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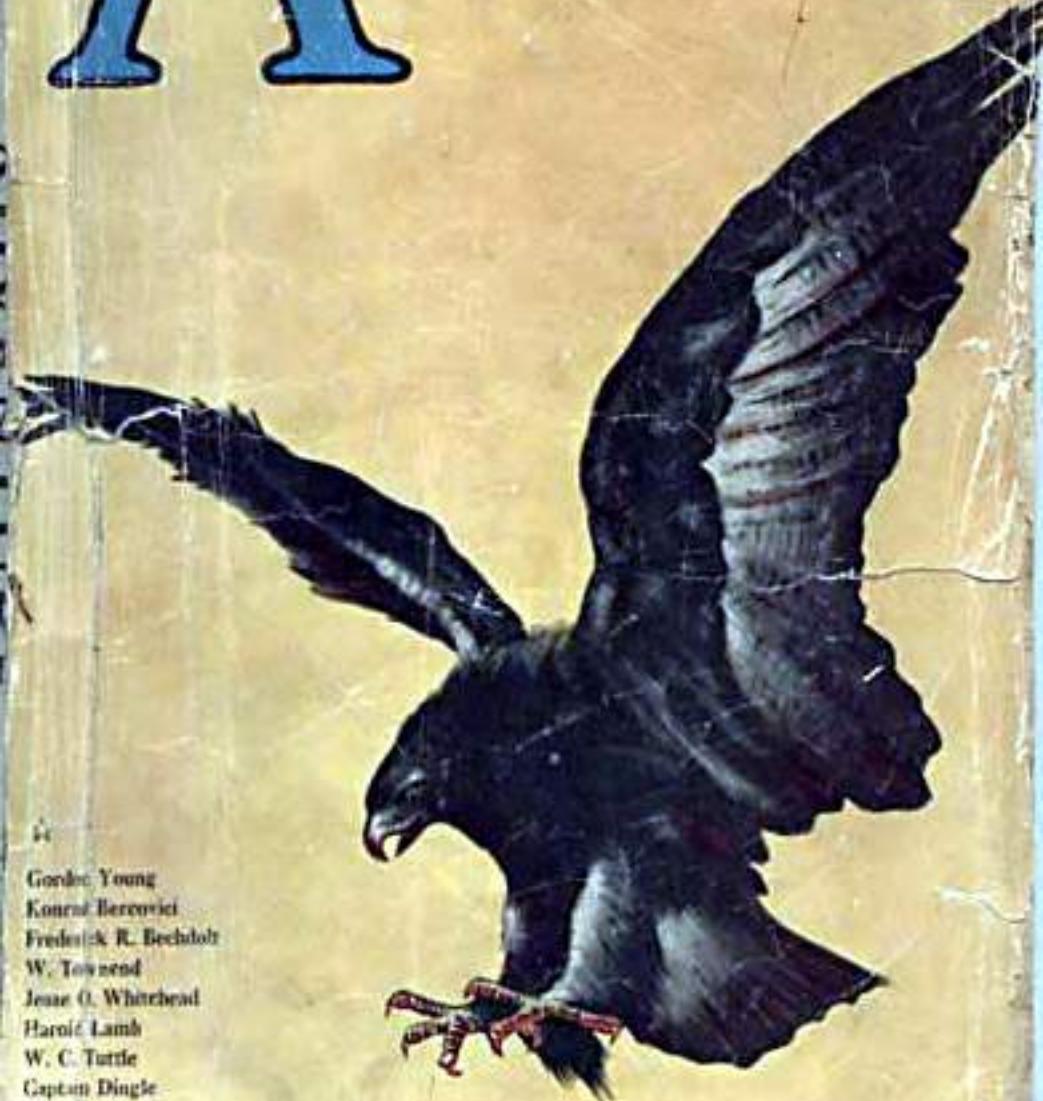
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PUBLISHED  
TWICE A MONTH

# Adventure



Gordon Young  
Konrad Bernovici  
Frederick R. Bechdel  
W. Townsend  
Jesus O. Whithead  
Harold Lamb  
W. C. Tuttle  
Captain Dingle  
Rafael Sabatini  
F. St. Marc

MERRIT CUTLER

# Adventure

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him, cracked his whip over the horse's back, remarked, "Giddap, you ol' hay-burner," and was once more on his way.

Lying in the ditch, under a small shrub, where it had fallen from Bill's wagon, a bright tin can glistened in the sunshine.

The rear wheel of the wagon had passed over it, causing its contents to leak out slowly and moisten the little patch of earth beneath. The can bore the label "Nitro-glycerin," but the odor of its contents was that of Kentucky Bourbon.



# THE GRAND CHAM

## A Complete Novel by Harold Lamb

*Author of "The Curved Sword," "The Village of the Ghost," etc.*

### I

#### THE GATE OF SHADOWS

**I**T WAS evening on the plain of Angora in the year of Our Lord 1394. The sun was a glimmering ball of red, peering through a haze of dust at the caravan of Bayezid the Great, surnamed the Thunderbolt, Sultan of the Osmanli and Seljuke Turks, master of the Caliphate and overlord of the Mamelukes of Egypt.

Bayezid reined in his white Arab.

"We will sleep the night here," he announced, "for this is an auspicious spot."

At Angora a decade ago, as leader of the hard-fighting Osmanlis, Bayezid had won his first pitched battle. He had been ac-

claimed sultan and straightway had slain his brother with his own hand. From that moment Fate had been kind to the man called the Thunderbolt.

"To hear is to obey," cried his followers. "Hail to the Mighty, the Merciful, the All-Dispensing One!"

Bayezid glanced around through the dust haze and saw the quivering shapes of silk pavilions rising from the baked clay floor of the plateau as his camp-followers scurried about. A line of grunting baggage-camels stalked into the nest of tents that marked the quarters of his grandees. Attended by negro slaves, the several litters of his women halted beside the khanates that separated his household from the small army that attended him.

A slow smile crossed his broad, swart face.

A powerful hand caressed the pearls at the throat of his tunic. Fate had indeed exalted him. He had been called the spiritual effigy of the formerly great khalifs of Damascus and Baghdad. He knew himself to be the supreme monarch of Asia, and in that age the courts of Asia were the rendezvous of the world.

True, on the outskirts of the sultan's empire, to the East, was Tamerlane the Tatar and his horde. But had not Tamerlane said that Bayezid, given the men to follow him, was the wisest of living generals?

As for Europe, Bayezid had advanced the border of his empire into Hungary; Constantinople, glittering with the last splendor of the Byzantines, was tottering; Venice and Genoa paid tribute for permission to use the trade routes into the Orient.

Bayezid glanced curiously at the group of Frankish (European) slaves whose duty it was to run beside his horse. They were panting, and sweat streaked the sand that coated their blackened faces. Fragments of cloth were wrapped about their bleeding feet.

Five of the six captives bent their heads in the salaam that had been taught them. The sixth remained erect, meeting the sultan's eye.

Bayezid half frowned at this boldness which broke the thread of his thoughts. His hand rested on the gold trappings of his splendid horse. To the side of this horse slaves were dragging a cloth of silver carpet that stretched to the opening of the imperial khanates.

This done, the hawk-faced Sheikh of Rum, through whose territory mid-way in Asia Minor the sultan's caravan had been journeying from Constantinople to Aleppo—the lord of Rum approached his master respectfully.

"O Light of the Faith," the old man observed gravely. "It is the hour of the *namaz gar*, the evening prayer."

"True." Bayezid started and his glance went once more to the white man who stared at him. "I will dismount. Bid yonder Frank kneel by my horse that I may step upon his back."

All around Bayezid the grandees were kneeling in their heavy robes upon clean prayer carpets, washing their hands and faces in fresh water brought by slaves from the springs that marked the site of the camp. The sheikh bowed and gave a curt

command to the master of the slaves, El-Arjuk, a stalwart, white-capped Janissery, whip in hand.

"The body of the Frank will be honored by the foot of the Great, the Merciful."

At this the captive stepped forward before the Janissery could touch him. Bayezid reflected that the white man understood Turki, which was the case.

And then to the surprise of the onlookers, the captive folded his arms and shook his head.

"Kneel," hissed the sheikh. "Dog of a *caphar*—unbeliever—"

"I hear," said the captive. "I will not obey."

The Janissery reached for his whip and the old Moslem for his simitar. The sultan checked them, springing easily from his peaked saddle to the cloth of silver carpet. From his six feet of muscular height he looked down at the white man. His beaked nose seemed to curl into his bearded mouth and his black eyes snapped.

Then the sultan knelt, facing toward the southern sky-line beyond which was Mecca, and repeated the *llah akbar* in his clear, deep voice. When the last of his followers had completed the evening worship Bayezid arose, his smile cold as the glitter of steel, his nervous fingers playing with the jeweled sword-hilt at his girdle. He noted the wide brown eyes of the captive who still stood quietly at his side, and with the interest of a born leader of men he scrutinized the square high shoulders, the long chin and the wide, delicate mouth upturned in a half-smile.

The man's face was burned by the sun to the hue of leather; his ragged tunic fell away from a heavily thew'd pair of arms. His body had the lines of youth, but his eyes and mouth were hard with fatigue.

"You know my speech," observed the deep voice of the Thunderbolt. "And your eyes tell me that you are not mad. What is your name and rank?"

"Michael Bearn," responded the Christian.

"Mishael Bi-orn. Your rank?"

"None, my lord." The man's smile broadened slowly.

"In what army did you serve?"

"None, my lord."

The patrician sheikh, whose fathers had been warriors, spat upon the ground and assured his master the sultan that this dog and the other Franks had been taken when a

Christian galley was shipwrecked on the Anatolian shore a year ago. The Turks who took them had said that this dog was *khan* of the galley, that he was a *caphar* magician who steered his craft by a be-deviled needle that pointed always to the north.

"What is your country?" demanded Bayezid.

"I have no country. The sea is my home."

Michael Bearn had been born on the cliffs of Brittany. His mother, an Irish gentlewoman, had landed from his father's ship for the birth of the boy. When his father, a taciturn Breton, had died Michael had left his mother in a tower on the Brittany coast and had taken to the sea.

There had been talk of a crusade against the Turk who was master of the Holy Land. Michael's mother had pleaded with the boy to wait and join one of the bands of warrior-pilgrims to Rome. But Michael had no yearning for the cassocked priests. The sea called him and his father's blood urged him to strange coasts.

It was the way of women, he had told the Irish mother, in his young intolerance of belief, to seek comfort of priests and to covet the insignia of the cross. His mother had hid her tears and Michael did not know how he had hurt her.

Following the bent of that time, a few years had brought him to the Levant and the glamor of trade with the Orient. He had been master mariner of the galley wrecked on the Anatolian coast while it was being pursued by Turkish pirates.

"And so," mused Bayezid, "a slave without rank, without race and an unbeliever dares to disobey a command of mine? So be it. You have strength in your arms and pride. It pleases me to put both to the test."

It was part of the secret of the Thunderbolt's achievement that he enforced cruel discipline among his followers. Michael Bearn's eye lighted and he lifted his head.

"Set a simitar in my hand," he said quickly. "My lord, choose one of your skilled swordsmen and let him wear his mail. With a simitar—his weapon, not mine—I will stand against him in my shirt."

The stubborn pride of the Breton that had not let him prostrate himself under the foot of a Turk flared at the chance to

strike a blow with a weapon. He had endured captivity doggedly, seeking for a chance to escape to the hills to the east where were tribesmen who did not owe allegiance to the sultan.

But he had not been willing to demean himself, to gain time for a further chance at liberty with his five comrades. Like all seamen of the age, he was experienced in the use of sword and mace.

A swift death was better than months of running beside the horse or litter of a Turkish master.

"Shall a dog be given a sword?" growled the aged sheikh, quenching Michael's new hope. This time Bayezid glanced at his follower approvingly.

"Bring this man," he ordered, "with the five *caphars*, his comrades, before my tent. Bring a sword, and"—he nodded thoughtfully—"the iron sleeve."

 AT MENTION of this instrument of torture which broke the bones of a man's arm as easily as glass, the slaves who understood Bayezid's words shivered and stared at Michael. They followed, however, after the white cap of the swaggering Janissery, to see the torment inflicted.

The dark face of the Thunderbolt softened in pleasant expectancy as he knelt on a priceless carpet under the open portico of his tent and scanned the six Christians. He was accustomed to play with his victims. Disdaining further to address the captives openly, he whispered to the Sheikh of Rum, who stood in the half-circle of courters behind the sultan.

"Know, O ill-omened ones," translated the old Moslem in bastard Greek, "that your leader has offended against the Majesty, the Splendor. Torture will be the lot of your khan unless—"

With an eye to dramatic effect he paused, nodding to the master of the slaves who advanced from the group of watching Janissaries, a spear's cast away. The warrior carried a misshapen thing of iron resting on a wooden table. The rusty metal was formed in the semblance of a lion with an enormous mouth, lying prone on the table. Twin bars projected on either side from the ribs of the beast.

"—unless," resumed the sheikh, "one of you five *caphars* will offer to fight in defense of the body of your friend."

Michael Bearn looked up quickly, intending to warn his mates not to accept the proffer of the Moslems. But they did not meet his eye. They were Portuguese and Italians, wasted by sickness and misery.

"It is not fitting, verily," the spokesman went on, interpreting the low words of Bayezid, "that a good weapon should be given to the hand of one who is accursed. Yet a lion may slay a dog, and the sight of an infidel's blood is a blessing to a true believer. So, one of you may take up the quarrel of your comrade and fight with swords against one of the champions of the Janissaries. Whether your champion conquers or not, the man named Bearn will be spared the torture."

Whereupon the sheikh drew his own simitar and held out its hilt.

Michael Bearn would have taken it, but the wily Moslem shook his head.

"Not you," he explained in Arabic. "The Most Wise will presently make a test of your strength. Now he tries out the Christian hearts of your comrades."

As none of the others volunteered for the duel, the sultan made a further concession. The man who offered to fight would be set free—if he lived—with Bearn.

But the five men would not hazard their lives on a chance of liberty. They cast sidelong glances at the glittering simitar and at a stalwart warrior who stood forth from the guards, his shield dressed ready for the conflict.

It gave keen pleasure to Bayezid to see these men refuse the issue. He smiled to think that they clung to the ignoble life of slavery. His own men were trained to value their lives lightly in battle and to die for their faith.

It pleased Bayezid, also, to deny Bearn the chance of the fight, for he knew that the young seaman would have welcomed it.

"So be it," he nodded. "The torture."

The expectant master of the slaves summoned the waiting warrior and set the table before Michael Bearn.

"Hold forth your arm," he commanded.

Michael paled and set his lips as he extended his left hand.

"The right one," objected Bayezid, following all that passed with the eye of a connoisseur.

A moment later Michael's right arm had been thrust up to the elbow into the iron gullet of the lion and strapped into place.

The Breton stiffened as he felt the cold touch of the vise, concealed within the form of the lion, grip his bare forearm. Bayezid nodded, leaning back on his pillows, under the sweep of a peacock fan in the hands of a slave.

The two Janissaries threw their weight on the projecting levers and there came to the ears of the spectators a dull *crack* as if an arrow had been snapped in half.

But Michael did not cry out. Sweat started on his face and blood dripped from his lip where his teeth had set upon it. This did not suit Bayezid, who had expected screams and a prayer for mercy.

"Again," he snarled.

The two torturers altered the position of Michael's broken arm slightly and clamped the levers into place a second time.

This time Michael groaned softly and swayed on his feet, sinking to his knees.

"Now the *caphar*'s pride is broken because his strength has passed from him," thought Bayezid, watching keenly. To the attentive sheikh he whispered:

"The broken ends of the bone of the arm have been ground together and he will whine for mercy—like the other dogs who have no stomach for pain."

The Janissaries released Michael's arm from the instrument of torture at a glance from the sultan. On the back of the forearm the skin had been broken by a bloodied fragment of bone.

Supporting himself by his left hand on the table, Michael rose slowly to his feet, wincing and setting his lips as he did so. His eyes were dark with agony as they sought Bayezid's face.

The youthful pride and humor had vanished from Michael's countenance, leaving a grim mask of purpose. The abundant vitality of his powerful body had been sapped by the ordeal. But there was a new vigor in his poise, the strength of an unalterable determination.

So the captive faced his tormentor.

"I shall not forget this, my lord sultan." He indicated his maimed limb. "I shall be avenged—" His voice choked.

The Sheikh of Rum who had been studying the eyes of the injured man now drew his weapon again and salaamed before Bayezid.

"O Most Wise, it would be best to slay this one. An injured snake is quick to strike."

The Thunderbolt shook his head coldly. He had not yet tasted the delight of the torture to the fullest.

"Nay. I would watch the *caphar* run beside my litter on the morrow, and see how he bears his pain."

The Sheikh of Rum was very wise.

 IT WAS a week later that the six captives made their attempt to escape from the caravan of the Osmanli. During the week they had been ascending to the cooler plateau of Lake Van, where the summits of the Caucasus were visible far to the north.

Yet it was to the east that the six had decided to flee. They had seen that the outriders of the Turks who pillaged supplies in the villages of lesser Armenia had kept a vigilant outlook in that direction.

To the east lay a pass called the Gate of Shadows, leading into the lands of Tatary. Michael and his mates did not then know why the Turks shunned this pass. But they believed that once in the Gate of Shadows they would be safe from pursuit owing to this superstition of the Turks.

The night on which they made their venture was clear. The stars shone brilliantly through the colder air of the height by the lake. Men and beasts of the caravan were weary after a long march. Bayezid was never sparing of his followers.

Two things had decided the Christians upon this night. They were at the point of the march from Constantinople to Aleppo, which was nearest the Gate of Shadows. And the Moslems had fasted for three days. That night was the feast of Miriam when the long fast was broken and warriors and courtiers alike satiated themselves with meat and wine.

Bayezid, although calling himself head of the faith, always allowed his men their fill of debauchery, knowing that it drew soldiers to his ranks.

Consequently the Janissaries who watched the *aul* where the Christian captives were kept apart from the slaves of other races were a little drunk and more than a little sleepy.

Michael, by tacit consent, had been chosen the leader of the six. Memory of the torture to which he had been subjected had made the Portuguese and Italians eager to flee. Cowards at heart, the nearer peril of the "iron sleeve" made them willing to

risk the death that was penalty for an attempt to flee their bondage.

And Michael, who yearned for the freedom that would afford him a chance to strike back at Bayezid, had formed a plan readily.

The *aul* was a rough square shelter of rocks resembling very much a large hut without a roof. The stone walls were as high as a man. The two yawning spearmen who acted as guards had built a fire just within the entrance.

As usual the prisoners gobbled down the evil-tasting *pilau*—broth of rotting sheep's flesh—that was set before them in a kettle. The evening prayers of the Moslems had been completed long since and soft radiance coming from the silk pavilions of the nobles indicated that the feast was well along.

A heavy guard of wakeful Mamelukes stood about the enclosure where Bayezid was quartered and other mounted sentries paced about the circuit of the fires around which warriors and slaves alike drank, sang and slept.

It was the first watch of the night when one of the Portuguese rose and tossed a double armful of dried tamarisk branches on the fire that had sunk to embers. A crackling blaze climbed skyward barely three paces inside the *aul* entrance.

For a moment the interior of the walled space would be concealed from the glance of passers-by. One of the Janissaries growled and spat, motioning the Portuguese back to his place. The other sentry leaned on his battle-ax half-asleep.

Making signs that he wished to communicate something, the captive moved nearer the first sentry, while one of the Italians arose stealthily and keeping within the large shadow cast by the three men near the fire, slipped to the rear of the Janissery.

Michael appeared to be asleep. In spite of his crippled arm—the bones had been rudely set by a *hakim* of the sheikh who, in obedience to the pleasure of his master, intended Michael to live—in spite of his weakness and the fever that had set upon him for several days, the guards always kept vigilant watch upon him, knowing that the Breton was more dangerous than his mates.

Through his half-closed eyes Michael could see the Italian detach a stone from the top of the wall behind the three men silently. The arms of the captives had been left free,

although their ankles were secured at night by heavy leather thongs that would not yield to their fingers. Naturally none of them had a weapon of any kind.

The sentries had no reason to expect an attempt to escape. Even if the two Janissaries could be disposed of, the captives would have to pass through the camp and pierce the cordon of riders in the outer darkness in order to gain the plain.

Even clear of the camp they would be pursued by well-mounted warriors and the odds against them in a hostile country were very great.

The first sentry was staring mockingly at the Portuguese who cringed beside him, gesturing futilely. And then the Italian cast his heavy stone with both arms.

It struck the Janissery at the base of the skull and pitched him forward a dozen feet. He fell, stunned, with his face within the edge of the fire.

The second warrior started out of his doze and his lips parted for a cry. But the Portuguese, frenzied by peril and hope of escape, clutched his throat. The Italian had leaped after the stone and caught up the spear of the man he had slain.

This spear he thrust into the clothing over the stomach of the choking sentry.

"Harken." Michael had run to them and addressed the struggling Moslem. "Be silent and do as I bid ye or your body will lie in the fire."

A stringent odor of burning flesh and cloth came to the nostrils of the sentry and he ceased struggling, waiting for the blow that would slay him. But Michael with his left arm dragged the smoking corpse from the flames and swiftly directed two of his men to conceal it under some of their robes in a corner. Before doing so, he saw that they took a dagger and simitar from the dead Janissery and stowed the weapons under their own clothing.

"Now," Michael commanded the watching sentry, "your life will be spared if you do this; call twice for El-Arjuk, master of the slaves who is in command of the *aul* this night. He gorges himself at a near-by fire. Do not cry for aid, but call his name."

The man winced as the spear in the hands of the Italian pricked his belly. He did not believe that he would be permitted to live, yet he had smelled the burning flesh of his comrade.

"El-Arjuk!" He lifted a long, wailing cry

while Michael listened closely. "Ohai—El-Arjuk!"

"Again," whispered the Breton and the call for the master of the slaves was repeated.

This time a harsh voice made answer. Michael's eyes narrowed and he ordered the fidgeting captives back to their sleeping-robés with the exception of one man who stood against the wall, drawing the sentry back with him and pressing a dagger's point from behind into his flesh.

Michael caught up the long battle-ax that had supported the Janissery in his ill-timed doze. He hefted it in his left hand, found its length unwieldy, and broke the wooden shaft in two under his foot.

Taking up the shortened weapon, he held it close to his side, away from the fire.

"Keep back," he hissed at the others, "for this is my fight."

They mumbled and straightway fell to staring in fear as a burly form strode through the entrance of the *aul* and came around the diminishing blaze of the fire.

"Who called?" growled El-Arjuk, glancing at Michael and the one sentry swiftly.

He was flushed from drinking, although his step was steady. In feasting he had laid aside his armor, but held a small target of bull's hide and a simitar. Noticing the absence of the other Janissery and the strange quietude of the one sentry, he started.

"Blood of Sheitan——"

"I summoned you," said Michael grimly. "To your reckoning. Guard yourself!"

With that he leaped, swinging his haft of the battle-ax. With one motion El-Arjuk flung up his shield and slashed forward under it with his sword.

The blade met nothing but air. Michael's jump had carried him over the low sweep of the Turk's simitar, while the hastily raised target momentarily obstructed the vision of his adversary.

The Breton's broad chest struck the shield, bearing it down, and his shortened ax fell once, the full weight of his powerful body behind it. El-Arjuk had started to cry for aid when the blade of the ax crashed into his forehead and the cry ended in a quavering groan. Michael fell to the sand with his enemy, but he rose alone, listening intently.

From somewhere outside the *aul* a question was shouted idly, for the thud of the

two bodies and the moan of the master of the slaves had been heard.

"Reply," snarled Michael at the staring Janissery who was going through the motions of ablution, kneeling in the sand. The Moslem wished to die with this rite performed. "Reply with the words I put into your mouth or we will fill your throat with the unclean flesh of the dead."

The warrior hesitated, then bowed his head.

"It is naught," he called back over the stone wall as Michael prompted him, "but the death of a dog, upon whom be the curse of Allah for his sins."

A satisfied laugh from the listeners without, who believed that a Christian slave had been killed, came to the ears of the captives. Wasting no time, Michael had green tamarisk branches cast on the fire causing smoke to fill the *aul* entrance.

Behind this makeshift curtain he ordered El-Arjuk stripped of his brilliant yellow coat and insignia and instructed the nervous captives how to rewind the white turban so as to conceal the blotches of blood.

This done, the Portuguese who was like the master of the slaves in build was clad in the garments and given the shield and simitar. Meanwhile the excited men would have slain the stolid sentry had not Michael intervened.

"I made a pledge," he said coldly. "You want blood, methinks, and you will find plenty before long."

So the surprised sentry was bound and wrapped around with the clothing of the Portuguese until he was helpless either to move or cry out. Then, with the two bodies, he was laid in a corner of the enclosure and covered with sheepskin robes.

"Say to Bayezid," smiled Michael, "that I bid him not farewell—for I shall seek him again."

When the fire died down presently and passing soldiers glanced idly into the *aul*, a group of men issued forth without torches. At their head was the familiar uniform of the master of the slaves, and their feet were bound with leather thongs, permitting them to walk only slowly.

It was entirely natural that El-Arjuk should have work for the *caphar* slaves to do that night, so the revelers paid scant heed to the group. It was whispered, moreover, that one of the infidels had been slain, so it was entirely to be expected that the others would be used to dig a grave.

At the outskirts of the tents where darkness concealed them Michael called a halt. Passing near the fires, the garments of El-Arjuk had been their safeguard; in the dark they would be challenged at once by the mounted riders who patroled the camp.

So Michael waited, kneeling on the ground in order to raise passing figures on the sky-line. He ordered his comrades to cut off with the weapons they had concealed under their clothes their bonds and to carry the cords until they could be concealed at a distance from the camp. Not until he was satisfied that a patrol of horsemen had passed the ridge in front of him did he give the word to advance.

An hour later they were beyond the outer guards and running due east, under the stars that guided them, toward the Gate of Shadows.

 ON THE second night they took their ease. Michael had gone among the hill villages at twilight. He had worn the dress of El-Arjuk and when he returned to the men waiting in the thicket up the mountain-slope he said:

"The *Darband-i-Ghil*, the Spirit Gate, lies six hours' march above us. Come."

The six had run before now—too swiftly at first for long endurance—by the north shore of Van. Michael had steadied them to a slow trot and had taken pains to pass through such rocky ravines as offered, in order to wipe out traces of their passage. They had seen no pursuers, even after leaving the lake.

"Nay," growled a Genoese. "Par Dex, our bones ache and our feet bleed. We must sleep."

"Sleep!" cried Michael. "With Mamelukes riding in our tracks who have orders not to return alive without us. I'm thinking that Bayezid made short work of the Janissery guard whose life we spared. Will his horsemen yearn for a like fate?"

He himself was near the point of exhaustion, for his arm was scarcely knit and fever had weakened him. But the men would not move from the spot where they had been watching the lights of the Kurd village and talking among themselves.

Realizing that they must rest, Michael sat down against a tree for a brief sleep. The half-light of dawn was flooding the thicket and the sky over the black hills to

the east was crimson when he woke at the sound of approaching footsteps.

It was his own band and they were coming up from the village. Some of them were reeling, though not from fatigue, and their breath was heavy with olives and wine. They looked back over their shoulders and grinned uneasily when they met his eye.

"We've taken the Moors' food," boasted one fellow. "It's their own law, methinks. An eye for an eye. They'll remember us."

Michael glared. These were common men, very different from the belted knights who had sometimes visited his mother's home in Brittany. She had hoped that he would be a knight. Instead, he had led a rough life and had toiled against hardships until—this.

"—, what fools! That was a Kurdish village, and the men have good eyes and horseflesh. Well, I must bide with you, for you have named me leader. Come."

They ran sturdily through the dawn. Months of trotting beside the nobles of the Osmanli had schooled them to this. By midday they were above the fields in a place of gray rocks and red clay. In front of them a half-dozen bowshots away a great gully between mountain-shoulders showed the blue of the sky.

"The Gate of Shadows," they cried.

And with the words riders came out of the woods behind them.

Michael measured the distance to the gully, glanced back at the shouting Mamelukes, and shook his head. He pointed to a mound of rocks near by and led his five men there.

"'Tis the gate of heaven you will see," he grunted. "No other, and not that, if you can not die like Christians."

And the five, to give them their due, fought desperately, using the few weapons they had carried from the Turkish camp, and eking these out with stones.

The Mamelukes, reenforced by Kurds from the hill village, tried at first to make them yield themselves prisoners. But the captives knew what manner of death awaited them at Bayezid's tent and hurled their stones. The big Portuguese went down with an arrow in his throat. The Genoese leaped among the horses, knife in hand, and struggled weakly even when his skull was split with a mace.

The rearing horses stirred up a cloud of dust that covered the mound. Into this

cloud Michael strode, swinging his half-ax. The first rider that met him was dragged from saddle and slain. Michael went down with a Mameluke on top of him and neither rose, for Michael's left hand had sought and found the other's dagger in his girdle.

When the last Christian had been shot down with arrows, the Turks dismounted and proceeded to pound the skulls and vital parts of the bodies of their victims with rocks. If any of the men of El-Arjuk had been in the party Michael would have suffered the fate of his comrades.

But the Mamelukes had neglected to give him the *coup de grâce* owing to the body of their warrior that lay upon his. When they lifted up their dead they saw only a prostrate Frank besmeared with blood—not his own—and with a swollen, bruised right arm that looked as if it had been crushed with a stone.

The senses had been battered out of Michael by the mace of the dead Mameluke and it was a fortunate thing for him. Because by the time he crawled to his feet there were no Turks within view.

Instead, black-winged birds casting a foul scent in the air hovered over his head. The vultures had been descending on the bodies of the five men when Michael Bearn stood up.

Now they circled slowly in the air or perched on the rocks near by patiently. Michael looked at them long, and then at the bodies of his comrades.

The five had not been brave men, but they had died bravely.

Michael walked slowly away from the knoll toward a rivulet issuing between rocks in the mountainside that rose mightily above him. He knelt and drank deeply. Then he dipped his head in the stream, wiping sway the dried blood. The flapping wings of the vultures impelled him to look up.

His glance penetrated straight down the ravine that was called the Gate of Shadows and he studied thoughtfully the vista of brown plain that lay beyond. Once within the pass he knew that he would see no more of the Turks. The evening before he had been told when he visited the Kurd village that the rock plateau in front of the pass had been the scene of a massacre by the Turks.

The skeletons of the dead were in the pass and a superstition had arisen that the souls

of the slain had not left the place. The voices of *ghils* had been heard in the darkness. So the Moslems considered the place not only unclean but accursed.

"Fore God," he sighed, "we were at the Gate, the very Gate. Well, here must they wait for me—my five mates that were."

So saying, he went back to the knoll, driving away the birds, and dug with his battle-ax a broad shallow grave in the loose sand. Dragging the bodies into this with his one useful arm, he covered them up first with sand, then with large rocks that he rolled down with his bare feet from the knoll.

 FROM a wisp-like tamarisk thicket clinging between the boulders of the plateau, he cut two stout staffs with his ax. These he bound roughly together at the middle with a strip of leather cut from his jerkin. The longer staff of the two he imbedded in the sand at the head of the grave.

He had fashioned a cross.

"Rest ye," he said gravely and extended his left arm over his head. "*Vindica eos, Domine.*"

Now as he said this he glanced again at the ravine and the plain beyond where he could find food and a tent among the Tatar villages. Then he turned to the northwest where beyond the hills lay the Mormaior, or Black Sea, and beyond there the great cities of Europe.

To the northwest, if he could penetrate thither, were his countrymen, and theirs, he thought, was the power that might some day strike at the Thunderbolt.

It was to the northwest that he began to walk, away from the grave and the Gate of Shadows. Greater than the will to live was the will to seek again the man who had crippled him.

When darkness came and covered his movements he pressed forward more rapidly, swinging his short ax in his left hand. As he went he munched dates and olives that he had plucked from trees near the mountain villages. He found no men to accost him in these orchards, for the fields were scarred by hoofs of many horses and the huts were charred walls of clay.

Bayezid's riders had been pillaging the villages of Lesser Armenia.

Once, walking barefoot, he came upon a young wild sheep and killed it with his thrown ax. By now the villages had been left behind and below and the moon stared

at him steadily from above the pillars of huge pines as he entered the forest-belt.

Another thought came to Michael. He remembered that, in the tower of ill-fitting stones on the sea cliffs of Brittany where the grass was short because of the ceaseless winds, a black-haired woman waited, sitting by her weaving. He had vowed that he would come back to sit at his mother's table and tell of the voyages to the East. And this, she would know, he would do. A lawless boy, with his father's hot blood in him, he always kept his word.

From time to time he was forced to beat off the attacks of wild dogs with his ax as he worked through the passes of the Caucasian foothills. His bloodshot eyes closed to slits under the lash of the cold wind and he swayed as his heavily thewed limbs carried him down toward the place where he had seen a glimmer of water in the distance.

It was bodily weakness that drew his thoughts home to the tower and the coast where he had played as a child. For a space he forgot Bayezid and the torture. He had been hale and strong as a boy. Was he to go through life a cripple? Was that the will of God of which his mother had spoken, saying—

"The ways of God are beyond our knowing."

Thirst had been his invisible companion and the water-courses that he crossed were dry. They led him down to a plain of gray rocks and white salt, where the salt particles in the air dried up the moisture in his throat and brought blood to his lips.

The smell of water coming toward him from the wide shore fired him with longing. He went forward in a staggering run and knelt to dash up some of the water in his hand.

It was thick with salt and dull green in color.

"The Sarai Sea," he reflected, "the sea of salt. Eh, a rare jest to a thirsty man."

He knew then that he had come out on the border of the sea now called the Caspian and not the Mormaior (Black) Sea. But, rising, he saw some dull-faced Karabagh fishermen staring at him from a skiff in an adjoining inlet and he laughed exultantly, lifting his hand to the sunset in the west.

The skiff would fetch him to a Muscovite trading-galley, and in time Astrakan, then Constantinople. He had heard at the court of Bayezid that the Franks were

mustering a crusade, to assemble at that city. The chivalry of Europe was taking up arms against the Turk.

"There will be a battle," he whispered to himself, "and I shall have a share in it, God willing."

## II

## THE RIVER OF DEATH

ANOTHER sunset, and a war galleass was feeling its way with a double bank of oars against the sluggish current of a broad river. There was no wind and the heavy red pennon emblazoned with a winged lion hung nearly to the water between the steering-oars of the high stern castle.

The dark figures of men-at-arms pressed close to the rail of the benches that ran along each side of the waist of the vessel, above the moving gray shapes that were the rowers' backs.

"Give way, to the shore," called a voice from the stern platform.

As the heavy-timbered galleass drew in, fully manned for action, toward the rushes of the bank, the speaker cupped his left hand to his eyes and stared at the ruddy light of countless fires. His right arm hung stiffly at his side.

A year had not availed to restore the use of his injured arm to the man who had been a Turk's slave. Now by infinite pains he could manage with his left. Unlike the men-at-arms and the mailed Venetian archers clustered upon the stern, he wore no weapon.

Michael Bearn had reached the Venetian fleet in the Black Sea at an opportune moment. Experienced ship-masters were needed to take command of the new galleys that were to cooperate under the Venetian flag with the Christian army on the mainland.

The body of the Venetian fleet lay off the mouth of the Danube, waiting to convey the victorious army of the Christian Allies to Asia Minor and Jerusalem.

It was a great array that had come against the Ottoman. Besides the Venetian war-craft, Sigismund of Hungary was up the river and the cohorts of Slavs, Magyars and the Serbs. With these were the pick of the chivalry of France, the forces of the Elector Palatine and the Knights of Saint John.

They had struck down through the mountains of the Serbs and besieged Nicopolis, on the river. Warnings of the approach of the conqueror Bayezid had reached them, and the French knights who had brought shiploads of women and wine down the Danube had laughed, saying that if the sky were to fall, they would hold it up with their spears.

Verily it was a goodly array of Christendom before Nicopolis—an army blessed by the Pope and dispatched against the Ottoman, who had swept over Arabia, Egypt, Asia Minor—far into Greece, now impotent, and the rugged mainland behind Constantinople.

The Moslems held Gallipoli and a *khadi* held court beside the marble and gold palace of Paleologus. Bayezid the Conqueror, surnamed the Thunderbolt, had never met defeat.

Bayezid had advanced to the relief of the Moslem governor of Nicopolis and Emperor Sigismund and Count Nevers, commander of the French, had given battle.

For days, hearing of the coming struggle, Michael Bearn had chafed upon the narrow after-deck of his galleass. He had urged the Venetian commander to make his way up the river, to assist in the struggle if possible.

Bearn had been told by the *provveditore* that the fleet of the Signory of Venice had promised to convey the army only to Asia Minor. It was not the policy of the Maritime Council to risk the loss of good ships—but Bearn was allowed to go, to bring news.

It had been a dangerous path up the Danube, for small Turkish craft thronged the shore and bodies of Janissaries were to be seen from time to time in openings in the dense forests.

Now, conning the darkened galleass close to the bank, Michael Bearn strained his ears to read the meaning of the tumult on shore. He could see horsemen riding past the glow of burning huts and the clash of weapons drifted out over the quiet waters.

"Sigismund pursues the Saracen!" exulted a man among the archers on deck.

Wild hope leaped into the heart of Michael Bearn. Was the issue of the battle so soon decided? Had the armed chivalry of France outmatched the power and skill of Bayezid? He yearned for the first glimpse of victorious French standards. Yet, knowing the discipline and power of the veteran Moslem army, he doubted the

evidence of his eyes that the emperor and the French could have pursued their foe so far.

"What ship is that?" cried a high voice, and the splash of hoofs sounded in the rushes as a man rode out toward the galleass.

"Venetian," answered Michael promptly. "Is the battle won?"

The men on the vessel held their breath as the rider, before answering, swam his horse out to them and, grasping at ropes lowered over the stern where the oar-banks permitted him to gain the side of the galleass, climbed heavily upon the deck.

"If you are a Venetian—fly!" he cried, staggering against Michael. "Never have the eyes of God seen such a defeat. Bayezid has sworn he will stable his horse in Saint Peter's. I am alone, of a company of knights who followed the Constable of France."

Michael Bearn gripped the knight by the shoulder fiercely.

"The Constable of France — defeated —"

"Slain."

The wounded man was too weary to be surprised at the fire in the eyes that burned into his. Michael drew a long breath. He was too late. And his countrymen had fallen before Bayezid.

The knight was removing his mail hood with shaking hands.

"We thought the Saracen was shattered," he said hopelessly. "Our camp was surprised, yet the French mounted and rode to the attack, through the skirmishers and the cavalry with white woolen hats —"

"The Janissaries," nodded Michael.

"—and past them, into the ranks of the horse-guards that are called Sipahis, of Bayezid. Our lances, forsooth, had broken them asunder. We had lost many and our ranks were ill-formed when we gained the summit of the hill where we found not a rabble of defeated soldiery, but a forest of forty thousand lances. Ah, Saint Denis!"

"Bayezid ever keeps his best troops till the last."

"He has ordered slain ten thousand Christian captives, sparing only the Count of Nevers and twenty knights. I escaped."

"And the emperor —?"

"Floats down the river in a boat. He made a brave stand, 'tis said, until the Serbs joined the Moslems and struck his flank —"

"'Tis done. Rest you and sleep." Michael spoke curtly, what with the hurt of the news. "There are wounded to be brought off from shore."

 URGING his vessel almost upon the shore, he formed his men-at-arms into lines to pass out what of the injured they could find, while he made his way inland to turn aside the fugitives he met into the galleass.

He saw only haggard and dusty men, weaponless and exhausted. On mules and purloined horses camp-followers dashed past along the highway, striking aside those who got in their path. Semblance of order or discipline there was none.

Wounded foot-soldiers who had cast aside their heavier armor limped into the light of the burning houses near by, silent and grim-lipped. Michael was mustering a group of these at the water's edge when a mailed horseman spurred up and grasped at his shoulder.

"For the love of —! Is't true there is a ship at hand?"

Michael looked up under drawn brows and saw a handsome Italian cavalier, his velvet finery besmirched and his jeweled cap awry.

"A hundred ducats, sailor, if you will take me on your ship at once," the horseman cried, fingering at a heavy purse with a quivering hand.

"Spare your purse-strings and wait your turn," responded Michael shortly.

But the cavalier, befuddled by fear, was pushing aside the watchful foot-soldiers, to leap at the ropes that had been lowered from the vessel, when Michael's left arm, thrust across his chest, stayed him.

"You are a captain, *signor*," he observed quietly. "Help me to get these wounded to safety."

The Italian glanced back and saw that a fresh route of fugitives had come into the light at the shore. A tall bazaar trader with his servants was striking down those who sought to climb into a muddy cart drawn by nearly exhausted horses. Michael could read the fear in the red-bearded face of the trader. A woman, her skirt dragging about her knees, ran screaming into the path of the cart, holding out imploring arms.

The servants, under the oaths of their bearded master, lashed the horses on and

the woman, in all her sad finery, was cast to earth under the hoofs of the beasts. The cart disappeared into the darkness but she lay where she had fallen.

"You see!" cried the Italian. "Death is upon us unless we fly. Out of my way, dogs——"

Drawing back his arm, Michaël struck the man, sending him headlong into the water. Heedless of the blow, the other rose and fought his way to the ropes that offered a way to safety.

"Wo!" His cry came back to Michael. "Death is upon us. Fly!"

"Fly!" echoed the wounded, struggling toward the ropes. "The Turks are at our heels."

Those who could not stand unsupported were thrust down into the water. Men, striking at one another's heads and tearing at the surcoats which bore a crimson cross—the stronger among the fugitives, up to their necks in water, fought for the ropes.

When Michael at last—seeing that the galley was crowded to capacity—clambered up the gilded woodwork of the stern and gave the signal to get under weigh, the tumult on shore took on a fiercer note.

Looking back, he could see the flash of simitars among the huddle of the flying. Lean, turbanned horsemen wheeled and charged through the burning houses. A shrill shout pierced the wails of the injured.

"Ya, Allah! Hai—Allah—hai!"

Michael Bearn, hearing this familiar cry of triumph of the Moslems, saw again in his mind's eye the ruined villages of Armenia, the tortured slaves, and—most clearly of all—the grave in the sand before the Gate of Shadows.

He looked at the two men beside him, the sleeping French knight whose valor had been fruitless, and the sullen Italian officer who regarded him askance, fingering his bruised face.

The army of crusaders that he had journeyed for a year to join was no more. And Bayezid, angered by the loss of so many of his men, had doomed ten thousand captives to death. Was there no power on earth that could match the Thunderbolt?

"I wonder," thought Michael. He knew that of one place Bayezid was afraid, or at least that the Thunderbolt shunned that place.

It was the Gate of Shadows.

### III

#### THE BLOW IN THE DARK

IT WAS an hour after vespers and the lights of Saint Mark's were glowing softly against the vault of the sky over the great city of Venice. Along the narrow streets, however, and the winding canals the square houses with their grilled doors and carved stonework showed only slits of light from barred windows.

At that hour worthy citizens of the City of the Lagoons went abroad attended only by linkmen and with armed retainers to guard their backs. Those who were more cautious, or who had more powerful enemies, paid *bravi* to watch the retainers.

A stranger wandering from the lagoons and the main canals would soon have lost his way. In the poorer quarters where the high buildings seemed to lean together against the sky men looked closely into the faces of those they met and turned the corners wide.

Near the Piazza where the walled palaces of the nobles lined the canals the alleys were filled with refuse and ended more often than not in a blind wall. Servants stood whispering in the shadows of the postern doors and often a soft laugh came from an invisible balcony overhead.

"A pox on these castles," said Michael Bearn heartily. "Is there never a place where a body can see before and behind him at the same time?"

He glanced up, trying fruitlessly to guess his direction by the few stars visible between the buildings. All that he could make out was that he seemed to be standing in a space where two alleys crossed. Listening, he could hear the music of fiddles and flutes somewhere near at hand.

A fête, he knew, was going on in a near-by palace and he had promised himself a sight of it. It was exasperating to hear the sound of the festivity and still be unable to reach it. Michael laughed, realizing that he had lost his way completely.

There had been no lack of offers of a guide. For only that day Michael had received a gold chain and a key of the same precious metal from the *Consoli di Mercanti*—the Maritime Council—as reward for his services in bringing back a galley with the survivors of the army of the Count of Nevers from the ill-fated field of Nicopolis.

It had been a stormy passage, beset by Turkish pirates in the Levant, and Bearn, thanks to his skill as mariner and his knack of handling men, had been one of the few captains to return without loss.

But in spite of this honor Michael's purse was light and he could not afford to pay a retainer, or even to take up his quarters at a good inn.

"Faith," he thought, "'twould have availed more if the worthy council had given gold ducats instead of this chain, and as for the freedom of the city that they said went with the key—I can not find my way to yonder music."

He had heard mention of the fête at the council, and also of a renowned voyager who was to be present. Two things had drawn Michael to the festivity; the hope of good meat and wine—he had not wanted to confess to the ceremonious members of the great council that he was penniless—and curiosity. Voyagers from the East were few in that age and Michael wondered whether he would find at the palace Fra Odoric, the priest who had built a church in Tatary or Carlo Zeno, the sea-captain.

Either one would have information that would serve Michael in his plans.

His reflections were interrupted by a light rounding the corner of a building and gliding toward him under his feet. He was surprised to see that he was standing on a wooden bridge. The light was in a gondola passing beneath him.

"Ho, my friends," he called cheerfully, "in what quarter lies the *palazzo* or whatever it is called of my lord Contarini? I can find it not."

If Michael had dwelt longer in Venice he would not have hailed an occupied gondola in the dark. His shout only caused the rower at the stern to glance up warily and thrust the long craft forward at greater speed. A shutter in the hooded seat was lowered briefly and a face looked out of the aperture.

Then the gondola passed under the bridge.

Michael grimaced, bowed, and was passing on when he hesitated. The light on the gondola had been put out.

This was not altogether strange, if the people on the vessel had believed that foot-pads, as personified by Michael, were on the bridge. But the keen eyes of the seaman caught a white swirl in the water. He

fancied that the gondolier had checked his craft sharply and that it had halted a short distance beyond the bridge.

If the occupants of the gondola had been alarmed by his hail, they would not have chosen to remain in the vicinity. So Michael thought and was ready to smile at his own suspicion, when he heard a footfall and the clink of steel upon stones. From the direction in which he imagined the gondola had halted a man was coming toward him, feeling his way with drawn sword.

Michael planted his feet wide, with his back against a blank wall. Presently he could discern the grayish blur of a face moving toward him over the bridge. There was no sound and Michael knew that the newcomer was taking pains to be silent. This quietude and the rapidity of the other's approach from the canal were ominous.

Then Michael stepped aside. He had heard rather than seen a swift movement toward him in the gloom.

Steel clashed against the wall beside him and sparks flew. An oath came to his ears as he snatched out his own sword, hung by its baldric on his right side. Long practise had accustomed Michael to the use of his left arm—had given to that limb the unusual strength possessed by one-armed men.

In the darkness he sought the other's blade, found it, thrust and when the thrust was parried, lunged again.

"By the Pope's head!" snarled the stranger.

"Amen," said Michael, drawing back alertly.

His weapon had bent against mail on the other's chest and Michael, who wore no such protection, was fain to risk a leap and come to hand-grips.

But even as he tensed his muscles for the spring he heard footsteps and the darkness was dissipated by the light of a lanthorn which rounded a corner behind him.

For the first time he saw his antagonist, a tall man, very fashionable in the short mantle and wide velvet sleeves and cloth-of-gold cap that were the fashion of the day in Venice. The man's olive face was handsome and composed, his eyes restless, his beard smartly curled.

His right hand held the broken half of a sword, his left a long poniard. Michael was rather glad that, after all, he had not made that leap.

Whereupon Michael frowned, for the other's face, although not his bearing, had a familiar aspect. Sheathing his own sword, the Breton smiled and took his dagger in his left hand.

"Good Morrow, *signor*," he said from hard lips. "The light is better now than when you traitorously set upon me. Shall we resume with our poniards?"

The other hesitated, measuring Michael, noting the width of shoulder and length of arm of the Breton, whose featherless cap was thrust well back, disclosing black curls a little gray about the brows. Under the curls gray eyes, alight and whimsical, met the stranger's stare.

"You ponder, *signor*," prompted Michael politely. "Perhaps it surprises you that I who bore no weapon on shipboard have now mastered the use of blade and poniard with my one hand. Or perchance your sense of honor and the high courage you display in a crisis prompt you to refrain from matching daggers with a man in a leathern shirt when you wear a mail jerkin."

At this an exclamation sounded behind him. Michael had not failed to glance over his shoulder at the first appearance of the light and had seen only a fox-faced merchant in a long ermine cloak and attended by a brace of servitors who looked as if they would have liked to flee at sight of bare steel.

Now he perceived that the merchant was staring at him round-eyed as if Michael had uttered blasphemy or madness.

"By the rood!" swore the tall stranger.

"By whatever you wish," assented Michael, "so long as you fight like a man. Come, the sight of a coward spoils my appetite for dinner."



HE WAITED for the other's rush. Michael had recognized in his assailant the Italian captain of mercenaries who had struck down his wounded countrymen in the effort to force himself aboard Michael's galley at Nicopolis. The other must have recognized him from the gondola and had sought the revenge he had sworn for Michael's blow.

Instead of resuming the duel, the Italian smiled coldly and stepped back, pointing to his chest where the doublet was slashed over the mail.

"I do not fight with cutthroats, Messer Soranzi," the Italian said to the merchant,

who was staring at them, excusing his action. "This sailor beset me on the bridge after hailing my gondola under pretext of asking his way. You can see where he struck me."

The shrewd eyes of the merchant went from one to the other and he fingered his own stout belly tenderly.

"A lie," remarked the Breton promptly, "and a base one, forsooth. This fellow's blade is snapped and you can see on the stones behind me where it broke off."

Soranzi stared at him curiously and uneasily.

"You must be mad, good sir," he observed, "to wish to encounter further Pietro Rudolfo, the famous swordsman and *condottiere*."

"Faith," grinned Michael. "Is it madness to face the famous Rudolfo, instead of waiting to receive his knife in your back?"

He marked in his memory the name of his enemy. Rudolfo in spite of the open insult did not renew the fight. Instead he muttered that he had no time for night prowlers when he had already been delayed too long on his way to the house of a friend.

The merchant was sidling past Michael, holding up his long skirts, and shot a sharp question at the Breton, once he had gained the Italian's side, accompanied by his men.

"Your name and state, *signor*?"

Michael nodded at Rudolfo to indicate that the *condottiere* knew both but Rudolfo was silent.

"You have an excellent memory, Ser Pietro," the Breton commented, "for it impelled you to let out my blood. Yet must I salve it myself."

To Soranzi he said—

"I am called Michael Bearn, the master-mariner."

At this the merchant glanced at Rudolfo in some surprize for it was known from the Rialto to Saint Mark's that the young Breton had been honored that day by the all-powerful council. The interests of Venice and its merchants lay upon the sea and the dictates of the Maritime Council were law.

Moreover Michael's bearing was hardly that of a cutthroat. Soranzi murmured diplomatically:

"Now that you two worthy captains have reached an understanding it behooves me to

press upon my way. I am in haste to hear a most wonderful tale of a voyager who has found a new road to the riches of the East, more vast than those narrated by Ser Marco Polo himself."

Michael bowed, realizing that Rudolfo would not fight now.

"Will you direct me," he asked, "to the fête of my lord Contarini, the leader of the great council? I have lost my way."

Soranzi's lips parted to respond, but Rudolfo nudged him.

"Follow this alley," the *condottiere* directed curtly, "in the direction Messer Soranzi came for some distance."

With that he turned on his heel, took the arm of Soranzi and with a backward glance walked away across the bridge. The lanthorn was soon lost to sight around a bend in a street where Michael had been wandering.

Sheathing his dagger, the Breton listened to the retreating footsteps, and laughed heartily but silently in the darkness.

"'Tis a rare jest," he thought. "Soranzi perchance would have directed me aright, but the excellent Rudolfo saw fit to send me mum-chance in the wrong course. Aye, I make no doubt they are bound to the Palazzo Contarini themselves."

The reflection that Rudolfo had been at pains to keep him away from the fête caused Michael wonder whether the *condottiere* had not had a stronger motive than the desire for revenge in attacking him. Rudolfo had known from Michael's own words that he was bound for the Contarini Palace.

Of course it would not be particularly pleasing to Rudolfo to have Michael appear at the palace where they would, perhaps, meet. But surely if the captain of mercenaries had merely wished the killing of Michael his wish could better have been fulfilled by sending *bravi* after the Breton when the latter left the palace.

Michael felt sure that Rudolfo had good reason for wanting at some cost to keep him from the palace.

By now Michael was conscious again that he was very hungry. Opposition served to whet his desire to go to the fête. Following the retreating footsteps by ear, he passed over the bridge again, into a dark passage he had not noticed before that led him presently out upon a wide terrace overlooking a brightly lighted court.

## IV

### MICHAEL IS ADMITTED

SORANZI and Rudolfo were just disappearing within the gate of the Contarini house. A throng of gondoliers and servitors grouped on the steps that led from the tiles of the court to the door gave back with low bows. Just as ceremoniously a chamberlain, standing within the entrance, greeted them—as Michael observed.

He cast a swift glance around the court. It fronted a canal by which the guests were coming to the fête. In one corner some fiddlers and flute-players assisted by a bedraggled dancing bear were amusing the waiting servants and helping to empty a huge table of its meat and wine.

It was this music he had heard from the alleys in the rear of the establishment.

Near at hand a fat Turkish gymnast in a soiled silk *khilat* was making the commoners gape by balancing two swords, one above the other, on his forehead and squealing shrilly as if to call attention to his prowess.

From a window of the palace the low sound of a woman's laugh floated out over the court. It was not a pleasant laugh, holding as it did a veiled note of discontent.

"That would be the new *donna*, my lord Contarini's choice of a mistress," observed one lackey in the throng about the sword-juggler to another.

"A red-headed she-fox," mumbled a second who had had his share of red wine. "'Grant I stumble not over her train—'"

"Or spill aught on her finery. 'Tis said she craves jewels as ye thirst for the flagon. She it was that coaxed my lord—who is made o' drier stuff, — wot—to have the voyager tell his tale."

"Nay." The lackey nodded solemnly over a tankard. "All Venice repeats that the riches of Cathay are found at last. Hide o' the —, 'twill do us no good, but Messer Rat-Face Soranzi has come running, holding up his skirts like a woman—"

Both laughed and Michael smiled at the description of the stout merchant with the thin face. He was ascending the steps confidently when the chamberlain stopped him at the door.

"I know not your face, *signor*. Were you bidden to the palace this evening?"

Michael halted, his foot on the top step. Looking down the long hall within, he could

see groups of the guests, young men in short cloaks of every hue, wearing under these tight tunics of crimson velvet and gold cloth, elderly men in long fur mantles, women in the jeweled exuberance of dress and with the red-dyed hair that was a fad of the time.

The splendor of it caused him to gasp. Meanwhile the chamberlain was insolently eying Michael's boots of soft leather and his ragged mantle.

"I have the freedom of the city," murmured Michael, still intent on the spectacle within.

It was the turn of the worthy chamberlain to gape and seize his long staff in righteous wrath. A commoner sought entrance to the fête at the Palazzo Contarini!

In another moment the guardian of the gate would have shouted for the servitors to fling Michael into the canal. It was well, perhaps, for all concerned that a diversion occurred at this point.

A group of lackeys approached the door from within, hauling along a shrinking, stumbling figure in grotesquely striped attire. It was the figure of a hunchback wearing a jester's cap.

Behind the lackeys and their captive strolled several courtiers, smiling expectantly.

"Give him to the bear to play with!" cried a servitor.

"Nay, set the dogs on him."

"Aye—the dogs, the dogs!" cried the courtiers. "Twill be better sport than bear-baiting itself."

Michael saw that the craggy face of the jester was pale and that he winced at mention of the dogs. The anxious glance of the hunchback met his and then circled away as if vainly seeking some avenue of escape.

"Hold," spoke up the chamberlain irresolutely, addressing the courtiers and ignoring Michael in the more pressing matter at hand. "This is good Bembo, my lord's fool and favorite. Would you slay him, signori?"

"Verily is he a fool," answered one of the young nobles carelessly, "and so must pay for his folly."

"Not so. He is no man's fool," corrected another, "and so the dogs will have his limbs for their sport. 'Tis an ill-shapen thing, by the archangel!"

"Bembo," whispered a lackey, "had the cursed luck to spill a dish of sirup of figs on

the train of the *donna*, who is in a rage thereby. To appease her my lord has cast off the ill-begotten fool and my lady has bidden us make sport of him. The dogs—ho, the dogs!"

While one varlet ran eagerly out of the hall, evidently to fetch the dogs of the household, the courtiers dragged Bembo to the door and called the crowd below in the court to witness the coming spectacle.

A joyful shout went up and the servitors deserted both table and Turk to enjoy the more attractive spectacle of a human being worried by the teeth of animals. Michael had a swift recollection of his own torture at the hands of Bayezid's men and the way in which the slaves thronged to watch his suffering.

His back stiffened and he swung his right arm gently at his side—the only movement of which it was capable. And he stood his ground at the head of the stairs, although the courtiers were pushing against him.

"Strip him," counseled a rough voice from below—the same lackey who had commented upon the fiery temper of his mistress a moment ago. "The dogs will bite the fool more toothsomely if he be naked."

"Aye, aye, strip him!" the cry went up.

"Stay," said Michael gravely to the courtiers. "The man is a cripple, wherefore would it be small honor to you, *messires*, to make game of him."

"Blood of the saints!" A young fellow with a face like a woman made response. "By the splendor of heaven, what have we here?"

The chamberlain saw an opportunity to please the nobles.

"A man, my lord of Mocenigo," he informed loudly, "who claims the freedom of the city and so the liberty to attend the fête of my lord Contarini."

The jester's lined face had brightened at Michael's words, but now he appeared hopeless once more. Not so Mocenigo, who scented a finer jest, even, than the tormenting of Bembo.

"He does not look like a lack-wit, this burgher-sailor," he vouchsafed, wrinkling his nose, "but—phah—methinks he is foul of the sea."

They stared at Michael, the crowd below pushing and elbowing to gain a better view. A gentleman laughed and the lackeys guffawed. That a common sailor, or so they

thought, should have construed the freedom of the city as an invitation to the fête!

A distant snarling and barking sounded from within the palace, plainly to be heard now that the fiddlers had ceased playing in order to watch the spectacle.

"Throw them both to the dogs; strip them both," called a lackey from the rear of the throng.

But Michael's glance had sought out the courtier who had laughed, and his gray eyes were very hard. Seeing his set face, those nearest him with the exception of the slightly intoxicated Mocenigo, gave back slightly.

"No need to fetch the dogs, my good cur," Michael smiled at the man who had laughed. "The pack is here and—till now—in full cry."

There was an exclamation at this and a rustling of feet. The servitors sensed a quarrel and realized from the way Michael spoke that he was a Frenchman of good blood. Whereupon they discreetly waited for the quarrel to be taken up by their betters.

"'Od's death!" swore the courtier who had laughed, making however no move forward. "Seize him, ye varlets, and hale him into the lagoon."

The lackeys nearest Michael advanced obediently, but without enthusiasm. Baiting a victim lost its savor when the prey showed fight. Then one of them cried out shrilly:

"Ho, this is Master Bearn who conquered the Turks in the Orient. Not an hour since he overcame Pietro Rudolfo in the street with his sword."

A silence fell on the group at the head of the stairs. The servants remembered that they were unarmed and retreated promptly. Bembo looked up again with hope in his wavering eyes.

Michael, standing his ground with his left hand at his belt, reflected that Rudolfo must have a reputation here.

Muttering something about looking to the dogs, the man who had laughed slipped away, accompanied by his fellows. Mocenigo swore roundly after them and clutched uncertainly at his sword.

At once Michael stepped forward, gripping the other's wrist and wrenching downward as the young noble started to free his blade from its scabbard. The weapon

clattered to the tiled floor and Mocenigo's right hand was helpless in Michael's left.

Now the courtier was no younger than the seaman, but his smooth face made a strong contrast with Michael's brown countenance wherein the skin was drawn taut over jutting bones and deep lines ran from nose to mouth.

Mocenigo, flushed, made no struggle, knowing that his strength was overmatched; instead he waited with a dangerous quiet for Michael to strike or taunt or reach for a weapon. He did not know that the Breton had but one useful arm.

"You are no coward," grunted Michael, "but you carry your wine badly, my lord. The cups make a man quarrelsome."

With that he released Mocenigo, picked up the latter's weapon, handed it to him and turned his back. The courtier handled his blade irresolutely, staring at the seaman's back.

"Close the door," Michael was instructing the chamberlain, who—seeing that Mocenigo made no move—obeyed, thus shutting out the curious throng in the court.

"You were best away from here, Bembo," said Michael quickly to the jester. "Some side postern; this is your chance."

When Bembo had vanished from the hall he wheeled on the gazing Mocenigo. "This mocking of a fool ill beseems your chivalry my lord."

At this the young courtier flushed more deeply than before, and sheathed his sword covertly. "'Od's blood, *signor*, you are a strange man and a ready one. I was in the wrong and I apologize." He bowed graciously. "Surely you are of gentle blood in France?"

"Nay, *signor*—my mother was of gentlefolk, but I am a commoner, without land or till."

Michael nodded affably to the perplexed chamberlain.

"Now that I am here, announce me to your master. In the haste of the moment I forgot to say that he bade me come to the fête."

But when the three sought Contarini they found him and the circle of his friends seated, listening to the tale of the voyager. Only one of the listeners noticed Michael's entry into the audience chamber in the rear of the assemblage and that one was Pietro Rudolfo.

## V

## CATHAY

**G**REAT lords, counts, knights, burgesses and ladies! Attend ye, dispose yourselves to listen. Never have your ears been greeted by such a tale as this. Never have soldiers, priests, sailors or astrologers breathed such a romance as this true record.

"*Signori*, ladies; no man hath so much knowledge and experience of the diyers parts of the world—and especially that of Cathay—as hath Messer Ruy de Gonzales Clavijo!"

The speaker, broad as he was tall, black-bearded and mellow of voice, bowed very low, sweeping the heron plume of his cap across the floor of the library of the Contarini Palace. His enormous cloak of Armenian velvet vied in color with his scarlet doublet of Persian silk.

"I am Messer Ruy de Gonzales Clavijo," he concluded.

In the library were gathered the leading spirits among the guests. Contarini with his mistress beside him sat directly before the speaker. Close behind him the pale face of Soranzi, the merchant, gleamed in the candle-light.

A hundred years ago Marco Polo had completed his book. Discredited at first, it had been confirmed to great extent by wandering Franciscan monks. It was known in Europe that Cathay existed somewhere at the eastern end of the world—this side of the Sea of Darkness.

Venetian galleys were engaged in trade with Persia and Arabia, at Ormuz. Continued tidings of the vast resources of silk, spices and gems in China and India came in. The door of the farther East had been half-opened. Venice was agog with rumors of the riches of the Indies and the Pope had more than once sent emissaries to find the land of Prester John.

"Consider, my lord—" Clavijo bowed to Contarini—"the marvel that I have seen. It is no less than a city of brazen walls, in the desert where a hundred caravan routes meet. It lies behind the lofty mountains which are a natural wall beyond the last of the three seas—Ægean, Mormaior and the Dead Sea that is of salt, as you know."

The listeners nodded. Venetians to the heart, they knew the geography of the Black

Sea and something of the Caspian. Clavijo, the Spaniard, went on.

"Seven years ago, my lord, did Ser Clavijo set out humbly from Constantinople over the perilous waters of Mormaior where no ships may have iron in them, lest the devil's loadstone that is at the bottom of the sea should draw out nails and braces and every soul perish."

Contarini shrugged. He did not set much store by the superstitions of the sea. Clavijo pointed to the map on the silver globe beside him.

"It was not the least of the marvels, my lord, that Ser Clavijo attained to the farther shore of this sea where the spirits of the waste are said to lie in wait for travelers. Aye, he heard their mutterings in the night, on the desert floor, and in the morning his servant was dead. The natives say that this muttering comes from the sands—the *reg ruwan*, talking sands. Yet Clavijo makes no doubt that demons are to be met in the waste places.

"But beyond here exists a rich and fertile valley. My lord, it may well be that this is no less than the Eden of the Bible. Forasmuch as the Bible relates that the three strange kings came to the birth of Christ, bearing rich gifts of incense and myrrh, it is reasonable to suppose that this legend relates to Cathay, which may well be the kingdom of Prester John."

He glanced mildly at his intent audience. A dozen times within the last fortnight had the Spaniard been called upon to tell his story and by now he well knew the phrases that best appealed to the religiously inclined. As for the ladies—

"The way to this valley is most difficult to encompass; forby bands of Moorish horsemen do swoop upon the unwary. It was one of these bands that came on Clavijo, alone in the desert, and guided him, a prisoner, through the storms of sand that are more fearful than the tempest of the sea. In this way he was taken to the gate in the brazen wall.

"Inside that gate he perceived the trees of gold and silver, of which you have heard, and the fountains that run wine more delicious than the famous Chian.

"Great jewels are the fruit in these gardens of the brazen city. The inhabitants are fair of face and speak a Moorish tongue. Alas, your servant Clavijo has not the gift of words to describe all that he saw. Moreover,

he was a prisoner, kept for the pleasure of the Grand Cham who is the king of this place."

Clavijo's broad face turned toward the stately red-haired woman who was the mistress of his host.

"My lady, it came to his ears in the city of the Grand Cham that all who entered the valley never got any older. There is no time in this city of Cathay, and people do as they please. It is a most pleasant spot. Many marvels Clavijo heard there—of the cameleopard and the taurelephus that gives most rare milk. But concerning this Clavijo can not know the truth. The gardens and the Cathayans he saw with his own eyes. Some of the silk of the place he had made into a doublet and this you yourselves may see—"

Clavijo tapped his broad chest with a smile.

"This is but a poor specimen. The robes of the slaves of the Grand Cham are of the sheerest gossamer, my ladies. The emeralds on his fingers are large as hens' eggs. The perfumes of the palace are finer than the dried roses of Persia."

The women who had been listening sleepily until now looked up with interest.

"Living unto themselves as they do, the Cathayans have no knowledge of the value of gold in the other world. It comes, Clavijo heard, from the mines of Ectag, sometimes called the Golden Mountains. Here there be slaves who labor in the mines, and but for the grace of God Clavijo would be such a slave."

The small eyes of Guistani Soranzi widened and he plucked at the edge of his fur robe.

"Did you bring back some of the gold, Messer Clavijo?" he asked.

"Alas, some I took with me when I fled from the city, but necessity compelled me to cast it away when I crossed the desert." Clavijo stepped back and bowed. "My escape was due to one of the servants of the Cham who was a Christian at heart. Otherwise, it would not have been possible to surmount the brazen walls."

"And the Grand Cham?" put in Rudolfo curiously. "What was he?"

"Some called him Cham, some Khan. Perchance the two words be the same. He is like to the Emperor of the Chin, because Persian and Turk and other pagan sultans render him tribute. Also, of all the

caravans that pass by the valley he takes tribute. Some say he has the powers of a potent magician, yet this must be because he has the wisdom of a hundred years."



CLAVIJO ceased his tale with a low bow. Contarini studied him with green, fathomless eyes, but the mistress of Contarini was a-quiver with eagerness and whispered to him of the gems of Cathay that might adorn her beauty.

Rudolfo's elegant figure advanced to exchange greetings with the voyager, as did the other guests with the exception of Michael, who remained leaning against the wall, rubbing his chin reflectively as if something puzzled him greatly.

He saw that Clavijo presently left the throng. Straightway Michael followed down a narrow hall that led to an alcove where a table loaded with fruits, wines and sweet-meats awaited the guests who had not yet arrived.

Somewhat to Michael's surprize the portly Spaniard dug his fingers into a fine dish—peacock pie. From the pie his hands went to his mouth. His bearded chin worked voraciously and the pie diminished apace.

Michael's hunger came upon him anew and he joined the man on the other side of the table.

"By your leave, Messer Voyager."

His left hand began to make havoc with the remnant of the pastry.

Clavijo glanced at him from small black eyes, as if disturbed by the interruption.

"It irks me to eat alone," smiled Michael invitingly. "Come, good sir, I see you looked at yonder Sicilian grapes desirefully. Proceed. Consume. Your long suffering in the Orient must have given you a rare stomach for such fare. See, I join you."

The Spaniard wiped his beard with the back of his hand and with the other covertly fastened upon some brandied figs. He seemed to have an unlimited appetite.

"Verily, I see that you are a man of parts," said Michael again. "Let me call to your notice this excellent Chian wine. A toast, Messer Clavijo—a toast."

"Ah."

The Spaniard nodded approvingly and poured out two cups of the fine wine. Michael, who had had enough of the food, lifted his politely.

"To Cathay," he announced, bowing.

"To Cathay," responded the other heartily.

"Sir, I know you not, but you are good company and a man of rare discernment—"

Clavijo fell silent and his mouth opened wide, while he did not raise his cup. Michael, glancing quickly over his shoulder, saw that two men in uniform had entered the alcove.

They wore dark cloaks and carried only stiletos at their belts. Both wore black masks that concealed the whole of their faces with the exception of the eyes.

"*Madre de Dios!*" swore Clavijo.

The two masked servitors or officials—Michael could not decide which—advanced to the table.

"*Signori*," said one, "which of you is the renowned voyager from the Orient?"

It was politely said and Michael set down his cup reflectively, seeing that Clavijo's eyes had widened at the words. Under the circumstances the newcomers might be seeking either the Spaniard or the Breton. Evidently, if they desired Clavijo, they had not been in the audience-chamber when the latter was telling his tale.

This inclined Michael to the belief that he was the man wanted. He wondered briefly if these were agents of Rudolfo, but remembered that the *condottiere* would hardly resume his quarrel in the home of Clavijo, unless imperatively urged.

It was hardly likely, furthermore, that Mocenigo would choose this way of punishing Michael for the scene at the door. Michael, unfamiliar with the customs of Venice, hazarded a guess that these were servants of Contarini sent to summon either him or Clavijo in this curious fashion.

"I am from the East," he responded, as the Spaniard was silent. "I am called Michael Bearn, of Brittany."

"Aye," put in Clavijo promptly, glancing involuntarily toward the hall down which the two had come; "this is the gentleman you seek."

Plainly he did not desire to go with the masked men. They, however, looked at each other questioningly and asked Clavijo's name, which was reluctantly given.

"*Signori*," decided the one who had first spoken; "we were sent for the voyager from the Orient by one whom you both know. Since we can not be certain of your identity, will you both have the great kindness to come with us?"

Clavijo looked as if he would have liked

to refuse, but the masked men ushered them down another hall and flight of steps. They passed out of the house into the darkness of an alley. The loom of the buildings against the stars, the smells and the distant echo of a flute assured Michael that they were now near the bridge where he had met Rudolfo.

It was his turn to be reluctant, yet Michael strode ahead, whistling between his teeth. He felt morally certain that the two attendants had come for Clavijo and that Clavijo did not want to go with them. And Michael wanted very much to see where Clavijo was being taken—where the Spaniard did not want to go.

A second stairway took them to a gondola, a torch at its bow. Michael recognized the Contarini crest on the gondola hood as he scrambled inside, followed by his companion, breathing heavily.

The two masked attendants took their stand fore and aft by the rowers. In the darkness of the small cabin Michael sat down on what he first thought to be a cushion and then made out to be the form of a man.

He said nothing, wondering if the man were dead, until a whisper came up to him:

"*Signor Michael*, a service for a service given. Pietro Rudolfo plots against you. I heard it whispered as I fled the palace."

It was Bembo. A moment's reflection showed that he must have hidden himself away in one of the Contarini gondolas, expecting to leave the palace unseen in this way. Michael eased his weight off the other.

"Do not yield me up, *signor*," went on the whisper. "Soon we shall be far off from the red-headed *donna* and the dogs and servants."

"Faith, I will not, Bembo. Are these masks Rudolfo's doing?"

"Nay, generous sir. They are servants of—Contarini."

A slight hesitation before the name did not escape the Breton's notice. "Whither are we bound? Have they business with me or Clavijo?"

"Clavijo." Bembo chose to answer the last question. "We—you and I—will be released at the *Con*—at the gate we are coming to—"

"Who in the fiend's name are you talking to?" demanded the Spaniard, who had been unable to understand the low whispers.

"A fiend—if it likes you, Messer

Voyager," murmured Michael. "He says the devil and all the hellish brood have seized upon you."

"*Madre de Dios!*"

Clavijo, it appeared, was superstitious and more than a little credulous. Then the boat stopped and the three—for Bembo joined them—stood before an iron-studded door in which a small square slid back, to cast a stream of light on their faces.

Michael saw a masked face staring at them through the aperture. Meanwhile the gondola and its men drew away from the landing and disappeared in the darkness.

Clavijo's olive countenance went a shade paler when he made out the stunted form of the hunchback. He had not seen Bembo at the fête and Michael's careless words had aroused his apprehensions.

Before he could speak the door opened wide and the figure within reached forth to pluck the Spaniard inside. The door was slammed in the faces of Bembo and his friend.



THROUGH the square peephole Michael could make out the two men inside withdrawing down a hall. A second glance showed him that they stood on a narrow stone landing with the black surface of the canal at their feet. The door presented the only means of leaving the steps.

"Bembo," whispered Michael, "unravel me this coil. Where are we, and why are we left like varlets on the threshold of this hospitable place?"

"Because, *signor* comrade," the jester grinned up at him in the dim light from the opening, "we are varlets—or at least the gate-keeper believes we look like such attendants of the great Spaniard. Your cloak is—"

Bembo hesitated, fearing to offend, but Michael answered readily.

"Zounds, 'tis shabby enow!"

"This is the entrance to the *Consoli di Mercanti*. So many masks mean that the council is in secret session. We had best content ourselves with hailing a passing gondola and making off with a whole hide, for we are both here by mistake."

Michael wondered why Bembo's presence had been taken for granted until the hunchback explained that he had often come here in attendance on Contarini and the guardians of the place could not know that he was

no longer the servant of the great Contarini.

"Good," he said thoughtfully and pressed against the door, thrusting his left arm within the opening. Bembo plucked at his sleeve in sudden anxiety.

"What would you, *signor*?"

"Why, entrance, before yonder masked fellow returns to his post. I must hear what the council has to say to the voyager."

In spite of Bembo's protest that the night session was secret and that they both might end the evening in the damp cells of San Giorgio Maggiore prison, Michael worked away at the door until he had drawn back the bolts and pushed it open.

This done, he pulled the shivering hunchback into the stone passageway, closed the heavy portal and whispered:

"Now, good Bembo, you are verily a lost fool if you lead us not into a safe hiding-place where we may hear what is said in the council. You say that you know the intestines of this place of masks—"

Michael's words received sudden point by the sound of footsteps returning toward the passage. Bembo fled with a crab-like motion down the narrow hall and slipped aside into the shadows of another passage opening into it, and Michael ran after him silently.

Taking the Breton's hand in his, the jester led his new friend through the darkness down a winding flight of steps until the dampness indicated to Michael that they were under the canal.

Here they were in a confined space where the air, however, was not stale and two gleams of light pierced the gloom from one wall. Michael was somewhat taken aback to hear voices echoing clearly in the stone chamber, although they were plainly the only occupants.

"'Tis the whispering gallery," explained Bembo so softly that the words were barely discernible, "that gives upon the council chamber. My lord Contarini was wont at times to spy here upon the testimony of prisoners before the judges. Speak not, for the gallery runs overhead to an opening behind the councilors."



AS THE Council of Ten ruled political Venice, stamping out conspiracies and punishing any man it listed mercilessly and secretly, the *Consoli di Mercanti* ruled commercial Venice with an iron hand.

The prosperity of the *Signory* was linked

indissolubly with the expansion of its trade, the crushing of its rivals and the mastery of new routes into the East, such as gave to Venice the monopoly of the great salt industry. The methods of the council were secretive and cruel, but Venetian judges winked at this, so long as the trade-routes were held, concessions secured and enemies weakened.

Of these enemies Genoa was then the most pressing. A few years before the army and fleet of Genoa had almost crushed the city of the lagoons—Venice being freed only by the dogged courage of Pisani and the intrepidity of Carlo Zeno. Since then Genoa had used every means to extend its trade to the eastward, away from the immediate power of the Venetian galleys.

Both cities had vied in making agreements with the on-sweeping Osmanli Empire which was even then extending from Anatolia into the mainland of Europe. But behind the armies of Bayezid were the spices, silks and jewels of India, Persia and China—veritable Golcondas to the trading-cities which paid fat tribute for the privilege of plying the Black Sea and tapping the Damascus and Aleppo caravan-routes.

So much Michael Bearn knew.

Standing close to the wall of the whispering chamber, he found that the two holes fitted his eyes and that he could see a long table covered with papers and globe-maps behind which sat a dozen masked men and before which stood the carefully groomed form of Ruy de Gonzales Clavijo.

The council was in secret session. A masked attendant clad in the manner of those who had ushered Bembo and Michael to the place stood by the closed door. Michael, studying the forms of the men behind the long table, singled out one in the center as Contarini and at the first words knew that he was right.

The voices rang clearly in his ear, conducted by a cleverly contrived gallery that ran from the shadows over the table to the wall above Michael's head.

"*Signor*," began the man in the center of the councilors. "You were summoned to speak the truth. Do not fail."

Clavijo glanced at the speaker swiftly, and measured the ring of masked faces. His brow was moist and his plump cheeks were flushed.

"This evening—" he responded.

"This evening," Contarini took him up,

"you babbled much nonsense and some news. *Signor*, we are concerned now with the trade of Venice. Frequently we have heard of a Tatar or Cathayan potentate beyond the Sarai Sea. We wish to learn if it was his court you visited."

At this Clavijo nodded understandingly. He looked serious, now that he had weighed the mood of these men.

"Aye, *signor*. Last night, I was about to remark, I spoke mainly of fabulous gems and garments and such like, for the pleasure of the ladies. But now I place the poor fruits of my journey at your service. Question me, therefore, at your will."

"Exactly where lies this city?"

"As you have said, beyond the Sarai Sea, a journey of a week by horse, until you come to the foot of the Ectag \* Mountains, called by the natives the Golden Mountains. The way lies over the desert floor and is perilous indeed."

"So, one may go by sea to Trebizond, where we have a *bailio* and thence—" Contarini consulted a map—"by caravan across the land of the tribes. Karabak, it is written here?"

"Aye, my lord. Marvelous it is to know that in that land there is a pillar of everlasting fire, rising from the ground with a blue flame—"

"Naphtha!" broke in a councilor. "Near to Batum. No miracle about that."

Michael studied the eyes of the questioners, greatly interested, much to Bembo's surprise.

"Not in the least," assented Clavijo gravely. "Yet there also I beheld the holy mountain of Ararat where first the blessed ark came to land after the Flood. And beyond there, my lords—beyond there lie the fields of solid salt, at the foot of the Sarai Sea, which signifies in Cathayan—Sea of Salt."

The councilors looked up at this, for the monopoly of the salt-trade was one of the greatest avenues of profit to Venice.

"That is good!" Contarini made a note and Clavijo smiled. "Now, what of your statement that this Cham of Cathay is aged beyond human years and a magician?"

"My lord, does he not dwell in this paradise of Cathay and was not the holy garden of Eden also a paradise? Have we not the testimony of the Bible itself that therein is no such thing as human age? Was not the

\*The Akh-tagh.

holy garden itself in the paradise of Asia?"

"How do you know the Grand Cham is a magician?"

Clavijo smiled, shrugged and hesitated, but one of the councilors spoke up.

"The good Fra Odoric of Pordenone himself visited these regions *con pellegrino*—as a pilgrim. Did he not see great piles of human skulls raised to the sky and the horns of beasts stuck upright upon mountaintops? Also divers wonders such as a city upon the sand which vanished as he walked toward it? Aye, and he mentioned that the sand spoke with a human voice."

Hereupon Clavijo drew a long breath of satisfaction and twiddled his curled beard.

"As I myself have said," he reminded Contarini, who alone among the councilors seemed to weigh his testimony doubtfully. The punishment by the Maritime Council of one who gave false testimony before it was no light thing.

"These miracles have my eyes beheld. Lo, I sat upon such a pile of human skulls, reaching a thousand lance-lengths toward the sky—the bones of those who aforetime sought the earthly paradise and failed."

"The Grand Cham must be a potent monarch," mused Contarini. "Aye, I mind me Fra Odoric spoke of a great Khan of Tatar who was the most merciless warrior upon the face of the earth—"

Michael strained his ears to catch the rest of the sentence, but Contarini had bent over a globe-map and was silent.

"'Khan' signifies 'Cham' in the pagan tongue," put in Clavijo, who seemed to be better pleased with the way things were going now.

 MAPS were produced and it was found that Ptolemy had outlined a kingdom beyond the Sarai Sea, under the star Taurus, and named it Chin, or Chnae.

"Which is verily the Chitae of Fra Odoric and my Cathay," pointed out the Spaniard. Sweeping his hand across the table in an eloquent gesture, he raised his voice.

"Here lies the power and magic of the East, *signori*. Alone, my comrades dead, I crawled from the brazen walls to bear this message to you. Others, like the good fra, have heard of the Grand Cham—or seen the city at a distance. But I—I have walked under the gold trees and heard the song of the slaves of a hundred races laboring in the

mines in the bowels of the earth. I have looked upon the riches of pearls, emeralds, topazes set into the walls of houses. Beside the city of the Grand Cham Constantinople is a rook's nest and Venice—pardon, but Venice is no more than a village."

Perceiving that his voice fell into ready ears, he folded his arms, his uneasiness vanished.

"I have spoken of jewels. My lords, upon the person of the Grand Cham and his radiant women there are solid plaques of emeralds and rubies, greater than those that you have brought in your galleys from Persia. And these jewels the Cathayans value not, save as handsome ornaments."

"What do the Cathayan folk value—in trade?"

"Perchance weapons, rare steel, cunning inventions such as the sand clock and musical organs."

Bembo, who was still shivering from apprehension, now noticed that Michael's shoulders were quivering as if the Breton were stricken with the ague and that his hand was pressed against his mouth.

Within the council hall Contarini rose as if satisfied.

"Messer Clavijo," he said gravely, "if your tale had proved a lie you would have had a taste of the iron beds of San Giorgio Maggiore. But we are well content with the news you bring, and it is now fitting that we announce to you the result of our deliberations before your examination. This morning I had speech with a French mariner of the name of Bearn who warned me that the Turkish power threatens the safety of the great city of Constantinople and Venice. That is idle talk and the council is concerned only with trade, not politics. Yet this foe of the Turks confessed that somewhere beyond the Sarai Sea is a Khan of Tatar who must be a potent monarch."

He paused and Bembo saw again that Michael grimaced strangely.

"The council has planned an expedition into the *terra incognita*," went on Contarini. "A jealous merchant will be sent with proper escort. By fair means or foul—mark me—he must win us wealth from the Cham. Our galleys will bear the voyagers safely through the Turkish pirates. You will be the leader of the expedition."

Clavijo was a graven figure of amazement. "I?"

"Verily. Venice will honor fittingly the

discoverer of the new trade-route—when you return. But return successful, for we have no clemency for one who fails."

A flush mounted to the Spaniard's brow which had become moist again.

"If My lord, the way is perilous. Scarce I es—"

"By your own words you would fain visit again this city that is an earthly paradise. You know the way. Have no fear that you will not be rewarded."

 CLAVIJO started to speak again, hesitated and bowed low. Then he jumped and swore roundly. A roaring, mighty laugh broke the silence of the council chamber. Yet none of the councilors had uttered a sound and certainly Clavijo and the attendant had not presumed to laugh.

Contarini it was who broke the spell of stupefaction by starting up and looking angrily at the wall behind which, in the whispering gallery, Michael Bearn was doubled up with mirth, laughing until he coughed.

The sound, magnified by the hidden gallery, had burst upon the councilors like a thunderclap and not a few crossed themselves in awe.

"By the blessed Saint Lawrence and his gridiron!" Bembo pulled at his companion in a frenzy of alarm. "Are you mad? They will be here in a minute with drawn swords. Come, or you will end your laugh in a dungeon—"

Fairly skipping with anxiety, he guided the still chuckling Michael up the steps, and listened a moment alertly. Michael seemed indifferent to the peril that was real enough to Bembo.

Hearing the sound of pikes striking the floor in the direction of the council chamber, Bembo turned the other way at the head of the stairs. He knew that there was a warder at the postern door by which they had entered.

So, instead of retracing his steps, he ran up another flight of stairs, slowing down as he emerged with Michael into a tapestried hall where several attendants without masks lounged.

"The council has broken up," Bembo announced when the servants glanced at him inquiringly. At the foot of the stair behind them Michael could see Contarini pass hastily toward the listening chamber with a group of halberdiers.

Following Bembo's lead he walked quietly toward the entrance at the end of the hall that was the main gate of the council house. The hunchback had reasoned quickly that the guards at the door, not having seen him enter, would take him and the Breton for Contarini's followers. Likewise, he knew that the aroused councilors would not be aware of the identity of the men who had been in the listening chamber.

So, playing both ends against the middle, he went to the gate, nodded to the pikeman on guard and emerged under the stars. As they did so they heard a distant shout from below and saw the servitors run to the head of the stairs up which they had come.

"They will bar the gate," whispered Bembo. "But, praise be to Saint Mark, we are outside the bars."

Michael noted with disgust that they were again on a landing with the canal in front of them. While they waited anxiously for a gondola to pass, a flurried councilor rushed through the door, glanced hastily at Bembo, and, recognizing him, glared at the dark canal.

"Did you see a man flee here hence, Bembo?" he questioned.

"Not yet, my lord," replied the hunchback truthfully. "But, if it please you, I will watch to observe when a man leaves the building."

When the councilor had reentered the hall, the great door was closed and barred. The two could hear the sounds of a hurried search within. They hailed the first empty craft that came abreast of the landing, and when they were fairly out of sight along the canal Bembo, who was curious by nature, turned to his new friend.

"What made you laugh, *signor*?"

Michael smiled reminiscently. "A splendid jest, my Bembo."

As he had listened to Clavijo's tale at the fête he had been struck by grave doubts as to its truth. The flowery descriptions of the Spaniard did not conform to Michael's knowledge of the Salt Sea and its tribes.

Furthermore, the man's face was vaguely familiar. Michael had a keen memory, but he could not place the man at first. Not until the testimony had been given before the council and Clavijo had been plainly disturbed did Michael remember him.

Then he recalled another frightened man. The scene on the shore at Nicopolis flashed before him, and he visioned a tall, stalwart

camp-follower of the Christian army driving a loaded cart headlong through the fugitives.

Clavijo had been that man. And the year of the battle of Nicopolis had been the year that Clavijo claimed to have been at the court of the Grand Cham of Tatary. Michael knew then what he suspected before, that the Spaniard had not been in the East. His tale had been a lie.

It was the decision of the council in taking Clavijo at his word that had struck Michael's grim sense of humor. It was, as he told Bembo, a rare jest.

## VI

### THE VENTURE

**S**AFE, for the nonce, in an odorous tavern hight the "Sign of the Sturgeon," on the docks of Rialto, Michael reflected the next day on what he had learned and fell to questioning Bembo, for there was much that puzzled him.

Bembo wondered somewhat, as he squatted on the table where their breakfast platter still lay, how Michael could obtain the money to pay for their quarters because it was becoming apparent to him that they did not have a silver *soldi* between them. When he mentioned respectfully that the landlord was chalking up their score behind the door and was growling for payment on account, Michael assured him that something would turn up to yield them gold.

Skeptical, but willing to believe in the good fortune of his new master—Bembo had attached himself to the Breton—the hunchback answered the questions.

"My lord Contarini must have money," he asserted, following the trend of his own thoughts. "His large establishments have impoverished him sorely and he is deep in debt to Rudolfo, the leader of his soldiers, who has waged Contarini's battles on the mainland. Methinks my lord can not pay—"

"And so has caught at the chance of riches wrung from Cathay," mused Michael. Egged on by his spendthrift mistress and his creditors, Contarini was planning to use his post as head of the Maritime Council to his own advantage.

This was more than probable because, while Contarini had aided Clavijo in spreading the tidings of a mythical kingdom be-

yond the Sarai Sea, he had been careful to have the council hear in secret the Spaniard's testimony as to the possible spoil to be gleaned from the Cathayans. So Contarini must believe the tale of Clavijo.

The Spaniard himself was merely posing as a voyager—an honorable figure in that age—and thriving on the gifts and hospitality of the Venetians. What of Rudolfo?

The *condottiere* had sought at all costs to keep Michael from hearing the tale of Clavijo. Why? Rudolfo must know of the coming venture into the East if he was in Contarini's confidence. He knew, too, that Michael had been on the border of the *terra incognita*.

What did Rudolfo fear that the Breton would disclose? Rudolfo's cowardice at the field of Nicopolis?

Michael shrugged, and dismissed the problem. It did not matter, he thought—and wrongly.

What interested him was Clavijo's magnificent lie. Michael knew that there was truth in the well from which the self-styled voyager had drawn his tales. Fra Odoric had spoken truly of a powerful Khan of Tatary.

But would the Khan of Tatary, of whom Michael had heard in the camp of Bayezid, prove to be actually the Cham of Cathay? Michael would have given much to know. For this khan was the one man Bayezid respected on the face of the earth.

"If I could know," he began, and looked at Bembo. "Fool o' mine, and withal, wise man, we must have more news. Go you to the plaza of the city and learn what you may of preparations being made for a ship to the East.

"Look you, wise fool," the Breton continued thoughtfully. "Is it not true that the natures of men will seek their proper end? Give a thief rope and he will halter himself; a miser will bleed others till there remains no blood in his own veins; a boaster will trip o'er his own tongue. I, being a wayfarer voyaging on behalf of five dead men, will see—the day of judgment, Bembo."

"And a fool, master?"

"Will be happy, God knows."

Now in saying this, Michael Bearn voiced the destiny that was to shape his own life and the fate of several others in one of the strangest adventures that was ever recorded in the annals of Venice.

Bembo found his master a queer mixture

of moodiness and cheer. Michael had astonished the jester by forcing him to share their meals in common. Bembo had always fared, before this, with the hunting-dogs of Contarini.

"'Tis said," he ventured, thinking of the gold they must have to pay for their food, "that you have seen the battles of the pagans in the East. Could not you gain a place and honor as *condottiere* with one of the noble lords of Venice?"

"Would one of the noble lords employ a slave, Bembo?" Michael smiled at his companion's surprize. "Nay, there is no man's work in these mock wars of Italy where the *condottieri* bleed—their masters."

He looked out moodily at the forests of galley masts and emptied his flagon of wine.

"Being idlers, good Bembo, an enterprise must come to us. Go you into the city and learn if this venture is to be had—one wherein we may sharpen our wits and laugh mighti'y."

Bembo went. It was evening when he returned.

"So you have come back to me?" remarked Michael. "Are you not afraid of poverty and the dagger of Rudolfo? Bembo, if you had favor with a magician, what would you wish to be?"

The hunchback looked seriously at his torn finery.

"Saving my present service to you, my master, I would like to be the Grand Cham who wears a ruby on every toe and scatters gold as the monks scatter indulgences."

"So, has the Spaniard's gossip stirred your blood?"

"Master, it is truth. The council has commissioned Rudolfo to command the soldiery of the expedition to the land of the Grand Cham."

So suddenly did Michael Bearn spring up from his chair that wine and table were upset on Bembo, who fell back in alarm.

"No!" the Breton cried.

"Aye. They only await the selection of a proper mariner to go with Clavijo and those already chosen. Fifteen thousand ducats have been granted Messer Clavijo for funds. 'Tis said, despite his zeal to set eyes again upon the earthly paradise, he balked at taking the money for a space."

"Clavijo—Ruy de Gonzales Clavijo—goes verily to the Grand Cham!" Michael sat down on the bed and rocked with laugh-

ter. "'Twould make the devil laugh. And who else goes?"

"A certain young count of the Mocenigo family—a rare gallant. Soranzi—I heard the thrifty merchant consulted his astrologer and found that his horoscope foretold rare things of him in Tatary. *Verbum sat sapienti*—a word to the wise is enough."

"Soranzi! Who else?"

"Nearly the whole of Venice has begged for the chance. Nevertheless, the wise council knows that the company must be limited to a few; five gentlemen and the men-at-arms."

"Perhaps the Cham would give him the freedom of the city—of Cathay, in the desert—the sandy desert!" Michael remarked seriously.

Bembo gaped and retreated to a corner of the room, fearing that his master might be afflicted with madness, until the reassuring thought came to him that Michael Bearn was only drunk.

"Aye, sir," he grinned amiably, "there is sand i' the desert—"

"Clavijo vouches for it, wise Bembo, and for the saltiness of the sea."

"The salt—verily, sir—ha-ho!"

"Bembo." Michael shook his dark head gravely. "ark me, man; never will you behold such a voyager as Ruy Clavijo again. We will look no further, wait no longer. The wind is up, my fool, and we will sail with the tide. No quest could be more suited to our hearts than this."

He caught up his cloak, hat and sword and bowed ceremoniously to the jester.

"Behold, the new master mariner of Messer Clavijo and his party. I go to the council, or, better, to Contarini, for my commission."

Hereupon Bembo scratched his head and cast a tentative glance at the water jar. He had been eager to inform his master that Rudolfo was in the expedition, hoping to turn Michael from thought of meddling with Contarini's plans, and now Michael had said he would join the party.

"Let me bathe your head, master, before you go."

Michael laughed.

"Water, upon such a night as this! Nay, we will drink to our commission and to the Grand Cham. Come, most wise oracle, a toast!"

"To the Grand Cham." Bembo filled a cup reluctantly.

"To the Grand Sham!" Michael emptied the cup.

 IT WAS late that night when he returned, but the jester was sitting up, wrapped in his tattered mantle, solemnly eying the diminishing candle on the table. He looked up fearfully when Michael pushed in the door, for Bembo had entertained grave apprehensions as to the reception of his slightly intoxicated master—for such he considered Michael—by the members of the council.

To his surprise Michael's step was regular and his glance steady.

"'Tis done, Bembo," he smiled. "Rudolfo being luckily absent, Contarini passed readily upon the merits of our claim. We sail the day after the morrow."

Michael flung himself into his chair and clapped Bembo on the knee.

"'Twas not wine that stirred my brain, Bembo. Knowing Clavijo, I had a grave fear that he would lead his expedition anywhere but to the *terra incognita*. Knowing Rudolfo, I am assured that the venture will verily seek spoil. And since our worthy friends would fain despoil the Cham, why, you and I must go with them. Because, forsooth, the Cham is of all men the man I most desire to clap eyes upon."

Taking some gold coins from a new pouch at his girdle, he bade Bembo settle their score at the Sign of the Sturgeon on the morrow. The pouch itself he detached and handed to Bembo, who was scratching his head, deeply puzzled by his master's speech.

"What is that, master?"

"For you. I drew an advance upon my pay. We part when the ship sails. This voyage is not for you, Bembo."

The jester pushed the money away and the corners of his lips drew down.

"Wherefore, master? Am I not your man?"

But Michael, glancing at the low partition that separated their room from the other chambers of the inn, shook his head thoughtfully.

"I have good reason for bidding you stay here. This voyage is not like other voyages."

Bembo pricked up his ears and protested, but Michael would say no more. Long after the sea-captain had retired to his cloak and bed of boards, the jester remained awake, watching the candle-flame moodily

and glancing from time to time angrily at the purse.

He was hurt and his curiosity was stirred—two strong emotions with the hunchback. As the candle sputtered and subsided into grease, Bembo reached out a claw-like hand and pouched the money.

In the annals of the Maritime Council, in the pages devoted to the voyages into *terra incognita*, it is recorded that of Messer Clavijo and his company only one man returned to Venice.

## VII

### THE CASTLE WITHOUT DOORS

CLAVIJO, in choosing the *Nauplia*, had selected the most comfortable means of travel to be had in those days. The pilgrim galliot was broad of beam and fitted with extra cabins in the stern castle. A dozen great sweeps aided the lateen sail. The sides of the vessel were high, and sloped well inboard—affording good protection against the waves.

The pilgrim galleys were designed to provide some ease for passengers. Live fowls were carried. The master of the ship could not remain at any given port for purposes of trade more than three days. He was also obliged to put in at any port they might fancy.

Clavijo, Mocenigo and Rudolfo had all quartered themselves aft; Soranzi had made shift with sleeping-space below decks. But Bearn, who had discovered for himself the unattractiveness of quarters under the deck where the passengers camped all over each other, appropriated space for his mantle and bundle on the main deck under the overhang of the bow.

He was somewhat surprised to see that the ship's captain was hugging the shore, keeping a course well within sight of land. "Coasting" it was called in those days. Since this was the popular route, favored by the passengers, it was more liable to attack by Moslem pirates than the more direct course out into the *Ægean*.

Pirate galleys frequented the sea lanes to the East, off Greece, and Michael had observed at a glance that the *Nauplia* was poorly equipped for defense. Moreover he wondered that Clavijo was not afraid of encountering thieves. The Spaniard had been entrusted with a treasure of some

fifteen thousand Venetian ducats and valuable goods.

It was the second night out and a full moon hung in a clear sky; the man at the steering-oar guided the *Nauplia* within sight of the shadows of land.

Near Michael groups of Armenian and Muscovite traders slept, men and women together, heedless of the clamor of voyagers at dice and wine, or the quarreling and singing below decks where torches of pine-pitch made sleep difficult, if not perilous.

Michael found that he missed Bembo's light tongue and deeper philosophy. The jester would have been in his element on such a night. But Bembo had left him without farewell the day before the galliot sailed.

The tumult and lights of the pilgrim ship formed a great contrast to the silence and speed of a smaller galley that swept out of an inlet with oars plying on either side and spray flashing in the moonlight.

For a second Michael studied it, then took up his sword and ran aft to where the captain slept by the helmsman.

"Look at yonder craft," observed the Breton, shaking the slumbering seaman, "and then dream if you can."

The Venetian stumbled to his feet, gazed, and swore roundly.

"Saint Anthony of Padua! I like it not."

He strode to the break of the stern castle.

"Ho, therel! Cressets! Women into the stern! Out with your swords, *messers*. There be pirates at hand or I am a blind man!"

The gamesters sprang up. Men of the crew ran to fix torches in place at the ship's side; fagots contained in steel baskets were kindled at bow and stern. The women, wailing and crying, were driven below decks.

"Captain," suggested Michael, "it would be well to man the sweeps and get the galliot well under weigh. Your sloping sides are comfortably devised for boarders. Our safety lies in ramming the galley with our wooden beak, such as it is."

The Venetian, experienced in such matters, saw the wisdom of this and was giving orders for the rowers to push out the great oars, when a tall figure appeared on the balcony below the steering-platform and silenced him.

"Nay. No time for that. Summon up your oarsmen to fight on deck."

Michael, leaning down, saw that it was Rudolfo who spoke. The *condottiere* had

drawn his sword and was giving swift instructions to his own men who tumbled up, pulling mail hoods about their heads and stringing their bows.

"You hear me, fool!" Rudolfo cried at the Venetian. "I am in command of the armed forces of this cursed galliot. By the rood——"

The captain shrugged, glanced at the oncoming galley—now not a dozen ships' lengths away—and complied. The crew hurried to the danger point at the ship's side, shepherded by Rudolfo, while the *Nauplia* barely moved through the water, for the wind was light.

Young Mocenigo reeled upon deck, more than a little the worse for wine. Michael saw Soranzi peer from a cabin and straightway vanish.

The brazen sound of the ship's bell voiced a warning to all who still slept. From the dark huddle of Muscovites and Armenians emerged men with bows—Oriental traders, well able to fight in a crisis. On the waist of the *Nauplia* tumult reigned.

Glancing up at the sail, the Venetian skipper whispered to Michael: "Let the gallants do as they please. By Saint Anthony, I'll keep our bow against the other craft."

Michael took his stand beside Rudolfo. The *condottiere* was a brilliant figure in the ruddy light of the torches, his silver-inlaid helmet glittering, his crimson mantle flung back from his mailed chest. He ceased his directions to his men long enough to look swiftly at the Breton and his teeth shone at his beard.

"By the rood, *messer*, you stand behind me? I see you love not the front line of battle."

Now Michael wore no armor under his jerkin and mere prudence had dictated that he shelter himself behind the high rail as long as possible to escape the first arrow flights of the pirates, until they should board.

"As you wish, *signor*."

He pulled himself up into one of the platforms fashioned for archers to stand on. Rudolfo moved slightly away and Michael smiled at the inbred suspicion that took the *condottiere* beyond his reach.

But the arrows from the galley rattled high against the mast and tore through the great square of the sail that bellied and flapped as the Venetian skipper came about to present his bow to the pirate craft.

Rudolfo's half-dozen archers plied their long bows with disciplined precision.

"Saint Mark and Rudolfo!" Their shout went over the water to the galley. Answering cries identified the attackers as Turks and Greeks.

"Dogs!" snarled young Mocenigo. "The Lion of Saint Mark! Ha—do you like his claws?"

He seized one of the cressets by its supports and cast it out upon the deck of the galley as that craft moved past—the maneuver of the Venetian skipper having kept the galley from striking the side of the pilgrim ship with its bow.

For a moment there was a pandemonium of shouts, cries of anger and pain and the flicker of javelins and arrows. The archers of Rudolfo, bearing long leather shields in front of them on their left arms, escaped injury, but Michael saw a pilgrim or two fall writhing to the deck.

Then the galley was past its prey and turning slowly—one bank of oars plying.

"*Pandol*!" called the *Nauplia*'s skipper. "About!" He pushed the two steering-sweeps over and the galliot swung slowly into the offshore tack on which it had been when the pirates were sighted.

Only one more attempt the galley made to close, and the motley defenders of the pilgrim ship were lining the other rail when something whizzed past Michael from behind and stuck into the wooden planking between him and Rudolfo.

The Breton glanced around and saw only the confusion of undisciplined men taking up new positions. Then he drew the knife from the rail.

"A pretty present," laughed the *condottiere*. "For you or me?"



THE knife was a long, heavy blade, its bronze hilt richly inlaid with silver. Michael thrust it into his belt and observed that the galley was drawing off, followed by the taunting shouts of the Venetians.

"They have small stomach for a fight," he muttered.

"Thanks to God and our good friend Pietro Rudolfo." Clavijo's bull voice filled the ship. "Come, Master Bearn, I do not see that you were any too forward in the affray. Doubtless your skin is tender and you hang back lest it be pricked."

Now Michael had not seen Clavijo at all

along the embattled rail of the galliot and he strongly suspected that the man had remained in his cabin until the pirates had drawn off. Then a stronger suspicion assailed him, and he touched the knife in his girdle.

"Aye," he assented seriously, "the skin is very tender—upon my back, and this poniard is both heavy and sharp. It was cast at me from behind."

He held it up by the point before the eyes of the Spaniard, who blinked and pulled at his long beard. Rudolfo took it, glanced it over, looked searchingly at Clavijo from under his thick brows and tossed it over the side of the vessel.

"Some sailor's blade," he shrugged, "and doubtless meant for my kidneys. I am not overpopular with the seamen of the *Nauplia*, because, verily, I enforce discipline upon occasion."

It was a long speech for the taciturn *condottiere* to make. Michael would have chosen to keep the dagger, in hopes of learning who its owner was. Yet, as Rudolfo said, it might well have been intended for him.

"Hark ye, Messer Clavijo." The Breton folded his arms. "Neither master of this vessel nor leader of your men-at-arms am I. The Maritime Council engaged me to aid you to navigate unknown waters if need be, and to arrange transport upon land. This will I do, so well as I may. Methinks the time may come when you will have need of my services."

He was looking at Clavijo, but Rudolfo spoke.

"As a slave, Master Bearn? It is said that you sleep alone in your cloak, so that no other may see the marks of a whip upon your shoulders."

So saying, he stepped back, laying hand lightly on the hilt of his sword. Michael Bearn drew a long breath, but his left hand—that Rudolfo, having learned his lesson once, was watching—reached up to the clasp of his mantle instead of to his weapon.

The cloak fell to the deck, and Michael's muscular fingers ripped open the collar of his jerkin, drawing it down over his bare shoulder. Both Clavijo and Rudolfo saw the deep red welt of scars.

"Aye," nodded Michael, "there be the marks of a Turkish scourge."

At this Clavijo started and a curiously intent frown passed over his smooth brow. He eyed the Breton's square, hard face and

wiry, gray-black hair as if seeing him for the first time.

"Moreover," went on Michael tranquilly, "signori, you will note that my right arm hangs useless. It was broken by those same servants of the sultan. Perhaps this is why I have no longer any love for fighting when there is no need——"

"But surely, Master Bearn," smiled Clavijo ironically, "there was need to repel these pirates, who would have made short matter of us otherwise."

 MICHAEL laughed. The attack by the small galley had had in it more bark than bite, and once it was clear to their enemies that the pilgrim ship was not to be surprized, the Turks and Greeks seemed to lose heart. Such an affair bore little resemblance to the grim struggles Michael Bearn had shared in, along the frontier of the Orient.

"You laugh, *signor?*" Rudolfo's voice was heavy with insult. "Perhaps you would relish another scourging?"

The dark blood flooded into the young Breton's face. Around the three a circle of Rudolfo's men and sailors had gathered, scenting a quarrel. The gleam of torches lighted the scene. He wondered if the others had expected the *condottiere* to challenge him.

Rudolfo was not the man to be forced into a fight that he had not anticipated beforehand.

And then Michael heard an exclamation from one of the seamen. A strange whirring filled the air. Shrill squawking resounded on all sides.

One of the torches was knocked to the deck by a fluttering, animated ball that leaped and bounded among the men. The deck of the *Nauplia* in a moment was full of poultry. Hens, roosters, ducks and guinea fowl dashed about underfoot and overhead.

"Ten thousand devils!" Rudolfo struck viciously at a fat pullet that collided with his face. The spectators, the tensity of the quarrel broken in a flash, started running about, clutching at the flying meat.

It was each man for himself and the best dinner to the quickest. The torches were soon darting into every quarter of the deck, leaving Michael in semi-darkness. Clavijo was leading the angry Rudolfo away.

A grotesque figure rose from the deck at

Michael's elbow—a misshapen, stained and grimacing form clad in striped raiment.

"Master," cried Bembo, "the field is mine. My light cavalry, released by a purloined key from their storage prison, have scattered our foes. Come, good master, let us make good our retreat!"

In the shadows of the bow Michael sat down on his bundle and laughed, more than a little provoked.

"A fair night, cousin mine," chattered the jester, taking this as a good omen. "Give me thanks for carrying you bodily away from the demons o' the sea. Black Rudolfo would ha' cast you overside as easily as I could suck an egg. Marry—the sight of eggs turns my belly for I lived upon them, hidden in the hold with the fowls for three days and two nights. Then, not an hour since I was awakened by a shouting as of the foul fiend, whereupon the roosters crowed, thinking it was day. Master, a soldier crawled into my castle, in the dark, and I thought the pirates held the ship and I was to be ripped open without the services of a confessor. *Pompa mortis!* Oh, the trappings of death!"

Bembo shivered and looked around anxiously at the tranquil moonlit sea.

"But, forsooth, the big soldier thrust his thatch through the window of the hold and bawled to the other vessel to stand off, that the plan had been changed, and it was useless to attack the galliot. A brave lad, thought I, to bid the pirates mend their ways and be gone. Verily he was a potent bully, for the miscreants gave back and left us in peace. So I—being sorely athirst from fear and hen's feathers and bad eggs—I climbed to the roof o' this house and saw Rudolfo about to spit you, whereupon I ran back for my winged allies."

"Was the man you saw in armor?"

"Armor, quoth a, verily so. When his face was i' the window I saw a steel cap as big as a bucket. Master, chide me not for coming. Nay, no voyage that was ever brewed could make me leave the good man who shared his wine and meat wi' me; nor would my curiosity leave me in peace until I learned wherein this voyage differed from other voyages, as you said."

Michael arranged his pack for a pillow and laid his sword close to his left hand. The jester blinked at him from shrewd little eyes, the great head turned to one side, like a dog's, questioningly.

"A ship, Bembo," murmured the Breton, his eyes closed, "a harmless pilgrim galliot, beats off an attack by well-armed raiders because—a soldier calls secretly to the foe from below decks. One of Rudolfo's men. A dagger is thrown from behind the mast. Feed your curiosity with that and let me sleep."

IT WAS a leaner and dirtier throng that lined the rail of the *Nauplia* when that good galliot entered the dark waters of the Golden Horn and anchored off the crowded shore of Constantinople after the storms of the *Ægean* that followed the attack by the pirates.

And when Clavijo and his party reembarked for Pera and the Black Sea in a small Venetian trading-galley, Mocenigo was no longer with them. The young count, Clavijo explained to Bearn, had found paradise enough in the Hippodrome and palaces of the emperor, and women to his liking. The departure of the others had been hurried by the insults of Moslem warriors who thronged the water-front.

Michael said nothing but sought out Bembo, who was sitting on a chest on the jetty, eying the preparations for departure.

"The first of us has fallen by the wayside, Bembo," he observed gravely. He had been apprehensive about the jester since Bembo bobbed up as a stowaway, but had not reproved him. "Will you not follow his example and remain here?"

"I would see the Grand Cham."

Michael looked at him and laughed.

"You will never see the Grand Cham."

"Well—" Bembo was surprised—"you must know, master, for you have traveled near Cathay. I would see the city and the gold palaces—"

"There is no city."

"Master? You have heard Clav—"

"Clavijo—" Michael's smile broadened into a wide grin—"Messer Ruy de Gonzales Clavijo is the greatest liar in Christendom."

Bembo gaped and glanced from the ship to the stores on the jetty and at the Breton as if doubting his senses.

"Clavijo, my good Bembo, is a man with one talent. Aye—a tongue. The sun never shone upon a greater liar. What he did not pick up at the water-front of Genoa and Venice he heard related of the traveling monks. When that failed him he had his tongue, and wit to match. It made his for-

tune in Venice. Until the council took him at his own value, forsooth, and sent him to find the city that is a lie."

Michael chuckled at the memory. "When Clavijo by his own testimony was in Cathay I saw him among a throng of camp-followers, fleeing along the Danube."

At this Bembo scratched his head vigorously. Then his eyes lighted and he leaped from the chest.

"Aye, master. Well, then, since this is a quest of folly, who should be the leader but a fool?"

When the galley cleared the Horn Bembo stood beside the helmsman, a wooden sword stuck in his ragged girdle, his twisted legs planted wide, and his bearing as important as that of an admiral of the Venetian fleet.

And when, a month later, the party of explorers rode inland from Trebizond, Bembo took his place at the head of the column, mounted on a caparisoned mule.

"On, into *terra incognita!*" he cried, waving his wooden sword valiantly.

In fact Trebixond was the boundary of what we now call Europe. It was the eastern door of the fading Byzantine Empire, the last trade port of the Serene Republic of Venice, which had its *bailio* stationed in an arsenal on shore. The walled city, rising on rocks from this shore, was the home of Manuel the Second, almost the last of the Comneni line—emperors of Trebizond for generations.

Now they were bound, as Bembo had stated, into unknown territory—into blank spaces on Venetian maps. No one in Trebizond had been anxious to accompany them for it was known that the mountains to the south and east as far as the Salt Sea were occupied by tribes who paid tribute to a monarch of Tatar.

Soranzi and others of the party had taken this information as a good augury and were in high spirits. So also was Bembo.

"Come, my flock!" He jangled the bells on his hood. "Follow your bell-wether. Ply your spurs, sound the timbrels! A fool is your leader, and folly your guide. Ride, my cousins in folly, and — take him who first draws rein!"

Journeying to the southeast, they entered bare brown plains and passes that wound among stunted, rocky hills where the valleys were yet snow-coated and the air was chill. For the first time the voyagers were alone in a strange land. And

stranger than the aspect of the country where isolated shepherds ran away at their approach and the inns were no more than walled spaces, where the animals could be picketed and fires lighted—stranger than this was the castle without doors.

The highway they had been following was no more than a trail from valley to valley. The castle overlooked this path from a barren cliffside up which wound a well-defined way cut in the rock.

Half-way up the ramp, as the travelers termed the road, they were halted by a ragged man on a shaggy pony who called to them harshly. Clavijo appeared to meditate on the meaning of the horseman's words, then shook his head. Michael, however, interpreted.

"The man is an Armenian. He says we are in the land of his lord and must pay the customary tribute. It would be best to do so."

Soranzi, who handled the expenditures of the expedition, demurred, and the rider retired, bidding them stay where they were. Presently a thin man clad in leathers and furs appeared in the roadway, followed by thirty or more even more ragged horsemen armed with bows.

At this Rudolfo swore and began to muster his mailed men-at-arms to the front of the column, when Michael checked him.

"This rider declares that he is lord of the castle, although he does not dare occupy it owing to the attacks of the Turks who are in the habit of raiding the country from the sultanate to the south. He says that he is very poor and a Christian—which, forsooth, is but half true—and needs money to carry on his fighting. What will you give him, Messer Soranzi?"

The merchant scowled, for besides the presents destined for the Grand Cham the only other goods in the caravan were his own large stock in trade from which he expected a profit of several hundred per cent. at the least.

"Tell the Moor," he commanded, "that we be merchants seeking the court of the Grand Cham. Travelers do not pay tribute at castles of the Grand Cham."

Michael grinned and spoke with the Armenian chief, who frowned in turn and responded testily.

"He says," announced the Breton, "that he knows naught of any Grand Cham or Khan except himself and the Turkish sul-

tans and that if we are to travel in his land we must make him a present."

Clavijo and Soranzi argued the matter hotly and finally produced a piece of scarlet cloth and a silver cup. These the Armenian refused angrily, saying that he must have more.

Darkness was falling and a thin rain pierced the garments of the travelers uncomfortably. Soranzi shook his thin fists and chewed at his beard.

"And this dog calls himself a Christian! Well, give him a roll of Phrygian purple velvet from the lot we carry for the great Cham—"

"And a handful of gold from your own fat pouch, Messer Merchant," snarled Rudolfo, who was both cold and hungry. "A pox on your bartering!"

This brought a wail from Soranzi, but mollified the Armenian, who withdrew up the hillside with his motley army and his spoils. But the Venetians found that the horsemen had not remained at the castle. It was quite empty; moreover every door had been removed from its hinges.

When the beasts had been quartered in the courtyard and Michael with some of the soldiers had succeeded in lighting a fire in the great hall—not without difficulty—and after they had dined on cold mutton, cold bread-cakes and wine, Clavijo, who had been very thoughtful for some time, spoke up—

"My friends, look yonder."

 RUDOLFO started nervously and they all stared at a sign on the stone wall of the hall, a cross, obscured by smoke, chiseled into the granite.

"That is a potent symbol of the Cathayans," nodded Clavijo, "one of the talismans of their alchemists. Aye, this castle bears evidence of their magic. Why is there no castellan? Where be the doors?"

As the men were silent, the snarling cry of a jackal came to their ears from the darkness and rain outside and Soranzi paled.

"Where vanished the knavish riders that we met?" continued Clavijo.

"To their tents, elsewhere," broke in Michael. "As for the cross, it is Christian in sooth. The doors were doubtless removed by the Turks who, the Armenian said, recently sacked the place and left orders that it was not to be defended again."

Clavijo shrugged, with a dubious smile. Since learning that Bearn had been a captive

of the Moors, as he chose to call them, he had been careful to avoid discussion with the Breton.

"As you wish. But soon we will come upon the piles of human skulls. I suppose you would say there is no danger there." He shook his head in gentle reproof. "Now, sirs, I have a plan. Messer Soranzi seeks to avoid robbery. Methinks you all would fain live longer. So be it. I, who have mastered the dangers of the mountains and the sands and the Cathayans, I will go ahead from here alone."

Michael glanced at him searchingly and was silent.

"You will be safe here, sirs," continued the Spaniard, "under the potent protection of Rudolfo and his men. I have no fear. What I have done once can be accomplished again. Even though I *never return*, I would prefer to press on from here alone. A score of swords and halberds will avail us little against the Cathayans. Better one should die than all."

"If I am not back by the first of Winter, sirs, you can retrace your steps easily to Trebizond. By tying the mules, head to tail, in a fashion I wot well of, I can make shift to bear with me the gifts for the Grand Cham, placed in packs upon the mules."

Rudolfo, however, voiced a blunt negative.

"By the rood, sir, we have made a bond between us. We will go in a body or not at all."

This view was shared by Soranzi, who, despite privations and plundering, had hugged to his bosom the dream of fabulous profits promised him by his astrologer in Venice.

"Aye," put in Bembo seriously; "we will go in our bodies or not at all."

"I would fain see the bull-stag that you say is to be met with in Cathay," insisted Michael.

"A most curious beast, Master Bearn," observed Clavijo mechanically. "It has more hairs on its tail than a lion in its mane.\* The pagans in Cathay entrap the beast by setting a snare artfully between two trees so that when the *taurus*—which is the name bestowed upon it by Herodotus—passes between the trees, its tail is caught fast. So tender is the beast of its fine tail that it remains passive lest a hair be pulled out, when the Cathayans may easily make it prisoner."

"Yet, *signor*," added Michael, "they must take care in freeing it, for if they should sever the tail from the body by stroke of sword, the bull-stag would perceive that its valued member was lost beyond repair and would no longer feel constrained to quietude. I fear that many imprudent Cathayans have died unshriven because they cut off the tail of a *taurus*."

Clavijo pulled at his beard—a habit when he was dubious.

"Most true, Master Bearn. Only one such as I who have knowledge of the wiles of the Cathayan beasts may cope with them. I remember a mighty serpent that I set out to slay. I found the serpent engaged in a monstrous struggle with a dragon before its cave."

"Saint Bacchus preserve us!" Bembo glanced fearfully at the shadows in the corners of the damp, leaf-strewn hall. Several of the men-at-arms who were listening from their fire drew nearer and gaped.

"The dragon is the mightiest monster of Cathay," resumed Clavijo more readily. "It has a lance at the end of its armored tail that can strike through the stoutest mail. *Signori*, I carefully avoided the sweep of the deadly tail and waited. As God willed, the dragon seized the serpent by the head. Both pulled mightily, and when their necks were taut I stepped nearer and smote with my sword, severing the Medusa-like head of the dragon from its shoulders."

"Well struck!" approved Michael. "And the serpent?"

"Alas, that was a most fearsome beast. For days I awaited an opportunity to slay it. Before long it transpired that the foul beast came from its lair to attack a passing lion. Verily, *signori*, it twined about the king of beasts and swallowed its victim hindquarters first. Forsooth, that was my chance. Rushing forward, I swung my sword upon its neck as it lay sluggish. When the head of the serpent fell to earth the head of the lion fell off with that of its conqueror, and I rode back with double booty to the city of the Cham."

Michael was rolling himself in his cloak on a table for the night when Bembo approached.

"Master," whispered the jester, "verily just now I looked without the castle and saw two spirits."

"Bah! Your own fears you saw."

"Nay, they had two great heads. Gian,

\*Clavijo had heard of the Central Asian yak.

the big lieutenant of Rudolfo, was with me and we both said a *pater noster*. Then Gian, being a braver man than I and somewhat the better for wine, crept closer and cast his knife at one of the two. Whereupon they disappeared."

This incident Michael did not permit to disturb his slumbers. He, as well as Clavijo, had noticed that the Armenians—the chief of Cabasica, the castle without doors—had left riders to spy upon them. The turbans of the watchers had served, doubtless, to make Clavijo exaggerate the size of their heads.

He was well aware that the Spaniard was caught between two fires. Beheading was the penalty that the Maritime Council would inflict on Clavijo if his deceit were discovered and Venetian officials should lay hand on him. So, Michael reasoned, Clavijo, possibly through Rudolfo's agency, had arranged for the mock attack by the pirates on the *Nauplia*, hoping to be taken prisoner and robbed by friendly hands.

But the galliot, owing to Michael's warning and the skill of the Venetian captain, had been able to offer unexpected resistance. Clavijo, if he had thought to have himself and his companions captured by a convenient foe, had been disappointed.

Mocenigo, a well-known Venetian and hence dangerous to Clavijo, had been persuaded, not with great difficulty, to fall behind at Constantinople. And the life of Michael—another dangerous member—had been attempted during the sham attack on the galliot. This puzzled the Breton more than a little, because he did not think that Clavijo was the type to turn so quickly to assassination.

Thinking over the situation drowsily, Michael remembered that Bembo had just said something about a man who cast a knife. What knife? Rudolfo had thrown the silver-chased weapon into the sea! Rudolfo—a knife. . . .

Hereupon Michael slumbered fitfully, dreaming that Clavijo had taken the form of a dragon with a man's head and that flames and smoke were spouting from his nostrils. He imagined that he was bound and helpless and the monster that was Clavijo came nearer until the flames touched his face. . . .

At this point Michael jerked into wakefulness and perceived that Bembo had heaped fresh brush on the fire which had blazed up

near by. Soranzi, his cloak wrapped closely about him, sat hunched by the flames, shivering and grunting in his sleep, looking for all the world like an old and dingy vulture with an overlarge belly and bald head.

Rudolfo and Gian were standing, fully clad, in a corner of the hall and both were looking at him.

Sleep had refreshed Michael's brain. It struck him that Gian had been the man who cast the knife at him.

For the remainder of the night Michael kept awake.

## VIII

### THE SITTING-DOWN BEAST

**M**ESSER RUY DE GONZALES CLAVIJO was a man of many cares. His expedition made slow and weary progress among the mountain-passes, guides could not be hired, food was scanty, hardships many. Yet they advanced to the south all too quickly for him.

For he could not turn back. Soranzi and Rudolfo and Michael Bearn would not hear of it. Nor could he confess that he did not know where he was going.

Once he tried losing his way. But Michael promptly rode ahead through the rain and found a fresh trail of many horses going in their direction. This new route took them out of the rocky hillocks down into more fertile fields.

"A fairer country," announced Michael, as the rain cleared, "with vineyards and date groves. On, to the Grand Cham!"

Looking back, Clavijo beheld a majestic summit, snow-crowned, with bare slopes rising to the height of the Alps.

"The Holy Mount Ararat," he said bravely, and crossed himself. "Forward, *signori*—if you have heart to face the dangers that beset that other mountain of skulls."

Their followers were not overeager. Some of the few servants were sick. Rudolfo's men-at-arms, accustomed to the machine-like wars of Italy, where an army marched but a league a day and where every hillside had its village and food and women, and the peasants had to bear the burden of both armies—Rudolfo's men muttered and sulked, except the lieutenant Gian.

Some whispered that the party was followed, that the spirits of the castle kept at their heels. Others pointed to distant bands

of horsemen on the plain, bands that Clavijo declared were Moors and pagans and Michael asserted to be Turks.

One night Gian and several men stole away, to rifle houses in a village. They returned with poor spoil but many tales. Bembo, who had slipped off to accompany them, stoutly asserted that he had beheld a monster walking among the houses of the Moors or Saracens or whatever the heathens might be.

He thought at first the animal had been sitting down, until it had moved off at the approach of the men.

"*Signori*," he protested, "it was still sitting down, yet it ran. It had the body of a horse, spotted like a snake, the legs of a deer and the head of a stag. And its neck! Beshrew me, *signori*, may I never eat pudding again if its neck did not rise up from its body like Gian's spear when he lances an apple from a peasant's tree. Nay, it was as tall as the mast of a ship, for the monster stopped and smelled of fruit over a garden wall that was too high for us to climb."

Bembo had seen a giraffe.

This interested Michael, for he had never heard of such animals in Asia Minor.

After this inroad upon the inhabitants, the Venetians were shunned more than ever. A hot sun beat upon their heavy garments. The road they followed was no more than a track of deep mud.

Clavijo was very unhappy. For, in spite of his brave tale, he had never before been farther east than Constantinople. And the last thing he wished was to return, a prisoner, into the Venetian power that stretched even to Trebizonde.

And then came the night when, encamped at a short distance from the road, they were awakened during the last hour of darkness by the rushing sound of horses' hoofs passing by along the road.

They saw nothing of the riders, only heard the horses sweeping past with incredible speed. Clavijo wondered fearfully what kind of men could ride at that pace in the darkness.

Dawn revealed the bodies of three of his servants, their throats cut, lying by the ashes of the camp-fire.

"It was the spirits of the waste!" cried Soranzi. "We must hasten; we are near the city in the sands."

The merchant pointed to thin traces of

sand in the earth. But when they looked for footprints of the assassins approaching their camp they found nothing. Nothing, that is, except the hoof-marks that were quite fresh in the road near by. Michael, however, knew that Gian's excursion into the village had brought the pursuers upon their tracks.

Clavijo was more than a little superstitious. He fancied that the fantoms he had summoned up by his words had pursued their steps. The spirits that he had invoked had taken form. In his tale he had said that his servants met death.

"Hasten!" he cried. "Away from here!"

The three bodies were buried in a shallow grave. There were now only eight attendants—Bembo, a sick servant of Clavijo who was carried in a litter, Gian and his four men and Soranzi's servant.

When the pack-animals were loaded and trudging forward, Michael reined his horse in beside the Spaniard.

"Signor Clavijo," he said softly. "You have left the path that we were following. By the sun, unless I am blind, you are taking us in a circle. Wherefore?"

The Spaniard pointed toward the site of the distant camp.

"Death is upon us. We are in the land of Gog and Magog, where *djins* pursue Christian travelers. Oh, it is an evil day!"

"Do *djins* cast a dagger, a heavy poniard, with bronze hilt overlaid in silver, at a Christian's back? On shipboard?"

The black eyes of Clavijo widened.

"Nay, forsooth! You describe the dagger once owned by Gian. I have not seen it since—"

"Rudolfo, your friend, threw it into the sea. Come, *signor*, here is need of truth."

"As God is my witness, I have spoken the truth."

"About Cathay? And the Grand Cham?"

Clavijo was silent, sullen almost.

"*Signor*, the death of your men ends all buffoonery. You were their master—"

"*Por Dios!*" Clavijo's full face went livid. "Do you suspect me of that? I did not do it. Nor do I know aught of the dagger cast at you."

Michael glanced at him thoughtfully. "Then confess to me, *signor*, that you never saw the court of the Grand Cham."

"Master Bearn—" Clavijo started, and drew a long breath. "You heard what I told the council. Have you not believed?"

Have you not seen the holy Mount Ararat and heard Bembo relate the aspect of the strange beast of?"—he lifted his head stubbornly—"Cathay?"

Michael laughed shortly. "Faith, *signor*, it would take a magician of Cathay himself to tell what is true and what is false." He checked the other's exclamation. "Nay, listen. I have sounded the bottom of your tale. You were in Constantinople, not Cathay. Your wonders were garbled stories of travelers picked up on the jetties and in the markets. Your city—an illusion of the sands that some call by a strange name—a mirage. Your tower of skulls—a heap of stones."

"The Grand Cham——"

"Of him will we soon learn."

Clavijo shrugged.

"You heard the emperor at Trebizond speak of a great Tatar king."

At this Michael smiled.

"Man, you are wonderful. You pulled wool over the sharp eyes of the *Signory*, and beguiled two emperors. It has been a rare jest, this voyage. I could love you for that. Nay, I can not think that you wished to stick me in the back, or to slay those poor fools."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"If a man's child could tell when you lied and when not, I would be your friend, Gonzales. This much I will do for you. You can not turn back. Soranzi's greed is fired by the strange sights he has seen and yearns for his promised profits. Rudolfo will not give in to you, unless he is in your confidence——"

"God forbid!"

"That had the ring of truth. Well, by my reckoning we are near the Tatar tribes. Now that death dogs our steps we can not push on blindly. We are followed, without doubt. I shall strike back along our track and seek to take captive one of the riders, whether Armenian or *djin*, and make him tell us where we are and what is in store for us and why we are followed. Do you call a halt to rest the beasts and await my coming. Do you agree?"

Clavijo chewed his beard, and flushed.

"As you will, Master Bearn. We will wait."

*sdw*

 IT IS more than possible if Michael Bearn could have had his way that Clavijo and those with him, who were yet alive and well, might have returned in safety to Trebizond.

The Breton was barely gone, however, when events took another turn. Rudolfo had been more silent than his wont that morning and now he dismounted, nodded to Gian, and strode to Clavijo's side.

"*Signor*, your sword and dagger."

The Spaniard drew back, surprized. Whereupon Rudolfo reached out and secured the weapons for himself without trouble. Gian and another soldier took spear and poniard from Soranzi's servant. Seeing this, Rudolfo turned to the merchant, who was armed only with a knife.

"Messer Soranzi, an unpleasant duty has fallen upon me. Since leaving Venice I have suspected this Spaniard of deceit. By the Rood, it is plain that he knows not the way he follows. Just now he has doubled on his tracks. I think his tale was but a pretext to get money from the honorable council."

Soranzi's little eyes narrowed and his thin face darkened. He cast a venomous look at the unhappy Spaniard.

"Witness, Messer Soranzi," continued the *condottiere*, "that this deceiver can not speak the language of the country he claims to have traveled. He would have left us at Cabasica and taken the Cham's presents with him."

Conviction leaped into the twisted face of the merchant and he shook with rage.

"The man's face declares you have the right of it," he hissed. "What can we do?"

"This. I am the leader of the men-at-arms. I take command, forsooth! Every man except the five troopers and myself must give up arms. You, Soranzi, assume charge of the money, articles of trade and gifts. Take an inventory of the goods, and keep it. The —— himself knows in what quarter this liar has led us. We will strike back to Trebizond and consult further—Ha, dog! Would you do that?"

The roving eye of the *condottiere* had fallen upon Bembo as the hunchback was stealing away quietly in the direction Michael had taken along the back track. Rudolfo spurred after him and struck the jester into the mud with his mailed fist, leaning down from the saddle to glare at him.

Bembo rose, drew his wooden sword from his girdle with a flourish and handed it to Rudolfo.

"You have overcome me, *vi et armis*. Take my sword."

Rudolfo's answer was to cast the thing

away contemptuously; nevertheless he kept a wary glance on the jester.

"We will wait for Master Bearn," he said shortly. "When he returns he must answer on the spot for the death of the three varlets."

Now Bembo would have given a leg to be able to run off and acquaint his friend with what had happened. The fool, like most unfortunates who are crippled in body, was sensitive to impressions.

He was afraid of Rudolfo, and more afraid of Gian. He looked upon Michael as his sole protector and Michael would presently walk back, armed only with a sword, to where his enemy waited with a half-dozen men-at-arms.

These same men were alert and eager, pleased at the chance of reaching Trebizond again. Bembo noticed that they did not seem surprised at the turn in affairs, and that Gian was a-grin.

"Saint Bacchus aid me and keep good Cousin Michael away," he prayed. "Or our guts are in the saucepan!"

They had not long to wait. Michael stepped from between two trees against which the men-at-arms were sitting at the road's edge. He had come through the dense thorn thicket without a sound.

Rudolfo and Soranzi were not a little disturbed by this sudden apparition in their midst of the man for whom they were looking down the road. The captain of mercenaries glanced at the thicket and saw that half-hidden within it was a queer kind of native shrine—a mere heap of stones with rags stuck upon sticks hanging over it.

Soranzo tried to read the Breton's harsh face—a task that was no longer easy. Michael's brown eyes were half-closed and the merchant noted that he worked the fingers of his right hand slowly as if testing long unused muscles.

"Signor," said Michael to Rudolfo, "I heard, while I was coming through yonder thicket, some words of yours. You made bold, methinks, to say that I slew the three varlets. Is it not so?"

Michael glanced around the ring of faces that had gathered close to him. The men-at-arms were gaping, fingering their weapons, intent on Rudolfo. It was significant of the natures of the leaders that Michael seemed, for the moment at least, to enjoy the mastery of the situation.

His dark face was lighted by a kind of

inward amusement, while Rudolfo was pulling at his mustache with lowered eyes. The watching attendants ignored Soranzo and Clavijo, knowing that the test of leadership lay between the Breton and their own captain.

"And reason know!" said the latter curtly.

"Fore —, masters, here have we a low-born churl who stinks of the sea and who bears the scars of slavery on his wrists and back. Since our landing he has held intercourse with the pagans of the countryside. Aye, did he not interfere on behalf of the knavish robbers of Cabasica? And warn my good Gian from his excursion into the native village some time since? What more of reason would you have?"

This arraignment, although it satisfied the servitors, raised grave doubts in the keen mind of Soranzo—doubts which were heightened when Michael responded gravely that he had slept in a tent with Clavijo the night before and that the Spaniard could testify that he had not left the tent until aroused by the others.

"Yet," growled Rudolfo, who was gaining confidence, "you can walk out of a wood without a sound. Why can you not move even more silently in the hours of darkness when the evil powers are strong? There is black magic in the air, by the rood! How else could riders gallop like the wind—as those we heard anon—when an honest Christian can not see where to put his foot to earth?"

"Master Bearn speaks the truth," broke in Clavijo bluntly, "and—my head on it—he is an honest Christian."

"You are not lacking in lies," growled Rudolfo. "We may no longer believe you. Moreover, by the mouth of his friend Bembo, the Breton stands accused."

Michael glanced at the hunchback keenly. He would have staked his life on the fool's faith. The tie between the two had been strengthened by the hardships of the journey.

In fact it was pity for the hunchback that had impelled Michael to join the party again. He had been approaching them through the thicket, moving silently as was his custom, when Rudolfo's loudly spoken threats arrested him.

Understanding that the *condottiere* had taken the leadership of the party from Clavijo, and that the Italian's first blow would be against himself, Michael had been

strongly inclined to part company with the others and strike for the Tatar country that he knew could not be far from here.

Thus far the course of the voyagers had fitted in with the plans of Michael, who was anxious to appear before the khan as an accredited representative of a European power, with the gifts that experience had taught him were needful in gaining the friendship of an Oriental monarch.

More than once he had steered Clavijo to the west, away from the south where bands of Turkish irregulars were thick. Michael had no desire to be brought a second time before Bayezid as a captive.

Now Rudolfo had seized the reins, and while Michael could not know precisely what intrigue the *condottiere* had in view, he knew that Rudolfo had penetrated as far into *terra incognita* as he cared to go, and also—after events had shaped themselves to the Italian's satisfaction—he would be most likely to head back to Trebizond as soon as he had the treasure of the expedition in his hands.

It was the sight of the blow Bembo received, and his warm love of the cripple, that brought Michael to face Rudolfo.

"'Tis a lie—" Bembo had started to cry when Rudolfo's cold glance shut him up as a knife-thrust closes a turtle.

"Bembo had gossiped with my men," he said dryly. "The fool hinted that his master was bent hither on revenge. What revenge should he seek save against me with whom he has a feud as good Messer Soranzi knows well? Aye, and against the Signory of Venice that requited him with scant usury for his services."

Bembo hung his head. It was true that he had liked to babble of the Breton's prowess.

The others nodded in owl-like wisdom. In the minds of the servitors Rudolfo had gained the mastery over Michael. Soranzi and Clavijo were puzzled. Michael, who was by no means a slow thinker, sensed the drift away from him.

"I must take measures for our safety," Rudolfo was saying, "for the pagans are close on our heels. Bind me this miscreant."

"Verily—" Michael smiled quickly—"you are a rare leader, *signor*. Were you not among the captains of Nicopolis? Did not you, Clavijo, see him there? Rudolfo saw you?"

"Aye," admitted the Spaniard.

"Then answer me one question. If you saw Clavijo at Nicopolis, Rudolfo, why then must you have known he lied, even when you embarked with us upon this venture. Why were you fain to wait until now to accuse him?"

The *condottiere* could not repress a scowl at this sudden thrust, but he answered composedly:

"I may have seen him at the battle by the river, but a pox on't! I marked him not. Verily I did not recall his face when he told his tale at Venice."

Rudolfo lied well. Michael, failing to catch him off his guard, turned to Soranzi, who was too shrewd a judge of men and too alert where his own money was at risk to be convinced by Rudolfo's charge against Michael.

"Your lives, *signori*," the Breton said gravely, "are at stake. Would you know why?"

They were silent at that and the thin mouth of the merchant pinched together as he answered—

"Why?"

"You call it black magic—faith—when horsemen gallop i' the night, *signors*. Nay, they were Tatars who ride with a loose rein in day or dark. I know because I have this hour caught one who followed in our trail. Some news I had from him. War threatens between the Turk and the Tatar—the sultan and the khan. *Signori*, these be mighty monarchs and their bands of riders on this borderland are more numerous than the good people of Venice itself."

"Then," Soranzi's logical mind probed for information, "the Tatars slew our men last night?"

Rudolfo and Gian glanced at Michael, who shook his head gravely.

"Nay. The Tatars passed us as the wind passes. Our varlets were slain by Kurds of the village that Gian and his men visited. So said my prisoner. After Bembo left the place, frightened by sight of the sitting-down beast, our brave men-at-arms made themselves free of the women of the village, the Kurdish warriors of the place being absent with the riders of the Turkish army."

Gian and the others were silent at this and uneasy, lacking Rudolfo's calm.

"Two Kurds only reached our camp in the night," went on Michael, "or our throats as well might have been cut. The Moslems

do not forget a wrong, Rudolfo. Wherefore, death follows in your track."

"And what manner of man was he you caught?" inquired Soranzi uncomfortably.

"A Tatar who sighted our cavalcade and followed 'till more of his fellows could be summoned and our merchants despoiled. Mark me, Soranzi, the Tatars are grim enow, yet they attack boldly and do not slit throats i' the night. Nay, they would rip your belly with a sword. You would fare better with them."

Soranzi squirmed and the men-at-arms muttered under their breath. All glanced up and down the wooded ravine and at the impassive rock shrine.

Suddenly Gian broke the silence with a great oath and strode to Michael, his dagger flashing in his hand. The point of the weapon he set against the Breton's bare throat. Michael, after a quick glance at the ring of armed men, had not moved.

"Speak the truth, master," he growled, "or your gullet will be slit for the ants to crawl in. What devil's work brought us to this place? Whence lies Trebizonde? Speak!"

The man's face was twisted by anger and fear. Michael smiled, for he could read Gian like a book and the man's action and words had told him three things.

One—Rudolfo had confided in his lieutenant that the Breton was to be made captive or done away with, or Gian would not have dared what he did. Two—Rudolfo, as well as Clavijo, had lost his bearings but did not wish the men to know it. Three—they were all afraid, and so much the more easily handled.

"You have got yourself a new poniard, Gian," he observed, "in place of the one you cast at me and Rudolfo tossed overside. It was a poor cast for such a clever thrower."

He paused interrogatively and the man, angered, caught at the bait before Rudolfo could speak.

"The mast—" he muttered and stopped. "Death and damnation!"

"The mast interfered with your throw? Precisely. Then, after the mock attack of the pirates—I thought them in the hire of Clavijo till your master cast aside his mask just now—had failed to despoil our venture for Rudolfo's profit, your master waited till he was beyond the last *bailio* of Venice. Men will wag their tongues. It was necessary to have us beyond the

*bailio* and the trade-routes before Rudolfo could seize the gold and riches entrusted to Clavijo by the council. That is why we are here, Gian."

 MICHAEL had guessed at this, but he had hit the mark. Gian glanced at his master inquiringly, but Michael spoke first.

"Do not make another mistake, Gian. With my life, your guidance would be lost. If you doubt it, ask Rudolfo whither lies Trebizonde."

"You will tell us," said the *condottiere* dryly.

"Tut, *signor*; have you time to waste? Soranzi—a bargain. My safety and Bembo's pledged on your word, and we guide you to safety? Do you agree?"

It was to the men-at-arms rather than the merchant that Michael directed this shaft. The Venetian was thinking furiously and he nodded.

"Agreed. But stay—what proof that you can bear us hence?"

"The Tatar lies i' the thicket yonder, bound with his own belt. Your addlepates, Rudolfo, would never find him. But bid them look i' the thorns behind the shrine—"

In a moment Gian and his worthies dragged forth a squat figure, wrapped hand and foot with strips torn from a shawl girdle. His broad head was set close to square shoulders, and while his body was long and muscular, his legs were short and bowed. His slant eyes glared at his captors who freed his ankles so that he could stand without difficulty.

The Tatar's sword had been tossed by Michael into the bushes, well out of the prisoner's reach.

"What this man knows he will tell me," explained Michael, "and no man of you save, perchance, Bembo will understand aught of what he says. I know a word that will conjure us our safety through Tatary."

Hereupon the men-at-arms crossed themselves and muttered under their breath. They were more than ever convinced that Michael had intercourse with the powers of evil and that this native was his familiar.

"The bargain is struck," asserted Soranzi again.

But out of the corner of his eye Michael saw Rudolfo gnawing his thumb and presently, leaning toward Gian, to whisper a

quick word. Gian in turn muttered something to his men and took his stand behind the bent form of Bembo. Michael waited alertly.

Rudolfo cried at him suddenly—

"Your sword and dagger, throw them down!"

The words were prompt and so was Michael's answer. He thrust his captive forward against one of the oncoming troopers. Snatching out his sword, he parried the rush of another, beating down the man's blade and sending him to the earth.

Instantly Michael dropped to his knees and the third assailant tripped over him, cursing. The fourth, a short, wiry fellow in pliant mail, thrust at the Breton before he could rise. Michael caught the blade in a fold of his cloak and lashed out as he came erect. The man dropped with a split skull.

Rudolfo had set spurs to his horse, while the others looked on aghast at the swift clash of weapons. Before Michael could step aside, the *condottiere's* beast struck the sea-captain, knocking him a dozen feet. Then came the grinning Gian, who leaped upon Michael's sword where it had fallen and glanced inquiringly at Rudolfo.

"Do not slay," instructed the *condottiere*. "Bind Master Bearn to the Tatar or Turk or whatever breed of devil it may be—"

"And where may the devil be, *signor?*" inquired Gian, gripping the half-stunned Michael in his great hands.

They looked around at that and beheld the Tatar vanishing into the bushes up the slope by the road. His long turban cloth trailed after him as he leaped with the nimbleness of a goat from rock to rock until he passed from sight before the men-at-arms could draw bow. Nor could a horse follow where he had gone.

"No matter," grunted Rudolfo. "Messer Soranzi, verily you are a greater fool than I took you for. The guile of Master Bearn bewitched you. Not only would you have let him ride free, but you would have followed where he led—to his allies the Tatars or fiends or whatever they be."

He leaned from his saddle to jerk Michael, who was more than a little hurt, to his feet.

"So, my friend," he sneered, "you would hide your knowledge from us and bargain for it! By the Pope's head! Tonight I promise myself we will know all you know."

Gian has a rare knack with a dagger's point inserted in a man's ear. There is no time for't now; this is a perilous place—"

Whereupon the men-at-arms set Michael on a horse, binding his wrists together behind him with the wrappings taken from the escaped Tatar. The Breton was badly shaken and bleeding from the mouth, but they handled him in no wise gently.

The minds of the servitors were full of the idea of Satanic powers pursuing them. Since Michael showed no fear and had familiar knowledge of the pagan tribes, these men had no doubt that he was in league with the powers of darkness that their superstition conjured up.

Soranzi was torn between fear and greed. The astrologer in Venice had assured him of profits passing through his hands such as he had never seen before.

As for Clavijo, he was burning in the fires of conscience. He had lied. In his story before the Venetians he had repeated that his followers had been slain at the edge of *terra incognita*, and that the spirits of the waste land had dogged his footsteps.

And now these two things had happened. He felt as if he were under a spell and found himself looking about for the tower of skulls that he had included in his tale. Only Rudolfo was free from superstition.

Under his quick orders the bulkier and less valuable portions of baggage and stores were abandoned. Sick horses were set loose. When they had mounted, Clavijo saw that no provision had been made for the sick servant or the dying soldier.

"You would not leave them, *signor?*" he cried.

Rudolfo shrugged.

"They will die anyway."

When the cavalcade of mounted men and pack-animals moved off, Bembo slipped from the thicket where he had hidden during the hurried departure and ran among the horses, clinging to Soranzi's stirrup. The merchant, reduced to a state of panic by the events of the past hour, drove him off with kicks and blows.

"Leave the fool to his folly," gibed Gian, who noticed Bembo's frantic efforts to keep up.

"To leave him would be to reveal our course to those who pursue us," observed Michael. So Bembo was suffered to hold his friend's stirrup.

## IX

## THE RAVINE

**T**HREE is a subtle intoxicant of fear in the hurry of many persons to be the first to reach a point of safety. The trot of the horses broke at times into a gallop. Some of the stores fell from the packs. Soranzi alternately cried upon God to witness the loss of valuable goods and prayed for greater haste.

The sun was obscured, a thin mist veiled the pine-thickets and the stretches of sandy ground on either hand. The heat wilted their strength. Rudolfo turned many times, apparently thinking to throw pursuers off their track, but the track of a score of horses could not be concealed, Michael knew.

As evening closed in they were threading through gorges that hastened the coming of darkness. Often they looked back in the failing light. No one desired to be last. And then Rudolfo, in the lead, halted abruptly.

Before them in the twilight stood a great mound of human skulls.

"'Tis the Sign o' the Skull," muttered Bembo, "where we will sleep the night."

The jester voiced the fear that had come upon the party with the evening. Clavijo had ordered a huge fire to be lighted near the mound of human bones, and the ruddy glare of the flames shone upon a hundred grinning masks that had been men. Nor was it any chance collection of skeletons piled together on a battle-field. The pyramid of skulls was regular in shape and no body-bones were visible.

The lighting of the fire brought night upon them with a rush, down the black bulk of the mountain-slopes and the mouths of the rock gullies that opened into the gorge on either side. Instinctively the men kept close to the blaze and they ate little dinner although they had fasted since morning. Michael sat apart under guard of a sentry and without food. By Rudolfo's orders he had been bound hand and foot and only the unexpected sight of the monument of skulls had delayed the torture that was preparing at Gian's hands.

Sight of the pyramid told Michael something unknown to the others and only guessed by Rudolfo. The *condottiere* had lost his way.

During the panicky run of the afternoon when the sun was invisible behind clouds, Rudolfo unwittingly had doubled again on his course. Whereas Clavijo had started them north that morning; since then they had been circling blindly to the south and east.

And they had penetrated to the *terra incognita*—the gateway of the unknown land about which Clavijo had babbled. And to the place that Michael had known as the Gate of Shadows, where the five Christians had been buried.

It was a rare jest, thought Michael. Rudolfo was entering the place he had tried to shun, whither Michael had intended to lead him—and Clavijo, the liar, had beheld reality.

He heard a footfall behind him in the gloom and turned his head cautiously, for it was not the sentry's step. The soldier had moved off a score of paces toward the fire and stood leaning on a spear, his back toward Michael.

A foot from his eyes Michael made out the glimmer of steel in the faint light, and stiffened. A cloaked form took shape behind the dagger—a figure bent and stealthy. The knife was thrust forward even as Michael saw it, and its edge sliced away the bonds at his wrists.

Next, food on a wooden platter was placed in his cramped hands.

"Eat, for love of San Marco," breathed a trembling voice. "Brave Master Bearn, worthy captain, harken but do not turn your head. I have given to the sentry—a murrain on his greed—a whole purse of good silver *dinari*, that he be blind and deaf for a short moment."

It was Soranzi and a terrified Soranzi. Michael, as he munched the meat, reflected that Rudolfo's men were capable of taking a leaf from their master's book in selling their services.

"Pietro Rudolfo has dropped his mask with me," began the Venetian swiftly. "Alack! You spoke the truth this noon. I am ruined—beggared! He holds me captive and will take my goods—aye, every packet and bale. Every *soldi*'s worth."

He wrung his hands and plucked at his thin beard viciously.

"Once in Trebizond again, under the weak rule of the Comneni, Rudolfo claims all my store and the fine presents for the Cham as his, as payment for saving our

lives, he said. O body of San Marco, O blessed head of the Pope! He will hold me for ransom—a prince's ransom—" Soranzi sighed, whereat his meager teeth fell to chattering.

"Do you not see the rest, Master Bearn? The varlets, save his *bravi*, are dead or will be. Clavijo can not impeach him, for dread of the retribution of the council. You he will first try to bribe, believing that you, like himself, are bent on spoil. If you refuse his offer Gian will handle you till you reveal the way by which we may return to Trebizond."

"This is no news," said Michael shortly. "It means merely that Rudolfo knows that he has lost his way and is losing patience."

"But you will never see the walls of Trebizond. You will be left in a grave at Cabasica. Nay, more. Rudolfo, see you, with my goods and person in his hand, will attack and overpower the small Venetian outpost in the city. He will sell his spoils and perchance his sword to Genoa, which will pay a rare price. It was for this he sailed with us. Oh, we are lost! Yet the wise astrologer of my house in Venice predicted sight of extraordinary profits for me on this venture—the like of which I had never handled before."

Soranzi crept closer and clutched Michael's shoulder in a sweating hand.

"Good Master Bearn, you know this country. You are intimate with the pagan Moors and other infidels. I will pay well for a quick hand to aid me. Is it true you can lead us back from this accursed spot?"

Until now the Breton had been surveying the changing shadows on the black mountain walls that seemed to press down toward the fire.

"It is the Gate of Shadows," he said. "The *tengeri darband*. The Turks say that the spirits of a thousand dead, slain by this sword, walk in the valley of nights. It is the site of a massacre a generation ago. They shun it. Aye, it is a pass in the Ectag Mountains, through which Fra Odoric made his way out of the unknown land that lies beyond."

Even in his panic the merchant was struck by his companion's tone.

"You were here before? How may I know it?" Inbred suspicion struggled with his new desire to propitiate Michael.

"Behind the tower of skulls, in the sand of the gorge between two rocks that have

the semblance of men's faces, you will find a grave with a cross, Soranzi."

"I have seen it."

"Five men are buried there. They were my mates, Christian slaves taken from a French caravel off the Anatolian shore."

"In the name of —, why did you return hither?"

Michael stretched his stiff arm and laughed.

"To see the face of the king who did not fear the Turk."

The merchant's fears were thronging upon him.

"Harken, Master Bearn. I see Rudolfo talking with Gian. You are a man of your word; I never doubted it. If I free your feet with this dagger—the knots be over-strong for fingers—and give you the weapon, will you stab Rudolfo when he comes hither? He will think you bound. The sentry is my man. He and I will set upon Gian, until you can join us. Money and their own fears will deliver the other two soldiers to us—"

"And if I will not?"

"Gian's knife in your ear. You want a larger bounty? Name it."

By now Rudolfo and his lieutenant were moving toward them slowly. Soranzi fairly capered in anxiety, holding the dagger just beyond Michael's reach.

"Swear!" he whispered. "Five hundred gold bezants—nay, seven hundred of Venetian weight and measure—"

"A pox on your mouthing," grunted Michael. "Be still!"

He was studying the surrounding darkness with interest. A stone had rolled from the mouth of a near-by gorge. From the plain outside the ravine he could make out the soft *click-click* where a horse's hoof struck upon rock.

Riders were closing in on the men by the fire. Michael had expected them for some time. Rudolfo, after carelessly letting the Tatar slip away, had left a trail broad enough for a blind man to follow.

Then, as if this were not enough, the Venetians had made a bonfire in the ravine that would indicate the exact position of their camp.

The question in Michael's mind was—were the newcomers Tatars or Turks? Evidently the former, since the Ottoman bands shunned the gorge that they had named the Gate of Shadows.

AS HE reached this conclusion Michael made out the figure of a horseman at the edge of the circle of firelight. It was a Tatar and the same Tatar that Michael had captured that noon.

One of the men-at-arms beheld the newcomer at the same moment and gave a startled cry. The cry was echoed by Michael's shout.

"Cast down your weapons, fools!"

He knew the danger of resistance if men of the Tatar horde had surrounded them. The dozen Christians, afoot and framed against the fire, would not be a match for half their number of mounted warriors, armed with bows.

Too startled to heed the warning, or believing that Michael meant to betray them to the riders who were emerging out of the shadows, the man-at-arms who had given the alarm cast his spear at the foremost rider.

Michael rose, felt the hindrance of the cords on his ankles, caught the knife from the petrified Soranzi, slashed himself free of bonds and thrust the weapon back into the merchant's hand.

Soranzi was clawing at him.

"Guard me! I will pay what you ask."

A score of horsemen rode into the firelight. The Venetian who had cast the spear was cut down by the Tatar who had dodged the missile easily.

Again Michael shouted to his party:

"Stand back! Sheath your swords if you do not love death. Ah, the cattle—" as the men ran about, seeking their weapons and sending a hasty arrow or two at the riders who swept over them with a quick rush of snorting horses and a red flash of swords in the firelight.

Gian ran close to the fire and wheeled, to cast a javelin at a gnome-like rider. The man went down, but a second Tatar caught the lieutenant's sword-thrust on his small round shield and split Gian's steel cap with a sweep of a heavy curved sword.

With a clash of armor Gian fell prone. The sentry who had been standing by Michael as if paralyzed now turned to flee into the dark, crying:

"The fiends of hell are loose! God have mercy upon our souls."

Michael reflected even as he ran toward the fire, avoiding the rush of a horseman, that men who fled from sword-strokes and cried on God for help merited little mercy.

The sentry's shout of fear turned to a moan as the Tatar who had passed Michael overtook him in the outer rocks. Soranzi had fallen to his knees and being patently unarmed—the knife had dropped from his trembling hands—was spared for the moment.

Michael saw that Rudolfo had taken a stand between the fire and the tower of skulls, his sword gleaming, his thin lips writhing.

A rider spurred upon the *condottiere*—Michael noticed that the Tatar horses seemed trained to go anywhere, even near flames—and a squat black body swung from the saddle. The Tatar leader leaped at Rudolfo's head, taking the thrust of the Venetian's sword on his shield.

The weight of the flying body broke the blade like glass and the two men grappled on the ground.

"My left arm for a moment's truce!" thought Michael, turning to face the riders who were trotting up to him. The last of the men-at-arms had been struck down.

"Pax. Oh verily *pax!* Peace, my gentle dogs. If you are men, bethink you, there has been enough of slaying; if hellions, begone to purgatory, I conjure you—avaunt!"

With the exception of the warrior who was locked in Rudolfo's arms the Tatars reined in and looked up with exclamations of wonder. They saw Bembo.

The grotesquely striped and bedraggled figure of the fool squatted mid-way up the pyramid of skulls. His teeth were chattering and his long arms shot out from his body in frenzied exhortation.

Bembo had seized the first vantage-point to hand. Now he gazed hopefully and imploringly at Michael. "Conjure the demons, Brother Michael; weave the spell you told us of—"

The half-moment of quiet was what Michael sought. He lifted his empty left hand and shouted one word in Turki.

"Ambassadors!"

One or two of the riders looked at him in surprise. Michael had learned in Bayezid's camp that in the Tatar country envoys to the khans or chiefs were inviolate. Ordinarily merciless, the Tatar war-chiefs took pride in the number of emissaries from other lands that came to them with tribute.

And in several instances the Tatars kept faith better than the monarchs of Europe. They respected an envoy and

were bitter in their rage against enemies who slew Tatar emissaries.

"Ambassadors are here," repeated Michael. "Are you dogs, to worry the stranger who comes with gifts?"

Those who understood his words repeated them to the others. The leader heard and rose from Rudolfo to stride to Michael.

His men joined him. They were short, brawny warriors, wearing furs and leather over their mail, and with bronze helmets bearing pointed guards that came down over brow and nose. Scarcely less black than their lamb's-wool *kaftans* were their faces, with slant, hard eyes and thin mustaches.

Their short swords were broader at the end than the hilt, and each had a target of bull's hide on his left arm. Michael saw that the empty saddles bore quivers and bows.

"Well conjured, Brother Michael," chattered Bembo. "The charm was a mighty charm. I will aid you."

He started to scramble down from his mount when one of the warriors seized his leg and jerked him to earth, staring at him with ox-like curiosity. Bembo's zeal dwindled.

He skipped away. The Tatar, no taller than the hunchback, made after him with the rolling gait of one better accustomed to a horse's back than the earth.

"I am Gutchluk, a *noyan* of the White Horde," growled the leader to Michael. "I heard your bellow. Whom seek you?"

Michael hesitated, for he did not know the name of the monarch of Tatary.

"The sultan?" queried Gutchluk. "Say so and we will sit you in the fire for the sultan has made prisoner some of the lords of Tatary and our Horde is angered."

"Nay," said Michael promptly.

"At Cabasica your men said they were merchants."

"I am not a merchant. I seek the khan."

At this Gutchluk's expression changed.

"Tamerlane the Great," he cried. "You go to the Lord of the World?"

"Tamerlane the Great," repeated Michael.

The warriors who had been pawing over the stores now desisted and came over to the fire, bringing with them Rudolfo, who was watchful and alert in spite of his bruises.

Gutchluk stared at his captives for a space, grunting under his breath as an animal does when disturbed.

"So be it," he made decision. "We will take you and your gifts to the Mighty One and you can spit out your speeches to him."

With that the Tatars fell to ransacking the half-empty pots and sacks of food, gorging themselves enormously. Soranzi, who crept from hiding in the rocks, marveled at this and at the callous way in which the men of the Horde stepped on bodies of the slain. He sought Michael and found him talking to Clavijo.

"Now, my lord the liar," the Breton was saying; "here must you serve yourself. Lie roundly and mightily at Tamerlane's court or you are lost."

He withdrew to talk long with Bembo, while Rudolfo slept in company with the Tatars who were not on watch by the fire and where the horses were picketed.

Before an hour had passed Soranzi, who had been intent on binding up his goods again, saw that Bembo sat alone. Michael was not to be seen.

 THE Breton had seized a moment when the sentries were away from the fire to move back into the darkness of the outer gorge. He had marked the position of the outpost Gutchluk had placed and circled this with care for he had a healthy respect for the keen senses of the Tatar watchers.

Nor did he make the mistake of attempting to take a horse from the pickets. Instead he felt his way patiently out of the ravine at the place where they had entered it. He found the grave he had dug, and its cross. Then he crossed the plateau to the woods on the western side.

The first glimmer of dawn showed him one of the horses belonging to the Venetians that had strayed out to the grass during the fight. This he mounted and rode back along the trail Rudolfo had taken. Once he paused to dismount and search in the thicket for something. He emerged with the sword he had taken from Gutchluk twenty-four hours ago.

Thrusting this through his belt, he continued on to the west.

Michael had not left the camp because he feared retribution by Gutchluk for his attack upon the Tatar leader at this spot.

Gutchluk had been following the Venetians and Michael had surprised him and overcome him fairly. This would raise rather than lower him in the other's esteem.

But Michael was aware that emissaries to a Central Asian monarch were always detained for a long space before given an audience. The more important the ambassadors, the longer the delay. It would be weeks before Clavijo and his companions could hold speech with Tamerlane.

Meanwhile Gutchluk had said that the sultan and the khan were at the point of war. Michael, if he was to have a hand in events, could not afford to be kept idle in the Tatar camp. Moreover the foolish resistance of Rudolfo's men had lowered the status of the Venetians.

If Tamerlane was the man Michael thought him, it would take more than trade-goods wrung from the captives to gain his ear. So Michael must bring to Tamerlane more than that.

Gutchluk had said that Bayezid and all his power was at Angora.

Was not this a good omen? Michael smiled, reflecting that he had sworn to the sultan that he would return to his court.

Now as he rode he kept swinging his right arm stiffly at his side. The blood was beginning to run through thinned veins and before long he would be able to use his crippled arm.

## X

### THE TOPAZ RING

IT WAS as if Clavijo and his party had been snatched up by a hurricane. They were swept down from the gorge called the Gate of Shadows, swept out to the south upon the high, rolling steppe of Iran where the receding hills of Mazandaran showed purple against the sky to the north.

Beyond these same hills, farther to the north, stretched the Sea of Sarai—the Caspian—about which Clavijo had permitted his tongue to wag and which he had never seen, although Michael Bearn had bitter knowledge of it.

The Tatars halted for nothing, except a snatch of sleep at the hamlets of sheep-herders or the bare walls of a Moslem *khan* by a caravan track. They, so Gutchluk explained by signs, were anxious to leave the borderland of the Turk behind. Not on their own account, for the men of

the sultan were dogs, but to safeguard the precious persons of the ambassadors.

So they passed over the dry grass of Iran, away from the clay valleys and the groves of the land that was called Kuhistan, in Persia, and many interminable lines of clumsy camels they saw passing over the steppe at night, and many ant-like bodies of Tatar warriors mounted on shaggy ponies inimitably swift of foot. And Clavijo and his people marveled. The Tatars had swung to the right and were journeying now toward the setting sun.

But they saw naught of the city with brazen walls or the gold trees or the fountains of wine of the earthly paradise that Clavijo had called Cathay.

*"Hic ignotus sum quia passuum,"* quoth Bembo the jester blithely three weeks later. "Here we are the barbarians, and the barbarians are the great lords and *signors*. Lord Gutchluk quarters us i' this penthouse and furnishes us a live ox, that we, poor Frankish outlanders, may eat in our cage like the hunting-leopards I saw dragged past i' their leash this day at time o' mass."

They were, in fact, at a *serai* where a huge fire glowed over which the Tatars roasted the pieces of animals whole. The *serai* was almost the only building in what seemed to the travelers to be the encampment of a limitless army. For two weeks they had been kept waiting, in the midst of this army.

Bembo was like a man born anew. Gutchluk and the other Tatars had treated him respectfully, for he bore himself boldly and had clad his person in new finery from the stores.

"The mummery is on, i' faith," grinned the jester. "Aye, each buffoon of us has his part to play. Behold Signor Dominus, the consul-general Clavijo—the great lord-treasurer, *provveditore*, Soranzi—likewise Rudolfo, the lord-general and master of armies. And most of all, behold Bembo, the wise councilor, the privy coz, the whisperer of kings. Without him, my hearties, the rooks would be emptying your eye-sockets back in yonder Inn o' the Skull."

Clavijo frowned.

"Tamerlane will see us this noon," he said. "We have been kept waiting long."

"Aye, verily. The delay measures our importance i' the eyes o' these gentlefolk. Two days agone Lord Gutchluk and a baron who looks like a prince of Eblis took

our gifts to the king, along with the camels of a khan of Karabak and the painted giant beasts with a tail where their nose should be—the beasts that are gifts from a lord of Khorassan. Now our turn has come and you must lie cleverly or be fed to the beasts, see you?"

"We can say we are an embassy from Venice."

"Nay, San Marco forbid. Firstly, the council, hearing that we who are mere voyagers have usurped ambassadorial rôle, would slit our throats. Secondly, there would be no need o' that, for Tamerlane would have us tied to the ground for his giant beasts to walk upon."

Bembo smiled at the consternation written in the Spaniard's face.

"Signor Gutchluk," he explained, "confessed to me not an hour since that recently certain merchants of Venice penetrated so far as Damascus and endeavored to sell nostrums and false sovereign waters i' the fashion o' mountebanks, and to claim exemption from taxes and gifts as is their wont. The Tatars threw them into the river. So, my cousins, we can not be Venetians for the word rings so ill i' the ears of these barbarians as the Venetian nostrums i' their bellies."

They were silent at that, looking blackly at the man whose tale had brought them—Soranzi, Rudolfo, and the injured Gian—hither.

"I tell you," swore Rudolfo, "that Bearn has betrayed us. Why else is he escaped here hence with a whole skin, leaving us to damnation?"

Michael's departure from the Gate of Shadows had puzzled the Tatar guards as well as Rudolfo. The warriors had searched for him briefly without result and had then pressed on to their army. What mattered it to them if one of the Franks chose to part company with them, so long as the chief ambassadors, as they considered Clavijo and Rudolfo, and the all-important gifts remained?

"He will return to us this night or the morrow," asserted Bembo stoutly. "He pledged it me the night he left us. Who are we that we should know his comings or that which he seeks in this land?"

"'Twere wiser, methinks, to question who he is." Rudolfo strode surly back and forth in front of the clay platform by the fire on which Bembo squatted.

So pliable is human nature that Clavijo and Soranzi had come to look upon the *condottiere* as a possible protector in their plight. At least they feared the Tatars—who seemed to them like animals—more than they feared Rudolfo, now that Michael had vanished.

"Is he not leagued with these pagan demons?" demanded the Italian. "What will his coming avail us? Nay, we must trust to our wits to cut a way out of this coil. I have heard the Sultan of the Turks, whose power is not far from this camp, is a rich monarch, different from these beasts. How if we could—"

He broke off as Bembo chuckled.

"So this is Cathay!" grinned the jester. "We must be bewitched, for we saw naught of Clavijo's golden city."

The Spaniard winced.

"Your master swore we would be safe here," he said uneasily. The coming ordeal of the audience with Tamerlane weighed on the three of them. Bembo alone was careless.

Having the gift of tongues, the jester had conversed in broken Greek with Gutchluk and his faith in Michael was strong.

"My master is a true man," he insisted. "He said he would join us at Tamerlane's court at the first of the new moon. He will keep his word."

Here they looked up as Gutchluk entered with another powerful warrior in black armor; the man Bembo had termed a prince of Eblis. The ambassadors were summoned by Tamerlane, who waited them.

They mounted and rode through the Tatar encampment, seeing on every hand nothing but horses, sleeping warriors, smiths who labored at smoking forges, herders who guided great masses of cattle hither and yon in the dust.

Then a vista of round tents opened before them. Some of these were on massive wagons; some bore standards of fluttering yaks' tails. It was a veritable city of tents.

Hard-faced men glanced at them casually; black slaves made haste to get out of their way. Once a line of elephants passed, hauling sleds on which were wooden machines of war, unknown to them.

It seemed to the cringing Soranzi that they had invaded a city of beasts. He heard a lion roar from the cages where Tamerlane's animals were kept. He saw giraffes, brought from Africa, penned in a

staked enclosure. Yet his merchant's eye noted the barbaric splendor of gold-inlaid armor, jeweled weapons, costly rugs spread within the tents and women's cloaks fashioned of ostrich feathers.

What kind of monarch, he thought, ruled over this hive-like multitude of pagans?



TAMERLANE the Great, King of Kings, Lord of the East and West, extended a gnarled hand across the chess-board and touched his opponent's king.

"Shah rohk," he said. "The game is mine."

He freed a long ruby from one bent finger and handed it to the man who knelt across the board from him—a silk-clad Chinese general who had come from the edge of the Gobi to pay homage.

Few could match wits even with fair success with the Tatar conqueror, for *Timur-i-leng* (Timur the Lame) had fashioned himself a board with many times the usual number of squares and men.

Gathered about the board were princes of Delhi, amirs of Bokhara, and khans of the White and Black Tatars and the powerful Golden Horde that reached to the shores of the Volga. They were standing under a gigantic pavilion stretched upon supports taller than the masts of ships. Over the head of the conqueror hung silk streamers, swaying in the evening breeze, for the sides of the pavilion were open and the men within could look out from the dais on which they stood, over the tents of the army.

"Summon the Frank ambassadors," ordered Tamerlane.

They came through one of the outer porticos of the purple pavilion—Clavijo and Soranzi and Bembo, each with his arms gripped on either side by a Tatar noble. They were worried and anxious, for they had ridden for six hours through the army that never seemed to have an end.

The custom of holding envoys by the arms seemed to them ominous. Clavijo stared at the kneeling Tatar, noting his big, bent shoulders, his massive length of body, his shaggy brows and hard eyes. Tamerlane, nearly seventy years of age, was near-sighted—a peculiarity that made his naturally fierce stare the more difficult to bear.

Soranzi blinked at the low table of solid

gold on which the Tatar leaned and muttered under his breath as he tried to estimate the value of a blue diamond in Tamerlane's plain steel helmet.

"From whom do you bear submission and greetings to me?" demanded the monarch. His speech had to be translated into Persian and then Greek, through two interpreters.

Clavijo's broad brow was damp with perspiration. To gain time to think, he said that he did not understand.

"Then take those 'dogs of interpreters and lead them through the army by a rope thrust into their noses," commanded the Tatar at once. "Bring others who are wiser."

The two unfortunates threw themselves on their knees, and Clavijo paled. But Bembo spoke up, kneeling and crossing his hands on his chest.

"Great khan," he observed in Greek, "their words were clear; it was my companion, the dominus, who was dazed by the splendor of your presence."

This, being interpreted by other mouths, satisfied Tamerlane and he motioned to the interpreters to continue.

"Franks," he resumed, "I have taken your gifts. The cloth-of-silver and gold pleased me. From what king do you come, from the other end of the earth?"

Hereupon Soranzi could not restrain a murmur of anguish. The bales of cloth had been his personal stock in trade, now lost beyond repair. Clavijo bowed and at last found an answer.

"From the King of—of Spain," he replied.

"Good! I have heard of him. How is my son, the King of Spain? Is his health good? Has he much cattle and treasure?"

They stared at Clavijo, these Armenians, Tatars and Chinese. The Europeans were quite a curiosity—petty envoys from a tiny kingdom somewhere at the end of the world. They had come, so reasoned the Tatars, to bask in the magnificence of the Lord of the East and West.

Clavijo was very much afraid. He would have welcomed the sight of Michael Bearn's cheerful face. But he gathered assurance as he began to describe the splendors of Aragon, enlarging upon the great ships and towns of Spain.

At this, however, Tamerlane began to pay more attention to a topaz ring that he turned and twisted upon a sinewy hand.

Fearing that his tale was lacking fire, Clavijo began to exaggerate as was his wont, until he was boasting hugely. Tamerlane scowled under bushy brows, first at the speaker, then at the ring. Finally he held up his hand for the Spaniard to see.

"Behold, Frank, a magician's stone," he said gruffly. "The topaz turns purple when any one lies to me. I always watch it and it has served me well."

Superstitious, as all men of his time and race, Clavijo stared in dismay. Indeed his round face turned a very good shade of purple. His flow of words dwindled as he scanned the topaz and fancied that it changed color.

This might well have been due to the twilight that was falling upon the great pavilion.

"Frank," observed the conqueror, "you come at a good time. My army is mounted for war against the Sultan Bayezid. He has preyed upon my subjects in lesser Armenia and I have offered him terms by which he may save his head. We will hear what he will reply."

To hear the sultan who was the scourge of Christendom mentioned as Tamerlane might speak of a slave added fuel to Clavijo's active imagination.

"If there is a battle, you will see a goodly sight," repeated the old conqueror. "Does my son the King of Spain fight battles or is he a dog of a merchant like the Venetians?"

Clavijo essayed a reply, glanced at the topaz ring which seemed to him to be now a deep purple indeed, and the last of his courage oozed from him. Breaking from the Tatar warriors who held his arms, he fell on his knees.

"Mercy, great lord," he bellowed. "Oh, mercy. Grant me royal clemency if I have offended. Make me a captive, but spare my life!"

This being interpreted, Tamerlane smiled. "Verily," he said shortly, "the Frank is frightened by my face. Nay, Timur the Tatar has harmed no ambassador. Fear not, but join in our feast."

He signed to the men who held the visitors. Soranzi, a-tremble with anxiety, took this to be a signal for their destruction. Without waiting for the speech to be translated, he flung himself at the Tatar's feet, embracing his slippers.

"O King of Kings," he cried, "my com-

panion has lied, even as your wisdom has suspected. He is naught but a seeker after gold, disguised as an envoy. The gifts that pleased you were mine. I will pay more. Do not believe this traitor when he says that I am a merchant, for he is a liar——"

Surprised by this outburst, Tamerlane turned to the interpreters with a scowl.

"Now the fat is in the fire," sighed Bembo.

Tamerlane pulled at his thin mustache, his small black eyes darting from one to the other. He surveyed his topaz ring and grunted. There was something wolfish now in the stare of the Mongol warriors.

Rudolfo swore under his breath and Soranzi did not cease to moan his fear. Since the attack by the riders at the Gate of Shadows his dread had grown upon him. That afternoon he had seen captives of the khan hauled through the camp in cages, like beasts.

"The gifts were mine," he repeated over and over, holding fast to the Tatar's slipper.

"Then you are not ambassadors sent to Tamerlane?"

"Nay." Clavijo and Soranzi were answering in one breath when Gutchluk knelt and addressed his lord, saying that the Franks had purported to be merchants before their capture.

Tamerlane was a man who never minced words and hated deceit. He was about to speak when there was a bustle in the outer porticos. A man flung himself from an exhausted horse, crying——

"A courier for the khan!"

Those who had crowded about Clavijo and his party gave back at this, opening a lane between Tamerlane and the newcomer, barely visible in the half-light of evening, who bowed thrice and knelt before the dais.

"O King of Kings," the horseman cried in Arabic, "I have beheld the answer of the sultan. He has struck off the heads of the Tatars' envoys and placed them at the gate of Angora. Thus Bayezid has made answer to you."

The old Tatar's face grew dark and veins stood out on his forehead. He caught his sword from its sheath and swung it over the head of the unfortunate messenger who remained quietly kneeling.

Then the khan checked the sweep of his

blade mid-way and stood staring out into the dusk, his face a mask of anger. Yet when he spoke, his words were measured and deep.

"Aye, there will be a battle." He looked down at the courier. "You are a brave man. Take twenty horses and go, that your face will not remind me of the deed you bespoke."

Replacing his sword, Tamerlane ordered that the army be ready to march on the morrow. For the first time Clavijo noted the great bulk of the Tatar and the fact that he was lame. In his youth, during an affray with the Seljuk Turks, Tamerlane had been beaten from his horse and cast to earth with three ribs broken and a mangled side.

Turning back to his chess-board, he observed the Europeans who still remained held by their guards.

"Come with my court, liars and merchants," he said grimly. "Instead of jugglers and musicians, you will amuse me, for I will pass judgment upon you then."

## XI

### THE THUNDERBOLT

**T**WO weeks before Tamerlane's audience with the Christians, the stars traced the outline of the river Khabur in Anatolia, two hundred miles west of Tamerlane's camp. Down the river toward the flat roofs of the town of Angora drifted a small skiff, only half-visible in the glittering light from the stars which seemed intensified by the heat of the windless July night.

But the stars were eclipsed by the myriad torches and lanterns of Angora and the illumination of ten thousand tents clustered about the Turkish town.

Bayezid, his court and his army held festival. Angora, an unfortified trading-town, yet served admirably for mobilizing the army of the Ottomans and Seljukes. Galleys had come from Greece, where the Crescent ruled, to land their loads of Moslems on the Anatolian shore across from Constantinople; the Mameluke had sent their splendid cavalry hither from Alexandria; the veteran main army of the sultan had been withdrawn temporarily from the conquest of Constantinople.

So Angora was filled with the warriors of a dozen kingdoms. Forbidden wine

flowed freely and revelry held the court-yards and roofs. The sultan knew how to hold the loyalty of his men by pleasure and by generous pay which reenforced the natural fanaticism of the Moslems and the devotion of the Janissaries—that formidable mass of soldiery recruited from Christian child slaves raised by Moslem teachers.

The skiff drifted with the current of the river to the jetties of the town, already crowded with native craft. Michael Bearn raised himself cautiously, clutched the side of a fishing-boat and climbed to the jetty.

"Who comes?"

A sharp challenge rang from a pair of spearmen standing at the shore end of the dock. Michael stiffened; then advanced carelessly.

"A sailor," he made answer in his good Arabic, "from the Byzantine coast. I have heard that the great sultan is here and I have come to look upon his face."

A lantern was brought from an adjoining hut and the two spearmen looked him over casually. Michael's skin was burned a deep brown by the sun and he had secured a short cloak that concealed the outlines of his stalwart body. His leather tunic and bare knees bore out the identity he claimed.

"Does a son of a dog think to look upon the favored of Allah?" gibed one of the Moslems. "Stay—you have been a slave on the galleys."

The soldier's sharp glance had noted the scars on Michael's wrists where the irons had pressed.

"Aye," assented the Breton; "a galley-slave." He tapped his stiffened arm. "But useless, my lord warrior. I have been freed in a battle."

His pulse quickened, for he knew the strict discipline of Bayezid's army—despite the appearance of revelry—and was aware that every precaution was being taken, now that the battle with Tamerlane was impending.

"You are no true follower of the prophet," said the sentry sharply. Michael's curls, escaping from under his loose cap, revealed that he was not one of the orthodox Moslem peoples.

"Your wisdom is fine as a rare gem," acknowledged he. "I am a Christian who has not seen his own country for many years. My lord warrior, I pray you let me pass into the town where there is wine

to be given away and sweets made of grapes and flour and butter. I have not eaten for two days."

This was strictly true. Michael's tone was that of the hopeless slave addressing his guards. The sentry sneered and ran his hand under Michael's cloak to make sure that he held no weapon, and then fell to cursing his own fate that kept him from the feasting. Michael made off.

At the river-gate of the town he was confronted by the head of a Mongol—one of the envoys from Tamerlane—caked with dried blood, stuck upright upon a spear. The crowd of soldiery and townspeople surging through the gate paused to spit at the wax-like features and to heap insults on the Tatars.

Michael was carried in with the throng, but now his eyes held a new light and his lips were hard with purpose. He knew for the first time the certainty of conflict between the sultan and the khan.

At the river's edge, up-stream, he had bought his new cloak with a few silver-pieces and the cap to match. He had cast away his sword to carry out his character of freed galley-slave.

Now Michael was among the alleys of Angora over which the crescent standard hung. He glanced indifferently at the lighted balconies where costly rugs were hung and at the magic-lantern pictures that Arabs were displaying in darkened corners. He heard the distant chant of fanatical *imams*, exhorting the Moslems in the mosques.

Asking his way from a drunken Sipahi, he approached the walled gardens where Bayezid and his court held feast.

The heat grew instead of lessening that night. The glimmer of heat-lightning more than once darkened the gleam of the stars. This the *imams*, crying from balcony and courtyard, announced as a good omen.

"The Thunderbolt will strike!" they said. "The world trembles."

The heat impelled Bayezid and his divan—the councilors who feasted with him—to leave the torrid rooms of the house where they were guarded by a double line of Ottoman infantry and to seek the gardens where an artificial lake shaded by cypresses offered moderate comfort.

On this lake was a floating kiosk of teak-wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl, its roof fragrant with flowers, with curtains drawn back to allow free passage to the air.

Bayezid, flushed with the stimulus of *bhang* and opium, lay back on his cushions, idly watching the play of torch-light reflected in the lake. The grandees were intent on a spectacle of women and boys who danced in iridescent garments of moghrebin and chrysoliths at the edge of the garden by the kiosk.

These feasts had been ordered by Bayezid, who felt himself at the summit of his power. Now he surveyed the splendor around him through half-closed eyes.

"We will make a welcome," he murmured, "for the Tatar boor. News has come to me that he advances with his power upon the Khabur."

They nodded assent—sheikh, malik and caliph.

"When he comes to the Khabur," went on Bayezid, "I will have a hunt declared. My troops will aid me in the pursuit of game. That will show the Tatar how much we esteem him."

Some of the councilors looked more than a little startled. It was no light thing to hunt game in the presence of Tamerlane's army. And Bayezid had ordered the Mongol envoys slain, wantonly, as it seemed.

The man who was called the Thunderbolt turned sleepy eyes to the dark face of the Sheikh of Rum, in whose country they were encamped.

"Give orders for ten thousand beaters to be mustered from the town. It is my will."

The official prostrated himself and muttered:

"Tamerlane has forty thousand infantry and twice that number of riders, O Guardian of the Faith. Will you pursue the beasts of the field when such a host stands across the river?" He plucked up courage from the sultan's silence. "Bethink you, Star of the East, there is but one cloud upon the face of your sky—Tamerlane. You have gained the Danube; Constantinople will be yours as Greece is now—then the rest of Frankistan. And, when Tamerlane falls, Iran, Tatary and India—"

"Sheikh," Bayezid smiled, "have you forgotten my spies in the Tatar camp?"

 IN THIS manner was it ordained by the sultan that they should mock Tamerlane. Festival was to be held in the town, even when the Tatar horsemen occupied the opposite bank of the Khabur. The bulk of the Seljukе knights—

the pick of the host—was to be kept in its tents by the town.

The councilors, hearing this, wondered whether ceaseless conquests had not affected the mind of Bayezid. But the leaders of the Mamelukes and Janissaries smiled, saying that they were invincible and—some beasts to be slain must be first trapped.

Michael Bearn, sitting among the cypresses on the farther bank of the lake where there were no guards, watched the feast of Bayezid until dawn reddened the sky across the river and the call of the *muezzin* floated over the roofs of Angora.

He was studying again the brilliant assemblage of grandees that he had seen at times from a distance during his captivity. He noticed the councilors start up from their cushions. By the fading light of the torches he could see them staring up at the sky.

Almost at the same time he heard a sound—a shrill cry that was more like a scream. It rose from one side of the miniature lake, swelled, and dwindled swiftly.

Michael knew the cry of herons and water-fowl. This was different. It was more like the scream of a horse in pain. Yet it had sounded a hundred feet above the kiosk. A shout reached his ears from the kiosk, a bow-shot away.

“The warning of Tamerlane!”

Guards were running here and there about the lake. Torches advanced along the shore toward him from the palace. It was no time to sit wondering about the source of the queer sound in the air. Broad daylight would be upon him in a moment.

Cautiously Michael began to crawl through the willow-thickets of the lakeside, toward a gully by which he had gained his point of vantage. The light was strong enough for him to see his way.

He stumbled over something projecting from the ground and found that it was an arrow. With some difficulty he pulled it out, for his curiosity had been aroused by its weight.

Instead of a point, the shaft terminated in a hollow steel cylinder, perforated in the sides. Michael weighed it in his hand and chuckled. Such an arrow as this, sent from a powerful bow, would emit a loud whistling sound when passing through the air. In fact it had been the passage of this shaft that he had just heard.

The arrow was plainly of Tatar make and Michael guessed that some man of Tamerlane's, hidden in the rushes across the lake, had sent it as a warning to Bayezid. He thrust the shaft under his cloak, and, hearing footsteps approaching, made his way down the gully.

For several days thereafter Michael was very busy. He frequented the bazaar, heard the news of the preparation for the sultan's hunt, and out on the plain of Angora behind the town saw regiments of Janissaries drilling constantly.

And he noticed another head on the Angora gate-posts—an old Tatar fisherman who had been seen more than once dragging his nets in the river. Under the head a large bow had been placed.

Michael guessed that the man who had fired the whistling arrow would not report his feat to Tamerlane.

He heard great amirs say openly in the town that Bayezid was drunk with power and with wine. Litters of Moslem women and captives from Georgia and Greece were passing constantly through the streets.

The finest cavalry of the sultan was encamped a league behind the town, apart from the rest of the army. Angora was continually a-throng with merrymakers, as if the fast of Ramazan had just been broken.

Knowing the inexorable discipline of the Ottoman army and the merciless cunning of Bayezid, Michael doubted the evidence of his senses. This was no idle laxity or sport such as the Thunderbolt was accustomed to use in pleasuring his men.

Even when Tatar horsemen were seen, swooping about the plain across the river, there was no sign of any preparation made to meet Tamerlane.

But when Michael made his way down to the river-bank one cloudy night, he found the boats that were drawn up on shore filled with men, and out in the center of the Khabur he could discern the black bulk of guard ships moving back and forth.

“Bayezid waits!” He laughed silently. “Aye, and thus he waited at Nicopolis! I begin to see the answer to the riddle. And now, for a visit to the sentry post that welcomed me at the jetty. Grant the same two Janissaries be on watch; the hour is the same.”

Dawn revealed two unexpected things to the officers of the Janissaries who commanded the guard at the river-front. On a

small dock two spearmen lay bound and gagged beside an extinguished lantern. The white woolen turban, the *kaftan* and bow of one were gone.

And one of the guard boats reported that its steersman was missing. A Janissery, the men of the galley said, had come on board when they were putting out from the shore—a warrior who declared that he knew the river and was skilled in managing a galley. He had carried a bow.

Before an hour had passed, so the tale was repeated, this helmsman had disappeared from the craft, taking with him the steering-oar. They had not heard him fall overboard. But at the end of the hour they heard a whistling arrow, shot into the air from the other side.

Michael's penetration of the Ottoman lines had been comparatively simple because the Turk guards—not yet drawn up in battle order—had not looked for a foe from within.

One of the sentries he had found at a distance from the lantern and had stunned with a blow on the forehead. The other, running toward the slight noise, had been easily overcome by the powerful Breton.

Michael exulted in the fact that his right arm was once more serviceable after a fashion. Stripping one of the guards of tunic, cloak and cap, he had gained access to a galley.

Not trusting as yet to his right arm, he had taken the steering-oar with him when he dropped over the stern of the galley to swim to the farther shore.

Here, to disturb further his late companions and to test his arm, he had let fly the cylinder-headed arrow over the river.

Now he began to run up from the bank of the Khabur, casting aside his cloak as he went and unwinding the cumbersome turban. It would not be very long, he knew, before he would encounter Tatar patrols and he did not wish to be cut down as a Janissery.

Michael had gained what he had come for. He had guessed the riddle of Bayezid's inaction and the revelry in Angora. An ambush was being prepared for Tamerlane.

The Tatars were to be beguiled into an attack and a trap was to be set for them on the river.

Michael studied the stars overhead and shaped his course by them, shaking his

head as he made out a crescent moon on the horizon. He would be late for his rendezvous with Bembo.

## XII

### TAMERLANE DECIDES

IT WAS the night set for the Tatar attack. The Lame Conqueror had been riding slowly among his host, listening as was his wont to the talk of the warriors about the camp-fires. Tamerlane, what with his age and the pain of his old injuries, seldom slept.

When the middle watch had ended and quiet had fallen in some degree on the Mongol army, he retired to his small tent and lay down on the plain mattress that served him for a bed. He read slowly, because of his poor sight, the annals of his ancestors and the tales of past battles written down by the chroniclers.

The plan of attack for the coming day had been decided upon, and every *khatun* had his orders, which in turn were transmitted to the *tumani*—the commanders of a thousand and to the khans of the hundreds. Tamerlane, however, was restless. News had reached him from the fisher-folk of the river that the Turkish grandees were at revelry, and Bayezid himself had ordered a hunt, even within sight of the Tatar array.

This puzzled the Conqueror.

Impatiently he ordered his ivory and ebony chess-board set before him, then brushed it aside, for there was no one in attendance who could play the mimic game of warfare as Tamerlane desired. He lifted his broad head and signed to a Mongol archer at the tent's entrance.

"Bring hither the Franks. I will pass judgment upon them."

It would amuse him, perhaps until dawn, to probe the souls of the Christians from the end of the world who had tried to throw dust in the eyes of the conqueror of the world.

He surveyed them grimly as they knelt before him, their finery rumpled by the confinement of the past few days. Fear was plainly to be read in their white faces—save that of Bembo. The jester was a philosopher.

Bembo was thinking that Clavijo's Grand Cham had proved to be a strange sort of monarch indeed. Steel and wool that clad Tamerlane's long body were hardly

the silks and chrysoliths about which the Spaniard had boasted.

The brazen city of Cathay had become a city of tents. The gold house of the khan was constructed, so Bembo perceived, of bull's hide. And instead of winning wealth, joined with perpetual life, they had been deprived of their own goods—or rather Soranzi had—and bade fair to earn a swift death.

The others had not failed to remind Bembo that Michael Bearn had not appeared as he had promised. To this the jester returned only a wink.

He had recognized Michael in the courier who had come in native attire from Angora. He knew that Michael was in the camp and would seek him out.

The moon was already five days old.

"Does this Frank," Tamerlane observed to the interpreters, indicating Soranzi, "confess that he is a merchant and a thief?"

At this Soranzi, reading Tamerlane's harsh countenance, broke forth into feverish words, which the interpreters explained to their lord.

"Aye, sire. O Great Khan. Splendor of the World! O monument of mercy and essence of forgiveness! O Conqueror of Asia. Grant but one small iota of mercy to your slave."

Tamerlane nodded, unsmiling.

"I will. See yonder weapons?"

"Aye, my lord." Soranzi's eyes widened at sight of jewel-inlaid simitars and gold-chased helmets and silver camails hung upon the walls of the tent.

"They were taken from my enemies, merchant thief. It will now be the duty of your life to furnish and cleanse the spoil that I shall take. Dog, do you understand? You may smell of the riches you may not taste. Pocket but one *zecchin* of this store and your bowels shall be let out with a knife. Go, to your work."

Soranzi trembled and could not refrain from a frantic plea.

"But my goods?"

"Begin by writing down an account of them—for me."

The Tatar was not lacking in a rough sense of humor. He was naturally merciless, yet he had no love of torture. A man without a god, a man fashioned for dealing destruction, he could still tolerate another man's faith in God, and he admired courage.

"You say that you are a warrior." He addressed Rudolfo, who was watching him in sullen dread. "Good. You have seen my ranks and the camp of my foe the sultan. Tell me how your Frankish king would plan the battle."

Rudolfo licked his lips and tried to speak out clearly, but his voice quivered. He described the order of battle of the Italian mercenaries—skirmishing by irregulars, the entrenchment of pikemen behind *abatis*, the feints and countermarches that produced the bloodless battles of his knowledge.

This recital Tamerlane ended with a grunt of anger.

"I did not ask you how your children played. I will have you placed with the Tatar boys and girls tomorrow by the river, where you may see a battle."

Glancing contemptuously over Clavijo, he stared at Bembo's sad face and gay attire.

"What kind of man is this?"

The jester rose and bowed ceremoniously.

"I am your cousin, O king," he stated cheerily.

Tamerlane frowned, puzzled.

"Because," pointed out the jester, "I am maimed for the fight, whereas you are lame for the flight."

"If you are maimed, you are useless and need not live."

"So be it," agreed Bembo. "I am not afraid. Nevertheless, I would fain set eyes upon my other cousin who is only maimed in the arm."

"Who is that?" asked the matter-of-fact khan.

"A wiser man, Messer Tamerlane, than all of us put together."

Tamerlane looked around as if to mark this other Frank. He noticed a helmeted amir who salaamed within the entrance of the tent.

"The other Frank," announced the newcomer, as Tamerlane signed for him to speak, "seeks admittance to the presence of the Lord of the East and West."

Two archers of the guard held Michael Bearn by the arms. Bembo and Rudolfo—Soranzi and the Spaniard had been dismissed—stared at him in surprise.

He had grown leaner, his face blackened by the sun. Around his shoulders was a rich fur *kaftan* and silk trousers covered the tattered bindings of his legs.

The amir who had announced him bowed again before Tamerlane.

"O Kha Khan, we know not this man. Yet, because of his claim, we could not refuse him admittance." The officer glanced at the silent khan and pointed to Michael. "He claims that he is to play with you at chess—as you play it."

In contrast to the flowery etiquette of Bayezid's court, Tamerlane, who was impatient of ceremony, always encouraged direct speech. Now he frowned at Michael as if trying to recall something that escaped his mind.

"I have come to play," assented Michael gravely, "the game that the great khan plays. It is known to me."

Tamerlane's brow cleared. Michael had spoken in his good Arabic, and with this the Tatar, who liked to read the Moslem annals, was familiar. The Lame Conqueror made a practise of treating well all scholars, astronomers and men of learning whom he took prisoner.

"You are a bold man," he said. "Three days ago when you came to me as a courier from Angora I ordered that you should not let me see your face again. I gave you horses. Why did not you ride hence?"

Bembo had known that Michael was the horseman who had reached the purple tent in the plain three days before. As Michael had not greeted him at that time Bembo had kept silence, trusting that what his friend did was for the best.

The jester did not know what a desperate game his friend was playing nor that Michael, having heard that evening of Bembo's plight, had resolved to stake their lives on a single throw.

"Because, O Kha Khan," the Breton rejoined, "it came to my ears that you lacked a man to play at *shahk* (chess) in the manner of Tamerlane, which is not that of other men of feebler minds."

 THE khan weighed this in silence, then motioned for the amir, the captives and interpreters to withdraw to the farther side of the tent, in the shadow. He signed for the two archers to kneel at either side of the chess-board which lay in front of him under the flickering candles.

"So be it," he assented grimly. "Frank, set up the men. Your daring earns you the chance. If you have deceived me, and can not play as you profess, these two dogs of mine will cut you in two. Your country-

men, Frank, have deceived Tamerlane. Beware lest you do likewise."

It was a long speech for the blunt Tatar to make. He was interested. His small, black eyes gleamed as he watched Michael squat on his heels before the board. Only the Persian, the Grand Mufti, Nur ud deen Abderrahman Esferaini, who had come to Tamerlane from Baghdad, and the Chinese general of Khoten had been able to cope with the Conqueror on the enlarged board and with the double number of pieces.

Now Tamerlane set up his men swiftly on his side of the board and motioned for Michael to do likewise.

Bembo, whose ready wit had grasped much of what was happening, knew that his friend could not play even the simpler game of chess as brought to Venice by the crusaders of the century before. So the jester grimaced and bit his thumb, invoking the lion of Saint Mark to Michael's aid.

The Breton fingered the array of miniature gold warriors, fashioned in the likeness of tiny horsemen, archers, elephants and *rohks*—castles—and with a single large effigy of a king. He knew neither the pieces nor their moves.

"Break off the head of one of your arrows," he ordered an archer.

The warrior hesitated, glancing at his chief, and then obeyed. Michael laid the wooden shaft carefully across the board mid-way between him and Tamerlane.

Then, smiling, he set up the pawns along his side of the arrow's shaft, and behind them the knights. Taking the thin gold chain given him by Contarini from his throat, he placed it near his end of the board, and within its circle the castles and the towering figure of the king.

In the clear space behind the gold circlet he stood up the jeweled castles. Tamerlane surveyed him fixedly, evidently growing angry. The Tatar's pieces had been set up in the orthodox fashion, very different from the queer array of the European's men.

"Explain!" he barked.

Michael touched the arrow. "The Khabur river." His finger rested on the tiny pawns. "Ships and archers." He pointed to the gold circlet. "Angora and its troops. Bayezid, the king who is the prize of the game." Last he indicated the castles. "The sultan's heavy cavalry on the plain of Angora."

Leaning forward, he ran his finger along the gold pieces—his own were silver. “The army of Timur the Lame, Conqueror of India, and the Caliphate.” He looked at the impassive Tatar. “This is the game that you play, O Kha Khan. And there is no other in the world today who can play it with you—save Bayezid the Sultan. His pieces will I play as he has planned. It is for you to make the first move.”

The lines in Tamerlane’s withered face deepened and his black eyes snapped.

“You are a spy!”

“Perhaps. You may call me so.” Michael’s thin nostrils quivered, and the smile left his face. “I have been in Angora. I heard the whistling arrow fall. Before that for three years I marched with Bayezid.”

Tamerlane did not shift his gaze. “Proof?” Thrusting his hand under his *kaftan*, Michael drew forth the long folds of a Janissery’s turban, spotted in places with blood. He pointed to the scars on his wrists.

“A slave, O Kha Khan.” He touched again the gold chain. “A gift for service rendered at Nicopolis where the host of Frankistan was broken by the craft of the sultan. Ten thousand Christians were slain there, after they had been taken captive.”

To this Tamerlane seemed indifferent. One religion, to him, was the same as another. He was trying to judge Michael’s purpose. His interest in the strange maneuver of the Christian upon the chess-board still held him passive.

Bembo plucked at the arm of the watchful *condottiere*.

“See you, Rudolfo, Cousin Michael holds the Cham in leash, but methinks ‘tis a thin, silken leash whereby our lives hang—”

Decision had come to Tamerlane.

“You are an enemy of the Ottoman.”

“Slavery under the Ottoman crippled me.” Michael’s gray eyes lighted. He had risked much to lead Tamerlane to make the statement that, spoken first by Michael, must be received with natural suspicion. “His men slew my brothers-in-arms. I have waited six years to strike a blow against him who is the greatest foe of my faith. I have heard in the Angora palace Bayezid boast that he will set your head, O Kha Khan, upon a spear before the Gate of Paradise at Damascus. Yet you alone can humble Bayezid. Will you let me serve you?”

“How?” It was typical of Tamerlane that he did not ask what reward the other might expect. Those who aided the Lame Conqueror received kingdoms; those who failed, death; unless flight saved them, which was seldom.

“It is for the Kha Khan to move.” Michael smiled again and motioned at the chess-board. “The sultan’s men have caught a flying pigeon that bore one of your messages to Tatary saying that you would force the passage of the Khabur at Angora and drive Bayezid before you.”

“True. The dog hunts. Aye, after he has seen my army. Disaster will come upon him for that effrontery, and the slaughter of my envoys.” Tamerlane’s eyes glowed fiercely. “Our Tatar hearts are mountains, our swords the whirlwind. We count as naught the numbers of our foes. The greater numbers, the greater glory for our chroniclers to write. Aye, thus will Tamerlane move, at dawn—”

His gaunt, calloused hand swept Michael’s array of chessmen off the board in a single motion. Michael still smiled. He had won his throw.

“So,” the Breton said, “did the Christian host at Nicopolis attack. Tamerlane has grown blind, and his wisdom is dust before the storm of the Thunderbolt.”

The dark blood flooded into the forehead of the Kha Khan. Veins stood out on his forehead and the yellow around the black pupils of his eyes grew red.

“Think ye, slave, Christian cur—” his deep voice cracked. “Think ye, sucking child, the horsemen of Turan and Iran are like to the mongrels of Frankistan?”

His great hand clenched and writhed in front of the eyes of the younger man who drew back before the vehemence of the Tatar’s wrath. The two watchful archers gripped Michael’s arms, and Bembo sighed mournfully.

“Is it thus,” said Michael swiftly, “that Tamerlane plays at *shakh*? You have made your move. I have not made mine. And Bayezid will make such a move. Do not doubt it, my khan.”

The cold rebuke of the Christian wrought upon Tamerlane’s anger and he became silent—as motionless as a snake coiled to strike.

“Aye,” snarled Michael, twisting in the grasp of the archers, “your horsemen will sweep across the Khabur, my khan. They

will carry the line of boats Bayezid has drawn up along the farther bank and filled with archers, hidden from your sight. Aye, my lord khan. Your warriors of Turan and Iran and the Horde will not be stayed by the trap that Bayezid has set for them in the tents on the shore. Within the tents is an entrenchment of lances sunk into the ground. It will not check your myrmidons."

He laughed in the face of the old Conqueror.

"And then, verily, your Tatars will carry the town. By midday they will have beaten back the Sipahis stationed on the crest of the Angora plateau. Aye, Timur. But then what? Your ranks will be faced by forty thousand fresh cavalry—the Janissaries. Aye, and by the Mamelukes, hidden in the valleys beyond—the pick of Bayezid's army."

The black eyes of Tamerlane riveted on Michael's face.

"More than that," cried Michael, "the line of boats will be ablaze, my Conqueror. Casks of naphtha are hidden within them, to be set alight. Your men will find no water to drink upon the plain of Angora; the river is foul. Your back will be to the river. Bayezid will turn aside from his hunt, which is meant but to cast dust in your eyes, and set his heavy cavalry against your tired and thirsty followers. By nightfall the riders of Turan will be slain or in the river. Aye, there are war-galleys awaiting you, around the upper bend of the Khabur. Your men have never fought against the Turkish ships."

At this Tamerlane brushed his hand across his near-sighted eyes, and a hissing breath escaped his hard lips.

"Bayezid revels—to make you the blinder," concluded Michael bitterly. "He ordered your emissaries slain, to anger you to attack. In this manner, not otherwise, will he make of your name a mockery, O Kha Khan, and of your empire—dust."

For the space of several moments there was complete silence, while a dozen men hung upon the next word of the old Conqueror.

Instead of speaking, Tamerlane rose and limped to the tent entrance, while the guards fell back with lowered heads. He glanced at the stars, marking the hour, and at the dark masses of men assembling under the wan gleam of the new moon, low on the horizon.

"Take the captives hence," he said at last to his attendants, "save the Frank in the *kaftan*. Summon Mirza Rustem, my grandson, Mahmoud Khan, and the *noyans* (barons). Take through the camp the new command of Tamerlane; my men are to sleep. The order of battle is to be changed."

 ALONE with Michael and a single servant in his tent, Tamerlane signed to his cup-bearer to fill two bowls with wine.

Obeying the request which was virtually a command, Michael bent one knee, touched the cup to his chest and forehead and put it briefly to his lips. The Tatar emptied his with a single gulp.

"Have you a thought," he asked bluntly, "how this sultan who has set a trap may be caught in his own deceit?"

Michael looked at the old Tatar thoughtfully, and smiled, reading the purpose under the other's words.

"Does a sparrow," he countered, "give counsel to a falcon—when the hood is removed from the eyes of the falcon?"

If he had made a suggestion, it would in all probability have been futile and would have opened him to the suspicion of being, after all, a secret agent of Bayezid, who had many such.

"Aye, if Tamerlane commands!"

"Then send a hundred of your horsemen to cut out a river-galley, to learn whether the boats be not manned and equipped as I said. Dispatch another hundred up the Khabur, to locate the war-galleys that I have seen."

Tamerlane tossed the empty bowl from him and poured Michael's scarcely tasted wine upon the rugs of the tent. It was an unpardonable offense to fail to empty a bowl bestowed by the khan; but Tamerlane dealt with such things in his own way.

"Those men have already been sent," he grunted. "I bade you spit out your thought how Bayezid may be attacked. He is too shrewd to force the crossing of the Khabur, and by the sun of heaven, my Tatars would throw dirt in my face if I sit here in my tents like a woman with child."

Thoughtfully Michael traced out the imaginary line of the river upon the chessboard.

"The sultan has shaped his strength to meet an attack," he responded slowly.

"It is true that he is too wise to cross the river. It is written, O Kha Khan, in the memoirs of the Ottoman that he who trusts too greatly in his wisdom shall stumble and eat dirt. Bayezid's strength would be more like weakness were he forced to attack—"

"Speak a plain thought!"

"Pretend to fall into the sultan's trap. And meanwhile get the pick of your army above or below Angora and across the river—"

"How?"

Michael smiled.

"If Tamerlane wills, a sparrow may become a falcon. I have taken the hood from the eyes of the falcon."

For a space the Tatar considered this, while one after the other the councilors and leaders of his army stepped into the tent—lean-faced men in armor—the few who had been selected by the Lame Conqueror from the warriors of mid-Asia.

"What reward claim you for this?" demanded the old man abruptly.

"I would ride with your horsemen to see the downfall of Bayezid."

Tamerlane grunted and glanced at the scattered miniature warriors of the chess-board.

"So, Frank," he growled, "you can not play chess!"

Michael shook his head.

"That is a pity," said Tamerlane regretfully. "You would make a rare player."



DAWN had broken over the river and the Tatar standards before the tents were outlined against the streaks of sunrise when Michael walked alone from the council of Tamerlane and sought Bembo.

He found the fool huddled beside a cage of the khan's beasts, guarded by a black Kallmark.

"San Marco heard my prayer, Cousin Michael," cried the hunchback joyously. "I prayed right lustily and bravely while yonder giant of Magog was washing his hands i' the air and bobbing his head i' the wind and talking with the sun."

Bembo had been interested in the dawn prayer of the Muhammadan Tatar. He skipped to Michael's side and grimaced at the warrior.

"Now make what magic ye will, son of Eblis," he chanted, "and the devil take ye,

as he will, for his own. Cousin Michael, did the mad Cham outror you, or are we saved? What's to do?"

"Where are the others?"

Bembo could not forbear a chuckle. "Rest you, good cousin. The master-merchant Soranzi is counting a myriad gold coins for the Tatar *wazirs*, as the pagans name their money-tenders; Rudolfo is departed with good grace and Gian to be escorted by Tatar children to the river."

"And Clavijo?"

Bembo nodded toward the cage. "With the apes, who love him like a brother. This black giant was to cut off my head—"

"You will be safe with me. Come." Michael smiled. "The Cham, as you call him, has given us some good sport. We will fly pigeons and when that is done, sleep. Then this night will you see a rare jest, my Bembo."

"So said Rudolfo to Gian when they went off. Gian has been grinning like a dog that scents a bone. Two days agone did I ask them what was i' the wind. That was before they knew that you were with us in pagan garb. Rudolfo cursed me, but his henchman, forsooth, muttered that my master was not the only man who could devise a plan."

Michael frowned, but could learn nothing more from the jester, except that Rudolfo had talked at times with a certain *wazir* who was open-handed with his gold and knew many tongues.

He could not waste time to search into a possible new intrigue on the part of the Italian, for Tamerlane had ordered him to assist in preparing messages to be sent up with carrier-pigeons—messages intended to fall into the hands of Bayezid.

In the annals of the Ottoman dynasty it is written that during the space of that day Bayezid, surnamed the Thunderbolt, hunted with falcon and dogs upon the plain of Angora, having in his heart naught but contempt for the Tatars.

With his grändees and picked cavalry the sultan rode from sunrise to sunset, his beaters spread across the steppe, without thought of water or bodily comfort. His men stood under arms all that time. His ships in the river remained at their moorings. His spies reported that Tamerlane was taking more time to muster the Tatar horsemen to cross the river.

But Bayezid had burned and broken down the few bridges on the Khabur, and

knew well that, save at Angora, there was no ford. This gave him assurance that Tamerlane could not cross except at the point where the sultan awaited him.

Further assurance came with a carrier-pigeon, struck down by one of Bayezid's hawks. From the bird was taken a message addressed to the court of Samarkand, saying that Tamerlane would that night cross the Khabur and crush the Ottoman army.

Whereupon Bayezid retired to the palace by the lake at Angora, hearing fresh news at sunset that the Tatars were assembling in their ranks.

So Bayezid feasted and received praise from the leaders of the Moslem world.

"The beast," he said, "may see the trap; yet, being a beast, he has no wit to do aught but charge upon the bait."

"Nay," amended his advisers, "where else could the Tatar cross the river, having no bridges or boats?"

Well into the night a tumult arose on the shore opposite Angora. Many lights were to be seen in the camp of Tamerlane and the neighing of horses could be heard clearly across the river. Soon came the ring of weapons and the shout of the Mongols. A line of fire grew along the waiting galleys. Flights of arrows sped into the masses that were moving toward the ford. Bayezid laughed, well content.

Rumors reached him from fishermen that Mongols had been seen far down the river, but Bayezid could see and hear the conflict that was beginning at the ships. Moreover the torches of the Tatar camp were plainly to be seen.

It is written likewise in his annals that at this time a Christian captive, escaping from Tamerlane's camp, swam the river.

This man, who was attended by another Frank of powerful build, was taken captive by guards at the Khabur shore and carried up into the town where the officers of the Janissaries had assembled near Bayezid.

The two were Rudolfo and Gian, who had discarded their mail and broken loose from the half-grown Tatars, slaying one with their hands—so stoutly had the boys pestered them with miniature weapons.

Once safely in the town, they made signs that they would be taken to the sultan and offered as proof of the urgency of their mission a ring that bore the signet of a Turkish *wazir*.

When the litter of the sultan passed, attended by torches and mounted grandees, Rudolfo and Gian knelt. Bayezid halted. He examined the ring and his brows went up. It was the signet of one of his spies.

"Where is the *wazir*?" he demanded of the Greeks in his retinue who could converse with Rudolfo. The *wazir* who was the sultan's man had not been able to leave his post in the Horde without discovery and he had sent the ring by Rudolfo, who was prepared to seek reward from Bayezid for information given.

"Tis small gain I seek from the Thunderbolt," he assured the Greeks. "Some gold and goods of mine taken from me by Tamerlane, who is a foul fiend. Lists have been prepared of the stuff and when the sultan overwhelms the camp of the Horde I will point it out. For this small gear I have tidings for the ear of the sultan."

Meanwhile up from the river-front came the clash of steel and the shouting of men. Bayezid, never impatient, scanned Rudolfo's face and observed that the man did not meet his eye. "More like," he whispered to the Sheikh of Rum, "that this Frank has had the slaying of my spy and has come to beguile me with words of Tamerlane's. Promise him his gold and get his news."

Rudolfo's message caused a stir throughout the grandees.

Tamerlane, he said, had left the camp across the river at dusk with the bulk of his cavalry, which meant the bulk of his army. The demonstration at the ford was being made by old men and boys—slaves, and horse-herders. The array of fires that winked at Angora from the other shore had been lighted to deceive the sultan into thinking that the mass of the Horde was still there.

As he spoke the tumult seemed to dwindle, and for a second doubt was written on the hard face of the Thunderbolt.

"If the Tatar has tricked me—" He thought of his preparations to defend Angora on the river side and the men he had thrown into ships and trenches on the shore.

"But there are no bridges and no fords," his councilors pointed out. "Where else could Tamerlane cross the Khabur? Perhaps he was fleeing with his army."

Bayezid had never met defeat. Astrologers had assured him that the greatest event of his destiny was to come to pass. He felt sure of his plan and of himself. Had not

his hunters' falcons struck down a carrier-pigeon that day with news of Tamerlane's purpose to attack?

So Bayezid laughed and questioned Rudolfo lightly as to which way the Tatar riders had passed from the camp. When Rudolfo replied that they had headed down the river, the sultan gave orders that a detachment of Mamelukes should ride down the Angora side of the Khabur and report if they sighted any Tatars. Meanwhile the two Franks were to be kept in attendance on him, for they would be useful.

The scouts never returned. Quiet settled upon the Khabur.

Some hours after dawn a Turkish war-galley was sent down the river to reconnoiter. So it was after midday that the vessel arrived at a point a dozen miles down the river and learned that here during the night the Horde had crossed the Khabur to the Angora side—the Tatars swimming their horses and the foot-soldiers holding to the beasts' tails.

Tamerlane, in fact, was now drawn up on the Angora plain with all his strength.

### XIII

#### THE CONQUEROR

BEMBO had secured for himself one of those animals of the Kallmark Tatars, a beast that was neither horse nor mule nor ass. This steed he had caparisoned gaily. Thus mounted, he trotted at Michael's side, discoursing cheerfully.

"A fair day, my cousin, and a goodly steed between my knees—albeit it savors not of bull-stag or cameleopard. Alack, my wooden sword is broken; yet I have got me another weapon which is a favorite among these barbarians."

Michael, clad in a mail shirt with a Tatar helmet on his head and mace and sword at his belt, glanced down inquiringly. He did not see that Bembo carried any weapon.

"Nay, it is invisible, good my cousin," chattered the jester. "I learned its use in the Venetian fields and it likes me well because it avails best at a distance from my foe—ha! Are devils loosed on the plain yonder?"

A distant clamor of horns and drums came to their ears. Michael had taken his position among a regiment of Chatagai horse commanded by Mirza Rustom, the

grandson of Tamerlane—a strong-bodied youth in rich armor. Directly behind them the standard of the Genghis family was raised, the yak-tail standard of the Mongols.

"The Ottoman attacks," explained Michael, rising in his short stirrups. "Bayezid has been maneuvering throughout the morning, and now his front ranks advance upon the Horde."

The plateau of Angora was nearly flat. The field favored neither Tatar nor Turk, except that Tamerlane had his left upon the river. Michael could see the masses of Moslem spearmen that had acted as beaters the day before, and other brilliant groups of irregulars—archers on either flank. Behind these, almost concealed in the dust that floated up from the hard clay, were Mamelukes, closely packed, and beside them the glint of lances of the Sipahis.

Bayezid, taken in flank by the swift move of the Tatar horde, had been compelled to realine his troops that morning and draw out of Angora, away from his galleys and trenches, to give battle. He had no other course open to him except to retire since Tamerlane refused to advance from the river.

There was no outcry from the Tatars. They waited as they stood. They flooded the yellow plain like bees clustered upon a board. And like an army of locusts was the advancing host of the sultan, fatigued by continuous marching, and tormented by thirst, but high-spirited and conscious of a hundred victories.

Michael's dark face was grave as he scanned their ranks—a hundred thousand souls, hitherto invincible, moving forward in the shape of a half-moon to the sound of their horns, Seljuke shouting to Ottoman, Turkoman to Mameluke. He knew the fighting ability of these veterans and was more than a little surprised at the calm alertness of the Tatars, not knowing that every Mongol shared the reckless spirit of Tamerlane, and would rather fight than eat.

"A thirsty sight," murmured Bembo, quaffing heartily of one of his skins of water. The day before, Tamerlane had ordered that each man be supplied with two such skins of water.

Emptying the goat's hide, Bembo dismounted to pluck stones from the ground, surveying each with care and throwing away all that were not round and of a certain size.

Michael looked up as arrows began to fly in dense clouds from the sultan's skirmishers. The front ranks of the Tatars took this punishment without cry or movement. By now the Turkish regiments of mailed horsemen could be plainly seen, moving forward at a trot.

Then the sun glinted on ten thousand arrows loosed at the same moment by the Mongol archers who shot three times while one shaft was in the air. The clamor among the Turks shrilled with shouts of pain and anger. Horses broke from the front lines, and the curtain of dust swelled so that it covered the scene of the battle from view from the rear where Michael and the Chataigais stood with picked regiments of Iran and the Tatar steppe.

The roar of voices merged with a pandemonium of clashing steel and thud of horses' hoofs. The tumult swelled until they could no longer hear their own voices.

Stationary at first, the brunt of the battle began to move onward toward the waiting masses of Tamerlane's horse, under Mahmoud Khan and the Lame Conqueror himself—the center of the army that was between the foot-soldiers and the cavalry in reserve, where Michael was.

"Bayezid's mongrel skirmishers have been killed off," he mused, "and his Sipahis are at work."

Even Bembo looked a trifle downcast. He glanced at the glittering figure of Mirza Rustem seated on a black stallion near them. The grandson of Tamerlane was chewing dates.

Plucking up his spirits at this sight, the jester took some fruit from his girdle and tried to follow the mirza's example. But he gagged and coughed up the food, thereby raising a laugh from Michael and the nearest Tatars.

A hot wind tossed the dust clouds high overhead and the glare of the sun pierced sullenly through the murk.

"*Hai—Allah—hai!*" the deep shout of the Janisseries came to them.

Mirza Rustem finished his dates and began to eat dried meat that he pulled from under his saddle where the heat and the chafing of the leather had softened the stiffened meat. Bembo, watching in fascination, found the sight too much for his stomach and turned to look at the masses of Tatars before them.

Tamerlane, his standard and Mahmoud Khan were no longer to be seen.

The red ball of the sun, high overhead when the conflict began, was lowering to the west.

A leaping, furtive form passed the jester's vision, like an incarnation of evil. One of Tamerlane's hunting-leopards had escaped from its cage. No one paid heed to it.

Bembo began to tremble, and found that the perspiration that soaked his garments was cold. The hideous din in front of him had dwindled for a space and now swelled again until it seemed to embrace the horizon.

He looked for captives to be led back, but none came. Surely, he thought, there would be wounded Tatars running from the front, and others not wounded who had escaped the eye of their leaders. That had been a familiar sight in the orderly battles of Europe.

"The Mongols fight each man for himself," grunted Michael impatiently. "They do not keep lines as we do; that is why Bayezid has not broken their center yet. Tamerlane's cavalry met the charge of the Janisseries—"

He rose in his stirrups, looking eagerly over the field. He could make out that the two armies were engaged from wing to wing. The Turkish half-moon was no longer clearly drawn and the bodies of reserve cavalry behind the half-moon had been brought up into the line of battle.

Unconsciously Michael had edged his horse up abreast of the stocky pony of Mirza Rustem. Now he felt an iron hand seize his bridle and draw it back.

Looking into the eyes of Tamerlane's grandson, he found them cold and spiritless. The Breton was flushed and impatient as a hunting-dog held in leash. But there was no fire in the glance of Mirza Rustem who gazed upon the death of thirty thousand men with utter indifference.

"Do you fight for your God?" asked the Tatar.

"As you for your khan."

Mirza Rustem turned to glance fleetingly at where he could make out the yak-tail standard in the black mass of the Tatar center.

"Aye," he said slowly, "yet your God is gold, no more. A *wazir* spy of the sultan confessed before we beheaded him this day that a Christian had gone over to the enemy

for gold. That is the word that is ever in the mouths of your breed."

Michael stiffened, knowing that Rudolfo must have tried to betray the plans of Tamerlane. He thought, too, of the mercenary Comneni, of the grasping emperor and the Venetians who had sent to plunder the khan.

Then there came to his mind the vision of the chivalry of France who had thrown away their lives with reckless bravery in the crusade against Bayezid. And he thought of the Christian graves that marked the cities of Palestine where the knights of the cross had struggled vainly with the conquering Saracen.

This he did not try to explain to the Tatar, knowing that it was useless.

"See," said the young Tatar again; "the standard advances. The wolf has shaken the dogs from his flanks."

Michael saw that the masses of Tatars that had been stationary were moving forward now. It was almost imperceptible at first, this hive-like movement of men waiting grimly to slay.

Tamerlane's center had stood fast for three hours. Bayezid's last attack had been broken.

What the chivalry of Europe could not do, the Lame Conqueror and his Horde had done. To Michael this was a strange thing. Where was then the power of God?

Hunger and the nervous suspense of the last hours had made his mind clear and unnaturally alert. He found that he was dwelling upon some words of a woman who had taught him wisdom before he became a man.

"The ways of God are past our knowing," his mother had said.

He wondered if she were reading from the Book wherein she had found these words, and smiling as she did, alone in her room in the tower of the seacoast. She had smiled like that when his father's ships brought in word of new conquests of the Moslems on the borders of Europe.

It did not seem to Michael to be a strange thing that the strongest faith should be in the hearts of women, who knew nothing of warfare.

This had passed through his thoughts almost subconsciously while he watched the battle. Now the dust curtain thickened, cutting off his view. There was a pounding of hoofs and shapes that looked like

birds crossed in front of Mirza Rustem and a man shouted something. Then they were gone, wheeling toward the Mongol right. Michael spoke to a Tatar squatted upon the ground sharpening his sword.

"Beduins—our men," he announced to Bembo, a new note of eagerness in his voice. "Be of good cheer, cousin esquire. Five regiments of Sipahis have been surrounded and are doomed in yonder mêlée. The Janissaries are reforming. Presently will we, God willing, bear our hand to the fray."

"I am well content here," rejoined Bembo sincerely. "San Marco——"

Almost at his ear a hideous clamor of kettle-drums and cymbals broke out. The jester clapped his hands to his head, only to see the standard of Mirza Rustem raised and the masses of Tatar horsemen move forward at a walk.

Michael touched spurs to his pony and Bembo sighed deeply. He looked longingly toward the rear where the leopard had fled, only to see lines of broad grim faces advancing and shaggy horses swarming together like bees.



THE sound of the Tatar *nacars* throbbed over the plain of Angora, summoning the Mongols to attack.

Whereupon every warrior of Tamerlane who could hold himself upon his feet ran or galloped forward. Some, who could not stand unaided, grasped the stirrups of the riders and struck out with their free arms.

And it was upon the checked and disheartened array of the Janissaries, ordered to charge a second time, that the Horde advanced. Defeated on both flanks, half his men slaughtered, and half of the rest staggering from wounds or thirst, the Thunderbolt ordered the flower of his veteran host to drive again at Tamerlane's center—only to be met by the picked horsemen of the Mongols, held in reserve until then under Mirza Rustem.

The Janissaries, shouting their war-cry, met the oncoming tide, wavered and broke up into scattered squares that melted away into mounds of dying and dead.

Michael, fighting beside the Chatagais, glimpsed the body of Gutchluk outstretched on the earth beside a mangled horse. The long hair of the Tatar was matted with blood and his black eyes stared up blindly at the passing riders.

Then through the dust Michael made out

the *noyan* who had been called a prince of Eblis by Bembo. The armor of the noble was cut and hacked away and one hand held together his nearly severed abdomen. He was seated on a heap of sprawling Sipahis, and he was smiling. The dead lay thick about him, for the Sheikh of Rum had penetrated here into the center of Tamerlane's host.

The Chatagais were galloping now, enveloping and sweeping over detachments of white-capped Janissaries. The remnants of a regiment of Turkomans, kin to the Tatars, threw down their arms and were spared.

"Bayezid is in flight to Angora with his grandes," cried Mirza Rustem. "We must not return without him."

The grandson of Tamerlane staggered in his saddle as an arrow embedded itself in his mailed chest. He dropped his shield to break off the end of the shaft. Michael slew the archer who had sent the arrow, and presently found himself riding alone through the dust clouds.

There he turned aside to follow a horseman who had entered a rocky defile at a headlong pace. The aspect of the man was familiar.

"Rudolfo?" he cried.

He had known some hours before that the *condottiere* had escaped from the guard of Tatar boys, slaying one in his flight to the river. But Michael had not thought until informed by Mirza Rustem that Rudolfo had sought protection and reward from the sultan.

Rudolfo, in fact, had been kept beside the retinue of Bayezid until there were no longer any to guard him. Then with Gian he had circled the remnants of the Turkish regiments to seek safety in flight.

He knew that his life was forfeited to the Tatars. It seemed incomprehensible to him that Bayezid should be routed. It was part of the ill fortune that had dogged him since the Gate of Shadows.

So panic—the panic that had seized him at Nicopolis—claimed him, and he turned into the first ravine that offered shelter. Michael's shout caused him to glance back swiftly.

He saw that the Breton rode alone. In the fear that beset him, Rudolfo felt that his only chance of life lay in slaying Michael. The issue between the two had been long in coming to a head. Now, Rudolfo thought, it was at hand.

The *condottiere* checked his horse and flung his javelin deftly. The spear missed the Breton but struck his mount, causing the beast to rear and plunge. Michael jumped to earth and hurled his mace.

It crashed against Rudolfo's round shield of rhinoceros hide, and the man winced as he dropped the crushed target from an injured arm.

He reached for his sword, but Michael was on him, had grasped him about the waist and hauled him from his saddle.

"Now may we settle the issue of our duel," muttered Michael, stepping back and drawing his weapon.

They had, in fact, strange weapons. Both had been deprived of the swords they had brought from Venice. The curved simitars felt strange in their hands. Rudolfo hung back, shaking the sweat from his eyes and gazing sidelong at the rocky defile in which they stood.

"Gian!" he cried. "I : me!"

Michael waited for no more but leaped forward, slashing at the other's head. Rudolfo parried skilfully, calling again for his follower.

Out of the corner of his eye Michael saw the tall figure of the man-at-arms on a panting horse. Gian had been following them.

At this Michael set his back to a rock, warding off the counter-thrust of Rudolfo, who pressed the attack, certain now of the presence of his ally. Gian plucked forth a long knife and held it by the tip, reining his horse nearer for an opportunity to cast his favorite weapon.

Michael heard rapid hoof-beats approaching down the ravine. He caught the flash of the dagger as it flew toward him, only to rattle harmlessly off the rock at his back.

Gian grunted and flung up both arms, reeled in the saddle and tumbled to the ground. But Michael had not seen the thing that struck him down.

"Habet!" a shrill voice chanted. "Goliath is dead! Stand aside, Cousin Michael, and let the other devil have his due."

By now Michael was aware of Bembo on his mule-ass, waving something about his head.

"Nay," the Breton growled; "this is my affair."

The fall of Gian had brought a scowl to Rudolfo's olive face. He pressed Michael desperately, cursing under his breath. The two simitars clashed and the helmet was

struck from the Breton's head. Rudolfo, panting, exerted every effort to follow up his success and reach his enemy's bare skull. Michael was taunting him softly.

As Rudolfo's blow fell Michael sprang forward dropping his sword. The other's simitar passed over his shoulder and Michael's powerful left hand caught the other's wrist, pinning it to his side.

At this the Italian grinned maliciously, for, with his enemy's left hand occupied, he fancied that Michael was defenseless. So Rudolfo gripped Michael's throat, bending his head back viciously with his free hand.

Somewhat he wondered at Michael's passivity, not knowing that the Breton's right hand, useful once more, thanks to long and patient practise, was feeling in his own girdle for the dagger Rudolfo carried.

Michael's searching fingers freed the dagger and plunged it into the other's throat, over the mail.

Sword in hand, Rudolfo swayed on his feet, choked and wheeled about as if to run. His knees sank under him and he blundered against a rock, falling heavily upon his back. Both his hands gripped the hilt of the dagger, strained at it and were still.

Bembo, having dismounted, bent over the *condottiere* and ripped off the bulging pouch that was tied to the dead man's waist. Michael saw for the first time that the jester held a long sling, made of thin strips of leather, a stone ready in the pocket. Catching his glance, the jester laughed.

"My weapon," he said proudly. "Gian's thick head was cracked like a hen's egg. Gian's thick purse was full of gold trinkets, plundered, methinks, from the slain. So I would fain crack open his master's nest-egg——"

From Rudolfo's pouch a stream of Turkish gold bezants poured forth.

"*Consummatum est*," murmured Bembo. "It is finished. Gian's spoil will pay me for saving your life, coz. These belong to you."

As Michael shook his head, the jester, nothing loath, poured the coins into his goatskin, after emptying out the remaining stones.

Breathing deeply from his effort, Michael gazed around at the shadows of the ravine and listened in vain for the war-cry of the Tatars.

"You will not hear it, coz," remarked Bembo. "What is left of the grandees is flying toward Angora with worthy Mirza Rustem in hot pursuit. The victory is ours, as I prayed San Marco it should be."

He tied up the sack and surveyed Rudolfo philosophically.

"Cousin Michael," he declared thoughtfully, "you are a wise man. In Venice did you assert that a man follows his bent. And here is Rudolfo, a noble seller of himself, a *condottiere* to the king's taste. He sold himself to Genoa, then Venice, then back to himself again. Last night he traded him to the sultan, and now methinks he has gone to purgatory to sell his soul to the devil."

Out on the plain of Angora the sun had set over the red mist and the red dust where the bodies of fifty thousand men lay motionless.

It was night when Michael and his follower sought Mirza Rustem and Tamerlane in the town of Angora. They knew that where the khan was, the sultan would be. Men had told them that Bayezid had been taken before he could leave the field and that a hundred of his grandees had died around him before he could be taken.

Torches borne by the Tatars and the glare of building tents revealed to Michael a strange sight. Tamerlane sat his horse at the entrance to the pleasure lake of the palace. Mirza Rustem in bloodied armor and the scarred, dust-coated *noyans* attended him.

Huddled groups of women and slaves stared in a kind of fascination at what stood before the old Tatar. Pushing past the onlookers to the side of Mirza Rustem, Michael saw the great bulk of Bayezid kneeling in front of Tamerlane's horse.

The sultan wore his embroidered cap with the blood-colored ruby, and his tunic of cloth-of-gold. His head swayed on his shoulders and his eyes were half-closed. His glance went from one to another of the *noyans* and finally rested on Michael.

The black eyes of the defeated monarch widened as he recognized the Christian who had been his slave. His lips twisted as he half-made a gesture of appeal, and then drew back before the passionless scrutiny of the Tatars.

Michael folded his arms and waited, to hear Tamerlane's word that would speak

the fate of the man who was called the Thunderbolt.

"Live—if you can," said the old Conqueror gruffly.

He signed to a group of his followers who brought out a cage that had held one of Tamerlane's leopards.

In this cage Bayezid was placed and the door locked. He could no longer look into the eyes of the watchers as he was picked up, with his prison, and carried through the flame-ridden streets of Angora.

Somewhere in the huddle of captives a woman screamed and the other Moslems took up the wail of lament.

But Michael did not accept it for himself, giving it, instead, to a friend. He turned his back on the East to seek a galley bound for the Brittany he had not seen for ten years and the castle where his mother waited.

So it happened that the *baillios* of Contarini and the Maritime Council of the Signory of Venice reported a curious thing.

In the heart of Tataray, they said, sometimes called the land of Gog and Magog, not far from the Salt Sea, there was a fine palace in fair groves of date and cypress trees.

The ruler of this palace of Fars was a weird man, with emerald rings on his toes and cloth-of-gold on his broken body. He called himself sometimes the Grand Cham or Khan, and sometimes Bembo the First.

 NEWS of what had come to pass in Asia spread to the world of Christendom. The wave of Ottoman invasion had been broken. In his marble palace standing over the dark waters of the Golden Gate, the Byzantine Emperor held revelry to celebrate the delivery of Constantinople.

The crusaders of Saint John took new heart; the pilgrim galleys that sailed from Venice were filled with new voyagers to the Holy Land. *Te Deum* was sung in the cathedrals of France. But no mention reached France of the share in the victory of Angora that belonged to an obscure voyager of Brittany. Nor did the mother of Michael Bearn hear the name of her son in the mouths of pilgrims.

The Maritime Council of Venice planned new inroads into the field of Oriental trade, and wrote off the moneys advanced to Signor Clavijo and his party as a total loss. In fact it was recorded in the annals of the council that Clavijo and all those with him were lost.

This, however, was not the case. Clavijo lived—outside the knowledge of the council that he dreaded—in Spain and wrote a book of his travels that was filled with most marvelous tales.

And Tamerlane rewarded Michael Bearn. The Tatar monarch bestowed on him a khanate in northern Persia—Fars, with its palace and riches.

