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Swords from the East

Harold Lamb

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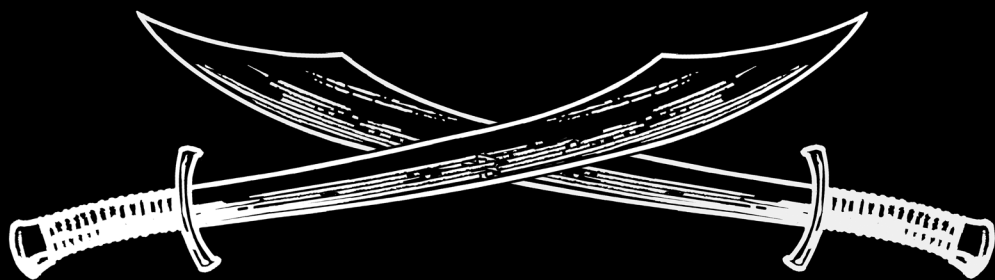


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Swords From The East




Harold Lamb

Edited by Howard Andrew Jones

Introduction by James Enge

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Foreword

Harold Lamb wrote that he'd found something "gorgeous and new" when he discovered chronicles of Asian history in the libraries of Columbia University. He remained fascinated with the East thereafter, which is evident from his first stories of western adventurers in Asia to the last book published before his death in 1962, *Babur the Tiger*. All of his popular fiction is anchored in Asia, whether it be the cycle of Khlit the Cossack, descended from the Tatar hero Kaidu, or Durandal's Sir Hugh of Taranto, who travels into Asia during the conquests of Genghis Khan, or even the adventures of Genghis Khan himself, as related in "The Three Palladins" in this volume.

Lamb tried his hand at contemporary fiction and was published in a number of top-flight magazines; these stories, though, do not hold up very well today. The characters, even when adventuring in Lamb's favorite stomping grounds, come across as wooden and dated.* In this age, both the 1920s and the 1120s are remote to us. It might seem odd that a story set in one time can sound old-fashioned and quaint while one set in the other does not, especially when they were crafted by the same writer, but looking over the whole of Lamb's work, one reaches an inescapable conclusion: it is when Lamb looked backward that his prose sprang to life. His historical characters are far better realized than his modern heroes. Passion for his subject was writ large in every historical story. Lamb loved what he was writing, and it shows, most especially in the tales crafted for *Adventure* magazine, where editor Arthur Sullivan Hoffman gave him free rein to write what he wished. Even today, some eighty or ninety years

*The best of Lamb's contemporary fiction is probably his short novel *Marching Sands*, which has been reprinted several times.

after their creation, no matter changed literary trends and conventions, these stories beguile with the siren song of adventure. Lamb's polished and surprisingly modern sense of plotting and pacing is in full evidence in every story in this volume.

Lamb's first real writing success came from sending characters into Asia to adventure, but before too long he tried his hand at writing of adventurers who *were* Asian. (Khlit, of course, is of Asian descent, but he would have been more "western" and familiar to his first readers than those characters he encounters through his wanderings.) Lamb tried his hand at several shorter tales with Mongolian protagonists, including "The Wolf-Chaser," a story of a last stand in Mongolia that proved so inspiring to a young Robert E. Howard that Howard outlined it and took a crack at drafting a version of the story himself.*

Lamb then tackled a novel of a Mongol tribe's perilous migration east, with a westerner as one of the main—though not the only—protagonists. Before too much longer, though, he drafted what he might always have longed to do, given his abiding fascination with Genghis Khan. The result was "The Three Palladins," which explores the early days of Temujin through the eyes of his confidant, a Cathayan prince. On first reading it as a younger man, I was for some reason disappointed that it had nothing to do with Khlit the Cossack, and I failed to perceive its worth. Like almost all of Lamb's *Adventure*-era fiction, it is swashbuckling fare seasoned with exotic locale. There is tension and duplicitous scheming on every hand. The author seems to have had almost as much fun with the characters as the reader, for some of them turn up in other stories—the mighty Subotai, and the clever minstrel Chepe Noyon in the Durandal cycle and "The Making of the Morning Star," which is included in *Swords from the West* (Bison Books, 2009). And Genghis Khan, of course, as a shaper of events and mythic figure, haunts much of Lamb's fiction, affecting even the Khlit cycle set hundreds of years later, most famously in one of the best of all the Khlit the Cossack stories, "The Mighty Manslayer," which appears in *Wolf of the Steppes* (Bison Books, 2006).

Lamb was fortunate to have become established as a writer of both screenplays and history books by the time the Great Depression hit. *Adventure*, his mainstay, was no longer published as frequently or capable of

*His outline and the aborted draft of the story can be found in *Lord of Samarcand and Other Adventure Tales of the Old Orient* (Bison Books, 2005).

paying as well. Lamb's fiction began to be printed in the slicks—*Collier's* and, a little later, the *Saturday Evening Post* (among a handful of similar magazines)—where he still wrote short historicals as well as contemporary pieces. Among the later work included in this volume is a deft little mystery adventure titled “Sleeping Lion,” with none other than Marco Polo as one of the primary characters, the other being a Tatar serving girl. Unfortunately, *Collier's* printed this story without its middle third. What remains is included. Sadly, the original is long since lost.

There also exist two curious pieces from Lamb's *Adventure* days: “The Book of the Tiger: The Warrior” and “The Book of the Tiger: The Emperor.” Together they tell the story of Babur, the Tiger, first Moghul emperor, mostly transcribed and condensed from Babur's fascinating autobiography. They presage Lamb's later books like *Alexander the Great* and *Theodora and the Emperor*, where the narrative is a history that occasionally drifts into fiction. Those volumes have never been among my favorites (*Hannibal*, both volumes of *The Crusades*, and *March of the Barbarians* top my list), but I'm fond of these Babur pieces even if they sometimes sound more like summaries than fully realized stories. Lamb captured the tone of a truthful and engaging historical character. The amount of luck (and the stupidity of his fellow man) involved in Babur's survival through adversity is difficult to believe. Were I to invent such a story and submit it to a publisher, it would be dismissed out of hand as preposterous, but this one seems to be true! Lamb later turned to other Asian characters as protagonists and narrators, and you can find many of those tales in *Swords from the Desert* (Bison Books, 2009).

Much of Lamb's fiction output revolved around conflicts generated by the colliding motivations of his characters and their cultures. Through most of the stories in this book, the physical environment takes on an antagonistic role as well, for the people in these tales of high Asia must contend with steep mountain passes, blinding snows, searing deserts, and ice-choked rivers. While justice may win out or protagonist triumph, the victories seem transitory, to be celebrated briefly before the candles are extinguished and the central characters shuffle off the stage. Kings, kingdoms, and heroes fall and fade to memory; nothing is eternal but the uncaring miles of mountain and steppe and the shifting northern lights that shine above them.

That life is sweet and Lady Death ever eager for the embrace of heroes is a theme that can be found in Lamb's fiction from the very beginning,

but readers may note that all of these tales—even the relatively light “Azadi’s Jest”—are infused with a certain bleakness more marked than usual. We can exult in the adventure, but we are reminded to savor our sand castles before time and tide sweep them away.

If you enjoy these stories of Mongolia, you have not far to look for more of Lamb’s writing on the subject; his history and biography books are still held in many public libraries. Harold Lamb’s first book, a biography of Genghis Khan, has fared better than any of his other works, remaining in print since 1927. Lamb himself thought this was peculiar because he believed his later books were better written. While *Genghis Khan* is a good read, I tend to agree: *Tamerlane* is a strong book, and *March of the Barbarians* is riveting. The latter title does little to reveal the quality within, for *March* is an in-depth history of the complex inner workings of the Mongol empire, written when Lamb was more experienced and had the financial wherewithal—as well as the clout with publishers—to take the time for extensive research. His Genghis Khan proposal had been approved by the publisher only so long as he could write the book in two weeks, a demanding request even for someone intimately familiar with the subject matter. *March of the Barbarians* covers the same material as *Genghis Khan* in richer detail, and then goes on to describe the great Khan’s successors with the same care. Frederick Lamb, Harold’s son, named it the favorite of all his father’s writing.

Lamb always had the gift of taking facts and infusing them with fascinating vitality, be it in fiction or history or a combination thereof. It is my privilege now to step aside so that you can acquaint yourselves with some of the most extraordinary people and events he ever brought to life on the printed page.

Enjoy!

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Introduction

JAMES ENGE

It was all Harold Lamb's fault. I had just asked my mother another one of Those Questions. Most questions we asked her got answers, but Those Questions got very serious, lengthy discussion-type answers. My first one of Those Questions, I distinctly remember, was when I asked my mother the meaning of a word which, as far as I was concerned, was just something that rhymed with "truck." The answer turned out to be quite complex, linguistically and biologically. The current question got almost as unexpected and serious an answer: I had asked my mother if "Mongol" meant the same thing as "Mongoloid."

The question was important to me, because I had been reading Harold Lamb's *Genghis Khan: Emperor of All Men* and, as far as I was concerned, the Mongols were pretty damn cool, and it was also fairly clear what they were: a confederation of tribes from the Gobi Desert who swept out under the leadership of Genghis Khan to establish the greatest empire in the history of the world. (It was like *Dune*, except real. Also, they weren't religious fanatics or spice addicts.) But I had been reading some other stuff (Heinlein's *Sixth Column*, I think) where "Mongoloid" was used as a racial designation, along with "Caucasoid" and "Negroid" and other ugly but impressive-sounding words. (Everything becomes more manageable if you slap the "-oid" suffix on it. A complex human individual turns out to be merely one sample of a type of humanoid, and even a hemorrhage is demoted to a mere hemorrhoid. Apply the right medicine to any "-oid" and it will shrink until you hardly notice it anymore.) And I had been hearing "Mongoloid" used as a slur on the school playground. I consulted a map and found the Caucasus Mountains and, as it happened, an Outer Mongolia but no Inner Mongolia, which struck me as very sus-

picious, very suspicious indeed. The Internet not having been invented yet (it was *that* long ago), I finally decided to ask Mom.

My mother, it seems to me now, was not a naturally patient woman, and the patience she was born with had lots of work to do, but she took a lot of trouble answering Those Questions from any of her kids. This was not one of her more satisfying answers, but that wasn't her fault: it's what she had to work with. By the end of it I had a lot of information about Down syndrome and abusive terms that one could but *should not* use in a variety of social environments, but the big (if unspoken) takeaway was how stupid people could be about race (a lesson worth learning early and often, unfortunately).

Never mind. Certain things became clear: people with Down syndrome were people with Down syndrome. People who used "Mongoloid" as a slur in any context were losers. And Genghis Khan was the emperor of all men.

I soon tracked down Lamb's historical narrative of the Mongol conquests, *March of the Barbarians*, and his last book, *Babur the Tiger* (based on Babur's autobiography, which Lamb also adapted for two stories that appear in this volume), and I even branched out to his other biographies, like *Hannibal* (although nowadays I think the good guys won that particular world war) and his two-volume history of the Crusades. One book I was especially eager to lay my hands on was his biography of Tamerlane "the Iron Limper." I never did find it (though I did file away that image of a tough guy who limped; seemed like it might be useful one day). Looking for Lamb's *Tamerlane*, I found Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, and whole new worlds opened up.

New worlds: that is probably Lamb's greatest gift to most people who discover him. There are some who have the history of the Moghuls in India or the migration of the Torgut Mongols at their fingertips: they won't have this experience from Lamb. For the rest of us, and I think it's most of us, no matter what our heritage, Lamb takes us places that are new, even though they have always been there—places that are richly imagined, even though they are real.

As a westerner writing about Asia, Lamb is often concerned about the clash between East and West, but his fiction is not polluted by the Yellow Peril hysteria so common in his generation (and later ones). As has often been observed, Fu Manchu and his villainous ilk can only exist as aliens in someone else's culture; in these stories, the westerners (if any)

are the outsiders. Western characters play the villain as often as the hero, and in the longest story in this book there are no European characters at all. Lamb is confronting Genghis Khan, Subotai Bahadur, Ye Liu Chut-sai, and others on their own ground, and he does so by taking the radical position that they are human beings—of various cultures, to be sure, but no more or less inherently inscrutable than someone from Brooklyn or Chicago. In fact, Lamb's stories are unusually free from racism of any sort, so that it is startling to read in one a casual reference to “thieving blacks.” (Even that might be the attitude of the viewpoint character rather than the narrator.)

Buddhists are not so lucky: Buddhism and the allied (or at least entangled) tradition of Bon are normally painted in hostile colors in Lamb's fiction. I don't mean to minimize this; I would just say that this represents a historical attitude that Lamb probably found in his sources, rather than importing it there. Howard Jones, the editor to whose tireless labor we owe these splendid new editions of Lamb's fiction, has wisely decided against meddling with Lamb's text for political reasons or any other reason. Even the rather Victorian dashes that mask the characters' mild and infrequent profanity survive in these editions unaltered.

In these adventures in a patriarchal world, most of the characters are men, but when women appear, they are not mere plot-coupons or MacGuffins. Nadesha (from “The Road of the Giants”), in particular, is a dashing, heroic figure, and the bitter Cherla (“The House of the Strongest”) and the tragic Aina (“The Net”) are, in their ways, equally memorable. Lamb often draws his characters in broad strokes, but they are never mere caricatures, and if he is intent on portraying historical realities that test the limits of our sympathy, he never forgets to make his characters sympathetic.

Lamb was also a gifted stylist of plain, eloquent English. That may be surprising: most of the stories in this volume originally appeared in a pulp magazine, not a medium famous for its literary sophistication. But *Adventure* was an unusual pulp, deliberately pitched at readers looking for more intelligent fare. (The young Sinclair Lewis worked there as an editor.) And, even when he was being paid by the word, Lamb just wasn't the type to lard his sentences with excess verbiage. He almost invariably (as Twain puts it) picks “the right word, not its second cousin.”

I like, for instance, the ambiguous threat the hero makes to the opposing general in “The Wolf-Chaser”: “‘Tell Galdan Khan what you have seen,’ smiled Hugo. ‘Say that he will never see his mirzas again. On the

first clear night I will come into his lines and speak with him.” His characters don’t all sound the same, but he likes to craft ones that speak with a certain snap. An exchange from “Sleeping Lion” (a tale of Marco Polo at the court off Kublai Khan):

“Can you make me invisible so that I may pass through gates unseen?”

“I can make a mountain invisible,” he croaked.

“How?”

“By looking the other way,” he snarled.

Lamb doesn’t bother to strain for unusual verbal effects. He picks subjects worth talking about, then describes with searing directness what his mind’s eye sees. Here are the Torguts on the move (from “The Road of the Giants”): “With steady eyes he was looking into a sunrise that, seen through the smoke, was the hue of blood. This ruddy glow tinged the brown faces that passed the Khan; it dyed red the tossing horns of the cattle. Two hundred thousand humans had burned their homes and were mustering for a march in the dead of winter over one of the most barren regions of the earth.”

Lamb writes a good deal about war, and he doesn’t write about it, as someone once said of Vergil, “with eyes averted.” These are ripping yarns in the finest tradition. Out of many examples, here’s part of a scene from “The Three Palladins” where the Mongols are fighting over the ruins of their leader’s tent. It was attacked during the night by assassins, shot full of arrows, and finally set afire. Temujin (later Genghis Khan) is feared dead, but then “the sand [was] stirring at the edge of Temujin’s crumpled and blazing tent. The sand heaved and fell aside as if an enormous mole were rising to the surface, but instead of a mole a blackened face was revealed by the glow of the fire. Presently the body of a man followed the face, and Temujin climbed out of the hole he had dug in the loose sand while the arrows slashed through his yurt.” He tunneled his way out of the assassination scene and lived to make his would-be assassins sorry that they’d missed. All in a day’s work—if you’re Genghis Khan.

But Lamb, in his interest in heroism, doesn’t shy away from war’s essential ugliness. Here (from “The Wolf-Chaser”) a French nobleman takes a stroll through a Tatar village as it is being sacked by its enemies: “Captives were being roped together by the necks. Children were lifted on lances, to guttural shouts. Almost within reach, Hugo saw a Tatar’s eyes torn out by a soldier’s fingers.” It’s all quite repellent, and Hugo is repelled—but,

with equal realism, he does not get involved. It simply did not occur to Hugo to draw his sword in a quarrel between peasants and common soldiers. “*Peste!* What is it to me?’ he grumbled.”

Hugo will eventually become involved, and thereby hangs the rest of the tale, which I won’t spoil for you. But this is a good example of Lamb’s historical imagination at work. Hugo is all wrong by our standards, and Lamb doesn’t attempt to justify him. But Hugo’s attitude makes perfect sense in the world through which he moves.

Lamb’s greatest talent (as a biographer, popular historian, or writer of fiction) is sheer storytelling. Whether his hero is a reindeer herder trying to keep his herd safe from interlopers who view the animals as mere commodities (“The Gate in the Sky”), or a French adventurer, looking for his missionary brother, who fights in a Mongolian Thermopylae (“The Wolf-Chaser”), or a Chinese nobleman who flees a murderous intrigue to become an adviser and court-champion to the young Genghis Khan (“The Three Palladins”), or a Siberian girl whose encounter with outsiders has tragic consequences for both sides (“The Net”), Lamb tells a tale where things happen that have an emotional impact, and where a surprise often lurks on the story’s last page.

These pieces of historical fiction have a certain importance for literary history. Lamb’s fiction, almost forgotten now, was an enormous influence over later writers of popular fiction such as Robert E. Howard, Norvell Page, and Harry Harrison, to name just three.

But that’s not the reason to read these stories now, or at least it’s not the most important reason. They are worth reading because they are *worth reading*: fascinating stories of heroism from a skilled storyteller who breathed life into his characters and the world they inhabit.

It’s been a long generation since I discovered Lamb. My mother has since passed through the gate in the sky, and now, instead of asking Those Questions, I am occasionally tasked with answering them. I’m no longer sure that Genghis Khan is the emperor of all men, or that empires are really such great things after all. But I’m more sure than ever that Harold Lamb is one of the great storytellers in the eternal republic of letters. For proof, I offer the book you hold in your hands.

The Gate in the Sky



The long night of winter had begun. Snow flurries swept the heights of the Syansk Range that separates Mongolia from Siberia proper. In that year early in the eighteenth century under the heights a great quiet had fallen.

Ice formed along the banks of the streams. Another week and the passes into the northern plain, with its scattered settlements, would be closed. The few traders who still lingered in the Syansk were hurrying down to the towns, several hundred miles away.

More and more the play of the northern lights obscured the brightness of *Uperer*, the polar star.

As he had done for a score of years, Maak, the Buriat reindeer keeper, led his herd from the upland pastures down to the valleys where the streams were still open and the larches had a thin garment of foliage.

His beasts were sleek from a season's cropping of lichen and Pamir grass. Their coats were growing heavier against the frost that was sending to cover all animal life on the heights. Two hundred or more, they followed obediently the white reindeer that was Maak's mount.

Maak's broad face was raised to the sky of evenings. His keen, black eyes followed the flicker of elusive lights above and behind the mountain summits. A gate, he knew, was ready to open in the sky, and through it the spirits—the *tengeri*—would look down on the earth.

This happened only occasionally, when the magic lights were very bright in the autumn—as now. For those who saw the open gate in the sky it was an omen. An omen of death or great achievement—one would not know which until time brought fulfillment.

"Someday the gate in the sky will open," he repeated to himself quietly as he watched of nights.

It might well mean death when he would be drawn up by the *Qoren Vairgin*, the king-spirit of the reindeer. Then he would make brave sport among the flaming lights and perhaps look forth in his turn from the spirit gate upon the whole world—upon the Mongolian plain whence the Chinese merchants sometimes came to barter for the soft horns of a young reindeer, to the towns from which the Russian colonist traders arrived every other year or so. Maak knew of no world other than this.

At times he wondered whether the gate would ever open.

Maak had seen no living being but his clansmen, the Buriats—and had seen them only in the spring and fall changes of pasture. He belonged to the wandering ones of the clan, the reindeer keepers. He had been told that the traders were superior fellows indeed.

Never did Maak leave his reindeer. The herd furnished him milk and fat. His long coat, soft boots, and cap were of their skins. His bowstring was reindeer gut; the skinning knife he inherited from his father, who had been a herder.

No one had ever seen Maak kill one of his herd. When he wanted meat he shot down other game with his bow. He was as lean as the reindeer—with long, supple muscles that hid his strength. His slant eyes were mild.

This shyness of Maak came from long isolation. Barely did he remember the chants of a dead grandfather—chants of Mongol warriors who had taught the meaning of fear to their enemies.

Traders who learned that Maak—like the other wandering ones—did not kill his reindeer or sell them—the traders laughed, saying that he was mad, a *khada-ulan-obokhod*, an old man of the mountain—a spiritless coward.

“He has turned into a deer,” they said, “with only enough wit to run away. Pah. He would not fight even for his own life!”

Nevertheless the other Buriats were superstitious about *khada-ulan-obokhod* and did not molest them.

As they came to a bend in the upper valley, Maak’s mount, an old white buck, halted with lifted muzzle. The herd, following the example of their leader, stopped and bunched together, eyes and ears pointed in the same direction.

They were in sight of a large stream that gave into the Irkut. Beside the river were three canvas tents and a knot of packhorses. Smoke rose into the chill evening air. Three men came from the fire and looked at them.

Maak would have turned when one of the travelers, a stocky, bearded man in a fine mink coat, waved to him.

Now Maak had been seeking that very spot to camp for the night. When the men invited him by gestures to join them he hesitated. Finally he edged the reindeer up to the tents and dismounted.

They were traders; the bearded man a Siberian colonist; a handsome, brisk young fellow was Orani, a Yakut half-breed; the third a silent Mongol.

"Greetings, *nim tungit*—tent companion," Orani, who acted as interpreter, proclaimed.

Maak nodded and accepted their hospitality shyly. His herd he let to graze on the moss in a birch grove, out of sight of the tents.

They gave him a luxurious brick of tea, and all four quaffed numberless bowls of the potent liquid as they sat around the fire.

"We have no meat, — take the luck!" explained Orani. "Game is bewitched around here and our bullets all miss. Sell us one of your fine, plump beasts and we'll have a feast; eh, Maak?"

The reindeer keeper shook his head. The men exchanged glances, and the Siberian, Petrovan, looked angry.

The traders had had ill luck with more than game for the pot. The fur they were taking back from the Syansk was a poor lot—some fair mink, but only a few ermine and no black foxes at all. The Mongol hunters were harder than ever to deal with. Petrovan considered it a personal grievance. Until now his summer trading had been good.

"The gentleman," informed Orani, "will give you a powder-flask and a handful of bullets for a brace of deer. Come, Maak; strike a bargain, man!"

Absently the Buriat shook his head. He had no musket, and he was admiring the businesslike hunting-piece of the trader and Orani's silver-mounted flintlock. He offered them some of his reindeer milk; they declined with a grimace, but the ever-hungry Mongol emptied all portions down his gullet.

Orani was surprised that Maak had no gun. How did he deal with bear and moose?

"They do not trouble me," said Maak after he had thought it over.

He was slow to think things out.

"Well, you're a fine fellow all right," agreed the half-breed. "Look here, we're on the trail to the Irkut, going to Irkutsk. Come along with your

herd; sell them in Irkutsk, and I'll wager they fetch a good price. Then you'll be rich like this gentleman here, and have tobacco enough to smoke every minute until you die, and a horse and sleigh."

He gulped the heavy smoke of his pipe down into his lungs, and glanced keenly at the Buriat.

The creases in Maak's leathern face changed as he rubbed some more tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. His black eyes twinkled. Maak had come as near as possible to a smile.

"No," he grunted. "What would I do without *them*?"

He pointed at the white buck that lingered near his tent.

When the Siberian retired to the big tent with a rug on the earth and a cot and lantern, Maak examined it from the opening with great appreciation. He was the last to retire to shelter from the cold.

The evening had been an eventful one. Maak would have enough to think about all winter. He had been entertained by a trader.

It was long after Maak had disappeared that Orani came out of his tent and moved silently off into the dark. An hour later the half-breed returned, and sought his blankets.

The camp by the stream was motionless except for the anxious movements of a big reindeer and the illusion of motion produced by the play of the northern fires in the sky.

The next morning they had no glimpse of *Qoren Vairgin*, the king of the spirit world who drives the sun across the sky behind flying white reindeer. Heavy clouds, settling athwart the snow peaks of the Syansk, hid the sun.

"Snow is coming in the valley," muttered the Mongol servant to Orani.

Thoughtfully the half-breed nodded but made no move to rise from his blankets by the fire.

The reindeer keeper also had noted the signs in the sky. He lingered for awhile hoping to see the departure of the trader; he even ventured to offer Petrovan some tobacco.

"Pah!" the trader grunted to Orani. "I would rather smoke dried horse-droppings. These mountain men are mongrels."

Orani's slant eyes narrowed and his hand went instinctively to his knife. When Petrovan had traded or gambled in a bad streak of luck, the Siberian was accustomed to slur Orani's mixed parentage.

"They are no better, excellency," he retorted, "than the overfed hounds that lie in the ditches of Irkutsk."

More than once Petrovan had been carried out of these same ditches when drunk.

Orani did not touch his knife, for he saw the other's eyes on him side-wise and knew that Petrovan's heavy pistol was in his belt. The Siberian shrugged and fell to watching Maak, who had mounted the white buck and was mustering his herd.

Two beasts were missing—young bucks that often strayed. Maak was anxious to work down into the larch and beech forests before the snow came, and he set out in search of the two reindeer.

He cast up the mountainside to the edge of the snow line without finding reindeer or tracks. Then he circled down, looking into the gullies where moss beds might have tempted his pets. Maak knew his charges as a shepherd knows his sheep. Reindeer were in fact very much like sheep.

When he had searched vainly for two hours, Maak headed back to camp expecting that the missing animals would have returned to the herd. Glancing into a ravine giving into the river, he stiffened in his saddle.

Below him lay the young reindeer, their throats cut. Maak bent over them and saw that they had been dead for many hours. He looked for the place where steaks might have been cut from the haunches. A puzzled glare came into his black eyes.

His first thought had been that the Mongol servant or Orani had butchered the half-tame animals, to get the meat he had refused to sell. But no meat had been taken from the carcasses. Only the throats had been cut.

Suddenly Maak grunted and climbed into the small saddle on the shoulders of the stalwart white buck. He raced the short distance into camp, and found that there was no longer a camp. Even his skin tent had been kicked down and thrown on the fire.

Men, horses, and reindeer herd had disappeared. Maak was a figure turned to stone. He was thinking out the thing slowly. Someone had killed his two animals—someone who knew that he would search for them, perhaps for hours, and leave the herd unwatched.

He trotted around the ashes of the fire, found the trail that led north along the stream. The ground was frozen, but here and there patches of fern and bracken told him what he wanted to know. His herd had been driven off, bunched, followed by horses.

Petrovan had taken his reindeer.

The thought stung Maak into action. The vacant stare hardened in his eyes, and his hands clenched. With worried, anxious movements he urged the white reindeer after the herd. He was angry, puzzled.

Why had the trader tried to steal his herd? The Siberian had more than an hour's start, yet Maak knew that he would be up with the fugitives before noon, so swiftly did his white beast eat up distance. Then, of course, Petrovan must give him back his reindeer. What else could be done?

Three hours later, rounding a turn in the ravine, Maak heard the *whang* of gun in his face and the shrill flight of a bullet close overhead.

He did not stop. A second report, and dirt flew up under the nose of the white buck. Then Maak knew that this was no strange jest of the gentleman's—no attempt to beguile him to the Siberian towns with his herd. He, Maak, had been robbed of the herd that had been his father's and his grandfather's. If he tried to follow the thieves they would kill him as speedily as they had butchered the two young deer.

With a wild cry the Buriat turned his steed aside and scrambled headlong away up the mountain slope, pursued by shots from Petrovan's gun and a shout of laughter from where Orani hid behind the rocks.

Maak passed from sight swiftly, for the heavy flakes of snow began to screen the mountain from the river and to cover all traces of the vanished herd.

Only one thing troubled Orani; they had let Maak know, before they decided on the rape of the herd, that they were headed for Irkutsk.

"Do you think the old man of the mountain would sneak after us to the settlement?"

Petrovan laughed until his beard bristled at the thought.

"I'd like to see him before a magistrate!"

Orani spat and closed one eye.

"This snow," he muttered. "Two days it has snowed and the — himself could not smell out hoof marks under a foot of this. But, you see, excellency, we have had to go slowly, driving this accursed herd, and Maak knows that we must have gone through the northern pass to Irkutsk. It would be better if we had not told him."

They both looked back at the ragged rock summits of the Syansk, now coated from river to summit with unbroken white save where the gray network of forest showed.

No living thing was to be seen. Their spirits had mounted since leav-

ing the pass unmolested, although they knew that the heavy snow—just now ceased—had covered their flight.

Petrovan shrugged.

"A rabbit couldn't come near us out here without being seen, you fool! That rascal of a Maak was frightened out of his senses by my shots. He is as timid as that white mongrel stag he rides. Come now; tonight we camp on this bank of the river."

Petrovan was indolent about crossing streams before making camp.

"Tomorrow, by the holy relics, we'll be across the Irkut and on the Siberian steppe."

Somewhat to their surprise, the silent Mongol slave broke into tongue as they rode down to the river—now wide and swift and to be forded only here for many miles. He wanted to cross the water before making camp.

"He is afraid that that dog of a Maak will make magic back yonder on the mountains," leered Orani.

The half-breed swore at the Mongol, and they made camp where they were. Orani rather wished Maak had shown up again. He wanted a shot at the Buriat—Petrovan had made a mess of the shooting.

While Petrovan snored through the night the half-breed sat with his back to a broad tree, watching, by the intermittent flickering in the sky, lest a thin, black figure try to approach the herd over the snow.

No one came. The herd edged about restlessly, seeking moss under the snow. Their flanks were beginning to fall lean. They had been driven hard. All their instincts led them to follow blindly after the one who happened to be the leader.

"Well, they will carry their skins a good way for us yet," remarked Petrovan the next morning as the men were preparing to mount. "We can get a good price for the skins."

"We might have had the white buck," grumbled Orani, "if you had attended to the old man of the mountain that night in his yurt."

He had had his vigil for nothing. Even Orani—who had attended to more than one man who was in his way—would not try to ambush three riders in daylight. And Maak, who had only a bow, could never attempt it now. Moreover, on the snowbound steppe not a rabbit could hide.

"Gr-rh!" hissed Petrovan. "The river will be cold—look at the ice on the bank!"

He was glad that they would not have to swim their horses more than halfway over the ford. Even the shaggy steppe ponies did not relish the em-

brace of the black Irkut; but the reindeer scarce heeded it as Orani drove the herd down, crashing through the border of thin ice, out on the ford.

Petrovan hitched up his knees and yelled for the Mongol to wait with the pack animals until the reindeer had crossed. He had fortified himself with black tea and brandy, and the blood raced through his stout body, well protected by the mink coat.

"Hey," he shouted to the servant, "take care of those packs or I'll send you to trim the ——'s corns!"

Now that he was leaving the Syansk behind his mood was pleasant. Not that he had been alarmed by the Mongol's remark that Maak was perhaps making magic, sitting on one of the peaks of his hills, talking to his *tengeri*. But Petrovan had feared that even in the snowstorm the reindeer keeper might find his herd and cut it out.

"He is like the reindeer after all," Petrovan thought. "He is a *khada-ulan-obokhod*, an old man of the mountain. Where he is driven, he will go."

Then the Siberian scowled. His horse was swimming, and in spite of his efforts to keep dry, the man was wet to his waist. An icy chill shot through his nerves.

"What in the fiend's name are you about?" he roared at Orani.

The half-breed, almost across the Irkut, had let the reindeer get out of hand. The leaders of the herd had no sooner gained footing on the farther bank than they about-faced, throwing the great mass of animals into confusion.

Orani bellowed and waved his arms to no avail. The herd churned the water, tossing their horns. Then they started back toward the Mongol and Petrovan.

At the same instant, Petrovan stopped cursing and Orani ceased his unavailing shouts. A white buck paced down the farther bank to the river edge, and on the white buck was Maak.

They had heard the reindeer keeper give no command, but the herd went before him as he splashed into the water. They could see that his face had changed. Fasting had thinned it, and it wore a fixed smile.

Orani's musket cracked. He had pulled it forward from his back where it had been slung. His pony, however, was flustered by the reindeer, and the bullet carried wide.

Hastily the half-breed reloaded and settled himself in the saddle. Maak's white buck was swimming toward him steadily, not twenty paces away. Ten paces. Orani held his shot, sure of his aim this time.

Maak was leaning forward, one hand on the antlers of his beast. The water was up to his belly.

"Ho!" he shouted.

His free right hand went back to his shoulder. An arrow flashed in it; the bow held on his other hand twanged, and as the musket of Orani flashed the reindeer keeper threw himself sidewise into the water.

"Hide of the ——!" muttered Petrovan.

He could see the arrow sticking in Orani's throat. The half-breed slumped into the black surface of the Irkut.

"They are both dead," thought the trader. "Well, that is not so bad."

Nevertheless his nerves were running chill, and he turned his horse's head back to the Syansk shore, in the midst of the herd. The reindeer could be brought under control, and Orani's wages were clear profit.

These calculations were ended by a glance over his shoulder. Close behind him the antlers of the white buck were gaining on his tired horse. Beside the black muzzle of the reindeer was Maak's fur-tipped head.

The eyes of the reindeer keeper were fixed on the trader. One hand gripped the antlers of the white buck. His bow had disappeared, rendered useless in any event by submergence in the river.

The teeth of Petrovan clinked together and his jaw quivered as he reached vainly for the musket slung to his back. He was a bulky man, and the sling was tight. Moreover, the pony under him, nearly exhausted, was unsteady.

Petrovan was up to his chest in water. Cold fingers gripped at his groin, and his teeth chattered harder than ever.

"Keep away!" he shrieked. "I swear I will pay—pay for your herd."

Still Maak smiled.

"By the mercy of God," the trader's cry went on, "I swear I will pay twice over. The herd is yours—you hear? Yours!"

It did not occur to him in his fright that Maak did not understand Russian and knew not what he was saying. The other's silence wrought on Petrovan's mounting fear, and he snatched out his pistol from his belt, which was now under water.

Maak's head was only a man's length away, and the trader twisted in his unstable seat to pull the trigger as swiftly as his chilled fingers permitted. The flint clicked harmlessly on the steel that could not ignite the wet powder.

Shifting the man's weight caused the pony to sink and lurch. Petro-

van was in the water where sharp hoofs struck and darted on every side. One split his cheek open. The heavy coat, water-soaked, and the musket weighed him down. An icy cold strangled the breath in his throat and numbed his heart.

But the panic that gripped him was from the man who floated after him, the man who walked forward against gunshots, who smiled at the weapon in Petrovan's hand and whom the deadly cold of the river could not hurt.

Petrovan clutched wildly at the antlers of a reindeer swimming by, missed, and was struck again by a hoof. His arms moved weakly now, and his head went under.

Maak, numbed and helpless from submergence in the water, could only cling to the antlers of the white buck. As impotent to aid Petrovan as to harm him, the reindeer keeper was drawn into shoal water and to the shore.

Turning here, he saw Petrovan's bare head an instant at the edge of the shore ice. Then the trader went down. Maak grunted and glanced at the Mongol, his hand moving toward the knife in his belt.

But the erstwhile servant of Petrovan was building a fire on the ashes of the old campfire. The Mongol, who was trembling a little, motioned for Maak to draw near and warm himself. Then he pointed out the pack animals, saying that they were Maak's and that he—the Mongol—had never had aught but peace in his heart toward a *khada-ulan-obokhod*.

Not until Maak had dried himself and eaten a little of the bread and tea of the other did he respond. Then he said that the packs and the ponies could go with the Mongol. Maak did not want them. He had his herd again.

"It was a strong *ijin*—magic spell—that you made on the mountain heights. It bewitched the guns and slew the Russian pig without a blow. Is not that the truth?"

So spoke the Mongol.

"Nay."

Maak shook his head.

"I went to the mountain top to see the camp of the thieves when the snow ceased. Otherwise I could not have seen it."

The Mongol was silent. He was in no mood to contradict his guest. But later among the Buriats he voiced the thought in his mind.

"Maak has looked into the spirit gate. When he sat on the mountain

looking for his enemies the gate in the sky was open. He talked with the *Qoren Vairgin* and his spirit ancestors."

And the Mongol spoke truth, though not in the way he thought. The urge to do battle for the herd that was dearer to Maak than his own life was a heritage of forgotten ancestors.

Maak had looked through the gate in the sky.