of the camp someone shouted; a horse neighed and presently men began to call out everywhere: "Quarter—throw down your blades! —Make an end—Erlik Khan gives quarter!"

First one, then a dozen of the Volga *burlaki*, seeing that the warriors of Tor grounded the points of their sabers, threw down their weapons. Then all stood disarmed, looking in stunned silence at the apparition that paced out of the forest wall into the moonlight.

Upon the white horse sat Ivga without her helmet. Her cape was thrown back and her shining black hair flooded her slender shoulders; her eyes sparkled with delight. The very poise of her head showed the pride she felt in Kirdy when she reined toward him, and placed her hand on his shoulder. So tall was the young Cossack that she needed not to lean down to do this.

"My falcon, even in former ages there were no greater heroes! *Ai*—my enemies lie scattered under your sword. Now it remains for Ivga of Tor to pay her debt."

VI

What is homage without loyalty, or profit without honor? No more than the husk without the seed!

Kashmiri proverb

The fear that shone from the stained faces of Ivga's men was no greater than the bewilderment of the Volga men when they beheld a young woman in command. They thought that the wizard, Erlik Khan, had chosen to appear in this semblance. All this amused Ivga, who issued orders to fetch in the pirates who had sought shelter in the forest, and to build up the fires.

"I will no longer wear the mask, Messer Giovanni," she assured the Genoese, who looked more sallow than ever when he saw her admiration for the Cossack. "Do you make known to these animals of mine why I hid behind the helmet of Erlik Khan."

"Men of Tor," responded the ready-witted captain, "the mistress is no magician. Erlik Khan is no more than a name, to put fear into our enemies. Those who first came to the *ousadba* beheld the dwarf, Erlik, and made up a tale that he was a *koldun*. The *boyaríshna* could not lead you, in the raids, if you thought she was no more than a maiden, unskilled in war. So she clad herself as you see, and took the name of Erlik Khan—and you have seen that no foeman could stand against her. Even," he added with a faint sneer, "these lordly and renowned Cossacks were taken—"

Ayub lifted his head angrily, but Ivga smiled at him, and flicked Giovanni with her whip.

"Enough, sir captain! And now harken, O ye river-men. Your lives are spared—if ye serve me faithfully in all things, giving up the ships hidden in the reeds of the river."

The captives answered with an instant shout—"We will serve you, gracious lady!"

Without leaders of their own, awed by her beauty, those nearest Ivga fell on their knees and beat their foreheads against the snow.

"*Ohai*, my dogs!" she laughed. "The portage is ours; now we will frolic on the Volga. We will make the red cock crow in the walled villages, and drink the wines of Astrakhan. Did Skal show you good hunting? Now the frontier is yours and you will take what you will—red gold and fair women, and the altar pieces of the monks!"

She knew how to stir their blood. They raised up their hands and roared approval, while the men of Tor listened eagerly, understanding now why the lives of the *burlaki* had been spared. With Skal's men, the power of Tor was doubled. With cannon and ships they could levy tribute on the river. Outlaws all, they grinned and nudged one another, elated—not quite certain yet whether she were witch or human, but assured of the good fortune that followed her.

"We will kindle things up, Lady-Miss!" they proclaimed.

Again Ivga laughed, her hand on Kirdy's shoulder.

"We shall kindle a flame that will light the border. The Tatars of the far steppe will obey the White Falcon; their hordes will cross the river, to our aid. We shall sow terror. And why, men of Tor?"

They held their breath and crowded closer to hear the better, forgetful of wounds.

"Why?" echoed Jean, the Frenchman, his eyes on her face. "*Boris Gudunov is dead!*"

Giovanni, his thin features sharp in the firelight, cried up at her.

"The tsar is dead?"

"Aye so—he who ruled Muscovy and the steppe with a hand of iron and bound you—and you—serfs to the soil." She pointed her whip at the outlaws. "Now the power of the tsar is no more than a shadow. Already his empire breaks up—the Kalmuk across the river rides against the Muscovites; the Poles are on the march. One town arms against another. The plundering has begun and we will take our share."

Only half understanding, the outlaws bellowed their glee. Plunder—they lived for nothing more than that.

But Ivga, utterly heedless of them, had bent her dark head to the silent Kirdy.

"My lord," she whispered exultantly, "such words serve to feed the rabble. Yet it is true, my falcon—all true. Once I lied to you, but now—"

The color deepened in his cheeks, and she brushed back the tangle of her hair.

"Now I yield Tor to you."

When he did not answer at once, she went on swiftly: "Out of the fragments of the border an empire can be built up. At such times of stress the masterless men flock to leaders. The Cossack Irmak made an empire with fewer men than these."

"Fewer, but they were Don Cossacks," said Kirdy reflectively.

"And cannot you lead Don Cossacks to Tor? It has been told me that Boris Gudunov sent five hundred of your comrades, you among them, to suffer in the deserts of Asia. Do you not live by the sword? Be master of Tor and the khan of all the hordes will send envoys to you."

The pressure of her hand, the insistence of her splendid eyes stirred the blood of the warrior. The hint of coming war aroused him instantly.

"And I, Ivga"—the words barely reached his ear—"will serve you, my falcon, body and soul. Of all men, I love only you."

"You!" he cried, trying to understand. "You love—"

"The White Falcon." She bent still lower in the saddle and raised his hand, pressing it with sudden strength to her forehead. Of all those who stood around them, only Giovanni saw the act, and frowned.

"Nay, my falcon," she added merrily, "do not the very gods serve you? Your sword will never be drawn against your brother Cossacks, because the Zaporogians have lifted the standard of war. Their siech, their mother, has declared itself free."

The beauty of the woman who had aroused his admiration, the savage appeal of her ambition, her very pride in him—all these faded from his thoughts. With an effort he drew his eyes from hers, and felt as if invisible chains had fallen away from him.

"The siech's at war!" A voice within cried it out, and the words rose to his lips as he looked around eagerly for Khlit. "Little grandfather," he shouted, "there is war in the Cossack land. We must hasten to the siech."

No longer was his spirit troubled; the path he meant to take was clear to his eyes; an eagerness to be in the saddle seized upon him.

"You would leave me?" Ivga's lips were still smiling, but her cheeks had turned colorless.

"The road awaits us."

"But—you would not leave me. Why? Among the Cossacks of the siech who would know the White Falcon? Here you are master. Yonder you would curry your horse and ride guard at night, in the snow. Your captain would shout at you, and if there is a battle, you would charge like cattle, pressed in among a thousand of your kind. Why do you think of that?"

Kirdy smiled. Ivga had painted for him the very longing that was in his heart. To take his place among the Cossacks, and hear a *sotnik* swear at him in his own language; to be in the saddle, on the night round of the picket lines, singing to the restless horses—to charge with the thunder of a thousand hoofs in his ear!

"*Ekh*, I thank you for the word. You are brave, *boyaríshna*, and beautiful as the dawn on the southern steppe. Now Skal is dead and you have many swords to serve you. Nay—we must seek the horses, because the road is long to the siech."

The bewilderment and dismay had left her eyes and they had grown bleak. Ivga had smiled at men before now, and they had given their lives to her.

"I would have—slain Erlik, for your sake," she whispered.

Kirdy's lips tightened. Because Ivga had almost tricked him into dishonoring his sword by cutting down the dwarf, who was no longer useful to her, he had distrusted her after that hour. But he found no words to make this clear to her.

Nor could he make clear to her that he had no love for Tor and its brigands—a woman's kingdom, luxurious as a court of Ind, but impalpable and brief as the morning mist. Khlit had said truly that the soul might be loosed from the body but a Cossack's pride could not be driven from his soul.

He did not see the flush that darkened even her eyes, or hear the swift pounding of her heart. Ivga's pride, in its own way, was no less than his.

"Choose!" she cried, struggling to breathe evenly. "The road, or my—service!"

Kirdy looked out beyond the fires. Over the serried line of the forest, the first dull streaks of the sun's rising were showing in the sky. The

moon had grown smaller, it seemed, and was like a round orange lantern hung near the horizon.

"Farewell, *boyaríshna*—may God keep you."

And in that moment Ivga had a feeling that it would be better to permit the three Cossacks to go, as she had pledged, unharmed from Tor. But anger, like a hot flash, leaped from her heart to her brain. She smiled strangely.

"I jested, my falcon. I see it is true that Cossacks are clowns without spirit who groom horses well. Giovanni!"

A glance at the thin, sardonic face of the Genoese captain decided her, and she spoke to him under her breath, turning her back on Kirdy.

With a half nod Giovanni passed around her horse, drawing off one of his gauntlets as he did so. Ignoring Khlit and Ayub, he bowed before Kirdy, the hand with the glove sweeping low.

"Ha, you are in haste, Messer Cossack. You would be off before I could remind you of your promise—a little matter of satisfaction that is due me."

Without giving Kirdy a chance to answer he stepped forward and made as if to flick the glove in his face. Kirdy's hand went to his sword hilt instantly and Giovanni appeared to ponder.

"Perhaps if I stir you up with the flat of the blade, you will stay to cross swords with me. Ah, so!"

Kirdy had started forward, his eyes blazing, until he was checked by Ayub's great arms.

"Will you fight with your own weapon?" Messer Giovanni asked with some curiosity. "Then choose the ground. As for seconds—"

"Enough!" cried Kirdy. "Begin!"

But the Genoese, who was no stranger to the dueling ground, wished to make the most of the Cossack's impatience. He would have challenged Kirdy on his own account; now, at the unexpected suggestion from Ivga that he do so, he experienced a keen satisfaction, knowing that the young warrior had aroused such anger in the mistress of Tor that his blood would certainly be shed.

Giovanni knew much of women. In Ivga's passion he foresaw favor for himself, and a step toward that for which he had planned patiently ever since, coming to Tor, he had been aware that Ivga was the winged rider.

Leisurely, he removed his coat, and warmed his fingers at the fire, bidding the outlaws throw on more wood so that the light would be better.

Then he stamped on the surface of hard, trodden snow, to make certain of the footing, and took off his coat.

Jean the Frenchman approached Kirdy, who, his *svitza* flung aside carelessly, stood with his eyes fixed on the black form of Giovanni.

"*Par dieux*," exclaimed the captain, "you will not fight with that light saber?"

Impatiently, Kirdy nodded.

"But you cannot do that!" The Frenchman flung out his hands and his eyes widened. "Look! Giovanni uses the heavy campaign rapier—a straight blade. With the curved blade you cannot parry his thrust—for long. Perhaps you have never dealt with an Italian rapier before?"

"He has not," Ayub put in, and added anxiously to Kirdy, "Eh, brother, that black dog will outreach you—his blade will glide around your *sablianka*."

The French captain put his hand on his hip and bowed.

"Young sir, you are brave. I—Jean Etienne de Montleherey—was once accounted a *maitre de l'escrime*. I have had bouts with Giovanni. Consider, he is fresh, you are wearied. Take then my blade, if you will. In its day, it served well a Christian king."

His blurred eyes gleamed and he straightened his shoulders with something of a swagger. Kirdy glanced at the plain rapier of the Frankish captain.

"Nay, *sotnik*, the curved blade fits a Cossack hand."

"As you will." Jean de Montleherey hesitated, and added under his breath, "Sir Cossack, in our duels the dagger may be used in the left hand. Giovanni wears a knife at his hip. Watch, then, his left hand."

He glanced at Giovanni, who had chosen his ground with his back to one of the fires and was bending the supple blade of the rapier in both hands. Kirdy, arms and throat bare, quivered with eagerness, the curved blade moving restlessly in his grasp.

"To one death, to the other life!" he cried.

The Frenchman glanced again at Giovanni, who nodded gravely. "Begin, *messieurs*," he said, and turned to Ayub. "A pity, is it not? A splendid youth. Name of a name!"

Kirdy had sprung forward, slashing thrice at his foe's heart, so swiftly that the watchers stared. And, quietly, Giovanni parried the cuts. His right

foot slid forward, his arm shot out and up, and when Ayub could see Kirdy again, blood was dripping from the base of the young warrior's throat. The point of the long rapier had pierced beneath the skin.

Kirdy gave ground. Here was no sweeping onset, no crashing strokes of the saber. He could not leap in and out, as a Cossack fights. The gliding thrust of the rapier could not be foreseen.

Confident now that he had checked the first rush of the Cossack, the Genoese began to attack at once. He was utterly cool as he took matters into his own hands. A master of the sword, driven to flee as an outlaw by an unfortunate duel, he had no doubt of his ability to slay the young Cossack.

"May God and His holy angels watch over Kirdy—*Aga*," groaned Ayub. "*Ekh*, he draws back again. The —— in armor could not stand before him with a saber, but that long spit is always at his throttle."

Giovanni was feinting and thrusting without an instant's respite, the corded muscles standing out on his forearm. The two blades were ripples of flame as the firelight gleamed on the bright steel. And still Kirdy gave ground, perforce, before the menace of that dancing point.

Breathing heavily, the Volga men pressed against the shoulders of their captors, forgetting everything in their delight at the savage play of the swords. Ivga never took her eyes from Kirdy, except when she glanced once fleetingly at Khlit. The old *ataman*, quite undisturbed and feeling the bite of hunger, had drawn a barley cake from his wallet and was munching it steadily, his eyes hidden by shaggy brows watching the flashing weapons.

Kirdy had retreated until he felt one of the wagons behind him. Here he held his ground, crouching, his right arm shortened, only the wrist and elbow moving.

The grating of the blades never ceased, nor were they for an instant disengaged. Giovanni was feeling the saber, his rapier whirling in and out. Both men were breathing fast, and sweat ran from their heads. Steam rose around them in the bitter air.

Giovanni's knees were bent, his body swaying back and forward. Now he smiled. He was growing tired, but Kirdy, weary when the fight began, was panting. Thrust followed thrust, always to be parried by the instinctive skill and the iron wrist of the Cossack. Once the rapier point passed through a fold of Kirdy's shirt at the side, and he cut at Giovanni's head.

But the Genoese slipped back a pace—and the blades had engaged again before the watchers were aware that the saber had struck, fruitlessly.

"Not then," gasped Giovanni, his smile fixed as if painted on a mask, "but presently—you will die."

He was growing flushed under the eyes, and anger surged through his veins. He had been confident of tiring the Cossack, and it was inconceivable to him that a saber could parry a rapier point for so long. The two men, nearly at the end of their strength, were gathering themselves together for the end.

And still the blades twisted and flashed without respite.

"He lives yet!" whispered Ayub hoarsely. "A golden candle to Saint Nicholas, and a new robe to the good Saint Andrew. May they—"

Suddenly he clutched his head, and Khlit drew in his breath sharply. For the last moment Giovanni had repeated the same glissading thrust—a light feint, a thrust to the other side, against the heart. Three times Kirdy had knocked the rapier point aside. Again Giovanni had feinted. But this time the rapier flashed up before Kirdy's eyes, and a knife gleamed in Giovanni's left hand as it drove for the Cossack's heart.

Kirdy's eyes, fastened on the livid face of the Genoese, had caught the sudden purpose and the flicker of the knife. His saber swept out and then up. The blade whistled as it cut down twice.

"Name of a name!" whispered the French captain.

Giovanni, slashed through the temples on each side, lay motionless in the snow. But his left hand, severed from the wrist by the first snap of the keen-edged blade, had fallen a dozen feet away, the dagger still gripped in its fingers.

For a moment no one moved and then Jean de Montleherey went to the Genoese and turned him over. He was dead—had died in all likelihood before he touched the earth.

Ivga, her lips bloodless, spurred her horse up to the two men and smiled at the French captain.

"Monsieur, you, too, have a word to say to this Cossack. Slay him!"

"I? It is true that I challenged him, and another day I will await him where he pleases." He shrugged plump shoulders, as if explaining a simple matter to a child. "Name of a name, though, he has fought ten men this night and is cut up, I—Jean de Montleherey—could not cross swords with him."

Ivga's hand, which had been pressed against her throat, sought her side. Kirdy, leaning against the wagon, his eyes closed, did not see that she had drawn a dagger from her girdle.

"No!" The Frenchman caught her arm impulsively, and she screamed suddenly.

Wrenching free, she leaned down, and before the man could defend himself, drove the knife blade into his throat.

"A hundred gold pieces to the man who strikes down the Cossack!" she cried to her startled men-at-arms. "Bows—take bows!"

Some of the archers began to string their bows; others, lifting pike and sword, ran forward. They were checked in their onset by a loud whistle from Khlit. The old Cossack had leaped to the top of the line of wagons, and now he whistled again. The men of Tor heard the soft impact of hoofs on the beaten snow and turned to see what riders were approaching.

They beheld, instead of riders, a gray pony with an empty saddle, followed by two others. The horses shied at the fires but made toward Khlit, who leaped into the saddle of the gray. He wheeled away, leaning to the neck of the pony so that all the archers saw was a gaunt leg, the tail of a flapping *svitza*, and a polished boot hanging over the saddle.

Kirdy and Ayub had jumped for their mounts before any man thought to prevent them. Running beside the ponies, they gained the saddle and raced beyond the firelight. A few arrows whistled over them without doing any harm.

At the edge of the forest Khlit had reined in, and they paused to look back at Ivga.

Motionless in the saddle, the *boyarishna* pressed her hands against her face. On the snow by the white horse lay the bodies of Skal and the two men who had sought her love. In the illusive glow of the firelight it seemed as if they were still trying to look upon her face with their sightless eyes.

Ayub crossed himself and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Eh, tell me brothers—she is beautiful, that's the truth. Is she a witch, or"—he pondered a moment—"a woman who wished to reign like a king?"

But Khlit and Kirdy heeded him not. They were looking intently at a figure moving toward them in the murk of the forest. It proved to be a mounted man, Shmel on his nag, shambling forward uneasily and yet hopefully.

"Noble colonels—and I swear you will be generals now that the illustrious Cossacks are at war—I obeyed in everything your ordered. I rode to the Tatar horse-herds, and as God lives, they came near ending my life with their arrows. When they heard the name of the *ataman* Khlit they bowed to the girdle and gave up the horses, pointing out the right ones to me. Then, believe me, I rode like mad to your nobility—"

"Give him gold," Khlit said to his companions.

The three Cossacks untied their wallets and tossed them to Shmel, who was struck dumb by this evidence of madness, and by the circumstance that the warriors had not even counted the gold and silver pieces in the heavy wallets.

"*The siech's at war, Jew!*" Khlit's beard bristled in a grin, as he tightened his reins and made off.

He was unusually happy. Not four days ago he had said to Ayub that Kirdy's eyes were not yet open. Until now the young warrior had not met with treachery; but at Tor he had dealt with the enemies who were hidden, and with the hatred of a proud and ambitious woman. Kirdy was unharmed—a stab in the throat, but unharmed in his spirit and much the wiser.

So great was Khlit's satisfaction, he actually praised Kirdy.

"You did well enough, for a mewling cub. Only don't give up the horses again, you little dog's brother!"

Appendix

Adventure magazine, where all of the tales in this volume first appeared, maintained a letter column titled "The Camp-fire." As a descriptor, "letter column" does not quite do this regular feature justice. *Adventure* was published two and sometimes three times a month, and as a result of this frequency and the interchange of ideas it fostered "The Camp-Fire" was really more like an Internet bulletin board of today than a letter column found in today's quarterly or even monthly magazines. It featured letters from readers, editorial notes, and essays from writers. If a reader had a question or even a quibble with a story he could write in and the odds were that the letter would not only be printed but that the story's author would draft a response.

Harold Lamb and other contributors frequently wrote lengthy letters that further explained some of the historical details that appeared in their stories. The letters about the stories included in this volume, often with introductory comments by *Adventure* editor Arthur Sullivan Hoffman, follow, and appear in order of publication. The date of the issue of *Adventure* is indicated, along with the title of the Lamb story that appeared in the issue. Lamb did not write a letter about every story.

October 20, 1923: "Men from Below"

A word about the *siech*. It was the military encampment of the Cossacks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Here gathered the picked warriors who left their tribes and families for the wars. To escape annihilation by the Turks and Tatars, it was kept an open camp, moved constantly up and down the banks of the Dnieper, below the cataracts, its exact position being concealed. So the warriors came to be called Zaporogians, or "Men from Below the Rapids."

The brotherhood of the warrior Cossacks was a military democracy; the Koshevoi Ataman, or camp commander, exercised authority over the free Cossacks, but only in time of a campaign. In peace, which was seldom, they did as they pleased.

Every entrant turned over his personal property to the *ataman* of his barracks, to be used for the common good. A thief among the warriors was almost unheard of, and stealing was punished by imprisonment in the stocks. A cudgel was placed by the stocks and any Cossack was privileged to beat the criminal as he passed by.

Lying was rare, and resulted in severe punishment. Murder was taken care of by burying the murderer alive under the corpse of the victim. Women were barred from the *siech* rigorously—possibly because it was desired to keep the situation of the war camp hidden.

The brief stay of the free Cossacks in the *siech* was an orgy of drinking, feasting and gaming—as long as the spoil taken in the last expedition held out. But once on the march again a man found drunk was shot down. In any dispute the older Cossacks decided what was to be done.

For weapons, the free Cossacks were forced to rely on what they could take from the Moslems, who were the best-armed troops in Europe at that time. No one received any pay. Often the barrack *atamans* buried some particularly rich treasure, intending to dig it up again when the regiment was broke or funds were needed. But, more often than not, the chronicles relate, they forgot about it or were killed in battle.

When a free Cossack wished to go back to his village or family, his name was taken from the roll of the Zaporogians.

Such was the brotherhood of the free Cossacks. Only two conditions were made to a newcomer: he must be able to use weapons, ride, and take care of himself, and he must be a believer in God and Christ. Every new arrival was expected to perform some feat to show his worth. A good many died in attempting to shoot the cataracts of the Dnieper, or in jumping their horses over the palisade around the camp.

During the reign of Lenin and Trotsky in Petrograd recently, the Bolshevik party tried to win over the Cossacks, and subsequently to break their strength, but found the "Free People" just as much opposed to Bolshevism as to the old tyranny of the nobles.

For the opening verse of the song quoted in a former story, "The King Dies," and for the version of Ivan Sirko's letter as well as several points in this summary, the author of these tales is indebted to Captain W. P. Cresson, whose history "The Cossacks" is the only modern account of this adventurous people in English.

September 30, 1925: "Bogatyr"

From Harold Lamb something in connection with his complete novelette in this issue. Step up and be introduced to kurgans if you have not already met them.

Kurgans such as the one mentioned in "Bogatyr" are in reality tumuli, or burial mounds. They are found in the vast steppes between Europe and the great wall of China.

I remember a Russian officer saying that in one mound near the Don River, a primitive cannon at least four centuries old was unearthed. The Russians used to dig into these mounds on the chance of finding gold ornaments, weapons, and so forth, very much as we Americans calmly dig up the burial sites of Indian tribes.

The similarity of the kurgans in Siberia, north of the Gobi, with those several thousand miles distant on the Black Sea, seems to indicate that they were built by the Mongols—perhaps in the age of Genghis Khan, perhaps in the day of Tamerlane (as we call Timur-I-lang), perhaps in the time of the khanates of Central Asia—the Golden Horde, etc., in the sixteenth century. No one knows for certain.

There are also found in the steppes curious stone warriors and women that face always to the east. And I think the figure monuments of Siberia are very much like them. The Cossacks relate that when these stone women are carried away to make gateposts for a house in some Russian village, it takes a half dozen oxen to drag them to the west, although one can draw them back again. *Moi, je ne sai*—

At any rate most of the Cossacks are extremely unwilling to dig up the burial sites, the kurgans. A hundred years ago the British explorer, Clarke, asked the hetman of the Don Cossacks for some men from the village to help him the next day. The men were ready enough until they found out that he wanted to uncover a nearby kurgan. They refused point-blank—said it was unthinkably unlucky—and Clarke did not get a look at the inside of the mound.

Some readers might very well think it a bit of imagination on the part of the author to picture a village of Cossacks being ordered to go and settle in the wilderness by the tsar. But this custom of advancing the Cossack *stanitzas* into the steppes of Asia was the chief means of Russia's expansion toward China—and into Alaska for that matter, or India.

Moreover, whole villages were not always sent. Five hundred or a thousand families would be ordered to transmigrate. As late as 1861 some Don Cossacks were ordered to migrate to the Caucasus, and proved rebellious. "But they soon recovered their senses," remarks a Russian historian, "and the colonization was effected *without resort to specially severe measures*." As to the title, we find it among the Mongols of Genghis Khan (Bahator) and among the ameers of Timur-i-lang, in India, as Bahadur, and in Russia as Bagatyr or Bogatyr— "g" being sounded as "h" in that language.

November 30, 1925: "White Falcon"

From Harold Lamb a word in connection with his three-part story beginning in this issue—something concerning the history that lies behind it:

The expedition of the Cossacks to Urgench took place in the beginning of the seventeenth century. Abu Ghazi, sultan of the Uzbeks, gives a good account of it. He was alive at the time or, at any rate, heard the details from no less a personage than Arap Muhammad Khan himself, a remarkable chieftain and a dour fighter if ever there was one.

More than a hundred years later Peter the Great sent an expedition on the same mission, under command of Prince Becovitch-Cherkassi. Although four thousand strong, this little army was wiped out by the Turkomans, who executed the prince and sold most of his men into slavery.

Probably only a Muscovite tsar of the seventeenth century would have sent five hundred men to bring him the treasure of a Muhammadan city, in the very heart of the power of the sultans of Central Asia, beyond the salt deserts and the inland seas. I have tried to tell the story of these five hundred Cossacks.

> *In 1602 five hundred Cossacks marched across the desert which divides the Caspian Sea from the Sea of Aral and took Urgenj, which is barely two days' march from Khiva.*
>
> *They returned with enormous booty, but were overtaken by the Khan of Khiva and the whole of their force was annihilated with the exception of only three Cossacks, who survived to convey the tidings of the disaster on the Jaick.—*
>
> From The Rival Powers in Central Asia, by Josef Popowski.
>
> *Arap Mahamet Khan having taken the field to pass the summer with the lords, his vassals, upon the banks of the river Amu—the Urusses of Jaigik (Russians of Jaick) who were informed that there were no soldiers in summer in the town of Urgens, came there with a thou-*

sand men and after they had cut the throats of above a thousand of the inhabitants, they loaded about a thousand carts with all sorts of valuables and, having set fire to what they could not carry away, they returned.

But Arap Mahamet being informed of it in time went to cut off their passage, and lay in wait for them at a certain defile, which he so well entrenched and palisaded in haste that the enemy could not force him till after an attack of two days and were obliged to leave all their booty behind.

In the meantime Arap Mahamet Khan, who did not deign to let them escape him so cheaply, having got the start of them, went to wait for them again at another defile; the Urusses not having been able to force this passage notwithstanding all the efforts they made to effect it; the water, which is very scarce in those parts, began at length to fail them, which reduced them to so great extremity that after having been obliged to drink the very blood of their slain companions to quench in some measure the thirst that had afflicted them, they were constrained to make a last effort to force the barricades of Arap Mahamet Khan.

It succeeded so ill with them that there escaped scarce a hundred men of them who made over to the banks of the River Khisil (Red River) and there built a cabin a good way on the other side of the town of Tuk where they lived by fishing, waiting some favorable opportunity to reach their own country; but Arap Mahamet Khan having been informed, five days after, of the place of their abode, sent men there who slew them all.—

From the History of the Tatars, by Abul-ghazi Bahadur Khan

The account of Abul-ghazi Bahadur Khan is interesting, as he was alive at the time—nephew, I think, to Arap Muhammad Khan, but his "thousands" are the usual Moslem historian's round figures.

I think the three survivors reached the border.

Glancing at the map, from Moscow to Khiva, it will be seen that the march of the Donskoi was a notable one—in the early seventeenth century. That was the time of the height of the Turkish power, and the Moghuls of India were still mighty.

Between these two the Uzbek and Turkoman khans and the Persians were fighting continuously. To march over the border of Islam in 1602 took a bit of nerve.

The attitude of Boris Godunov toward the Donskoi is about correct, historically.

The tsars *did* send the Cossacks on just such hopeless missions. You may remember I told you about the Cossack hetman, Platov, who was sent in Napoleon's time across these same deserts to conquer India—with three or four thousand men! Some of them came back.

We are indebted to Captain Victor L. Kaledine, essaul of the Don Cossacks, for the translation of the words to the "March of the Donskoi."

January 10, 1926: "The Winged Rider"

Something from Harold Lamb in connection with his novelette in this issue. In view of our Camp-Fire argument concerning Julius Caesar, I wonder whether that gentleman too read Sun Tsu.*

The wings used by the rider of the white horse were often met with on the borderland in those "times of the troubles." A generation later the armored hussars of Poland wore them, and they there became as famous as the bearskin shakos of Napoleon's guard in another century.

Sun Tsu, quoted in the chapter headings, wrote what is believed to be the first treatise on the art of war, 500 BC. It's mighty good reading. It was translated and studied by Frederick the Great, Napoleon, and the German high commanders who fought in the last war. Sun Tsu got precious little credit.

The map, by the way, is a copy from one old Russia Company "presented to the House of Lords." But I had to modernize the geography a little and change the old spelling.*

*Here Hoffman refers to the long-running debate about Julius Caesar's depiction by Talbot Mundy (pen name of William Lancaster Gribbon) in his multi-part saga of Tros of Samothrace. Of all the *Adventure* authors, Mundy and Lamb are the two most frequently discussed today. Mundy's Caesar is a brilliant, amoral schemer, which excited a storm of controversy amongst those used to reading of Caesar as an upright hero. A careful craftsman with a great deal of insight into human nature, Mundy could write a cracking good adventure tale and is still popular in some circles today.

*In lieu of the map mentioned by Lamb, refer to the map printed within this volume.

About the Author

Harold Lamb (1892-1962) was born in Alpine NJ, the son of Eliza Rollinson and Frederick Lamb, a renowned stain glass designer, painter, and writer. Lamb later described himself as having been born with damaged eyes, ears, and speech, adding that by adulthood these problems had mostly righted themselves. He was never very comfortable in crowds or cities and found school "a torment." He had two main refuges when growing up—his grandfather's library and the outdoors. Lamb loved tennis and played the game well into his later years.

Lamb attended Columbia, where he first dug into the histories of Eastern civilizations, ever after his lifelong fascination. He served briefly in World War I as an infantryman but saw no action. In 1917 he married Ruth Barbour, and by all accounts their marriage was a long and happy one. They had two children, Frederick and Cary. Arthur Sullivan Hoffman, the chief editor of *Adventure* magazine, recognized Lamb's storytelling skills and encouraged him to write about the subjects he most loved. For the next twenty years or so, historical fiction set in the remote East flowed from Lamb's pen, and he quickly became one of *Adventure*'s most popular writers. Lamb did not stop with fiction, however, and soon began to draft biographies and screenplays. By the time the pulp magazine market dried up, Lamb was an established and recognized historian, and for the rest of his life he produced respected biographies and histories, earning numerous awards, including one from the Persian government for his two-volume history of the Crusades.

Lamb knew many languages: by his own account, French, Latin, ancient Persian, some Arabic, a smattering of Turkish, a bit of Manchu-Tartar, and medieval Ukranian. He traveled throughout Asia, visiting most of the places he wrote about, and during World War II he was on covert assignment overseas for the U.S. government. He is remembered today both for his scholarly histories and for his swashbuckling tales of daring Cossacks and Crusaders. "Life is good, after all," Lamb once wrote, "when a man can go where he wants to, and write about what he likes best."

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