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Swords from the Sea

Harold Lamb

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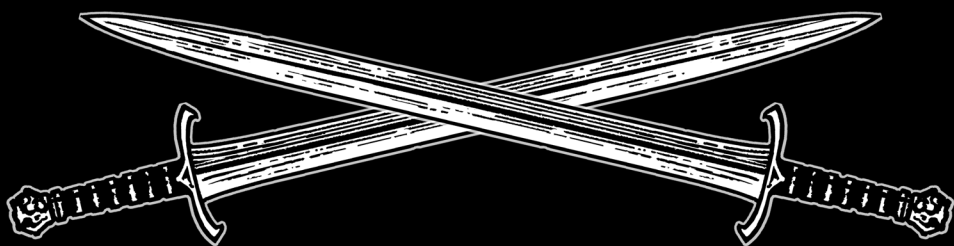


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Swords from The Sea



Harold Lamb

Edited by Howard Andrew Jones

Introduction by S. M. Stirling

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Foreword

This volume of Harold Lamb stories collects his historical magazine tales of seafarers, wanderers, marines, and Vikings. There are even some Cossacks here because there wasn't room for them in the final volume of Lamb's Cossack collections. Truth be told, they would have been an odd fit, as the Cossacks themselves are secondary characters to John Paul Jones, commander of Catherine the Great's navy, and the political double-dealing that proves more treacherous to Jones than the enemies on the water in two short novels of naval action upon the Crimean.

Here too is the exciting tale of a doomed search for the northeast passage by an English expedition, challenged by both the elements and a traitor in their ranks, and Lamb's last long historical, a compelling novel of the American expedition against the Barbary pirates. "The Drub-Devil March" shows that Lamb could well have kept spinning historical yarns of the quality from his *Adventure* days, if he'd had the time or inclination.

I became a Lamb fan by stages. I enjoyed his Hannibal biography so much in high school that I sought out more by him, hoping that *The Curved Saber* would contain more tales of the great Carthaginian (I didn't have a clue then that sabers weren't remotely Carthaginian). It proved instead to be a collection of Khlit the Cossack stories, which I read and loved. I didn't discover for many more years that there was a sequel volume, or that *White Falcon* featured many of the same characters, or, later still, that there were dozens of other Harold Lamb historicals that had never been collected. I was naive enough to assume that if a story hadn't been collected it must not be as good, a notion quickly dispelled when I purchased Dr. John Drury Clark's Harold Lamb *Adventure* collection from his widow. These stories were just as good—and some of them were better—than those already between book covers.

I enjoyed myself so thoroughly with those Lamb tales that I went looking for more. The earlier fiction from the more obscure pulps proved disappointing, as I've discussed elsewhere. But the first tale I read in *Collier's* impressed me mightily, a 5,000-word adventure of a Cossack, an allegedly haunted tower, a lovely princess, and a scheming noble . . . all in all, pretty grand stuff. I thought I'd found another treasure trove until I read the next *Collier's* story, which was a pretty similar tale with different stage dressing. So too was the next, and the next, and the next . . .

Maybe that's how the *Collier's* editors wanted things. Perhaps they didn't think their readers would care for historical adventure unless it was a romance. Maybe Lamb's own outlook had changed and he wanted to write stories with dependably happy endings. *Collier's*, *Pictorial Review*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* published him regularly, and all of his work began to read the same. Not everything was formula, though—from this period came "Lionheart" and "Protection," both found in *Swords from the West* (Bison Books, 2009), powerful pieces with romance as a driving theme but simply head and shoulders above the others, and one of my very favorite Lamb shorts, the moving "Devil's Song," found in *Swords of the Steppes* (Bison Books, 2007). On reading these it becomes clear that Lamb could still surprise with those characteristic twists and turns, and I can't help wondering if the change in tone was the fault of editors who were saying, "We'll take these, but try not to be so bleak next time—can you give us more *happy* endings?" How else then to explain away forgettable fare like "The Lady and the Pirate" and several others included here only in the interest of completeness?

Every good critic knows that you should judge a body of work by its most outstanding successes first. Lamb had many more successes than most writers, and it must be said that when viewed singly, most of these later stories *are* fine writing. Even if the endings are reminiscent of each other, the path to that conclusion varies. It must be remembered, too, that they originally appeared in magazines over a span of years; they were never intended to be read one after the other. Like Lord Dunsany's tales of Jorkens or Seabury Quinn's Jules de Grandin stories, they are better when they're not read back to back.

Aside from the aforementioned, my favorites from this period are Lamb's seven Viking yarns. Lamb always presents the Viking mind-set ably and gets a lot of play out of the honorable barbarian facing off against civilized

schemers. His Vikings may be uneducated in the ways of civilization, but they're no fools, and they're stout warriors with flashes of grim humor.

Lamb's ability to slide into the viewpoint of other cultures seems almost effortless. Having been schooled in rationality ourselves, we sometimes forget how cultures in other times viewed the workings of the world around them. Thus, in "Elf Woman" the Iclander Rang believes without question that there is a god slumbering in his volcano, and in "Forward!" the Cossack Ivak realizes, not with surprise but with understanding, why the men he chances upon react in astonishment to his reappearance, for they had assumed him dead. Their natural conclusion isn't that he has survived his wounds and come galloping after them:

By their bearing they were outlaws of the band, and their jaws dropped when they saw my face. Afterward I remembered that they must have thought me dead, and when the big black rushed on them in the eye of the rising sun they believed a bloody specter had come up out of Father Dnieper to settle their hash.

Magic and the supernatural are woven throughout the belief systems of these cultures; through the eyes of Lamb's characters, commonplace events can take on supernatural significance—the sight, for instance, in "Wolf Meat," of a man on skis who seems to his observer to be flying across the face of the snow. Showing us magical thinking in this way is a technique Lamb used sparingly but well throughout his historicals, and it is a technique seldom applied by other writers.

This collection concludes with Lamb's first printed story for the magazine that published his very best historical fiction, *Adventure*. "His Excellency the Vulture" might be simpler work than some of the other material included here, but it was a leap forward for Lamb, and contains what would soon become his trademarks: clever plotting, driving action, and wily lead characters. The appendix contains an added treat. In addition to the usual letters is an essay by *Adventure* editor Arthur Sullivan Hoffman that provides a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at Lamb's drafting practices and the challenges he faced in writing and publishing.

For those in search of other Lamb stories, I hope it hardly needs to be pointed out that there are eight Bison Books collections brimming with Harold Lamb's work, and three novels of Sir Hugh and the sword of Roland (*Durandal*, *The Sea of Ravens*, and *Rusudan*) from Donald M. Grant. But if you're still wanting more Harold Lamb adventure stories, *Omar Khayyam* and *Nur-Mahal* are historical novels even though they're of-

ten located in the biography section of your local library. There may yet be some stirring historical work in other pulp magazines from Lamb's early days; Jan Van Heinegen and other fans still search diligently. And lest we forget, there is a whole shelf full of histories and biographies that brought Lamb fame and recognition.

It is almost criminal that the work of such an accomplished writer has been neglected for so long, and I am grateful that Bison Books stepped forward to give this fiction the treatment it warranted. Now that all of these tales are so readily accessible, I hope it is time at last for Lamb to be recognized as a master of adventure and for his fiction to take its place upon the shelves beside Dumas and Stevenson and Lamb's contemporary, Sabatini. We Americans have waited too long to acknowledge the worth of adventure fiction and even now look askance at it more regularly than we value it. We should be proud that men like Jack London and Robert E. Howard and Harold Lamb lived and worked here and spun new fables for us.

Any educated person can write, but storytelling is a gift that must be honed and crafted. Harold Lamb had that gift, and he practiced his skill until his prose shone with a high gloss. He took his readers to new lands through the eyes of fascinating characters, and he told wonderful tales with a precision and a depth of knowledge and understanding that only a small number of writers can match. Few if any have surpassed him in his chosen field, and none has ever matched his particular voice. We should treasure these stories and his skill in telling them, but, more particularly, we should read and savor them.

Enjoy!

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Bill Prather of Thacher School for his continued support. This volume would not have been possible without the aid of Bruce Nordstrom, who long ago provided me with Lamb's *Collier's* texts as well as his *Saturday Evening Post* and *Pictorial Review* stories and the text of "The Drub-Devil March"; Alfred Lybeck, who provided *Camp-Fire* letters and additional information; and Brian Taves for the essay written by Arthur Sullivan Hoffman. I also would like to express my appreciation for the advice of Victor Dreger, Jan van Heinegen, James Pfundstein, and Kevin Cook, gentlemen and scholars all. Lastly, I wish again to thank my father, the late Victor Jones, who helped me locate various *Adventure* magazines; and Dr. John Drury Clark, whose lovingly preserved collection of Lamb stories is the chief source of 75 percent of my *Adventure* manuscripts.

Introduction

S. M. STIRLING

One thing we tend to forget about the pulps was how *many* of them there were, and how much was written for them. The science-fiction and fantasy segments and the superhero pulps remain freshest in memory, because they were at the root of traditions that have continued and flourished ever since; and the Western, if not in such condition, is not forgotten. But in fact, the adventure pulps contained *dozens* of distinct subgenres: Western, Oriental, Detective, South Seas, any number of historical types such as the pirate story or the tale of the Crusades. And miscegenation in plenty—tales of detectives having adventures in Chinatown, for example, or of super-science set among Tibetan mahatmas (the last a specialty of Talbot Mundy, a contemporary of Lamb's), or psychic Chinese detectives involving “spicy” tales of white slavery.

Harold Lamb specialized in Oriental/historical adventures—for a number of reasons, starting with the exceedingly rare one that he was a genuine historian of the Orient, the author of well-regarded biographies of Genghis Khan and other figures, and of a redaction of the autobiography of Babur, the first Moghul emperor of India and descendant of Tamerlane. Together with a grasp of history and character far above the average of the tribe, Lamb had a driving narrative focus and a talent for depicting action as vigorous as any, even Robert E. Howard's. But he wasn't limited to stories of Cossacks and Mongols, well known though his efforts in those fields are.

The stories in this collection are largely crossover; pirates-plus-something-else, for example. We have Vikings on the Golden Horn in Constantinople . . . which really happened, by the way. Vikings actually ruled Russia for some time—the very word *Russ* originally meant *northman*—and some of their raiders actually sailed down the Volga, took ship on the Cas-

pian, and pillaged Persia! The Byzantines were so impressed by Viking fighting abilities that they recruited a special “ax-bearing Guard,” also known as the Varangians, which for centuries came mostly from the Viking countries.

We also have a story of Renaissance England—in the obscure reign of Edward VI, Elizabeth’s little-remembered half brother. It’s a rousing story of proto-buccaneers and obscure northerners in the terrible lands beyond the White Sea, but it also illustrates how Lamb actually *knew* history, not just the high points that other writers instinctively reached for. Not for him the well-known exploits of the Elizabethan sea-dogs; instead he sets his story a generation earlier, when the English made their first tentative steps to break the hold the Iberian peoples had on the routes to the world beyond Europe.

Lamb also had a taste and talent for centering his fiction upon the unusual hero. For one thing, he generally avoided the noblemen who populated so much of historical fiction—and often enough the sweet noblewomen. He was more likely to take a battered middle-aged Scot or a Venetian flower girl as his companion—or to match John Paul Jones with a Cossack and set them on the Black Sea!

Another notable feature of Lamb’s adventure stories is that they are much more like an actual adventure than most—that is, they’re full of discomfort, misery, and danger. The end never feels predestined; they have a sense of brooding *risk* that’s unusual. When the Barbary pirates swarm in, you feel the terror that caused the hill-towns all around the Mediterranean to be sited high up for the sake of defense, not aesthetics.

I’ve said that Lamb wrote historical fiction; but in a way, all his fiction was historical in another sense: he had a deep awareness of the depth of time. A tale of a “modern” American soldier in Turkey—set in the 1950s, and so growing historical to us!—draws parallels with the same city in the age of Justinian and Belisarius, fourteen hundred years before. The Cathedral of Holy Wisdom plays a role in it, and the gallery above the nave. Just as an aside, there’s runic graffiti scratched there, from when the Byzantine emperor’s Varangian bodyguards waited out the ceremonies by scratching “Yngvi Was Here” in the marble! The sheer otherness of the past is there, and also the constants—love, hate, the intrigues and treachery of the powerful, whether emperors or Viking kings or Hansa merchants, and the rarity of honor and trust.

With Harold Lamb, the whole bright tapestry of the past is open to you. There’s never been a better guide!

Longsword



When they brought Irene before the Caesar, he looked at her in silence. He wanted to be rid of her forever.

But Irene's hair gleamed like pallid gold; her eyes reminded him of green sea water. Her slight young body held itself erect before him. She was utterly still, in her wayward pride. The Caesar wished that she were not so lovely. People would remember her, if she disappeared.

The Caesar, John Dukas, supreme commander of the armed hosts of the Byzantine Empire, was quite capable of making people vanish into thin air. He had at his command certain obscure assassins, Asiatic slave dealers, and eminent physicians. Not long ago he had executed in public Mikhail Comnenus, the father of Irene Comnena, who had in his veins the blood of the Emperor, and had rebelled against the Emperor, who was the cousin of John Dukas.

Irene, the only child of the dead rebel, remained to be disposed of. Otherwise she would in all probability bear children of her own, who would nourish the death of their grandfather in their minds. The Emperor himself had ordered that she should be made away with, but he had not indicated how this was to be done.

"What would you like, Irene Comnena?" he asked gently. "To be sent to the house of a friend? What friend?"

The girl did not answer. She was afraid that this Caesar who sat in a chair shaped like a throne and who wore a blue mantle almost the hue of the imperial purple intended to trick her with words. Besides, she had no real friends in Constantinople.

"You must have a protector, Irene."

She shook her head. The only thing she wanted was to be sent back to the palace on the Pontus shore where the Judas trees were in bloom and

the funny fishermen sang as they dragged the nets in. But they had told her that the estates of her father belonged to the Emperor now. She was really very frightened, and pressed her fingers tightly into her palms. She did not want the protection of this quiet bronzed man with the oiled hair.

The Caesar reflected that even black slaves can be bribed to tell their secrets, and the deep waters had been known to yield up weighted bodies. The Emperor did not wish the body of this girl to be found, and if it were found, he, the Caesar, might have to take the blame.

The Caesar and the Emperor were cousins, and they hated, each one the other, like cousins. At times the Caesar wondered if that gaunt figure in pearlsewn cloth-of-gold did not possess the art of reading another's mind—even while he brooded everlastingly over books and jewels and legends of mad saints.

"Let me go away," the girl whispered.

"I will find someone," the Caesar assented, "to take you away."

When the slaves led her back to the tapestried room that was her prison, she had no longer need to appear proud. She crouched down on the window seat, sobbing convulsively, because she was alone and she had no one she dared confide in any longer.

John Dukas considered how he might find someone who could carry her beyond the borders of the empire without attracting attention. This would not be easily done, for the nobility of Constantinople was an inbred society, a few families all related more or less to the Emperor, tracing their descent back to Constantine and imperial Rome. For some seven hundred years these few families had preserved themselves and their amusements behind the triple wall of Constantinople, while barbarians overran the ruins of western Rome. Huns and Bulgars and Turks had not conquered them.

The aristocracy of the city hired other barbarians to defend them, and their greatest dread was boredom. During the seven centuries they had achieved mastery in intrigue and enlightenment in subtle vice, quite certain that beyond the circle of their intelligence lay only the darkness of Chaos.

The women especially treasured their secrets of refinement; for their bodies they had the sheer silks and the perfumes and cosmetics of all Asia. The galleys of Venice brought them rare glasses and silverware; the carpets

of Tabriz and Kashan covered their floors, and at the end of their whispering galleries they could hear the gossip of the unchanging city.

These aristocrats knew Irene Comnena as a self-contained girl who preferred the country house on the Pontus to her city palace and their society; most of them knew her by sight. So John Dukas must needs smuggle her into oblivion without attracting attention. Byzantine society winked at assassination, but it never forgave bungling.

"What is that?" the Caesar asked, staring at something within the rim of the Golden Horn.

A secretary came to the window, standing respectfully behind him. Below them extended the imperial gardens, and—beyond a guarded wall—the jetties crowded with galleys and trading vessels. In a private anchorage lay the Caesar's barge, gilded and carpeted and canopied, with space for forty rowers. Upon this barge he was accustomed to journey up the Bosphorus or to cross over to Chalcedon—even to take pleasure trips out to the islands. But he was looking at a strange craft coming in past the guard-ships.

It was smaller than a galley. It had a prow that reared up into a wooden dragon head much the worse for wear. Battered shields were ranged along the rail above the oars.

"Your Illustriousness," the secretary explained, "it is a dragon ship from the far northern sea."

The Caesar had never seen such a craft in Constantinople. "From what land?" he asked.

"May it please your high Excellence, from the end of all land—what is called the ultimate Thule."

John Dukas nodded as if satisfied. "Bring me a report," he said, "of its master, and its probable length of stay—" for the first time he glanced at the secretary—"Theophile."

Now the dragon ship lay in the bight of the Golden Horn. A gangboard stretched from its foredeck to a stone jetty. On the afterdeck its master sat, gazing at the lofty towers and the mighty domes of such a city as he had never seen in his days before now.

Brian was his name—Brian Longsword, a sea rover and a great manslayer by reason of his strength in weapon-play. Wide shoulders he had, behind an arching chest; he had such legs that he could leap his own height into the air, and with his fingers he could pull nails from a plank. But he was

handsome and gentle until something angered him overmuch. He had a youthful beard curling around his chin, and he had mild gray eyes.

"It is a good hamlet," he said, "for spoiling."

Beside him squatted an old Viking of more fell than flesh. A far-wandering man he was—Fiddle Skal they called him—and he had many tales at his tongue's end of the wonders he had seen. "Rather," he grunted, "would yonder dwellers spoil thee, Brian."

The tall rover gazed down affectionately at the gray steel blade that lay upon his knee. He was polishing with a sheepskin the long sword that had won him his name. "Oh, I would bid them take their weapons," said he, "and many of them would be raven's meat before that happened."

Fiddle Skal grunted again. He had been in Constantinople, which the Vikings knew as Micklegarth, before.

"These men—" he waved a crooked hand at the crowded waterfront—"do not stand their ground with weapons. Nay, they have other ways of plucking gold and gear from the likes of us. But they have grand horse racing, whatever."

"I would like well," observed Brian Longsword after a while, "to see that."

So they went ashore, the Viking sea rover and his foredeck man. They walked with a clumsy rolling gait, yet many heads turned after Brian, who had put on a red cloak. At the first booth where carved ivory trinkets were displayed he stopped to stare admiringly.

"Come away, man," urged Fiddle Skal, who was impatient to get off to the Hippodrome to watch the chariot racing.

Just then a Greek peddler edged up with one thing in his hand, holding it so Brian could not help but see it—a round miniature painting no larger than a man's hand, with a frame of gold and pearls. A dainty woman's head the size of his thumb looked up at Brian.

"Does your Lordship wish to buy a slave—such a slave?" The man asked in fair Norman French, which the Vikings understood well enough.

The hair of the head was pale gold, and the eyes met Brian's no matter how he turned the miniature. He had never seen anything like it before.

"Her portrait," the Greek whispered.

Meanwhile Fiddle Skal had peered around Brian's arm. "Put it down," he urged. "'Tis a Greek trick. One like that is not for the likes of you."

Brian thought this would be true. Still, he gave it back reluctantly and

followed slowly after the hurrying Skal. The eyes of the miniature still seemed to be beseeching him.

So he stopped readily enough when that same Greek bobbed up at his elbow again, out of the crowd.

"This way your Lordship," the fellow whispered. "Up this alley—come."

Brian looked over the heads of the chattering throng. By now Fiddle Skal was almost out of sight hurrying toward his horse racing. The tall seafarer wanted above all things to set eyes on the woman of the miniature. There could be no harm in that, he thought, and he might find Skal later. But the truth was that whatever Brian had in his mind to do, he did that, no matter what might be in his path.

Following the Greek, he made his way through a kind of garden, into a gate where lounging spearmen inspected him curiously and a softly stepping person with a staff appeared, to whisper to the Greek. Again the big Viking followed patiently through dim corridors, up winding stairs into a tapestried room.

There he stopped, motionless. By the window the woman of the miniature lay, curled among cushions. She was twisting her heavy hair with slim, white fingers, and she looked up at him, startled. Brian felt the hot blood rush into his cheeks. It seemed to him that here was an elf-maid, come among mortals.

When she spoke, her voice was like the chiming of a golden chain. Not a word did he understand. He had seen the girl, though, and that was enough. He would have liked to pick her up in his arms and bear her off to the ship. But it seemed she must be bought.

After avid questioning by the Greek, and—through the Greek—by the man with the staff, Theophile by name, it turned out that the woman's price was two hundred and ten gold byzants. That, strangely enough, was the exact number of coins Brian had confessed that he had in his wallet. So he handed his wallet to the fellow, who began to argue fiercely with the bearded Greek. They did not count the money before the woman, and Brian moved toward her shyly.

"Thy name?" His deep tones rumbled through the room.

She only looked at him strangely, as if puzzled, and turned suddenly away to the window.

"Her name is Irene," the Greek was whispering, "and now she is shy—you understand? Consider, my lord. Now she is a slave, but once she was the

daughter of a magister militum—of—of an earl, you understand.” He addressed the girl respectfully, and she answered briefly. “She asks an hour or so to gather her belongings together. At the hour of the vesper bell she will be brought down to your ship.”

Still talking, he edged Brian from the room and into the corridors. At the garden gate he said farewell hurriedly, to hasten after the man with the staff who had retained the purse.

Veiled women looked quickly into Brian’s flushed face as he strode down toward the waterfront. He thought of nothing but the living thing that was Irene, who would, soon, belong to him.

Halfway down the market street, however, he had an idea. Here, in a booth at his side was a carpet somewhat like the luxurious carpet in Irene’s room. He motioned to a bowing shopman to roll it up and carry it after him. He did not know anything about haggling. But after that he looked to right and left. When a thing caught his fancy he had it carried forth and strode on, with a growing procession of merchants’ boys at his heels. The last purchase he made was a couch with a brocade covering.

When he reached the dragon ship he went to his sea chest and ransacked it for gold rings and bits of silver. When he had a handful of these he distributed them among the bearers.

Only a few of his stalwarts had remained to guard the ship; the rest were amusing themselves on shore. These few he set to work swabbing down the half-cabin under the afterdeck. He made them wash down the sidewalls that looked of a sudden bare and inhospitable.

He moved his sea chest and sleeping skins to one side and spread the new carpet over the rough planking. The couch he arranged on the other side, with an ebony chest, cushions, and gilt candelabra. The linen cloths with pictures of strange birds—meant to cover the walls—he did not meddle with. Such as that was woman’s work. But he did have his men rig up a length of tapestry to screen the newly adorned cabin from the open waist of the ship.

It was after dark when Fiddle Skal pushed through the tapestry and blinked in astonishment. “What wine,” he growled, “did they pour out for you, to turn your mind to this peacock’s nest?”

Brian admitted it was for a woman.

“What manner of woman would set foot on a dragon ship?”

“One that I bought.”

Fiddle Skal's jaw dropped open, and he remained speechless for a moment. "You—the warfarer—bought a woman? Where is she, then?"

"After the vesper bell she will be brought down to the boat."

The foredeck man pondered and his beard twitched in a grin. "That is to be seen. Did you buy her in the slave market?"

When Brian described the garden and the lion-guarded portal, Skal burst into a roar of laughter. "May the dogs bite the Greeks! That was the Sacred Palace. It must be that the imperial slaves have shown you some dancing girl. And for that you gave them all your gold!"

And he struck his hands together. "A princess, no doubt, she was—for two hundred byzants—"

He stopped, amazed. A seaman came under the hanging to say that armed men in uniform had come to the gangboard. Skal went to the rail, to peer into the darkness.

These men carried no torches. But he saw a white-veiled figure emerge from a litter and come down the gangboard. Behind her followed a black slave in the red cloak of the palace guard, and he carried on his shoulder a box.

The Vikings stared in silence as if spirits had appeared among them. The guards and slaves departed with the empty litter, and Brian stepped toward the veiled girl, who was now alone. Fiddle Skal heard her speak slowly, as if the Norman tongue were strange to her. "My lord, you are he that will take me to my home. But what manner of ship is this?"

Fierce joy surged through Brian's body. Irene had come. She was here on his boat—she was his. When he tried to speak his throat closed and he could not utter words, although he was laughing softly from sheer exultation. Beckoning her to the afterdeck, he clumsily drew back the tapestry hanging so she could see her new quarters. And she cried out in dismay. The common bazaar hangings and the glaring rug appeared to be a stage set to deceive her. Theophile had sworn to her on holy relics, and she had hoped—although she had not quite believed—she would be sent back unharmed to her summer home on the sea. Theophile and the Greek trinket seller had shown this great Viking to her that afternoon and assured her that he had been commissioned by the Caesar to bear her thither in his ship. And she had thought that the Viking's gray eyes were honest. So she had hoped. But this cabin—a pagan Tatar would have provided better quarters for a slave.

"Let me go!" she whispered.

Slowly Brian shook his head. He would never do that.

It seemed clear, now, to the girl: the Caesar had sent her to this strange ship with the dragon's head to be slain at sea.

"Is—is it thy will," she whispered again, "that I should find my death here?"

Brian could only shake his head. "That," he growled at last, "will never happen while I can hold a weapon."

She let the veil fall from her face and looked into his eyes to read the soul behind them. And in that moment she knew more of Brian than he knew of himself. A flush of blood darkened her cheeks and she spoke shyly, "Then why did they bring me here?"

"First tell me," he bade her, "who thou art."

So it happened that she told him of the capture of Comnenus and the slaying of him, when the Caesar's ax-men hewed her father into five pieces under the eyes of the mob in the Hippodrome. And then of her imprisonment in the Sacred Palace, when the slave girls whispered one day that she might be spared, and the next day that the Caesar would poison her food—until that afternoon when Theophile had ushered Brian into her room.

The Viking listened without moving. At the end he nodded, because he had thought it all over carefully and he knew now what was to be done.

"It is clear to me," he said, "that they are mighty liars. Now, sleep."

Sitting on his chest with the sword on his knee, he kept watch while the tired girl stretched out on the couch. At first she pulled the mantle over her head and cried a little. Then the slapping of the wavelets against the hull and the swaying of the curtain made her drowsy. Not until the last candle had guttered out did the Viking rise and go forth to the deck.

There a shaggy shape croaked at his elbow. "The messmates are saying that harm will come out of taking that mighty dame on the ship."

"I will take her, and I will keep her."

Fiddle Skal sighed. "That is to be seen."

The last thing John Dukas expected was a visit from the master of the dragon ship. He was seated at his noon meal on a terrace overlooking the sea when his chamberlain announced that the Viking demanded admittance. It pleased the Caesar's humor to see him, although Dukas instructed Theophile to have in four stalwarts of the Varangian Guard to stand behind the table. These mercenaries were the Emperor's personal

guard, but the Caesar cultivated them against the day when he might feel himself strong enough to seize the imperial palace and the throne of Constantinople. There was a proverb that he who ruled the army would someday rule the empire.

The Caesar looked up indulgently while he selected a bunch of grapes and dipped them into wine. "What says the barbarian?" he asked Theophile.

Brian had his shield on his arm, an iron cap on his head. He gazed about him in wonder, and, obviously, he did not know how to prostrate himself fittingly.

"Your Illustriousness," explained the secretary, "he hath a grievance."

It seemed to the Caesar amusing that a sea rover who had just been given a fair girl should come with a grievance.

"And what is it?" he asked.

"He says your Illustriousness hath dealt churlishly by his bride. He says that the woman who will be his bride was held in captivity here like a slave . . . For that reason he comes to challenge your Illustriousness to combat with weapons, ahorse or afoot, on sea or land, with sword or spear or ax."

John Dukas selected a grape, rather regretting that the four Varangian swordsmen should be within hearing. He himself was skilled in handling weapons; he judged himself a match for the slow-moving seafarer who had been mad enough to defy him, but he had no intention of settling a quarrel in this fashion. "Ask him," he responded, "by what right he claims a bride in Constantinople."

Everyone in the room heard Brian's answer. "By two hundred and ten byzants paid down."

With lifted brows the Caesar glanced at Theophile, who fingered his staff uneasily. Then, gently, he shook his dark head. "Tell him a Caesar of the empire does not cross words with a warfarer."

"I am Brian," the Viking said slowly, "Sigurd's son, Earl of Drontheim at the land's end, and I hold myself equal in blood to any man so faint of heart that he will war against a girl. Tell the beardless one so."

This baiting John Dukas had found amusing. He contemplated the earl of a thatched village at the land's end who meant to marry Irene. This dull man was waiting patiently, unmoved as the timbers of his storm-battered dragon ship. And in this patience John Dukas found something disturbing.

He had not, it seemed, managed to make Irene disappear without notice. It might be better if she did not join herself to such an outspoken earl.

"Seize him," he ordered his Varangians. "Disarm him."

Not a man moved to obey. Those four mercenaries from the Norse lands had seen the gold ring of a chieftain of their folk; they had heard the broad accents of the north. In their scarlet cloaks and gilded helmets they stood motionless.

Theophile and the slaves cast down their eyes, trembling. Only John Dukas found amusement in the situation.

In another moment, he thought, they might salute the barbarian. A feckless breed, touchy about points of honor, yet dense of brain. So—they served the Byzantine princes for hire. To Brian aloud, he said, "So be it. I will meet this earl on the morrow, when he comes ashore again, and I am armed. Until then, bid him go without harm."

Brian considered, and nodded. "Tell this lordling to arm himself well." And he strode from the hall between the silent guards.

When the Caesar and Theophile were alone, the secretary wiped the sweat covertly from his cheeks. But John Dukas was little concerned about the byzants that had found their way into his wallet. Instead, he reflected that it was necessary now to dispose of this sea-roving earl. After which he could confidently expect that the Viking crew would dispose of the troublesome Irene in their own fashion.

"Theophile," he said, "I do not wish another such conversation with your barbarian. You will go to Phocas and bid him place his spies on the jetty by that dragon ship. He shall observe the movements of the barbarians, and when this Brian, son of Sigurd, comes ashore again, Phocas's men shall set upon him in the market street. They can pick a quarrel with him, and knife him in the back. Then, Theophile, you might reward Phocas with some of your ill-gotten byzants. Do you understand?"

"Your Magnanimity," cried the secretary, "it shall be done."

"I hope so," smiled the Caesar. "This evening I go to the Asia shore to take command of the army encamped there. But I shall hear the gossip of the town. And if there is more bungling, Theophile, you shall be given red gloves to wear."

The secretary looked down at his hands, at the skin upon his hands. When the Caesar smiled, he was quite capable of ordering the skin stripped from the fingers of one who had displeased him.

As for the Caesar, he had many other things to think about that afternoon. The sun telegraph was winking a message to him from the dark hills of the Asia shore, across the blue waters of the Marmora. Officers from distant points waited to talk with him, apart from listeners. Once, indeed, a bearded man in a striped robe appeared like an ominous djinn, at his elbow. The bearded one, the Bokharian spy, prostrated himself before the Caesar and whispered tidings.

"May the star of good fortune never fail your Magnificence. I come at command of Phocas, who serves your—"

"What says he?"

"The barbarians of the ship thou knowest sent men to the market for grain and oil and dried fish. Phocas himself, waiting in a fishing skiff, listened to their talk. He heard the voice of the woman thou knowest in the cabin of the ship. Ai! He heard her voice many times, and she urged the master of the ship to go away from the city in his boat."

"And what said he?"

The oriental spy glanced up shrewdly to judge if his message pleased or not. "Phocas thinks he will not go. Ai—he spoke angrily with the woman, swearing that he had a duel to fight."

With a gesture the Caesar dismissed his spy. If he knew the mind of Sigurd's son, the Viking would never turn his prow away from a combat. But when late that afternoon—when the sun had gone down behind the Golden Horn and lanterns were appearing like sparks in the darkening alleys—he looked out over the waterfront, he noticed that the dragon ship was moving out from its berth. It was turning toward the sea.

At the same time a cortege was proceeding from the Sacred Palace toward the great basilica, the gaunt Emperor was walking in his cloth-of-gold to the place of prayer.

The Caesar liked to overlook the city at this hour of candle-lighting, when the round domes merged into the blue haze, and the sea wall faded against the dark water. It would not be long, he fancied, before he would walk, clad in gold, at the head of his court while the singers intoned hymns of praise. He was thinking then of the four Varangians who had disobeyed his spoken order. Perhaps his cousin the Emperor suspected him—so the Varangians had dared defy him, hoping that he might be struck down by that barbarian.

If so, John Dukas reasoned, he should lose no time in joining his army. By degrees he could move his cataphracts, his mailed cavalry, across the

strait, into the city. The Caesar could act swiftly without seeming to hurry. By full starlight he was at his barge, sitting the saddle of his white charger, with a dozen nobles and officers armed at his side. Beneath the tossing flames of torches his Bulgarian archers, twoscore strong, manned the waist of the great barge. (Dukas had chosen no Varangians to go with him this night.)

The barge captain struck a chant and the slaves on their benches heaved at their oars. With a fanfare of trumpets and a waving of torches the barge moved out of the harbor toward the distant shore. The Caesar was aware that with the plumes swaying upon the goldplated helmets, and the purple cloaks of his nobles fluttering in the night breeze, it made a fine sight for the crowds on the shore.

A half-hour and he would be at the head of his army on the Asia side. Then the captain of the slaves cried a warning, and the oars hung motionless. John Dukas heard the thresh of other oars. A shape appeared on the bow.

A wooden dragon head, crudely carved, with its tongue sticking out, loomed above the rail of his barge. The two craft drifted together. Wood crunched against wood. The barge captain shouted furiously, but the deep voice of Brian, Sigurd's son, cut through his complaining.

"I see well that you have come armed for weapon-play, lordling."

It was all absurd, the Caesar thought. That clumsy dragon head that should have been well on its way into the Marmora under the starlight by now. Those twoscore wild figures leaping from the rail of the Viking's ship to the foredeck of his barge—so swiftly that the Bulgarian archers had no time to string and raise their weapons. Absurd, the way the unarmed slaves slid under the rowers' benches or dropped into the water to cling to the oars.

"Shield wall—shield wall!" cried a grotesque bearded man. Roaring their glee, the Vikings pressed into double ranks, shield overlapping shield, stretching from rail to rail of the barge. The shield wall, topped by iron helms, moved forward swiftly over the benches.

The Bulgarians took to their axes, and hewed at it. Steel clanged against iron, as the long swords flicked out among the axes. Several of the Bulgarian mercenaries leaped into the water, and more were trodden down by the Vikings. Blood flecked their arms and heads, but when a man went down the warrior behind him stepped forward to his place.

John Dukas looked to right and left. Far off shone the lights of Con-

stantinople; no vessels except fishing craft were afloat in the darkness. Over his head, hugging the long wooden neck of the dragon, he made out the slender figure of a girl.

"Stand fast!" John Dukas cried at his men. "Stand—for aid is coming."

Leaning down he snatched a spear from an officer. Rising in his stirrups he hurled it fair at Brian, in the center of the shield wall. The Viking swayed his head aside and the spear went by.

Brian had changed. His eyes were shining. He sang as his sword whirled. The muscles rippled along his bare arm. Here, in the weapon-play, he tasted his joy.

John Dukas flung himself from the saddle of the white horse—for the trembling charger was useless in a boat. In the boat he must fight, for in armor he could not swim through the water. With his nobles he rushed forward.

"Now," cried Brian, "there is little between us, Caesar."

Absurd that John Dukas should be fighting sword in hand, under the last of the guttering torches, under the dragon's head and the eyes of the girl he had put there to make an end of her.

But Brian thrust the boss of his shield into the face of a Byzantine captain; he drove the pommel of his sword into the jaw of another. "Make way," he said between his teeth, and came at Dukas.

The Caesar slashed wide at his head, and Brian's iron cap clanged off, leaving blood flowing down. The Viking's sword crashed full upon the Caesar's unlifted shield, cracking it and driving it back on his arm. And Dukas felt sick, at the power that numbed his arm and drove the links of his mail into his chest. Raising his sword again, he was only in time to parry a second terrible blow that beat down his blade and wrenched his right arm from wrist to shoulder.

He staggered, his crippled arms flapping at his side. A voice was screaming in his ears, and it was his own voice. His jaws snapped together and fell apart, while the Viking's sword was sweeping toward him a third time out of the air.

John Dukas's body lay on the boards of the deck, the knees moving slowly. Apart from it, still fast in the goldplated helmet with the Caesar's crest, lay his head. Above it the Vikings were stripping gear and jewels from the nobles who had thrown down their arms at his fall.

"Well, it cannot be said that he was a great man with his weapons."

Brian leaned on his long sword, staring down at the body, puzzled. It had been a brave encounter, he thought—that of the two boats on the water. But this Caesar had brought with him too many nidding fighters to the duel, and after all he had fallen as easily as a common man.

He had fallen and the duel was over. “Back to your benches, lads!” cried the Viking. “Out oars and away!”

When the oars churned the water white under the star-gleam, he stood by the steering sweep, watching for pursuit. No sail followed. Slowly the lights of the great city merged and dwindled astern. Fiddle Skal was singing to the laboring messmates of the sword that wrought a lordling’s doom. But Brian wondered why the sea was without hue and cry after them.

In his mind he recalled that afternoon, when he had seen again the two men that sold him Irene. The bearded Greek peddler had been fishing in a skiff; but Theophile had brought a message to the ship. Theophile, that confidential man with the staff, had said that Dukas would fight the duel that evening, coming out in his barge to meet the dragon ship midway between the city and the Asia shore after the first starlight. Theophile had whispered it, showing fleetingly a signet ring in his hand. And now Brian wondered.

He washed the blood from his head and went down into the cabin where Irene was sitting, with a curtain cloth on her knee. The place looked bright now and not at all like a wolf’s throat. She held out her hands to him. “You are brave, my lord.”

It pleased him, but still he did not forget the doubt in his mind. “I am thinking,” he explained, “that Dukas the Caesar did not relish that duel of ours. It may be that he did not seek it. Yet that man of his, Theophile, showed me his signet ring.”

Irene sewed a stitch or two. “It was not his. I saw it.” She sighed and thought for a moment. “The ring was the Emperor’s. Aye, Theophile must have been his spy.”

Brian could make little of this. “Then why, after that, didst thou pray me to sail away?”

“Because—” she lifted her eyes suddenly to him—“I was afraid for thee. Do not think now of that which is past, and I will not.” She took his face between her hands and smiled unsteadily. In her heart she had said farewell to the sunlit palace by the Judas trees. “Wilt thou take me to that land where the lotus eaters are, and no one remembers aught?”

“Aye—if it will make thee glad, my lovely one.”

“So glad,” she said softly, “so glad.”