

Wolf's War

by Harold Lamb, 1892-1962

Published: 1918
in »Adventure«



I

Khlit was angry. Very angry was Khlit, he surnamed the Wolf, and the Cossack of the Curved Saber by his enemies, Tatars and Turks. Khan Mirai Tkha would set extra watchmen about his herd of cattle at night, if word had come to him that Khlit was gripped so hard by the little devil of rage.

For no one in the Zaporogian Siech, the war encampment of the Cossacks along the bank of Father Dnieper, not even the *Koshevoi Ataman* himself, was better known to Khan Mirai Tkha than Khlit, the Wolf. And what the Tatar chief had learned, he had learned too late, to his cost, for it was the way of the Cossack to strike without warning. Wherefore Khan Mirai waited with patience for the time when Khlit should strike too soon or too late and the ancient score would be wiped out.

For no khan of the sixteenth century had more spear points at his call than Mirai Khan, great-grandson of the leader of the Golden Horde, not Yussaf himself, who was called prince of princes.

Now that Khlit's mustache was white and the muscles on his arm lean, the Cossack knew that the score between him and the Tatar had grown to the point where, on either side, it must be wiped out. Wherefore he was angry. For against his wishes the entire body of the Zaporogian Siech had departed to fight the Poles to the west, and with them had gone Menelitzza, his foster son who had come to the Siech to win place as a warrior.

The Poles, Khlit considered, were less worthy foes for Menelitzza than the Tatars, so when he was overruled by the atamans, he felt that it was a mistake the Siech would pay dearly for, and for the first time he sulked at home when the Cossacks set out.

Another reason for his ill temper was a woman. Menelitzza, instead of knightly fame for the joy of good blows struck and received and the hot smell of battle, had told him that he planned to return an approved knight of the Siech to win a woman for wife. Women Khlit regarded as part of the baggage of Poles and Turks, useful otherwise in making and serving wine and in cooking food.

He had offered to get Menelitzza a half-dozen Tatar women to cook and prepare wine for him but the boy had persisted in his plan to win a certain woman of a nearby village, one Alevna. When Khlit asked Menelitzza, in deep sorrow, why he wanted a girl instead of himself, the Wolf, for comrade, the boy could give no other reason than that Alevna had black hair and curling lips. Wherefore was Khlit now sitting, to his deep disgust, on his horse at the threshold of the sloboda of Garniv, where Alevna lived. He had come to see with his own eyes what manner of person was Alevna, the black-haired beauty, and to satisfy his curiosity as to why Menelitzza favored her, above six others.

It was doubly offensive to Khlit to seek out a woman and to ask questions in a village where he was little known. But he sat his sheepskin hat on the side of his head, lit his long-stemmed pipe, and, with his knee carelessly crossed in front of him, trotted into the village street. As he went, his gray eyes under shaggy brows searched out the women for a possible Alevna.

He drew rein before a group of girls chattering in front of a cottage, on the doors of which were painted pictures of the good saints driving devils into purgatory. This, Khlit judged, was the house of a worthy Christian. A slender, dark-haired girl in a blue dress with gold ornaments and a necklace of silver coins had already caught his eye.

She was not as large as her companions, who had coarser features and hands—evidently maidservants—but she ordered them about with great dignity, flashing a delighted smile as she did so and pushing back her mass of black hair. She glanced long and curiously at the dusty Cossack sitting on his horse by the cottage gate.

"Which one of you sparrows," said Khlit gruffly, "is the beauty, Alevna?" The maids were silent with sheer surprise, but Alevna ran to the gate, opened it, and confronted Khlit with flushed cheeks.

"Old man," she cried, stamping a booted foot, "are you blind with dust that you cannot see me?"

"I saw you," growled Khlit, puffing at his pipe. "Can you tell me which is Alevna, the black-haired beauty?"

The girl came near to the horse with knitted brows.

"What do you want of Alevna?" she asked angrily. "That is my name. I never saw you before, old man."

"You see me now, little wren," answered the Cossack. "I am the foster father of Menelitza, the young Cossack who swam the Dnieper to come to the Zaporogian Siech, and who desires you."

Alevna did not appear to take kindly to this speech, which Khlit had taken pains to make mild and conciliatory because he wanted to watch the girl, not frighten her away.

"Then you are Khlit," she said quickly. "I know about you. The Cossacks went away and you stayed behind to sleep on your stove, for fear of the Poles. Or it may be just because you are old, and the young men are better fighters. Menelitza has chosen badly when he made you come wooing for him."

The Cossack's pipe slipped in his teeth from surprise. He, Khlit, to come wooing a girl for another man! He to be accused of sleeping when the Siech marched! But Alevna was taking revenge for his early remark. Warrior as he was, Khlit was not skilled in word battle, being content to let one word do the work of two.

"The women of the village are talking about you," continued Alevna, hopping on one foot in delight, "and they said how you talked against the *Koshevoi Ataman* himself when he ordered war against the Poles—"

"Bah!" Khlit's voice took a lower note. "The Poles are but meant for the swords of the Siech to sharpen upon. They are like sheep. The real foe of the Ukraine is there, across Father Dnieper."

Two dimples showed in Alevna's red cheeks.

"So that is why you sit in your house on the hill looking across Father Dnieper, old man, to see if you can find any enemies. That is all you are good for, now, isn't it—that and to come paying suit to young girls—"

A titter of laughter broke from the maids at the gate. Khlit shook his head like a wolfhound that is bitten about the ears.

"My house on the hill has much booty in it," he growled, "from my enemies. And the Tatars know the name of Khlit so well they come not near it, though there is the ransom of ten hetmans inside."

"You need more than money, old man," said Alevna mockingly, as she stroked his horse's neck, "if you want to woo a girl, with your face. I had heard that Khlit was a mighty warrior. I am disappointed."

"Menelitza is strong," he said. "He desires you. What he desires he will get."

"Then it will be another wife," cried the girl. "I will not marry him!"

Khlit puffed thoughtfully at his pipe and leaned closer to her. His glance bored into the girl's brown eyes.

"Are you afraid of me, wren?" he asked.

"No," said Alevna seriously.

She advanced to the horse's side and placed both arms across the saddlebags, her smiling, fresh face within a foot of Khlit's shaggy countenance. Brown eyes peered into gray for the space of a minute. Khlit's hand shot out and closed firmly

around the girl's white throat. Just a little, his fingers tightened. One of the maids screamed. But Alevna did not cease smiling.

"You are not afraid now?" questioned the Cossack. "I might kill you."

"No," she said.

She felt safe, being a woman and beautiful. Arrogantly she said, "Will you know Alevna now?"

Khlit dropped his hand and gathered up his reins.

"Yes," he said. "You have a snub nose."

Whereupon he trotted away up the village street, without a backward glance at the dark-haired beauty he had come ten miles to see.

II

The passing of time did not assuage the anger of Khlit. Tales were brought to him at his cottage overlooking the banks of the Dnieper of how the army of the Siech fought the Poles, and old women did not scorn to mock at Khlit because he was not with the others.

To tell the truth Khlit did not much heed the tales of fighting on the Polish border. His thoughts lay in another direction, across the river. From childhood Khlit had heard tales of the Tatar Horde, of Nogai, grandson of Teval, seventh son of Juchi, leader of the Golden Horde.

He had seen towns laid in smoke and ruins from one end of the Ukraine to the other, when the Krim Tatars marched, and he knew how followers of the Great Turk incited the ever ready horsemen of the East to try the strength of the Cossack armies. Year by year he had faced the flying hosts of swarthy horsemen who discharged clouds of arrows as they advanced or retreated and he had seen the ground covered with bodies of good Cossacks.

Such memories were not lightly forgotten, and Khlit waited at the door of his cottage, his eyes searching the river for what he knew would come—a sally of Tatar horsemen across into the Ukraine in the absence of the Siech army. To get him food, he went to the river with a pronged spear and returned with fish, which he baked in smoke and ate. Only at midday he slept and then, like his Tatar enemies, with one eye open.

It was during one of his midday naps that Khlit learned the news he had been waiting for and expecting with the wise knowledge of a fisherman who is sure of his prey.

He had not many visitors at the cottage, partly because he was wary about making friends, and partly because Cossack folk held him in some fear, wherefore they lost no chance to mock him because he had not gone with the Siech.

So it happened that he was instantly alert when there was a patter of hoofs on the rough trail leading to his cottage, and a small, bent figure came into view mounted on one horse and leading a pack animal. By its gray cloak and wizened brown face, Khlit recognized the figure as that of Yemel, a Jewish merchant, who spoke all tongues and ordinarily haunted the path of the Siech, as full of news as a squirrel, news gleaned from Kiev to Tatary.

“Hail to you, Khlit,” cried Yemel, climbing down from his horse and seating himself on the tree trunk beside the Cossack. “I have some rare gold ornaments taken from the Polish towns by our brave Cossacks. Perchance, noble sir, you would like to exchange some trifling things for them.”

Yemel rambled on describing his goods, his bright little eyes on the Cossack’s impassive face, and throwing out occasional hints that he was thirsty and corn brandy was excellent to the taste. Khlit motioned to the hut, whereupon the Jew jumped up spryly, and reappeared with a full beaker of brandy, at the same time wiping his lips. Khlit did not fail to debit Yemel with two beakers instead of one, but he said nothing until his guest had done refreshing himself.

“A fox does not play tricks without reason, Yemel,” he said finally. “Full well you know I trade not in spoil, which I take by the sword. In your jackal brain there is something you would tell—for barter I care not—so, Yemel, speak or be gone.”

“Aye, noble sir,” chirped the merchant, his eye brightened by the drink, “as always, your words are the very coinage of pure gold in their wisdom. You might add that the jackal does not come to the lion’s den without reason. Honor me with your attention, *bogatyr*, for Yemel scorned to believe what he heard in the villages, that Khlit, he of the Curved Sword, the Wolf, had stayed behind to sleep when the Siech—”

“Enough!” said Khlit impatiently. “You have news?”

“For your ear alone, Khlit,” admitted Yemel, “for we two are wiser than the whole Zaporogian Siech.”

“Spawn of the devil,” said Khlit mildly, “do you link your name with a Cossack? Is your blood the same as mine?”

“Nay, Khlit,” broke in the merchant hurriedly, “I said not that. Do not believe that of me, noble sir. I meant that my word was for the ear of one wiser than all the Siech. Just a little moment and I will tell it. Khan Mirai Tkha has gone upon a hunt.”

Khlit’s gaze flickered over the Dnieper and back to Yemel.

“The Khan, who loves the chase of the stag,” continued Yemel, “has taken many horsemen as beaters and crossed the Dnieper in his hunt. Truly, it has been a great take, for I have come this day from the spot where the stag was found. Khan Mirai is a great hunter.”

“Aye,” said the Cossack.

“He hunted the stag into the streets of Garniv, just across the river,” explained the merchant. “And his horsemen who were beaters surrounded the village. It is a pity that the Zaporogian Siech wars against the Poles, for Khan Mirai hunted well.”

“Were many slain?” queried Khlit.

“All. I saw the scalp-locked bodies of Cossacks strewing the street like fish in the bed of a brook which has run dry. Khan Mirai has returned across the river with many slaves and much booty.”

“Aye, he is a good hunter.” Khlit bethought him for a moment. “What of Alevna, she who was the beauty of Garniv, the black-haired one? Was she among the slain?”

“Nay, Khlit, Alevna is missing. They say she was among the slaves, being beautiful, in spite of her temper. What a pity!” Yemel shot a calculating glance at Khlit. “The news of the Khan’s great hunt is not as old as the sun today. Truly, I

hurried here with the tidings, for I said to myself that Khlit should hear. It has cost me much trade, for you will not barter, only give. They say you are more generous than Yussaf, prince of princes—”

“Peace!” muttered Khlit, impatiently. Jerking his thumb over his shoulder, he added, “Go to the hut for reward, Yemel. Select one thing. If it be too fine I will take it from you and rip your hide for payment. If it be too little you will cheat yourself. Choose!”

Rid of the chattering merchant, Khlit knitted his brows in thought. The coming of Khan Mirai did not surprise him. He had been looking for it. It irked him that he had not seen the Tatars cross, even ten miles down the river. For them to escape unfollowed was to Khlit a sin of the first magnitude. Yet, with the army away, who was there to follow into the land of the Horde after the swift horsemen of the Mirai tribe?

Another thing Khlit meditated on. The Tatars had taken Alevna, the woman who had come between Menelitzza, his foster son, and himself. Well and good, he thought. A woman always bred trouble, and Alevna he had read as a great mischief-maker. Now he was well rid of her.

With Alevna disposed of, Menelitzza would return to his cot in Khlit’s hut and eat and drink and fight as a Cossack should. But—Khlit shook his head—suppose Menelitzza became very angry when he learned that the girl was gone? Young men were unreasonable as wild horses. Menelitzza might even go so far as to blame him, Khlit, for the loss of the girl.

Khlit filled his pipe and considered the question with great care. It was true that the foster son would be saddened by the news from Garniv, as he had joined the Siech to win knightly fame so that he could claim Alevna for wife. It was, furthermore, quite possible that Menelitzza would try to go after the Tatars when he returned, which would be dangerous, as well as useless, it being then too late. Alevna was desired of Menelitzza. She was, in a way, his property.

That being the case, Khan Mirai had despoiled Menelitzza of something he coveted, which was the same as saying that he had despoiled Khlit. Which was not to be permitted. Would the women begin saying that Khlit had been robbed by the Tatars and had slept in his hut like a swine-tender? There was no telling what Menelitzza would say when he got back.

At this point in the Cossack’s meditations, Yemel emerged from the hut, having been inside a full hour. The merchant’s face was wet with excitement. In one hand he held a Turkish scimitar with jeweled hilt and chased-gold scabbard. In the other was a silver beaker with an emerald of considerable size set in the handle.

Khlit looked up and scowled. “Hey, dog,” he growled, “said I not one thing, and you have two? Do you love your skin so little you would try to cheat me?”

“Harken but a moment, noble sir,” whined Yemel, clutching his treasures. “You did tell me to fetch one thing, but if it was too much I could have nothing. So, to make sure of pleasing you, I brought two things, one little and one big, to allow you to select my reward. If the sword is too much, I will take the small beaker, and be gone.”

“Then the sword is more valuable than the beaker?” inquired the Cossack thoughtfully.

“Assuredly, noble sir,” Yemel cried. “You can see its pure gold and fine jewels for yourself. It is too great a gift, I fear, even for your munificence. Of a truth, I did wrong to bring it. I must take the beaker.”

“Nay,” returned Khlit, “you can have either. Did I not promise the one you want? At once, dog!” Yemel’s agitated eyes traveled from sword to beaker and back again. He gripped both for an instant. Then he flung down the sword, clutching the beaker to his breast. A smile twitched Khlit’s gray mustache.

“You lied, Yemel,” he growled. “For the jewel in the beaker is worth two swords, and you were not blind. However, I have a mind to deal lightly with you. Take the beaker. You might have had thrice its value, for there are other emeralds within. Hey, come with me to the Tatar camp, and you shall have ten times its worth.”

A wail broke from the merchant at this news, silenced by a wave of the Cossack’s hand. Gathering up the gold sword, Khlit went into the hut. Yemel watched him with the despairing eyes of one who was punished beyond his deserts.

The merchant had gone, and the sun was low in the west when Khlit again emerged from the cottage. This time he was dressed in red morocco boots, long svitza or coat, a wide leather belt from which his sword hung together with gold tassels, and high sheepskin hat, from the back of which his gray scalp lock reached to his shoulders.

He went directly to the stable behind the hut, saddled and bridled his horse, filled his saddlebags with mealcakes and tobacco, and sprang on his horse. For a moment he searched the river with his glance, and then urged his horse forward in the direction taken by Khan Mirai.

III

Next day’s sun saw Khlit riding steadily along the steppe on trail of the riders of Mirai. The level plain, covered with lush grass and with only occasional ravines where trees and undergrowth offered shelter, was not a favorable place for concealment. What there was, Khlit made the most of with customary caution, for he was already far into the country of the Horde where a captured Cossack was a dead Cossack.

For various reasons the old warrior had come alone on his quest to gain Alevna. There were few Cossacks left in the villages. The pick of the fighters were in Poland. And Khlit was not the man to encumber himself with clumsy assistants. Likewise, it would have been impossible for many men to travel unseen across the steppe, and such force as he could have mustered would have been too small to encounter the full strength of Khan Mirai’s thousands.

Khlit knew from experience that the Tatars were dangerous foes, wary, swift to act, and more merciless even than the Cossacks themselves. The Horde were roaming folk, carrying their houses with them on wagons and going from place to place to obtain good grazing for their herds of cattle and horses.

Yet, if he had considered his quest impossible, Khlit would not be where he was now. His ability to think clearly into the future had kept Khlit alive until his hair was gray, when few Cossacks lived to middle age. Khlit, reasoning coolly, saw that

he had certain advantages. He knew the land of the Horde from previous forays after cattle and horse. He was familiar with the Tatar way of fighting, which was deadly to strangers. Also, Mirai's men had a wholesome respect for the name of the Wolf. And they did not suspect he was following them.

Although he had been riding fast, Khlit had seen nothing of the Tatars by midday. The steppe appeared deserted, except for the deer and hare that fled at the sound of his approach. When the midday sun beat down on him, Khlit slipped from his horse, leading the animal into a grove of oaks that bordered the trail he was following. He seated himself on the turf, took some mealcakes and dried fruit from his saddlebags and prepared to eat his first meal of the day.

He had scarcely set his teeth into the first cake when he knew that he was no longer alone on the steppe. Farther along the trail a horse whinnied. At the first sound Khlit sprang to his own animal and wound his neckcloth about the beast's nostrils lest it should make answer to the newcomer. Then he trotted to the edge of the grove to get a view of the stranger.

Khlit had not seen a Tatar for some years, but he did not mistake the little figure seated easily on a steppe pony trotting down the trail. The man's swarthy face peered out under his pointed helmet. A cloak was thrown loosely over his coat of mail, a quiver of arrows at his back, his bow in a case at the saddle.

Evidently the Tatar was not suspicious of enemies, for he was singing a low, chuckling song, glancing occasionally to right and left, more from force of habit than watchfulness. Khlit crouched in his cover and scanned every movement of the rider.

The latter's course took him to within a few yards of the oak and he went by with a careless glance into the grove. Khlit did not move until the Tatar was well past his retreat. It was his first sight of prey in many months and his nostrils opened eagerly, while his gray eyes narrowed.

When Khlit did move, he lost no time. Trotting out, very quietly for a man of his size, into the trail, he covered the distance between him and the rider. As the latter, startled by some sound, or by a glimpse of a moving shadow beside him, turned in his saddle, Khlit's arms closed around him in a crushing grip that the Tatar strove in vain to break.

The Cossack had caught his enemy's lasso from the saddle as he grasped him, and when the two fell to earth Khlit made quick work of binding the smaller man securely, pinioning his arms to his side.

"Flat-Face," he grunted, standing upright and adjusting his coat, "a sword is needless when a fool rides recklessly over the steppe. You are a nasty-looking villain. I think I may slay you after all."

The Tatar made no move, his small eyes fixed intently on Khlit's every movement. The latter crossed his arms and stared down at the bound man thoughtfully.

"Hey," he said, "I need a messenger to the great Khan Mirai. You know what I'm saying, devil take you, in spite of your rude stare. Tell Khan Mirai that Khlit, he called the Wolf, the Cossack of the Curved Saber, is following the trail of the Horde, and he will not leave until the Khan presents him with a gift. A gift of the girl Alevna, taken from the village of Garniv. Tell your leader if he does not hand over the girl, the Wolf will bring death and woe upon the tribe. Aye, great woe."

He assisted the man to his feet and helped him into the saddle, first carefully removing sword, bow, and arrows.

“Bring back your answer to me here, Flat-Face,” added Khlit. “And think not of treachery against the Wolf, or you will do little more thinking.”

Khlit struck the horse on the flank, and the beast started quickly back along the trail. The Cossack watched it for a moment, then took a mealcake from his pocket and began his interrupted repast. He did not sit upon the turf, however, for he led his horse out to the trail and trotted after the Tatar.

Khlit had had time to eat many meals, and he had, in fact, smoked many pipes, by the time that the other appeared again. This time the Cossack had staged his welcome in a different spot, some two miles nearer the Tatar camp. He had selected a place near the trail where he had a good view of whoever might return, and at the same time be safe from observation himself. A turn in the trail around some rocks screened him.

He saw the Tatar making his way along the steppe alone, but his glance was fixed on the distance, not on his late foe. Apparently the man came unaccompanied, but Khlit was not one to believe in the good faith of anyone until convinced by his five senses. Which was fortunate, for as the Tatar was nearly abreast of him, the Cossack made out several helmets and spear points coming up the trail a good distance in the rear.

It needed no second sight to convince him that other riders were following their friend with no good intentions toward him—Khlit—and, as before, he acted swiftly.

As before, he let the Tatar pass by him a short distance, when he wheeled his horse from cover and sprang after him. The unfortunate rider heard the hoofbeat, and turned his horse with the quick skill of his race, feeling in the quiver at his back for an arrow.

But Khlit had not misjudged his distance. As the Tatar fitted arrow to bow, the Cossack’s horse struck him and dashed his own horse to the ground at the same instant Khlit’s heavy sword found his head. Horse and rider alike were cast to earth, and the Cossack wheeled away from the trail with a flourish of his curved sword.

“Hey, that was good, very good,” he chuckled to himself, as he put several miles of steppe between him and the spot where the Tatar lay. “Now Khan Mirai will know that the Wolf is following him and that the Wolf is Khlit.”

IV

The heart of Khan Mirai Tkha, great-grandson of Juchi, leader of the Golden Horde, was not light within him in spite of his successful raid on the Cossacks across the Dnieper. He sat in the sun, his legs crossed under him, his armor laid aside, stroking his black mustache and gazing moodily about the camp of the tribe.

There were many reasons why Khan Mirai should have been carefree, for he had rejoined the main encampment of the tribe with booty and slaves. The host of the Mirza Uztei-Kur, which the Khan was honoring with his presence, was located in a grassy basin, a mile or so in extent, surrounded by a ring of wooded hills.

Nothing better in the way of an encampment could have been desired. And the Khan's own quarters, the leather and silk pavilion mounted on a wagon drawn by fifty horses, was richly furnished with Mongol draperies and Persian rugs.

But there was a thorn in Khan Mirai's side—Khlit, the Cossack Wolf, who had followed his riders from the Dnieper far into the land of the Horde, past the Kartan Mountains where no Cossack had set foot before, was still in the vicinity, and, in spite of every stratagem the iniquitous brain of Khan Mirai could hit upon, was still unharmed. And he had set his mark upon the Tatars.

Wherefore, it would not need a *shaman*, or conjurer, to tell that the Khan was irked. For a Tatar lives by mares milk and flesh, and by fighting, and the Khan was visiting one of his subject tribes who looked to him to deal with the Cossack pest.

To add to his discomfort, that morning when he stepped from his pavilion he had seen seven crows fly across the encampment, and heard their croaking. Khan Mirai knew by this that some misfortune was not far away. It might be possible to ward off the misfortune by aid of the tribe *shaman*. If this pending misfortune were in any way connected with Khlit, it should be dealt with at once, by all the skill of the conjurer and the intelligence of the Khan, with Mirza Uztei-Kur.

The Khan saw the squat figure of the Mirza approaching him and made room on the wagon step for the leader of the tribe.

Uztei-Kur was more at ease on a horse's back than on his bowlegs. He stood perhaps five feet in height, with heavy shoulders, a face broad and yellow as a full moon, and slanting beads for eyes. Unlike the Khan, Uztei-Kur was in mail and bore his scimitar. Men said he slept thus.

He did not greet his chief, merely pulling out a pipe which he filled from the Khan's tobacco jar. A pitcher of soured mare's milk had made up the other's breakfast, and this Uztei-Kur emptied with several gulping swallows. Both were silent for a space, waiting for the other to speak.

"Have you news of the Wolf?" asked Khan Mirai at length, speaking what was on his mind.

"Aye," muttered Uztei-Kur between his lips. "Yesterday we had news of Khlit who calls himself the Wolf. Truly, he was bred of the devil's jackal. It was when we chased a stag in the woods to the west. As we passed under the brow of a cliff a heavy rock bounded down. Two were crushed and another had his backbone cracked, so we left him to die. The stag escaped us."

"Did you see Khlit?" queried the Khan.

"Nay, who else could it be?" demanded Uztei-Kur, baring his teeth, which were pointed as a jackal's.

His eye wandered over the crowded encampment and came to rest on his companion.

"Khlit is hanging around until he gets the woman he asked for. I have seen her. She is worthless to us, for she has the temper of a serpent and the fury of a tiger. None can touch her. Why not give Khlit what he wants and get rid of him?"

"Heart of a lizard!" Khan Mirai spat into the dust at his feet. "Know you not that Khlit is worth a hundred Alevnas to us? Make him slave and we can taunt the Cossacks without measure. He is a prize worth the sack of Garniv."

“Then hunt him down,” growled the mirza, whose Mind could hold only one idea at once. “And call me not a lizard, Khan Mirai, if you would not find a lizard can sting. I have hunted Khlit for days, without finding more than his horses dung. Consult your *shaman*, whom you love as a camel loves a spring, and learn how you may snare the Wolf.”

The Khan puffed at his pipe. He was not of Tatar blood alone. He came of Mongol ancestors, and had the tall body and slit eyes of his kind. The mirza he looked on as a dog, to be whipped to obedience, who knew and cared nothing for the arts of the conjurer or the sacred books that had been part of the treasury of the Golden Horde.

“Today,” he said, not without hesitation, “I saw seven crows over the tribe. And I have heard that yesterday the *shaman* walked alone in the woods as he does when a battle is near. But what battle can come to pass here? And now the *shaman* wears his mask, another sign that he is disturbed.”

“Aye,” said Uztei-Kur without emotion, “the double-faced one sulks in his house today.”

“He can tell us,” decided the Khan, rising to his feet, “whether it will be possible to trap the Wolf. If so, we shall ask him how, and out of his wisdom which is allied to unseen potencies he will announce a trap. If he declares that the oracle believes we cannot trap the Wolf, then we will give up the girl, perhaps. But the *shaman* is very wise. He will devise a trap.”

Khan Mirai caused it to be known in the camp that they were going to consult the conjurer, and should be undisturbed. The Tatars were not inclined to disobey the command, for they held the conjurer in wholesome fear, and for the last day he had sulked and spoken to no one, besides wearing his mask, which was a bad omen.

Threading through sleeping camels, the two leaders came to the wagon-house of the man they sought, in a cleared space near one side of the camp. The pavilion was like the others, save for a narrow opening at the dome-shaped top and curious engravings around the leather sides, representing forms of animals and birds, with many crows.

Truly, Khan Mirai discovered, the *shaman* was sulking. For he called for many minutes at the entrance before the conjurer emerged, wrapped from head to foot in a red cloak, and wearing his mask.

V

Although Khan Mirai had consulted the conjurer many times before he never lost a feeling of awe when he stood before the dark entrance to the house, where so many strange images were hung from the walls. The wizard himself impressed the Khan, for he was a wizened little man, scarcely as high as the Tatar leader, although the latter was standing on a lower step. A peculiar smell, like that of dried poppies, crept into his nostrils and he turned his eyes away as the figure in the red cloak bent its mask in the likeness of a dog's head upon him.

When he had made known his business and received the grudging assent of the shaman to enter, Khan Mirai stepped inside with Uztei-Kur, and, groping his way through the blackness, seated himself cross-legged upon some antelope skins.

“Tell us what we have come to know, *Shaman*,” he said, “concerning the Wolf, and you shall have sequins of gold to buy herbs and stag’s antlers.”

The *shaman* gave vent to a curious chuckling sound at these tidings, and for a space moved about in the darkness—for he had closed the leather flap over the door—making his preparations for the coming oracle.

Abruptly, he jerked the flap from the vent at the top of the pavilion, allowing a ray of sunlight to descend into the center of the house. In this light he stood revealed in all his conjuring attire. He wore his dog’s mask, but the red cloak was discarded, and a myriad of iron figures hung from his body. Iron snakes twined down his legs, iron horses in miniature hung from his arms, with tigers, jackals, birds, and fishes.

The cascade of little images covered him completely, and every move he made was accompanied by a loud clanking. In one hand he held a stick. Before him was placed a wooden drum.

Khan Mirai looked on with satisfaction and not a little awe, as at something he was accustomed to, but with which he was not entirely at ease. The *mirza* had drawn back into the shadows. Slowly at first, then more rapidly, the *shaman* began his ritual, every move being followed closely by the Khan.

With his wooden stick the conjurer beat methodically on the drum, facing first toward a huge pair of stag’s antlers on one side of the house, then toward an elephant’s head mounted in some fashion and stuffed into lifelike semblance, and then toward a serpent, similarly mounted, dimly to be seen in the semi-darkness.

As he proceeded, the cadence of blows on the drum became quicker, the *shaman* struck up a dance in which his iron cloak rattled and clanked, and accompanied himself with a muttered shrieking, looking now toward the vent in the top of the house. More and more rapidly he danced, wielding his drumstick and shrieking with the full strength of his lungs. As he did so, the Khan leaned forward breathlessly, his eyes fixed on the ridgepole which was visible through the opening.

When the clamor was at its utmost, the *shaman* suddenly whirled with a loud cry, and pointed to the opening at the top of the house. The Khan sprang to his feet, and as he did so the conjurer fell to the floor and lay motionless beside the drum.

“Did you see?” whispered Khan Mirai to the *mirza*. “The crow came and sat on the ridgepole. Never have I seen the *shaman* in such ecstasy. The prophecy will be, without doubt, more wonderful than ever.”

“For twenty summers,” returned Uztei-Kur disdainfully, “I have sat in the gloom and watched, and I have never seen any crow alight on the ridgepole. If it is indeed the great-grandfather of the ravens—”

“Hush,” whispered the Khan, “the *shaman* is returning to consciousness. It has taken only a moment for the message to reach him.”

Both men were silent as the conjurer stirred, moved his arms, and sat up. Crouching on his haunches, he drew his red cloak about him, and stared at them from behind the dog’s mask.

"I have heard," he cried in a hoarse voice, "the words of the raven that has given of wisdom—to the first khans of the hinterland—to the great Genghis Khan—to Kublai Khan, lord of mountains—to Yussaf, prince of princes, from whom it came to the camp of Khan Mirai Tkha, great-grandson of Juchi, leader of the Golden Horde, at his summons. In my ears poured the wisdom greater than the locked books of the treasury of Pam, more just than the words of the Dalai Lama, he of the mountains."

The conjurer stretched his hands before him as if clutching some imaginary object.

"The wisdom concerned the Wolf who follows the track of the Khan—it tells of a trap that may be set. This is the wisdom—the Wolf is cunning, but he is vain of his strength—Mirai Khan may go alone to where the rock fell from the mountain and seek for the slain stag. He will find the Wolf by the stag. He can tempt the Wolf into a trap. Out of his pride, the Wolf will come, and Tatar eyes shall see the Wolf ride into the encampment of Mirai Khan."

VI

Now Mirai Khan, although he, like most of his people, held the *shaman* in awe, was no fool, or he would not have been leader of the Tatar riders. After turning over the words of the conjurer in his mind, he decided that after such a successful trance, the message of the raven must be unusually pregnant, wherefore it behooved him to follow the given advice, as his father and father's father had done before him.

Yet because he was wary, he went to the spot Uztel-Kur named to him, where the rock had fallen from the cliff, mounted and armed. And he went stealthily, approaching through the wood, not from the plain, at a walk, eyes and ears alert for signs of danger. For the shaman had said he would find Khlit, by the stag.

He found time to wonder, as he went, why the stag should be lying in the wood. For Uztei-Kur had said plainly that the deer had escaped him. Khan Mirai was aware, however, that it pleased the *shaman* to cloak the wisdom of his words in riddles. He was prepared to find something else at the spot.

But he was not prepared to find the body of a dead Tatar, stiff in the grass, for he had forgotten what Uztel-Kur said, that one of the hunters had been crippled by the rock and left to die. By the body he halted warily, for he saw the rock, a boulder about the height of a short man's belt. For many minutes Khan Mirai did not move. His gaze went from the body to the underbrush about him, and a frown gathered on his swarthy brows.

His keen ears had caught the sound of movement near him in the wood, just where he could not tell. Something was approaching, and the sound told him that the approach was gradual and quiet, not the careless trampling of a deer or wild horse. Khan Mirai reached back into his quiver, fitted arrow to bow, drew his small target over his left arm, and waited for the sound to materialize into view.

He had half expected it, yet he gave a soft grunt of surprise when a horse and rider pushed quickly through the undergrowth into the clear space by the boulder, and Khlit confronted him. The Cossack lounged in his saddle, as he guided his

mount to within a few paces of the Tatar. In one hand he held a pistol, of Turkish design.

Khan Mirai had last seen Khlit when the Tatars tossed him bound into a tent to await torture at their pleasure, many years ago. Khlit had escaped then, because a reckless Cossack had ridden through the camp with another horse, at night, and released him, at the cost of his own life.

The Cossacks were surely devils, thought Khan Mirai, for they cared not for their lives in battle. Khlit was older now, but the Tatar did not mistake his scarred face and broad, erect figure.

Neither spoke, for to do so would be to give the other advantage. The Tatar had his bow bent and ready, but so was Khlit's pistol. An unreliable weapon, but then the arrow might also miss its mark and Khan Mirai was in no mind to meet the onset of the Russian's heavy steel and whirling saber. So each measured the other in silence, while their mounts pawed the turf and strove to get their, muzzles down to the grass. It was Khlit who broke the silence.

"Have you come to count your dead, Mirai Khan," he said, "to look for a stag that was slain in a hunt? Have you seen one?"

"One Of our own was slain," spoke Mirai Khan.

"Aye," said Khlit grimly. "Here at your feet. Two others were slain at the same time. It was a good hunt. Does it please you? Every day some of the hunted do not return to camp. For I, Khlit, am a hunter."

"Your will be the hunt, Khlit," returned Khan Mirai. "If not today, very soon. A prophecy has been uttered, that I would find you here, and that you shall be brought to the encampment. The first part has come true, soon the other will be true."

"Who spoke the prophecy?" asked Khlit with interest.

"A *shaman*, in holy convulsions. His words are truth, O *caphar*, more true than an oath you swear on that little gold ornament you carry."

The Cossack knew Khan Mirai referred to the cross he wore around his neck.

"Was not my promise true also?" he asked. "Eh, that death should sting the tribe like a wasp, if the girl were not given back to me?"

The Tatar scowled.

"Why is Khlit, he of the Curved Saber, eager to gain a woman?" he said contemptuously. "The girl is scarce grown, and with a temper like a vixen."

"Harken, Khan Mirai," said Khlit. "The woman is not for me. Years ago when you had bound me, a Cossack rode through your camp and loosed me, being slain in the doing. His son I have made my son. And his son desires the girl Alevna for wife. Wherefore I have come for her, to pay the debt I owe."

Khan Mirai considered these words and saw a light. Verily, the *shaman* was potent beyond all foreseeing. For he had told the Tatar that Khlit might be tricked through his pride. And there was the solution.

Khlit, so reasoned the Tatar, was under blood debt to free the girl. So closely was Alevna guarded in one of the wooden houses—none except the Khan and her guards knew which—that it would not be possible to rescue her, even if Khlit were able to gain the camp. So Khlit, failing to terrify him, Khan Mirai, must buy her at a price, and that price should be himself. Gladly would the Tatar surrender a thousand Alevnas to see the Cossack bound before him.

“So, you have come to pay a debt, Khlit?” he asked, watching the Cossack narrowly. “Good! I swear to you that there is but one price that will buy Alevna. If you would clear your debt, you must buy the girl with yourself. Do that, and Alevna shall choose a horse and ride free into the steppe.”

Khlit considered this with bent brows.

“The debt must be paid,” he said. “But I do not trust you. When I see with my own eyes Alevna ride free into the steppe and none follow her, I shall be ready to say that you will receive your price”—he hesitated only for a moment—“and then I will ride into the encampment in the plain. This is how it may be done.

“Soon, I shall light two fires on the hills to the west. When you see two smokes arise late in the afternoon give Alevna a good horse. I shall watch her go from the camp past the hill out to the steppe and lose herself to view. Think not to trick me. Then, before the sun kisses earth and the blackbird night flies over us, I will ride into your camp, as the father of Menelitzza rode when he lost his life.”

The Tatar studied his foe.

“Do you swear that on the gold token?” he asked finally.

Khlit held up the miniature cross in his left hand.

“I swear it,” he growled. “Devil take it, when did Khlit break his word?”

Khan Mirai knew that the Cossack’s promise was better than other men’s. Moreover caphars did not lightly, strange as it seemed, perjure themselves when they swore an oath on their token. When the Tatar remembered the prophecy of the *shaman* he felt elated. The conjurer had sworn that Khlit would ride into the camp. Had not the first part of the prophecy come true?

Yes, Khan Mirai thought that the dice of the gods were falling as he wished. To part with the girl was a slight price to pay for the chance—the probability—that Khlit would do as he promised. Of course the Cossack might come galloping with drawn sword. Khan Mirai expected this. But he would be overpowered. The thought of Khlit bound before him settled the question.

“It shall be as you say,” he snarled, his eyes alight. “I shall look for the smoke.”

“Aye,” said Khlit, “so be it.”

The parting of the two warriors was not lightly accomplished. Each urged his horse slowly backward, watching the other. It was not until they were a good bowshot apart that Khlit wheeled his mount and disappeared into the wood that had sheltered him so long from the eyes of the Tatar riders.

Khan Mirai lost no time in leaving the spot, with a last glance at the dead man, and hastened to present a gift of gold to the *shaman*, who, as he expected, was still lying in the wooden house after his convulsions, which must have been severe, as two prophecies had been made, and each had come true.

VII

When the two columns of smoke rose from the western hill and drifted with the wind over the camp, Khlit watched a girl’s form ride past in the distance.

His eyes were keen, and he could not mistake the figure on an Arab mount, whose poise and movements were those of Alevna. Even the tilt of her dark head

he recognized, as she looked back at the Tatar camp, and the eager flush of her cheek when she saw freedom before her.

Khan Mirai had kept his promise. Now he would expect Khlit to keep his word.

But Khlit was in no hurry. He watched Alevna until the girl disappeared down a ravine. He scrutinized idly the herds of cattle which were grazing near the foot of the hill between him and the camp. He even tried to count the horses which he saw wandering about the plain riderless, their manes whipping in the brisk wind, their heads lifting alertly at the slightest sound.

The scene was pleasant, revealed by the level rays of the sun, sinking over the steppe to the west. Khlit considered it with appreciation, stroking his gray mustache. It had been several days since he had talked with Khan Mirai and he reflected that the Tatar was probably impatient at the delay. But Khlit was not to be hurried. He had not lit the fire until he was ready.

Now he scanned the smoke thoughtfully as it floated over the plain, dwindling to a narrow thread and then vanishing. The lives of men, he mused, were like smoke, gathering size and strength at first, then fading rapidly. Like smoke, they drifted where the wind blew, until there was no wind.

There was nothing to prevent Khlit from mounting his horse and riding away in security back to the steppe, to the banks of Father Dnieper and Russia. The path was open. Night was coming on, and the dark would conceal his flight. Yet he stayed.

Menelitzza's father, Khlit reflected, had shared bread and salt and wine with him. Nay, he had shed his blood for him. And the opportunity was offered now to pay back the debt. Khlit did not bother to wonder whether Menelitzza's father would know of it. It was sufficient that the debt could be paid.

The words of the *shaman* were true, although Khlit had not wasted a thought on them. The pride of the Wolf would lead him into the Tatar camp. His pride was such that he could not give the Khan the chance to say that he, Khlit, had turned his back upon a foe and broken his word. Yet, Khlit mused, the *shaman* had said nothing about the cunning of the Wolf. At least he had heard Khan Mirai say nothing of it. And that was very great.

The sun had almost touched the earth and Khlit rose and stretched himself as a dog does, first one foot then the other. He loosed his saber in its scabbard. Stopping for a moment to light his pipe, he went to his horse and very carefully ran his hand over saddle and bridle, feeling for any weakness. The horse, fat and strong from good feeding, whinnied and touched his shoulder with its muzzle. Then Khlit returned to the fire.

For the last time he cast a keen glance over the plain. The camp of the Tatars appeared as usual, but the Cossack noted bodies of horsemen darting about here and there, and others among the camels and wagons. All the Tatars except a handful of horse-tenders were near the encampment. Khlit noticed this preparation for his reception without emotion. He had not expected Khan Mirai to do otherwise. Then Khlit acted.

Stooping over the fire, he caught up a half-dozen kindled sticks and sprang to his horse. The animal snorted and reared at the flame, but Khlit gained its back, and by hand and knee urged it down the slope of the hill, riding swiftly between the trees. In both hands he held the brands.

The horse needed no further urging than the smoke at his ears to stretch into a frantic gallop, and at that pace Khlit slipped from between the trees to the surface of the plain a half mile from the camp.

With the wind whipping his *svitza* about him, Khlit guided his mount on a course along the edge of the wood, which took him parallel to the camp. As he went, he dropped his smoldering brands into patches of the dry, waist-high steppe grass and watched the wind fan the spots into widening circles of black, out of which smoke poured up and tongues of flame shot.

He was unmolested in his course, for the few horse-tenders had drawn near the camp, loath to miss the spectacle of the Cossack's arrival in the camp.

Dropping the last of his brands, Khlit wheeled his horse straight for the herd of cattle, which already was alert and watchful of the smoke and flames. As the wind drove the black clouds toward the beasts their uneasiness grew into panic. Running together they began, horses and cattle alike, to move toward the camp. Little was needed to start them into blind fear.

That little was supplied by the careful Khlit.

With his horse at a free gallop the Cossack drove into the throng of beasts erect in his saddle, waving his heavy sheepskin coat and shouting at the top of his voice. The animals nearest him broke into a gallop, others accompanied them. The cattle tossed their heads, and here and there Khlit saw a horse rear upon the back of another, or the broad horns of a steer upflung. Closer and closer the frightened cattle pressed together, until he was forced to climb on the back of his horse to avoid hurt to his legs.

Another moment and the great herd of the Tatars was in full flight, with the roar and crackle of flames at their backs, toward the encampment.

The Tatars who were near the herd had not been idle. Several of them had pushed into the front of the throng, trying to turn the beasts to one side. Some went down, others were carried along in the resistless mass of several thousand beasts. Shouts, arrows, and waving cloths were useless in attempts to control the herd, now that the patches of fire in the rear had been united and spread out on either bank. The herd had smelled smoke and fear drove them on.

Jammed in the center of the herd, where he had taken his place at the start of the mad race, was Khlit. Such aid as he could give to his horse he did, with his sword, keeping the pressure endurable by mercilessly cutting down the cattle around him.

Probably no one but a Cossack could have been sure of his seat and his horse alike in the herd, but Khlit wasted no thought on either. Puffing at his pipe, his sheepskin hat thrust on the side of his head, he had eyes only for the camp as the herd crashed into the first streets. The wagon-houses were scattered at first, with crouching camels thronging the streets.

At the advent of the herd the camels scrambled clumsily to their feet and joined the flight. Houses crashed over on their sides at the first impact of the herd, which now split up and flowed through the openings, crushing Tatar riders who did not keep pace with them and pounding underfoot anything living which got in their way.

Thus did Khlit ride through the Tatar camp, as he had promised.

Arrows were shot at him from a distance, but none of the Tatars succeeded in getting near him, owing to the herd. The arrows missed their mark. Indeed Khlit was soon lost to sight in the clouds of smoke which swelled around the camp. The confusion grew into a tumult of bellowing beasts and shrieking women and children in the houses, who, comparatively safe from the herd, dreaded fire.

Once near the farther edge of the camp, Khlit saw a strange thing. From one of the wagons sprang a weird figure, masked and clothed in a mass of hanging iron images that clashed as he ran. In his arms were clutched some bags which he did not abandon, even when he essayed to mount a horse in the tumult. Looking back over his shoulder, Khlit found that the *shaman* was lost to view in the smoke.

All the Tatars had seen Khlit enter the camp, but very few saw him leave. By the time that the herd had gained the open space on the farther side of the camp the smoke had descended like a pall over the plain. Such Tatar horsemen as had escaped hurt, and had not been borne away by the rush of beasts, were forced to fight off the advancing flames. Some wagons were put in motion. Others were abandoned. None had time to follow Khlit.

Far into the plain on the other side raced the herd, only stopping when they could run no farther. Then the beasts separated and came to a halt, trembling and panting. Khlit slipped from his mount and, leading the horse, lost no time in gaining the nearest shelter of woods.

Once, as he climbed the hill that separated him from the steppe, Khlit looked back at the smoldering plain, smoke-covered, strewn with exhausted cattle, at the wrecked wagon-houses and the Tatars, dimly seen in the twilight, put to their utmost to keep the flames from the camp; then he turned his face to the steppe.

VIII

Khlit sat again in front of his house, watching the surface of Father Dnieper. As usual, he was alone. And he was turning over many things in his mind.

The Cossacks of the Siech had returned from Poland. Menelitza had come with them. The boy, as Khlit expected, had won fame as a fighter. He was an approved knight. Yet Menelitza had not come to see Khlit nor had the old Cossack sought out his foster son.

As Alevna had not known of Khlit's battle for her, or of the ride through the Tatar camp when he rode with the herd before the flames, the news had not spread in the Ukraine, for he himself had said nothing. Yet, out of his wise knowledge, Khlit foresaw that a tongue there was no stopping would tell how the ride was accomplished and the camp of Khan Mirai thrown into a chaos of blood and flame.

That, he thought, was fitting, for the raid upon Garniv should not go unavenged and it would gladden the hearts of his old comrades to know how Khlit had made the Tatar chief pay the price of his daring.

As before, Khlit's shaggy head lifted alertly at a sound approaching—a patter of horse hoofs and a jingle of bells. Seeing that it was only Yemel, the Cossack sank back on his seat while the Jewish trader brought his pack animals to a halt and sprang to the ground.

“Ha!” said Khlit, surveying him amusedly, “I thought you had left your carcass where it would do no more harm.”

“No thanks to you, Khlit, I am here,” snarled the trader. “Murderer, mad Cossack, do you value lives as little as cattle?”

“Less,” smiled Khlit, “in battle. Did you not reap spoil enough without whining for gold and jewels—”

“My pay!” gasped Yemel. “Noble sir, I have your word! Ten times the value of the costliest emerald. Did I not sleep in the wagon-house with the man I had killed, to take his place? As God is my witness, the Khan and *mirza* came to the house and sat on the body of the dead *shaman* while I danced to keep their mind from the taint of the place.”

Khlit threw back his head and laughed long. Yemel seized his chance.

“Did not I make an excellent *shaman*, noble sir? Well for you I knew the Tatar camp as a dog knows his kennel. Did I not serve you well, carrying out your plans, even as you said? And the pay is little for such a risk.”

Khlit waved his hand toward the cottage.

“Take what you can carry away, Yemel,” he answered. “I need not such things. For I shall be alone now. Menelitzza has taken Alevna to wife.”

Just for an instant the Jew glanced curiously at the old Cossack, somber now and gazing out over the waters of Father Dnieper. He made as if to say something, hesitated, noting the sadness in the Cossack’s eyes, shook his head shrewdly, and, taking a heavy bag from his pack horse, vanished quietly inside the hut.

