

In The Time of

ATTILA



FRANCIS ROLT-WHEELER



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A SWORD THAT SEEMED ALIVE, GLEAMING LIKE THE LIGHTNING
ITSELF.— *Page 169.*

IN THE TIME OF ATTILA

BY
FRANCIS ROLT-WHEELER

ILLUSTRATED BY
FRANK T. MERRILL



BOSTON
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IN THE TIME OF ATTILA



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PREFACE

Wilder man, more furious fighter, and more sensational conqueror never swept across the pages of a bloody history than Attila the Hun. To all time, his name remains a memory of fire and of slaughter. "The Scourge of God," as he called himself, he became a demon of carnage and a creature of dread.

Of his life, but little is known. In the following story, every historical incident has been taken from the original Greek and Latin sources. All the personages in the tale, save two, are historical characters.

To throw sharp light upon one of the most lurid pages of history, to set the thrill of battle and the mystery of hectic intrigue into simple form, to show the wild dash of the savage and barbarous Huns, and to blaze anew that World Trail of sword and fire which reached from China into Western Europe, is the aim and purpose of

THE AUTHOR

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IN THE TIME OF ATTILA

CHAPTER I

A STRANGE OATH

“ ‘WHO grooms Attila’s horse shall ride Attila’s horse!’ ”

The prophecy rang over and over again in the ears of Goderedd, the Goth horse boy, as he rolled over on the wet hay and sleepily opened his eyes. He could scarcely believe that the cloaked figure that had dropped the words in his ear, as he was going to sleep the night before, was not part of a dream. But no, all had been too clear for that.

Dawn came noisily and harshly to the camp of the Huns. The light, rushing up the eastern sky over the Cossack steppes and the marshy waste-land shores of the Black Sea, showed

Attila's camp in all its disorder, dirt, and savagery.

It showed some two hundred tents pitched here and there about the ground, without any pretense of regularity or plan. Horses were picketed on long heel-ropes, and all the baggage litter of an undisciplined camp lay helter-skelter on the muddy and sodden ground. It had rained shortly before daylight, and the ashes of last night's fires were black and cold.

Lean dogs barked hungrily, horses whinnied and kicked at each other, gawky roosters crowed, some Bactrian camels bubbled with the quarrelsomeness of their breed, and, from the outskirts of the camp, came the far bleating of sheep and goats, stolen and driven to camp the day before, for the Hun host must be fed.

Some of the tents were but three horse-hides sewn together; others were strips of discarded finery draped upon curved sticks. There were Bedouin tents from Asia Minor, of woven goats' hair, black, or in long strips of gray and black, sprawling and rangy, not a yard high at their sides and so low that, even in the middle, a dwarfish Hun could not stand upright. A few were well-made tents of Roman canvas, taken

in some raid as part of the camp spoil. There were almost a score of small Kirghiz "yourts" from Central Asia, with a demountable wooden frame, sides of felted camels' hair, roofed with tanned pony-skins, and weather-proof.

Not that all the savage warriors had spent the night under shelter; the starshine of the evening before had given no hint of storm. A good half of the Huns lay stretched upon the ground, their sheepskin saddles for their pillows, and their weapons—axes, swords, and javelins—by their sides.

Their costumes were as varied as their tents. A few of the men—the older warriors, mostly—wore long sleeveless coats of felted goats' hair, woven with a double weave, the long harsh hairs hanging downward, strong and slippery enough to turn a glancing sword-blow; over these were laced breastplate girdles of horse-hide studded with nails. There were Kipchaks in black baggy trousers, and Ifghiz in coarse white wool and leg-length boots.

A fair proportion were dressed in a mixture of motley garments, stolen or pillaged in many a bloody raid. Some appeared as Greeks in belted cloaks and Bœotian sandals, their Mon-

gol-like faces appearing all the more hideous in this garb; many had pieces of Roman armor, but dented, battered, and rusty; not a few were clad in leather as rustic Thracians; several wore skins of furs taken from the Northern Goths; and there were those, also, who had the bedizened remnants of what were once richly colored silken robes, but tattered, bedraggled, and spotted with dirt and bloodstains. All, save those who wore the old Hun costume, looked as savage as tawdry barbarians aping the manners of civilization.

There were but few women in the tents, for the Huns did not march as did the Goths, a nation at a time, taking all their women and possessions with them. The Huns rode in reckless disarray, slew when there was any one to slay, stole where there was anything to steal, gorged when there was aught to eat, and slept at will, with utter disregard as to whether sleeping-time were daylight or dark.

Such was the camp of young Attila, at this time, when he was nothing more than a predatory blood-brigand like his ancestors. The juvenile chief had not joined the army of his uncle Ruas the third king of the Huns, for he

was, in some measure, an outlaw. His father, Mundzuk, and his uncle Orta, had been denied their share of the kingdom, seized by the cold and cruel Ruas. Mundzuk had died and Orta had been killed by Attila, his own nephew. This murder had occurred during a raid on a Tartar camp. The Tartars had resisted, and Orta had given the order to retreat. Attila, enraged at such an order, had driven his sword through his uncle's back, rallied the savage warriors, and carried the Tartar camp by storm. That was a year before, when Attila was only seventeen years old.

Some four hundred warriors had followed Attila into outlawry, if that could be called following which was merely a disorderly clustering around a self-appointed leader, whose only claims to leadership were an extraordinary magnetic power, a savage blood-lust, and a reckless daring which made him risk anything for the sake of spoil.

When there was food or plunder to be found, the Huns raided, slaughtered, ate, and slept; only to plunder and slay, and then to eat and sleep again. When all the region had been stricken bare of food, when the direst torture

could elicit no further treasure, then, at a given moment, night or day, the Huns would break forth, strike camp, and ride on furiously. Little they cared where they rode, so that they should find folk to slaughter, clothing or furs to steal, grain or herds to seize for food. They knew nothing of agriculture, cared only for the chase, and lived on pillage secured by callous murder.

The Huns of the fifth century, who had come down in ever-increasing hordes from Asia into Europe during the half-century before, resembled nothing so much as a pack of human wolves, thirsting for blood and spoil. They settled in no country, organized no government, built no cities, did not a single moment's good to any living soul; the terror which they spread was largely due to their utter barbarity and to a fanatic disregard of death.

The Greeks or Early Byzantines of the Eastern Roman Empire feared them more than the pestilence; the Romans of the Western Roman Empire hated them; the Goths added a superstitious repulsion to their warlike hostility, believing these Asiatic dwarfs to be a race of demons from the Underworld. These three mental attitudes explain why the Byzantines were

ever ready to buy off Hun attacks by paying heavy tribute; why the Romans were ever ready to fight them; and why whole tribes of the Goths—who, at this time, occupied all Northern Europe and Western Russia—accepted unwillingly the overlordship of these swarthy and vindictive savages, who came from some far point of the as yet unknown continent of Asia.

Goderedd the Goth, Goderedd the horse boy, asleep among the horses, yawned as the daylight grew stronger, and rolled to a sitting position. Fair-haired, blue-eyed, sinewy of build for all his fourteen years, he already topped the greater number of the squat, full-grown Hun warriors. He hated them, just as they hated him, but he took good care not to show it.

Even Attila's precarious chieftainship would not be enough to save his horse boy from having his skull split in two, did Goderedd chance to arouse a Hun's beast-madness in a quarrel. The boy was no match for a Hun, perhaps he never would be; even the stalwart axmen and swordsmen of the Goths, men who towered a head and shoulders over their short but ter-

rible foes, knew that they met their fighting equals in a Hun. A century of savage warfare, day in, day out, from the farthest bounds of Tartary to the frontiers of Western Europe, had effectually weeded out all the weaklings, and the Huns under young Attila were the scarred dog-wolves of a fighting pack.

The Goth boy's first action on awakening showed his racial difference from his Asiatic camp-fellows. He strolled to the stream near by, and, throwing off his fringed tunic, sluiced himself to the waist with cold water.

No Hun would have done so; no Hun ever washed. They gloried in having black caked blood on their hands and arms, and grumbled that the times were dull if there were no more fighting before the dried blood had worn away.

His rough wash finished, Goderedd put on his tunic again, it was his only garment, sauntered back, took Attila's favorite horse to the stream, groomed it carefully with a rough comb of horn and a wisp of hay, then picketed the animal anew.

Two other boys, Huns, who looked after the spare horses of Attila, taunted him with his cleanliness, just as they mocked him for his

long fair hair and "water-eyes." Certainly, the blue eyes of the Goth were in striking contrast to the black, slanting eyes of the Huns, just as his slightly waving locks differed from the lanky strings of ever-greasy hair that dragged on a Hun's shoulders.

"How dirty must a Goth be, to have to wash so much!" said one of the boys.

Goderedd kept his temper.

"A horse is no worse for being groomed," said he.

"Let me comb your back, then!" was the Hun's retort. He would have liked nothing better than to score the white skin with deep scratches, and to see the blood run.

"Yours needs it more. It would be less work to scratch it!" Goderedd replied, good-humoredly.

This silenced the first boy, but the other retorted:

"One good horse will buy three Goth slaves."

Goderedd colored with anger and did not trust himself to answer. It was a point on which he was extremely sensitive. His silence was taken for cowardice, and the two Hun boys pelted him with stones as he walked away.

Not that Goderredd was a slave, nor held exactly as a prisoner. The Goths—the Eastern groups, such as the Ostrogoths and the Gepids—had become the allies of the Huns. For three centuries, ever since the conquest of Gaul by the Romans, Goths had come in enormous numbers into the empire, first as slaves, then as prisoners, afterwards as free citizens, and, at the time of this story, had become the fighting backbone of the empire.

Besides this, a huge Gothic kingdom had been established by Ermaneric, with a capital somewhere between the sites of Warsaw and Moscow, but, though Ermaneric counted at least half a million warriors scattered far and wide under his banner, they were unorganized and the Gothic Kingdom had been seized by the Huns, under Balamber, Attila's great-grandfather, sixty years before. The Huns, in hordes of thousands and tens of thousands at a time, crossed the passes of the Ural Mountains or swarmed over the steppes, forming an ever-increasing flood which burst upon Ermaneric and defeated all his armies in a series of pitched battles. Ermaneric was slain, or, according to

another tradition, had both arms and legs cut off and lived, a limbless trunk, for forty years thereafter.

The migrations of the Huns continued, creating the first World Trail between Asia and Europe, building up an empire which stretched from Mongolia to France, only to fall to pieces and disappear on the death of Attila. During this hundred and three years of Hunnish power, there were at least as many Goths as Huns acknowledging an Asiatic king. They were subject peoples, but they were not slaves.

Goderedd walked away slowly, ignoring the stones his comrades flung at him, pondering especially who the stranger could be who, at dusk, had said to him in the Gothic tongue:

“Who grooms Attila’s horse shall ride Attila’s horse.”

The prophecy was startling enough in itself, though Goderedd had sense enough to see that it might not mean all that it implied. The camp of the Huns was full of rude wizards and soothsayers, who made prophecies from the markings on the charred blade-bones of beasts thrown into the fire, and the boy knew that these

augurs always worded their rough oracles in a form which could be understood in half a dozen different ways. He would have liked to speak to Attila about it, but the character of the prophecy was such as to make it seem a thing he had better keep to himself. Nothing was easier to awake than the jealousy of a Hun, and, in those wild times, chief might become prisoner overnight, and prisoner, chief.

Goderedd had no fear of Attila—save during the Hun's attacks of rage, when all men trembled—for the chieftain had treated him with marked kindness. The lad had been taken prisoner a few months before in a Hun raid on a small party of the Goths encamped for the night, during a long journey southwards from the Baltic.

Orfrida, the mother of Goderedd, had been slain in the first charge, and Attila, himself, had cut down the Hun slayer of Goderedd's mother. Attila's motive, perhaps, had been due to jealous anger, for Orfrida was a woman of great beauty and an Amaling—that is to say, of the Gothic royal line, but the boy, naturally, had never even imagined that the Hun might have had evil designs upon his mother. He re-

membered, only, that Attila had avenged her death, and, therefore, he gave to the chief his ready devotion and allegiance.

There had been murmurs in the camp when Attila made the young Goth his leading horse boy and had given him the care of his favorite steed—a very signal honor. But the Huns kept their grumbling to themselves; they knew that the man who murmured openly against Attila would be sent to find his reasons in the Land of the Dead. Though but eighteen years old, Attila had proved over and over again that he knew how to command and to back his commands with his own blade. The wolf-leader of a wolf-pack, he held his chieftainship by sheer fighting power.

So, thinking deeply over the prophecy and wondering what it might mean, Goderedd traversed the untidy camp and passed over the low ridge, on the other side of which Attila had pitched his tent.

Coming to himself with a start, the boy rubbed his eyes in surprise.

Beside the rough but substantial “yourt” of Attila rose a pavilion, white and blue, of fine material, the tent-poles gilded, the curtains at

the entrance deep-fringed with golden tassels. It had not been there the night before. Such a tent Goderredd had never seen, though he had heard the Huns talk of such. Surely this must be a messenger from King Ruas, and for what reason but war!

Goderredd quickened his steps to learn the news. To his thinking, war was a thousandfold better than these petty raidings with a hungry stomach three days in the week, followed by a night-slaughter, an orgy, and a division of the spoil, of which none came to him.

The boy had not taken many steps along the ridge, in the direction of Attila's tent, when the same stranger whom he had seen at dusk, the night before, came out of the pavilion tent, and raised his arms in apparent adoration, just as the sun rose above the Eastern horizon. The evening before, the stranger had been cloaked, and Goderredd had noted nothing of him save his great height; this morning, the stranger was magnificently robed, with a curious square-shaped head-dress which seemed to be glittering with jewels.

Goderredd stopped instinctively. Like many of the Goths, he was a Christian, for the larger

part of the Goths had been converted, fifty years before, by the famous bishop Ulfilas. Ulfilas was an Arian Christian, that is to say, he differed on some points of doctrine from the orthodox teachings of Constantinople and Rome. Consequently, to the Romans, the Goths were hated heretics. Two hundred years of warfare hinged on this religious hatred, and the history of the Huns and Goths is bound up with it.

At the sound of the stranger's chanting, Attila came out from his "yourt." He was short of build, with a disproportionately muscular chest and an enormous head. His hands hung to his knees. His face was very dark, the eyes deep-set and slanting, and he had a trick of lifting his upper lips in a snarl, showing his yellow teeth. He walked with a positive and proud step, but his glances darted restlessly and suspiciously in every direction. His chief characteristic was an aura of power, which surrounded him like a magnetic field. He was dressed, like most of his warriors, in the sleeveless goat-hair robe, but his arms were covered with rude bronze armlets, and his breastplate was encrusted with silver. This breastplate was a piece of spoil from some tribal raid, and orig-

inally, no doubt, had been stripped from the body of some dead general belonging to the Eastern Emperor's army.

Goderedd advanced a little way, then hesitated, then advanced again. Should he dare to approach Attila, now in conversation with the stranger? But his orders were to report, every day, at sunrise, and Attila did not permit disobedience. He went boldly forward, salaamed with hand on forehead, and made his usual report concerning the chief's favorite horse.

Attila listened to the boy's words carelessly, and nodded him away. But the stranger intervened.

"You spoke of Goderedd, the Goth, last night, Chief Attila. Is this the boy?"

There was an inflection in the words that set Goderedd's heart astir. He looked frankly at the stranger, but took good heed to show no sign of recognition.

"It is the boy," said Attila.

"I have seen him already, as I told you. But I had no chance to speak to him."

Goderedd understood the stranger's reference. The words which had been spoken, the night before, were to be kept a secret from At-

tila. But he was even more surprised by the newcomer's next sentence.

“While you were watering Chief Attila's horse, this morning,” the stranger went on, “a boy of the Huns called you a slave.”

The young Goth started. How could the stranger know?

“A true saying, Most Noble,” he answered, not knowing what title to use.

“It was a snake-word,” declared the newcomer, who was dressed as a Persian mage. “There is no Hun in all Chief Attila's following who is less a slave than Goderedd. Chief Attila, pass me three of your armlets!”

He held out his hand imperiously.

Though the mage had only come to the camp the evening before, he had spent the greater part of the night in counsel with Attila, revealing himself as Mirkhond, former chief counselor of the great emperor Theodosius. In a few short hours he had established a mental mastery over the barbarian Hun, for Mirkhond was statesman, counselor, mage, and astrologer, and experienced in the ways of courts and kings. He had convinced Attila that a future of world-power lay before him, and the Hun's insensate

ambition had greedily devoured the prophecy.

So great had been the impression that Mirkhond had made upon Attila in a single night, that the Hun chieftain made no objection to the mage's strange demand, but took three armlets from his arm, tugging them off roughly, and placed them in the Persian's hand.

Mirkhond beckoned Goderedd forward, and, one after the other, slipped the heavy bronze rings upon the boy's arm. The Hun stared in mute astonishment. His own armlets given to a Goth horse boy, and that even without his asking!

“Let Chief Attila hear, and let you, Goderedd, hear,” declared Mirkhond, in tones which vibrated gravely. “These three armlets signify three lives. So long as the three lawful sons of Chief Attila be living, Goderedd, it shall be your duty to stay beside them, to guard them, to fight for them, if necessary to die for them. If one son die, take off one of these armlets that I have given you, and bury it in the grave of a son of Attila; so, too, for the second and the third. Should you die first, let the three armlets be buried with you, to show that you have been faithful to your trust.”



“CHIEF ATILA, PASS ME THREE OF YOUR ARMLETS!”

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Goderedd stared at Attila, and Attila at Mirkhond. They formed a strange group together. Mirkhond, tall and very straight, with handsome features and a fairly long, but well-trimmed black beard slightly streaked with gray, superbly dressed in embroidered robes and jeweled head-dress; Attila, short, herculean, flat-nosed, slant-eyed, with high cheekbones and a lower jaw both large and pointed, dressed as a Hun in goat-hair cloak and nail-studded leather cap, unadorned save for the stolen breastplate; Goderedd, well-built for all his youthful age, big-boned, big-handed, blue-eyed, and fair of skin, with wavy hair coming to his shoulders, which it was his special pride to keep in order. The boy showed his royal birth, though, because of pride, he kept his knowledge of it secret; both Attila and Mirkhond knew that the lad was of the princely line of the Amalings, but they thought that he did not know.

The dominant character of the three was Mirkhond. He was not a leader of men, but a master of the leaders of men, which is not at all the same thing. He held control of the strange scene.

“Do you make an oath, Goderedd?” he asked

authoritatively. "Remember your mother's death!"

The memory stirred the Goth boy's fidelity to Attila, though the idea of linking his life permanently to the Huns was not much to his liking. But the avenger of his mother should not find him slow to gratitude, and Mirkhond was not a man easily to be withstood.

"It is an oath!" agreed Goderedd. "I swear it on the Four Gospels!"

"Blood of a black dog!" swore Attila. "Your words ride fast, Mirkhond!"

"That should please a Hun," replied Mirkhond, with a grave smile.

Attila was, in a measure, staggered by the mage's coolness. The young chief was not married, nor, as yet, had he any immediate intention of taking a legal wife. The precision of Mirkhond's prediction that he should have three lawful sons seemed to assure the realization of his inmost hopes, but he could not understand the mage's choice of a Goth as the guardian of children not yet born.

Despite the power that Mirkhond had already secured over Attila by his evident knowledge and statecraft, the chieftain of the Huns

was naturally suspicious rather than credulous. The thought ran through his cunning mind that nothing was easier for a magician than to prophesy events so many years in advance that there could be no immediate proof of their fulfillment; he knew the tricks of the Hunnish sorcerers, and held them in mingled disbelief and dread. Furthermore, much as he liked Goderedd, the boy was a Goth—although royal, and therefore scarcely the fitting guardian for the sons of a Hun.

Mirkhond read his thoughts as though they had been spread on an illuminated parchment roll before him.

“You want a proof, Chief Attila. You doubt that I can read the future, or tell what happens far away, although I am not there. Proof you shall have, and that immediately. A moment ago, I mentioned that a boy of your people named Goderedd a ‘slave’ this morning, down by the stream beside the horses, while I was here in my tent. I will bring that boy here, running, with the sweat of fear on him.”

He fixed his eyes on Goderedd.

The mage’s mention of the stream and horses naturally threw the Goth boy’s thoughts back

to the scene beside the watering-place. The very instant that the picture formed itself in his mind, he felt as though some strange force entered his brain and snatched the thought away.

Bewildered, he looked at Mirkhond, who, having seized telepathically the vision that he sought, was staring into the distance with fixed eyes. A few moments later, the intensity of the gaze relaxed.

“He comes,” the mage said, calmly.

In a few minutes the Hun boy appeared, running madly towards them along the ridge. His eyes were starting from his head, and perspiration dripped from his sallow and low flat brow. He did not stop, nor make an obeisance to Attila, but plunged forward like one running in his sleep, until halted by a gesture from Mirkhond.

Attila gasped.

“It would have been the same,” declared the astrologer, “had I bidden him come from Rome. Is this the boy, Goderedd?”

“Yes, Mighty Priest,” the lad replied, changing his form of address.

“He has injured you. Slay him, if you wish.”

“I have no wish and I have no weapon,” replied Goderedd, bluntly.

“Think you that all weapons are made of steel? Take my hand, Goderedd!”

The Goth boy stepped forward and did so. Instantly, he felt his whole body tingling from head to foot with a thrilling vibration. It was simply an intense magnetic power, though the lad did not know it. His head buzzed, so that Mirkhond’s voice seemed to come from very far away.

“Hold out your other hand, and point your finger at him, Goderedd. He will be slain as though he stood in the path of the lightning. Do you feel it?”

“I feel it,” the boy agreed, unwillingly, for this rushing force in him, which was not his, seemed—to his barbarian mind—both magical and evil.

“Then point!”

The order was a direct one, yet the Goth boy was vaguely conscious that, although Mirkhond was giving him the power, he was, at the same time, inwardly bidding him not to use it.

A savage impulse to raise his hand and point,

and another inner warning to keep from doing so warred within him, but Goderedd's stolid Gothic sense began to get the uppermost.

"Death," he said at last, "is the punishment for treason to Attila. I have no right."

Mirkhond released Goderedd's hand, and immediately the boy's senses cleared. He rubbed the tips of his fingers, for they were aching.

There was a moment's silence, then Attila stepped closer.

"You could have killed him, Goderedd?"

"Yes, my Chief!" answered the boy, with assurance. He was confident of it.

Attila looked thoughtful and a little disturbed. He knew,—as all men of that time knew—that death-dealing powers existed in some of the Persian magi, highly trained in magic, though it was rarely employed, being almost as dangerous to the user as the victim.

The Hun chieftain looked, again, at the three armlets now on Goderedd's arm. In spite of his suspicion, the certainty gained on him that the prophecy would prove true. He realized that if Mirkhond were to help Goderedd with all his power and his knowledge, the two combined

would form an invaluable protection to his sons—should there ever be such.

In the back of his brain, too, lurked the knowledge that, in the event of any treachery, he had nothing to do but to slay Goderedd. The boy's royal birth, too, was not without its effect. He accepted the situation tacitly, for the mage had not asked him for an oath.

“Shall Goderedd remain as horse boy?” he asked abruptly, for he did not want to show the Goth a too open favor.

“For the present,” answered Mirkhond. “He is too young, still, to ride out as a warrior, and every one must have work to do. There is no need, yet, for your Huns to know all. That will come in time. Let it be seen, though, that Goderedd has your trust.”

CHAPTER II

THE LURE OF FAME

“ROME has run red with blood, Mirkhond? That were a killing worth the seeing!”

The narrow, beady eyes of Attila glittered hungrily.

“Red!” the mage repeated. “The marble steps were slippery; the courtyards of the palaces heaped with dead. Of blood and of revenge the Goths have drunk their fill. But Rome remains. Attila shall make more blood run between those ancient walls, and plunge his arms in gold pieces to the shoulders, if he will.”

“Ha!”

“You, Chieftain of the Huns, may do it. I see the name of Attila a flame upon the night!”

The astrologer drew aside the curtain of the yurt and pointed to the starry sky.

Attila rose from the heap of furs on which he was sitting, and accompanied Mirkhond outside the tent. He stared above him, expecting to see his name actually written on the sky, but

the stars only glittered above the steppe, as always.

“Read me the riddle,” the Hun ordered. “To back a horse or split a skull becomes me, but I have no skill of the skies.”

“It were a long reading, Chief Attila. Yet one thing I see clearly—the Empire of Rome glitters upon your finger!”

“Rome!”

Attila started, as well he might. Ambition drummed madly in his veins, though he was only a minor chief. The lust for power dominated him, but in his maddest moment he had never dreamed of Rome.

“Cities, like men,” the mage went on, “yield to the strongest sword. Three times did Alaric, the Goth, show his teeth to Rome, and thrice did the imperial city cringe before him. I saw it; I was there! What Alaric has done, Attila can do.”

“He is dead!”

“Attila will die, also, but his death shall shake the world, and his name be a word of terror to generations unborn.”

The snarl of pleasure showed the yellow teeth. To be feared was the Hun’s chief delight.

“Good words, fat words; juicy with blood!”

“Words for Attila. Hearken, Chief, King, Emperor—if you will—you who will bear upon your finger the destinies of Rome! Over the dwelling of Mirkhond, none but eagles hover. I was the adviser of the great Theodosius, and was at his bedside when he died; he was the Master of the World. I was the adviser of Alaric, the Goth, ravager of Rome, and was at his bedside when he died; Alaric in his turn was the Master of the World. Now do I come to Attila.”

“For my deathbed!”

“That may be,” replied the mage calmly, “though you are young and I am old. With me beside you, Attila can be Master of the World, as well.”

The two men eyed each other, the two strongest men of their time: Attila, squat, dwarfish, with a power that was savage, inhuman, and cruel; Mirkhond, tall, commanding, the embodiment of intellectual force, a Master of Kings. No man had ever endured the burning half-madness that lay in the eyes of Attila, no one until the coming of Mirkhond; the mage, himself, had been accustomed to see men shrink un-

der his penetrating glance. They measured each other's strength. The glance of neither fell.

“What do you know of Rome?” the Persian queried.

“That it has gold, and that its citizens are worth big ransom.”

“It is but little. They spoke true who told me that the Huns were ignorant. Rome will lie in the hollow of your hand; you must be clever enough to close your fist on it. Fate has chosen you to be a flame that sweeps in terror over both the Eastern and Western Empires of Rome, as a fire in autumn blackens the dry grass of the steppe-land. But a king must not be ignorant.”

“I know how to use a sword,” said Attila, grimly. “It is a speech that all men understand.”

“It is a common speech. If you can learn no more than that, Chieftain of the Huns, I move my tent and pitch it elsewhere. A wise man amid the ignorant is as a torch set to wet wood; the wood smokes, but gives neither light nor heat.”

Attila turned upon him furiously.

“Would you dictate to me?”

“For what else am I come? If you cannot learn, you cannot rule. Else, I go out across the world to Genseric, and Attila shall end his days in a skin yurt instead of a palace, or be eaten by wolves at the end of some tribal fray. Choose!”

“Who is this Genseric?”

“A Vandal.”

Attila spat in sign of contempt for that western branch of the Goths, at this time occupying France and Spain. Hate and ruthlessness were the principal elements in the character of a Hun, but the desire for power was paramount.

“Speak!” he said, thus tacitly admitting Mirkhond’s superiority.

The mage smiled inwardly. His point was won. Well he knew that, once having shown his thorough knowledge of the intricate affairs of that troublous time, Attila would not let him go. Low as was the grade of the Hun’s cunning, it was diamond-keen; barbarous and cruel as was his mind, it was dynamic. Mirkhond had not misread his man, and he knew his own worth. Knowledge was priceless in those times, as it is and ever must be.

“You waste your time, now, Chief Attila.

These raids for a handful of gold and some pack-loads of grain are well enough for others, not for you. Does a hurricane trouble itself with straws?"

"Let us march on Rome!"

"With a thousand men? You rave! Before you come to the gates of Rome, your followers shall be beyond the counting. That is not yet. First, you must have a kingdom of your own, impregnable."

"Where?" asked Attila.

"I will make you one."

"Where?" the Hun insisted.

Mirkhond would have liked to put him off a while, but Attila must be humored.

"Krym (the Crimea)," he replied. "Before the grass grows brown, it shall be in your hands. No king is strong whose camp is like a flower of the steppe, here to-day, and gone to-morrow. Your camp, Chief Attila, must be like a cedar of the mountains, which no tempest can uproot."

The Hun nodded.

"Such a camp, or kingdom, must be strong enough for you to be able to leave it when you go to war. Who will be your enemies? The

world! Attila, alone, against the world! And Attila shall be master!"

No doubt about it, the Persian knew how to play upon the overweening vanity of the Hun, but he was deeply earnest and sincere. From his study of the stars, he was convinced that Attila was one of those men whose Fate makes them the masters of the world, either for good or evil. But mastery means knowledge, and Attila would have to learn. Mirkhond determined to teach his savage pupil by building upon the Hun's violent pride.

"Attila, alone, against the world!" he repeated. "Where lie these enemies? Five empires you must face, Attila, and five empires you must conquer. Towards the Rising Sun lie many peoples, Medians, Persians, Parthians. You must tame them and set a line of blood for the frontier, a line of blood across which they dare not step."

"I will make that line!" said Attila, eagerly.

"To the south lie two empires in one, the Eastern Roman Empire with its capital in Constantinople, the Western Empire, in Rome. The Cæsars have found that one emperor cannot at the same time ride two restless horses; he can-

not keep one foot on the back of that biting white mare, the Eastern Empire, and the other on the back of the treacherous black stallion of the West. Therefore is the Roman Empire divided—a beast with two heads.”

The Hun nodded. Mirkhond’s illustration made it easy for him to understand.

“The Byzantines and Romans, weakened by wealth and having become feeble soldiers, welcomed their former enemies from the North, the Goths, enrolled them in their armies, and gave them posts of honor. They bedded their foes in their own tents. The Goths poured down from the Cold Sea (Northern Europe) and those who did not enter the Empire made a mighty kingdom under Ermaneric. Then came a million Huns under Balamber, from the country of the Rising Sun, and the Gothic kingdom fell.”

“I am of Balamber’s blood!” said Attila, proudly.

“Ermaneric had swept the Gepids, Ostrogoths, and Visigoths into his kingdom, as a gambler sweeps together the pieces of gold he has won at the game of the blackened bones. The Visigoths were the hardest of all to hold.

When the Huns came, like the fury of a raging fire, the Visigoths begged Valens, Emperor of the East, to let them cross the Danube and become subjects of the Empire. It was dangerous to Valens to admit a host of such enemies, but, much as he feared the Visigoths, he feared the Huns more. If these two peoples should make an alliance, they might sweep upon Constantinople and take the Eastern Empire. He allowed the Visigoths to cross. The powerful and warlike Visigoths immediately dominated Thrace.

“Foolish advisers suggested to the emperor that he should seize three hundred children of the Visigoths as hostages. By this foul treatment, Valens turned the would-be allies into enemies. He made matters worse by disarming the Visigoth warriors.”

“A fighter unarmed is a sick snake;” said the Hun. “One day he will find his venom-teeth and use them. A dead warrior will never bite any one.”

“Your people, Attila, then conquered the Ostrogoths and Gepids. Some Ostrogoths crossed the Danube and joined their fellow-Goths, leaving Balamber sole monarch of an empire so

great that it would take a moon to ride across it from east to west, a moon from north to south. But this addition of the Ostrogoths made the Visigoths in Thrace more dangerous.

“A Roman prefect treacherously tried to assassinate the Gothic leaders at a banquet. The Goths rose, defeated and wounded the Emperor Valens at the Battle of Constantinople, and the wounded emperor was burned alive in a little hut to which his own soldiers had carried him. Had there been a single man, in all that Gothic host, to lead them on Constantinople, the Empire of the East would have ended them. But they spent their energies in plunder. To win a battle, Chief Attila, is not to make a conquest. This have the Huns yet to learn.

“Disgrace followed on defeat. Julius, minister of war, ordered that all the children of the Goths, who had been seized as hostages, should be gathered in the market-places of the towns to which they had been taken, and there massacred. Not one was left alive.”

“Blood for blood,” said Attila, who would have done the same.

“Unwisdom! Blood for blood only causes a new blood-debt. The Roman had to pay that

debt, and paid it terribly. I saw the paying!

“Theodosius became emperor in place of Valens, and, by craft and war, restored his power over the Goths. By setting the River Danube as the frontier of the Huns, he admitted the mastery of your people over all the Northern world. Soon after the return of Theodosius’ embassy to the Huns, I came to Constantinople as Master of the Scribes, won the friendship of Theodosius, and never left his side.

“The very day that he was buried, I went to the camp of Alaric the Goth, then commander-in-chief of the Visigothic troops under Theodosius, and told him that the stars declared that he should stand, a conqueror, on the seven hills of Rome. Alaric demanded, of Arcadius, the weak son of Theodosius, the death of Julius who had slain the hostages. The emperor refused, and, to punish the Goths for this demand, stopped the pay of the army. The Visigoths revolted, and made Alaric their king.”

“And did Alaric march on Rome?” queried Attila.

“No, Chief Attila. World events move slowly, like an army burdened with spoil. Why should he march on Rome? Honorius, the Western Em-

peror who reigns now, Chief Attila, had done him no harm. His quarrel was not with him, but with Arcadius.”

“He marched on Constantinople, then?”

“He did. But Alaric knew—what you have yet to learn, Chief Attila—that undisciplined troops can never taken a fortified city. Finding Constantinople in arms and ready to receive him, he turned aside and led his armies through Macedonia and Thessaly, burning and slaying as he went, and camped before the walls of Athens. The Athenians had no stomach for such a bitter fight as that would be, and paid huge ransom. Alaric thundered on, sacking Megara, Argos, Corinth, Sparta, and many other towns, and adding spoil to spoil till the very baggage-mules were weary of transporting gold and silvers, silks and spices, all the treasures of Greece.”

Attila grunted enviously.

“Honorius, Emperor of the West, now began to fear Alaric, and sent Stilicho, a Vandal, his father-in-law and commander-in-chief of all the armies, with a powerful army into Thrace. A man worthy of your sword, Chief Attila, and but little wiser in counsel than I am. But his

star was setting, while that of Alaric was rising. Stilicho landed at Corinth, and, with his amazing skill of war, penned us in a mountain trap, cutting off the river which supplied the camp.

“There was little food in those parts. The Roman army grew a-hungred, also. I found water for the camp, for he who knows how mountains are made knows where to find the water they contain. The time for escape had come. If Stilicho was a master-general, Alaric was no less.

“Who can tell how that deed was done? Not I! By feint and counterfeint, by strategy I never even fathomed, Alaric took his host through the Roman lines. That night’s march was as a dream of terror that shakes a strong man in his bed. Up crags impossible we climbed like goats, two days’ march in a single night, and we had crossed the gulf before Stilicho could give pursuit. (It is the most famous strategic escape in all history).

“Two men I have known whose own soul-fire can light a flame in every man who follows them. One was Alaric; the other, Chief Attila, is you!”

The Hun's flat nostrils quivered, and his deep-set eyes blazed.

“I, myself,” the mage continued, “rode to Arcadius and wrenched from him a treaty, giving us all Eastern Illyricum (Greece and the Balkans) and making Alaric a noble of the empire. This treaty I shook, laughing, in Stilicho's face, as I returned in triumph from Constantinople. Any other man, Stilicho would have fed to the crows—but who dare draw steel upon Mirkhond!

“Three years we spent in preparation. Then, when Stilicho was away in Gaul, we set forth for the Western Empire. It was Honorius who had set Stilicho against Alaric, and Alaric did not forget. For twenty months we ravaged, and were preparing to burn down Milan—where was Honorius' court—when Stilicho returned from Gaul.

“The emperor fled to Ravenna, and Stilicho treacherously attacked us on an Easter Sunday, when the Goths were at worship and unarmed. Once, twice, and a third time he defeated us, for our army had grown sluggish during two years of easy pillaging, while Stilicho's troops were fresh from victories in Gaul. I then per-

suaded Stilicho to make peace with Alaric; we would act as a barrier between the two jealous empires, and he would be free to finish his campaign in Gaul.”

Attila grunted. It was a little hard for him to follow, but Alaric, Honorius, and Stilicho were names on all men’s lips at that time.

“And here, Chief Attila,” the mage went on, “the Huns come in, anew. Alaric’s army—we mustered sixteen legions—(eighty thousand men)—was not composed of Visigoths and Ostrogoths, only. Ten thousand men were light horsemen, Huns, under your uncle’s cousin, Chief Uldin.

“Suddenly there swept down from the north a huge invasion of heathens—Vandals, Sueves, Burgunds, and Alains—under their king, Radagais. Now this Radagais had made a solemn vow to burn Rome, and to sacrifice all Christian priests and Roman senators to his heathen gods. With most of his troops in Gaul, Stilicho could not stop this horde, and was too proud to send to Alaric for help.

“Radagais reached as far as Florence, leaving a blackened and desolate waste behind him,

without a living soul or an unburned city where his horde had passed—a devastation worthy of Attila!

“Alaric, without being asked, sent Uldin and the Huns to the aid of Stilicho. They fell upon Radagais, compelled him to surrender, beheaded him, killed seven men out of every ten, by count, and sold the rest and all the women and children into slavery. The Huns had saved the Empire.”

“They should have joined Radagais and helped to burn down Rome,” grumbled Attila, who had little love for the Christians.

“Stilicho now turned foolish. He tried to put his own son, Eucherius, on the throne of the Cæsars. I warned him, twice, that this would be his doom, for the stars held nothing for Eucherius. Honorius declared his father-in-law a rebel, and the troops, obedient to the emperor, deserted their old general. Stilicho fled to Ravenna, took sanctuary in a church, was lured out by treachery, and murdered in the street. His star had set.

“There was more foolishness to come. Honorius, afraid for his throne, declared all Goths

to be heretics, and degraded to the ranks every Goth officer in the army.

“This loosed a new river of blood.

“The people of the Western Empire, who had suffered nothing but robbery and violence from the Goths for over fifty years, seized on the Emperor’s edict as a pretext for revenge. They rose and murdered the wives and children of all Goth soldiers, spoiling their former spoilers, and won back, in a week, all that they had lost in half a century. That revenge but bred a blacker one.

“The flower of the Roman army, thirty thousand disciplined legionaries, with their officers, joined Alaric and begged him to lead them against Honorius and Rome. The moment had come for which I had been waiting. Stilicho was dead. Honorius had dismembered his own army. Goths of every stripe were eager for revenge. We plundered the whole land, and, next year (409) camped under the walls of Rome, the Mistress of the World.”

“To storm it?”

“To besiege it. A city like Rome is not to be taken by storm. A million people must soon starve, if surrounded. Famine is a weapon even

sharper than your sword, King Attila! The senators sent envoys, asking honorable terms of surrender, but threatening that the Romans might rise as one man and, by the weight of numbers, crush the host of Alaric.

“He laughed.

“‘The thicker the grass, the easier it is to mow!’ was his answer. But, at the last, he accepted an enormous ransom.

“Honorius agreed to make a treaty, refused, accepted and refused again. We marched on Rome, entered it, and Alaric ordered the Roman Senate to declare Honorius deposed. Attalus, prefect of the city—more famous for feasting than for war—was chosen for emperor by Alaric. I bade him not, but he refused to listen. I saw his triumph coming, and his doom beyond—he marched straight to his grim destiny.”

“He should have proclaimed himself Cæsar!” declared Attila.

“Impossible! The Roman legions would have revolted against a barbarian emperor. Attalus was useless and Alaric deposed him from his puppet emperorship. Again Honorius offered a treaty, and again broke his word. As well try to

make a treaty with a reed in a swamp, that bends to every gust!

“For the third time we marched on Rome. There was no parley. The whole army was hurled upon the city at midnight, and one of the gates was forced. By dawn we were the masters of the city. Alaric gave orders that there was to be no butchery, and that all churches and their treasures were to be spared.

“Orders avail little when a city is given over for pillage. The streets were heaped with dead, the gutters ran blood, and, on every corner, you could see man or woman being tortured to reveal the hiding-place of treasure. Yet Rome was not burned, nor anything destroyed.”

“They will have a different tale to tell when I sack Rome,” said Attila, grimly. “I must see black smoke behind me when I march away!”

“Alaric wished to rule Rome, not destroy it. But, by the sacking of Rome, he set both Empires against him. He was alone against the world, Master of it, but alone! For his own safety, he must control Rome, absolutely. The huge armies of Rome, and his own, needed constant supplies of wheat, and nearly all the wheat came from the African provinces. Hon-

orius forbade any shipments to Rome, and ordered the wheat-ships to sail to Tarentum or Ravenna. There was nothing left for Alaric to do but to try to conquer Carthage. He set sail hastily for Africa, but his fleet was destroyed in a sudden storm.

“Three days later he was smitten with a fever, and lay helpless on the shore. His dying wish was that no Roman might know the place of his burial. Four days later, he died. We carried his body to the bank of a little river, near the camp, and set two thousand prisoners to dig a new channel for the river. When the old bed was dry, we buried him there, turned the river back to its channel, leveled the earth as before, and slew every man of those two thousand, that never a Roman should learn where lie the bones of Alaric the Goth. The Master of the World lies there, and none shall bear that name again till Attila shall claim it.”

“That will not be long!” thundered Attila.

“So lies the world to-day,” went on the mage, “before the feet of Attila. The peoples of the East, the rivalry between the Eastern and the Western Empire, the Goths in the empire ready to follow any strong sword, the Goths of the

North and West always ready to shake off the power of Rome—all these, Chief Attila, you must ride and rule together.”

“I will ride them all!”

“So the stars decree; but not yet. A foal is not ready to be ridden by a warrior till its back can bear the weight. Remember the five parts of the world that you must conquer—first, the peoples of the Rising Sun, then, the Empire of the East, then, the Goths, and Rome, at the last.”

“Rome, first!” cried Attila.

“Ruin! You would be pinched between the Eastern Empire, the Goths, and the sea.”

With the toe of his sandal he sketched in the dust the geography of Europe, showing Attila how isolated was the peninsula of Italy, and how easily the Visigoths, Alains, and Byzantines could cut off a Hun army which had risked the crossing of the transverse Apennines, between Bologna and Florence.

“Therefore, Chief Attila,” he continued, “you must first become master of the peoples of the East. To do so, you must hold Krym as an impregnable kingdom. Your Huns are ready.”

Mirkhond thoroughly understood both Attila

and the wild tribesmen with whom he was dealing. He had endeared himself to the Huns as quickly as he had secured the confidence of their chief, and that by the only method they recognized—bloodshed and loot. With his precise knowledge of the weakness or wealth of the centers of settlement in all countries from Persia to Gaul, he had directed the raiding parties of the Huns to the places where spoil was the most plentiful.

Never did he appear as the instigator of these raids, leaving all the glory to Attila, but the older warriors knew the source of their chief's information, and even the most ignorant tribesmen dated their success and their enrichment from the day of Mirkhond's coming to the camp.

No one knew better than the Persian, however, how insecure is a power that is built on nothing but irregular robbery. This was his reason for firing Attila with the desire to capture Krym, or the Crimean Peninsula.

It was a daring project to suggest to so small a body of men as followed Attila, for the Tetraxide Goths of the Crimea had successfully resisted Balamber and the Hun armies for over thirty years. On one occasion, a force of twelve

thousand Huns had been cut to pieces in trying to drive a mad charge over the Isthmus of Perekop, only three miles wide, the sole communication between the Crimea and the mainland.

Attila was a reckless commander, but he was too naturally great a leader to attempt impossibilities. He listened eagerly to Mirkhond's suggestions, but answered bluntly that, with only a few hundred men, it was certain defeat to attempt the conquest of the Crimea.

"Why, Chief Attila?" the mage inquired.

"The Tetraxides," he spat, "are twenty times stronger than my Huns."

"Which is the stronger—a horse or a man?"

"A horse, since it carries a man."

"And which is master?"

"A man, for he knows more than a horse."

"Wise words, Chief Attila; mastery lies in knowing, not in strength. The day that you know more than the Tetraxides, you will be their master."

"You say it will be done?"

"I say it."

Attila looked at him thoughtfully. Since Mirkhond had been with the Huns, success had been

constant and the camp was full of spoil. Several other small bands had joined Attila's banner, so that the camp now held nearly a thousand men.

"Note well, Chief Attila," pursued Mirkhond, "the Tetraxides remain unconquered because their territory is mountainous and unknown, not to be reached save by a narrow tongue of land. Another way must be found by which your Huns may pass."

"Who is to find it?"

"Goderedd."

"A boy!"

"A small crack will empty a large water-pot, Chief Attila."

"Why send a boy? There are warriors enough among the Huns!"

"Can a Hun look like a Goth?"

"That is true."

"The Ostrogoths love not the Tetraxides, who call themselves Goths and are not truly so. But the people of Krym talk the Goth tongue. So does Goderedd."

"You also speak it, Mirkhond."

"I could not visit Krym unnoticed."

"But what can a boy do?" protested Attila.

“Young Goderedd cannot even wield a sword!”

“Very small and thin is the rung of a ladder,” replied the mage, “yet, by those rungs, great warriors climb the walls of a fortified city. Goderedd is one of the rungs on the ladder of your climbing, Chief Attila, but the glory comes to the climber, not to the ladder. Send him to Krym; his fate is bound up with yours, Chief Attila. It is upon your road to Fame!”

CHAPTER III

A CUNNING SCOUT

GODEREDD drew himself up, wearily, on the beach of the Crimea. It had been a long and tiring swim. It was his third night of alternate swimming and creeping by night along the shore of the Isthmus of Perekop, to be sure that none of the Tetraxide sentinels should see him.

The first part of his task was accomplished. He was in the redoubtable land of Krym, where never a Hun had been able to set foot. He was now on the peninsula side of the Isthmus. As this was the only land approach to the Crimea (there were no fleets, at that time, in the Black Sea), so long as this was held the Tetraxides believed their country to be impregnable.

Goderedd had received detailed instructions from Mirkhond and knew exactly what he was to do. He was, firstly, to learn as much as he could of the mountain passes and of the heights

which dominated the plains; secondly, he was to try and find some other route to the peninsula, by which an army could reach there secretly. The mage had heard, vaguely, that the great lagoon to the north—known as the Sivash or Putrid Sea—was extremely shallow. It might be possible to find a fording-place where a swim would not be too long for the horses of the Huns, trained only to the swimming of rivers.

In Goderedd's ragged tunic were sewn several pieces of silver and one or two pieces of gold, but he carried no other weapon than the sharp, iron-pointed, and heavy stick of the Scythian shepherds, a very efficient defense against a wolf. He went as a scout, not as a warrior.

Through all that day he slept, well hidden, in a clump of bushes, though there was little likelihood of discovery. The land was flat, marshy, desolate. On the coming of night, he finished his provision of scorched horse-flesh—it had been wrapped in tarred silk for the swim—and set out for the mountains. Dawn found him still in the plain. He slept during the day in a thick bed of Asiatic hemp-weed, and, at night, set off again, hungry, for he had nothing more to eat.

He could, undoubtedly, have found some marmots, had he dared to hunt by daylight, but he was afraid of being seen.

All that night he climbed steadily, having found a fairly well-marked sheep-path, and, towards morning, reached the pasture-lands of the heights. He was not long in finding fresh tracks, and followed the line of grazing of the flock until he came to the place where it had rested for the night. A shepherd and a boy were just cooking their morning meal. They looked at him suspiciously.

Goderedd came up and threw himself on the ground beside them. He was evidently tired and foot-weary; it was clear that he had been walking all night. Before even asking any question, the man handed him a piece of mutton and some sheep's-milk cheese.

“You come from where?” the shepherd asked.

Goderedd had his answer ready.

“I ran away,” he said. “I was keeping sheep down there—” he waved his hand in a direction other than that by which he had come, “and the other sheep boy hit me. I hit him with my stick, and he fell.”

“Dead?”

“I didn’t wait to see. He was only a slave, but the master liked him. He would have beaten me, so I ran away. I look for sheep to herd.”

The shepherd nodded. He was a stupid fellow, and Goderedd’s story was such a simple one that nothing seemed more likely.

“I have my boy,” he said, “but Swintha, who has many sheep, has no boy. Walk to him.”

“I will go—and the gods give you fortune,” he added, as thanks for the meal. “Where does Swintha feed his sheep?”

The man described the direction in which Goderedd should go, and the boy, deftly, as though in ignorance of the region, put a number of questions as to the lie of the land and the routes in the vicinity, by which the sheep were driven to the uplands from the plain. Goderedd treasured every word. Already, though he had been but two nights and a day in the country, he had learned much of the necessary topography by which a Hun army could reach the heights.

To recover strength, he slept that morning, and, in the afternoon, followed the shepherd’s direction. Three or four hours later he saw the

flock he was seeking, and went up boldly to the herder.

“Gunbredt told me to come to you, Swintha,” he said. “He declared that you had no sheep boy now.”

Swintha was a Tetraxide Goth of enormous size and strength. He was far more intelligent than the first shepherd, and Goderedd’s simple story of a fight did not convince him. He thought that the boy must have stolen, and had run away for that reason, but the thought never entered his head that the lad was not a Tetraxide, like himself.

The little differences in speech mattered nothing. The Tetraxides, like all the early Goth groups, comprised several tribes, each of whom spoke a slightly different dialect. The Goth tongue had never been unified, save by the bishop Ulfilas, who had translated the Bible into Goth. The Tetraxides were still heathens, and knew nothing of Ulfilas, being cut off—by the form of their country—from all the development of the Goths.

Having satisfied himself that Goderedd was a thief, and giving himself credit for his keensightedness, Swintha showed himself quite

ready to take the lad as a sheep boy. In the mountains there was nothing to steal, and he needed a herder badly. His former boy had been killed and eaten by wolves, and it was a difficult and onerous task to manage the flock, all alone, in rough mountains.

“If you will herd until the flocks go down, I will give you two sheep,” he offered. This was the usual pay. Swintha could have offered less, seeing that the boy was in need, but the Goths, as a whole, did not have the cheap bargaining spirit of Orientals.

“I will herd,” said Goderedd, and thus was the arrangement made.

Swintha was a shepherd, but he was—when occasion required—a warrior also. He soon came to have a liking for the boy, and Goderedd did not object at all to a shepherd’s life. He was far more free than in the Hun camp, and Swintha treated him as a comrade. The flock wandered widely, and the Goth boy learned a great deal of the nature of the surrounding country.

One night the flock was attacked by wolves. Goderedd was on his feet as quickly as was Swintha.

“Don’t run away!” shouted the shepherd.
“The wolf-pack will follow you!”

“Run!” cried Goderedd, in excited forgetfulness. “An Amaling does not run!”

With his iron-shod stick, and a torch, he joined Swintha in the furious fray. He fought savagely, boldly, breaking the back of one wolf and transfixing two others. He relished the fight, and was even sorry when the howling wolves broke away.

Although wolves seldom return, Swintha declared that they had better stay on guard, all night.

When the sheep had settled down again, the shepherd turned to the boy in great curiosity.

“What did you mean by calling yourself an Amaling?” he queried.

Goderedd bit his lip in the darkness. In his excitement he had not noticed that he had betrayed himself.

“My grandmother was an Ostrogoth,” he said hastily, “she was taken prisoner by the Tetraxides. My mother told me she was of the Amalings—but that may be just a tale.”

Swintha made no comment. He was no fool. Had Goderedd replied with a boast, he would

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have thought it an idle story; the boy's air of studied neglect only made it seem true. The shepherd had become aware that his sheep boy was of different metal than most of the rough Tetraxides, though Goderedd had done his best to seem ignorant. Still, thought Swintha, whatever the boy was, that mattered little on the mountains and he was a good herder. When they went down to the plains, in the autumn, it would be time enough to talk about the boy to one of the chiefs.

But if Swintha was thinking, Goderedd was thinking, also. By his lack of caution, he had attracted attention to himself. He had learned from Swintha all that was to be learned of that section of the mountains, he was quite used to the tricks of sheep-herding, and he had become proficient in the Tetraxide dialect, which differed but slightly from his own. He determined to escape.

The following evening, when the flocks were gathered for the night, Goderedd said suddenly,

“Oh, I'd forgotten. I got a lot of firewood ready, this morning. I'll go and get it before it gets quite dark.”

“Go,” said Swintha, unsuspectingly, “if it isn’t too far.”

Grabbing his stick, Goderedd set off in the fast-fading light. Swintha never saw him again.

Ostensibly hunting for work as a shepherd, Goderedd traveled all over the mountains, until he was satisfied that he knew the principal passes. A good half of his scouting work was done. He set himself to the second part of his task—that of finding a ford over the Putrid Sea.

So successful had been his scouting, in the guise of a shepherd, that Goderedd determined to try the trick a second time, but in a slightly different manner. He made his way to the Sea of Azov, struck to the northeastward, and approached a small fishing-village which was situated just where the lagoon-like waters of the Putrid Sea join the Sea of Azov. Behind, lay a terribly dreary country, so constantly swept by dust-storms as to be uninhabitable.

Using the same pretext of having been obliged to flee from the mountains because of a fatal quarrel, Goderedd tried to hire himself as a fisherman. Here, there was no chance. The skin

boats were only large enough for one person on board, and the boy had no experience.

Nothing could have suited him better. Goderedd produced one of his pieces of gold and bought a cranky skin-covered sailing craft, telling the villagers he would try his luck as a fisherman. The others laughed at him, for he knew neither how to sail, nor to fish. He was upset several times, but, being a strong swimmer, always managed to clamber back on his boat. His success was poor; his catch was seldom large.

“You fool, boy!” said one of the older fishermen to him. “Why you go always in Putrid Sea? More fish in open!”

“I’m afraid,” said the boy. “I’m a shepherd, not a fisherman, and I don’t know much about boats. Besides, though there are few fish in the Putrid Sea, they are bigger.”

The villagers thought this a great joke. Every fisher boy knew how to handle a boat, from childhood. Goderedd’s fear of the open sea only made his shepherd story seem more true.

It was not surprising that Goderedd caught few fish. His fishing was only a pretext. Most of the time he spent with a pole, sounding the shallow bottom. As for the smallness of his

catch, that did not worry him. He had still a few silver pieces, for food.

The boy spent a month in the Putrid Sea. He could stand it no longer. The smell was beginning to make him ill. He could no longer eat. But he had found what he came to find. At low tide, there was a long spit of sand, rarely dry, but often with no more than six inches of water over it and hard enough for horses. The channel to be swum was not more than a hundred yards across, and, at ebb, there was no current. Indeed, the tide is very small in the Sea of Azov. (Over this Arabat spit of sand the railway from Sebastopol to Exaterinoslav runs now).

Supremely contented with his discoveries, Goderedd resold the boat for almost nothing, and left the village among the jeers of the fishing-folk for a shepherd who thought he could learn how to sail a boat. No one in the village had suspected him of being anything but a silly fellow who undertook work he knew nothing about.

The boy's task was now accomplished. He could have returned to Attila and Mirkhond in all confidence, but he was so elated with his suc-

cess, and he so enjoyed this adventuring life on his own resources, that he had no desire to return to the Hun camp as yet. Swintha would not come down to the plain until autumn, for he could not leave his flock; the fisher-folk had not suspected Goderedd. There was no fear of discovery. He decided to see for himself what the defenses of the Isthmus of Perekop were like.

It was a long and stifling walk over the Dust-Plains. He had taken some dried fish and a gourd of water from the fishing village, but he had not dared to ask his way, since he did not want the fishing-folk to know that he was a stranger. The first day was disagreeable, and Goderedd's nose was soon bleeding, and stuffed up with dried blood and dust. Thirst soon beset him, and his gourd was empty by mid-afternoon. When evening came, his throat was parched and dry. There was no water.

The night was cool, and, despite his thirst, he slept soundly. On a fine, clear morning, he started off again at his best speed. Water, he must find! At ten o'clock the dust-whirls rose again. He staggered on, his only hope rising from the fact that he had found a little path.

That must lead to some place where people lived, and where people lived there must be water. It was nearly dusk before he came to a deep well, with a bucket of hide and a horse-hair rope beside it. That, in a word, was the saving of his life. But he had learned one important thing. To cross the Dust-Plains an army must bring its own water. The knowledge that his own sufferings had brought him to this discovery—which might have been fatal to Attila's expedition—cheered him greatly.

Next day, rested and refreshed, his gourd filled anew, he set out on his third day's march. First one, and then another path joined that on which he was walking. The track became wide and well-beaten. No doubt of it, he was approaching Akyt, the little Tetraxide settlement on the Crimean end of the Perekop Isthmus.

Goderedd advanced eagerly, astonished to see so much bustle about the place. There were only a dozen huts, but rough tents and brushwood shelters lay scattered on every side. It was a huddled agglomeration, and, when the Goth boy entered it, he was surprised to find that most of these huts and tents were not for soldiers, but for artisans, makers of weapons, chiefly.

He strolled through the place idly, no one paying the least attention to him, save a saddlemaker, at the door of a hut, who was sewing busily. He looked up as the boy approached, nodded, and at once began to talk. He was a garrulous old man, and ready to talk to anybody.

In the course of the conversation Goderedd mentioned that he had tried fishing, as a change from sheep-herding, but had no luck.

“You will do work?” queried the saddlemaker, eagerly.

“I only know how to herd sheep,” said the boy.

The saddlemaker pointed his needle at him.

“But you could learn to work!”

“I’d like to, if I knew how.”

“Learn to make saddles!” suggested the old man eagerly. “I have much work, too much work. I have no boy.”

“I might try,” agreed Goderedd, not wanting to seem too eager.

“Twenty thousand saddles must be made. Within three moons!”

This news gave another color to Goderedd’s rather aimless thoughts. What could the Tet-

raxide's need of twenty thousand saddles in such a hurry? He must find out, and where could he find out better than by staying a while in Akyt?

With the saddle-maker so eager to get a helper, and Goderedd only too ready to find a place where he would be inconspicuous, terms were soon made, and, the very next morning, the Goth boy took his first lesson in sewing leather with deer-sinew.

The saddle-maker was an inveterate talker. His tongue and his needle were never still. He gossiped all the day long, and Goderedd stored in his memory such of the information he received as might prove useful. The boy worked conscientiously, for that was his nature, and he soon gained the approval of his master.

Some three weeks later, one of the Tetraxide chiefs stopped outside the hut and had a long talk with the saddler. When the latter came back, he was bursting with importance.

“A saddle! With twenty pounds of silver! And silver spurs! And silver sewn on the stirrups! It is to me that Sunyamers comes to make his saddle! Oho! The Huns will squint!”

Goderedd's needle plied steadily, but he

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pricked his ears to listen. For all the saddler's talkativeness, he had not yet given the information that Goderedd was seeking. Now, in a single sentence, the whole truth had come out.

“Why does Chief Sunyamers ride against the Huns?” queried Goderedd.

His master started and looked at him, unconscious that his words about the saddle had given any clue.

“So you know of the raid! But, of course. Why? You ask why?” For a moment he seemed suspicious, then his expression cleared. “Ah, I remember, you are only a sheep boy—people know nothing on the mountains. I will tell you, I, Tasfrith, the maker of silver saddles!”

It was clear that he could not get his mind off the order he had received to make the saddle for the chieftain. He squatted again on the ground and began to work industriously.

“Why? Ignorant sheep boy! Sunyamers wishes to be the next king. He must have an army, so he must have gold. Where is there gold in Krym? Silver may be found in a hole in the ground (there are silver-mines in the Crimea), but gold must be found with the sword. The

tent of Attila is made of gold, he eats off gold plates, his saddle is gold, his stirrups are gold."

"I thought the Huns lived on slices of uncooked horse-flesh which they made tender by putting between their horses' backs and their saddles as they rode. Do they own anything at all?" queried Goderedd, who had his own reasons for wishing to seem ignorant of the Huns.

"Sheep boy!" said the saddler in great contempt, "you know nothing! Sunyamers will come back with a load of gold on every horse."

"But I thought it was always snow where the Huns live."

"Sunyamers will not wait till snow-time. When the flocks come down from the mountains, and all the warriors are gathered, he will ride."

Full of his subject, the saddle-maker rattled on, giving all sorts of information, some true and some mere gossip, but all bearing on the theme, how rich the Tetraxides would be when Sunyamers returned. Then he would be paid for all the saddles he was making. He explained how certain was success, since the raid would be a complete surprise, and how reprisals were impossible, since never could the Huns storm

the impregnable Isthmus of the Perekop. God-erredd showed just interest enough to keep the old man talking, but no more.

Two days later, the boy complained of feeling feverish and ill, and, the day following, did not appear at the hut for the morning's work. When he did not return that day, nor the day after, the saddler was annoyed, but he took the boy's departure philosophically, since he would not have to pay the boy's wages and he had gained six weeks' work for nothing.

Little did the saddle-maker dream that God-erredd had sneaked along the Perekop shore, by night, swimming out to sea, boldly, when he came to the triple line of defenses. He returned as he had come, unseen.

A week later he was back at Attila's camp, with all his information. He told his adventures in full detail to the chief and to Mirkhond, and the mage, with the boy's information, was able to prepare a rough but moderately correct map. Attila gave him no praise but threw him a purse of gold, a heavy one.

"Choose your own horse; you shall ride in my twenty-one!" he said.

Attila's "twenty-one" was his own picked

bodyguard, and Mirkhond frowned. The boy was too young to be put among the warriors, and such an action would only provoke jealousy.

Goderedd saw the mage's frown, and acted quickly on it.

"Chief Attila, I accept," he said warmly. "When I am old enough, I will remind you of your promise to take me in the 'twenty-one.'"

For the campaign in view, Goderedd's counsel was of daily need. While he had told his story in detail, on the day of his arrival, as the plan of campaign developed, more and more questions were put to him. Some he knew, others he did not. He began to realize, with a sense of shame, that, successful as his scouting trip had been, it was very incomplete. During the next few weeks, by learning of his omissions, he gained a grasp of the varied necessities required for large military movements, a knowledge which was to stand him in good stead in later years.

To Mirkhond's mind, the moment had come to strike. It was just two weeks before the time set by the Tetraxides, and they would be occupied with their own preparations. The warriors would have descended from the moun-

tains, and the passes would be now unprotected.

The Tetraxides were convinced that they had nothing to fear from the Huns, for experience had shown that the wild Asiatic horsemen knew only one mode of war—a mad charge without any wiles of strategy. Against such, every precaution had been taken by the Tetraxides. The narrow isthmus was mined with pits and criss-crossed with thorny barricades, hindering horses and preventing any united onslaught.

But Attila was a general born. With Mirkhond's advice and Goderedd's information, he shaped a campaign that would have done credit to the finest general of the Roman Empire.

Masking his real strength, he delivered a powerful feint attack on the Isthmus of the Perekop, having—through Goderedd—a knowledge of the nature of the defenses. The Tetraxides hurried every man forward to defend the Isthmus, all the more certain that the Huns intended to break through, since Attila was at their head.

At the same time, the main force of the Huns, under the guidance of Goderedd, crossed the Arabat sand-pit, swam the channel of the Putrid Sea, and reached the Dust-Plains, every

man carrying a supply of water for himself and his horse. Thence, in little bands, the Huns on their sturdy ponies climbed the steep sheep-paths which led to the rich alpine meadows of the Yaila-dagh Mountains. All the heights and passes were captured before the Tetraxides, anxiously awaiting a second and more powerful attack at the Isthmus, were aware that they had been taken in the rear.

The Huns commanded a position from which they could not be dislodged, and, not knowing how many thousand Huns might be hidden in the mountains, the Tetraxides surrendered, to save themselves from wholesale massacre, accepting Attila as master of the whole land of Krym. Sunyamers and all the Tetraxide chiefs were slain, but Goderedd saw to it that no harm came to Swintha and the saddle-maker.

Thus the Crimea passed into the hands of Attila, no longer Chief, but King, and his first rise to power was due to the loyalty and skill of Goderedd, the horse boy.

CHAPTER IV

FIGHTING AN AUROCHS

“I TRUST not these Illyrians, Euric,” declared Goderedd to one of his companions, some two years after the conquest of the Crimea, as they rode out in the early dawn along a dry river-bed, in the plains of what is now Croatia. “They would have been pleased to slit our throats last night.”

“A true word, Master. My knife was loose in its sheath all the night long, and my ears are tired from listening.”

“And you, Stryg?” asked the boy, turning to his other follower.

“Some stranger came smelling the horses last night,” said the Hun, tersely. “He will smell no more.”

“You killed him?”

“In silence, Master.”

“And the body?”

“It is well hidden. His friends will not find it soon enough to follow us.”

“What kind of man was it, Stryg?”

“I did not look. The body is hidden.”

The Hun reined his horse back, to avoid further questioning.

Goderedd said no more. If the Hun did not choose to speak, there was no way to make him. Yet the curtly told news was disquieting. He pressed the pace, the others spurring, likewise. It would have been difficult for any pursuers to overtake them, for the five horses were the pick of Attila's herd, that is to say, among the finest in the world. Still, a dead man, however well hidden, was not a good augury for a peaceful embassy.

The two years that had passed since the conquest of the Crimea had witnessed incessant fighting. The flood of Asiatics, ever pouring into Scythia, did not accept Attila as master without savage fighting. These wild hordes had their own leaders,—Mongol, Tartar, or Turcoman—and were as ready to raid a Hun camp as any other. Several times these furious drives all but overswept the eastern region, but Attila, growing stronger and more cunning day by day, held the frontier and hammered these savage peoples into obedience. With the Tetraxides, he

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ruled not less than fifty thousand warriors, now.

During that time, Goderedd had risen quietly but surely from the position of Attila's horse boy to that of Attila's most trusted messenger. The Goth boy's brain was a keen one. Just as Attila had grasped the art of war from Mirkhond with an aptitude that was astounding, so had Goderedd added statecraft to his naturally solid common sense. He had acquired, also, the Greek and Latin tongues, commonly spoken in those times, and which, like all Goths, he had known fairly well in childhood.

Besides, Goderedd was honest, unfailingly loyal to the oath he had made to Attila, clear-headed, and with a good memory. A Goth of royal blood, he had nothing in him of Oriental trickery. He could be trusted. This made him an invaluable messenger in the camp of the Huns, especially in those days when every message was sent by word of mouth; a courier was practically an envoy, and must be a man of confidence.

The Goth boy—he was a grown man, now—rode with sword at side, and two servants or followers. One of these, Euric, was an Ostro-

goth who had lived with the Huns all his life, his father having been a free warrior under Ermaneric; he was a little dull of wit, but a swordsman of noted skill. The other, Stryg, was a Hun; short and squat, but very wide-awake and a famous javelin-thrower. Though under Goderedd's orders on this mission, they were also spies on him, and the Goth boy did not doubt that each had separate orders from Attila to kill him, should they have suspicion of any treachery.

For that menace, Goderedd cared little. He was happy to get away from the camp of King Ruas, where, for three months past, he had been with Attila and with Bleda, Attila's treacherous elder brother. Goderedd knew a great deal about Bleda, far more than it was wise to know, and the boy had lived in hourly fear that the Hun might find it out.

Besides his satisfaction at being out of the Hun camp, Goderedd was in the highest spirits, for he was riding to the farthest point—or so it seemed to him—of the civilized world, carrying a message from King Ruas and Attila to Atawulf, King of the Visigoths. He bore in his memory, also, a special personal message

which Mirkhond had given him for Gallia Placidia, sister of the Emperor Honorius, held a prisoner in Atawulf's camp. She had been captured by Alaric the Goth, in the sacking of Rome. Atawulf, on succeeding to the Visigothic kingship, had offered to send her home in return for some eighty ship-loads of wheat for his army. As the wheat did not come, Atawulf had kept the emperor's sister as a hostage.

Goderedd's purse was full of gold, he was magnificently mounted, and each of his followers had a led horse. He was dressed in barbaric splendor, as befitted an envoy from the Huns, in silver-studded leather scale armor thrown over a black bearskin. His light helmet—without a crest, for he was not an officer—was such as was used by the auxiliary legions of Rome, and his legs, bare to above the knee, were protected by leather cross-gartering studded with silver points. His sword was slightly curved—Asiatic rather than Roman in pattern—and his shield was of bull's-hide, very convex, and with a metal rim and pointed boss.

The world was before him and he was on his way to Gallia Placidia to whom—so ran Mirkhond's message—he was to be “the friend and

confidant of the mother of emperors." His future shone brightly as he galloped on, ever and anon turning his head to see if there was any sign of pursuit.

Stryg must have spoken truly, the corpse must be well hidden, for, from the summit of a hill which commanded several miles of plain, there was no one in sight following them. No one could catch them now. Men were not squeamish in those days and Goderedd did not look upon Stryg's deed as murder; in wild countries and in wild times, often one must slay or be slain.

It would take a good-sized volume to recount all Goderedd's adventures along the road, for, in those days, a party of three could not expect to ride a thousand miles and more without sensational incidents, some pleasant, others less so.

He had rescued a child from drowning during a cloudburst; barely escaped with his life when pursued by some raiding Gepids, the fleetness of the horses having saved him; and he had dodged a pack of hungry wolves by swimming his horses for nearly a mile down the rapidly running Dniester River. Even after he had crossed the Danube and had come into the sup-

posedly law-abiding territories of the Roman Empire, he had a hand-to-hand fight with a party of murdering charcoal-burners, where he would certainly have been killed but for Euric's sword. The charcoal-burners—more than twenty in number—were as much afraid of Euric's laughter as his blade, for the Ostrogoth swordsman roared delight at every stroke; it was uncanny. Stryg fought like a panther, silently. They were a deadly pair.

Only once had Goderedd been seriously delayed, and that was by a tribe of Huns, less than two hundred miles away from King Ruas' camp. The chief would not let him pass, though Goderedd insisted that he bore orders from Ruas and from Attila. The truth was that he coveted the horses, but he pretended to Goderedd that he had sent to Ruas for further proofs of the boy's orders. Stryg gave him the slip and galloped back to the king's camp. Ruas sent the needed proof in the form of twenty horsemen, who cut off the chief's two ears, in order, as they said, that he "might hear the next orders better."

Yet one adventure that happened to Goderedd must be told, for it had some effect on the

fate of Europe, many years later, when Attila had become known as "The Scourge of God," and when his name had become a word of fear over the length and breadth of Europe.

Some three days after that slaying in Illyria of which Stryg refused to say a further word, Goderedd and his companions came to a dense forest. The road was a mere horse-track, though a well-beaten one. Wheels were little used in those days.

Several times the three travelers sighted aurochs in the forest and kept a shrewd eye on them, for these European wild oxen (now extinct) were given to savage charges at anything they saw. They were not swift enough to overtake a horse, but many were the charcoal-burners, hunters, or shepherds who were gored to death by aurochs. The Goths reveled in the chase of the aurochs, the Huns did not; the Asiatics liked fighting only for the sake of slaughter or spoil.

Goderedd was riding forward quietly when he heard, from not very far away, the bellowing of an aurochs bull, and, as it seemed to him, cries for help. He drove the spurs into his horse, Euric and Stryg thundering on behind.

Fifty yards farther, at a turn of track, he galloped into a small clearing. Thence came the bellowing and the cries.

Upon the ground lay two horses, one dead, the other dying, the fallen horse being, at that moment, savagely gored by a huge aurochs. The bull, a massive beast, more than five feet high at the shoulder, was pawing the ground and bellowing, its head slightly turned down ready to bring a wicked horn into action. It was facing a single man, who, his back to twin trees rising from a single root, was standing with sword ready. The flutter of a cloak caught the Goth boy's eye, and he saw a woman fleeing into the forest.

“Quick! Get her on one of the horses, Stryg!” yelled Goderedd. He knew the Hun's quickness of wit and his superb horsemanship. If the woman were but mounted, she could escape the aurochs; afoot, she was doomed.

Throwing the reins of his horse to Euric, the boy leapt to the ground and rushed forward to the aid of the hard-set man. He advanced quickly but warily, for he had fought aurochs before and knew the dangerous character of these savage cattle, bigger and fiercer than

any modern breed, and which, at that time, roamed in large numbers through the extensive forests of Europe.

The stranger was fighting under difficulties. A small boy, not more than seven or eight years old, was crouched in the crotch of the two trees, in a position where it was difficult for the horns of the aurochs to reach him, and the father stood in front, to defend his son.

The bull was bellowing with pain as well as rage, for a javelin had been driven deep into its neck; but, evidently, the weapon had not reached a vital spot.

On seeing Goderedd the bull turned its head slightly, undecided whether to charge the newcomer or its former foe.

The Goth boy cast a quick look at the ground around him to make sure that there were no brambles or undergrowths near to catch his feet, for he knew that the only way to escape an aurochs' charge was to leap aside as the bull came on. The ground was clear.

Goderedd advanced cautiously a step or two, the stranger calling out to him in Greek:

“Keep well behind the beast!”

The advice was good. An aurochs was a heavy

animal and could not turn with ease. Light-footedness was man's principal defense in such a combat.

At that moment, seeing that Goderedd still advanced, the bull decided to turn its fury on its new foe. Its bloodshot eye glared upon the boy, and, head down, it wheeled to make the charge. For this movement the Illyrian had been waiting, and, as the aurochs turned, he leaped forward and drove his sword in behind the shoulder. The blade turned in his hand.

The aurochs paid no heed to the glancing blow, and thundered on.

Although Goderedd was prepared and expecting it, the charge was so violently given that he had barely time to leap aside. It was well that he had kept behind the bull, or his sideward leap would have been too late. As it was, one of the horns almost grazed him. He had not time to recover his balance for a sword-blow when the bull had passed him, stopped in a cloud of dust, and wheeled again.

Seeming to know that its second wound had come from its original opponent, the aurochs did not attack the boy again directly, but, turning with a quickness that was surprising in so

seemingly cumbersome an animal, launched itself furiously at the Illyrian, pinning the man to the tree by the shoulder. The tree shook with the blow, and the crash of the shock stunned the aurochs for a few seconds.

Never could come a better opportunity! God-erodd dashed in from the side, and, knowing well where to strike, drove his sword with an overhand thrust behind the bull's horns and into the brain. The great creature stood still a second, then rolled over, dying. It tried to get to its feet again, gave a convulsive struggle, then stretched, dead.

For the first time, then, the Goth boy had a chance to turn and see what had happened to the other aurochs. For a moment or two he saw nothing but a confused jumble of horses, plunging and kicking, on the farther side of the clearing, where Stryg, having snatched up the woman, had come back to grab the reins of the others. Euric had just dismounted and was running forward, sword in one hand, javelin in the other, Stryg, the incomparable handler of horses, mastered his own and the other four, though all were rearing madly, made wild by the smell of blood.

The unharmed aurochs, weary at last of goring the now dead horse, turned to face a human foe. For Euric, Goderedd had no fear; the man was a famous swordsman. Yet an aurochs, even a cow aurochs, was not an enemy to be taken lightly. The boy hurried forward, to help in the fight.

Euric spoke calmly, not a trace of excitement in his voice, just as though he were engaged in ordinary conversation.

“Run into the forest, Master,” he said. “The horses are too near.”

Goderedd nodded. Of the aurochs, evidently, Euric had not the slightest fear, but there was a serious danger that the bull might turn, instead of attacking, and gore the horses that Stryg was holding. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for the Hun to escape holding five horses in hand, and, should they break away, the loss would be a grave one. Such horses as those were not to be found in all Illyricum.

The boy came closer to the aurochs cow, to attract its attention, then, as though frightened, turned and took to his heels.

The temptation of a fleeing foe was too great to be resisted. The aurochs charged after God-

erredd, who ran a little distance, then, when the beast was nearly on him, dodged behind a tree, then ran again. Euric followed, keeping closely behind the infuriated animal. This maneuver was repeated, and, when Goderedd stopped the second time, the horses were out of sight.

“Now,” said Euric, “we can fight him comfortably.”

Despite the peril, Goderedd could not repress a smile at his follower’s casual phrase. He was excited, terribly excited, himself, for he had neither the man’s experience nor his disdain of danger, but Euric’s confidence calmed him and he tried to speak without showing any tremor.

“What next?” he asked.

“Come to this side. Then run swiftly across him and in front of him,” said Euric. “I will let my sword talk to him as he turns.”

Goderedd did not hesitate. Coming broadside to the beast, he sped in front of him, a yard or two beyond reach of the spreading horns. The aurochs, confused, hooked viciously at the passing boy, giving Euric exactly the position he wanted—the head of the animal down, the shoulder a little slewed. He took a few steps forward and drove his sword, two-handed, with

a mighty stroke, squarely behind the aurochs' shoulder.

For an old hunter, warrior, and swordsman like Euric, a single blow was sufficient. The well-aimed blade pierced clear to the heart.

In spite of the vital wound, the aurochs turned upon Euric, who, perfectly at his ease, shifted his javelin to his right hand and waited, shouting to Goderedd to keep away, for the vitality of an aurochs was astounding, and the old hunter knew well that no one can tell what a wounded animal will do. For himself, Euric was confident that he was master of the situation, and, if truth be told, he was enjoying himself hugely.

Again the aurochs charged, but Euric, seeing that the beast's force was failing, contented himself with stepping aside, only holding his javelin ready should there be need to use it.

There was none. The great creature halted, wavered, rocked his head from side to side, belowed raucously, then fell on its knees, facing its foe. For fully a minute it knelt there, almost as though doing homage to its conquerer, then rolled over sideways, dead.

Euric drew out his sword, wiped it tranquilly

on the grass, and sauntered back to Stryg and the horses, without a word.

Goderedd hurried to where he had left the wounded stranger, under the tree. The wound was bleeding freely, and one arm hung uselessly.

“The other beast is dead!” the boy announced.

The Illyrian nodded. He was suffering, and already growing weak from loss of blood.

“My son is safe?” he queried. This was evidently his chief preoccupation.

“Quite safe,” declared Goderedd, stretching out his hand to the little lad, as Stryg came forward with the frightened horses. The woman slipped down from the horse on which the Hun had placed her, and ran across the clearing to her husband.

For a few moments, no one spoke, while she tore off a piece of her dress and bandaged her husband’s wounds. In those days of constant fighting, every woman was more or less a nurse.

In spite of his pain, the Illyrian thanked the boy courteously, as soon as the bandaging was finished. He was clearly of the better class, as his dress and his manner showed.

98 IN THE TIME OF ATTLILA

“My name is Flavius,” he said, “and I am a Roman citizen. This, my son, is Orestes. Command us in anything, henceforth; we are your debtors for life.”

Goderedd gave his name and told of his mission as a courier of Attila's, on his way to the court of Atawulf, in order to explain his presence in the forest with only two followers. In those days, men did not travel through Europe save in well-armed bands, for the Europe of the fifth century was a little-occupied and heavily-forested territory where roamed wild beasts and wilder lawless men.

“My house is not far,” said Flavius. “I shall be better when I can reach there. You will accept our hospitality?”

“I shall certainly accompany you home,” said Goderedd. “There may be other aurochs near. But how, since you were mounted, did the aurochs catch you?”

“I am a herbalist,” said Flavius, “and had dismounted a little distance back, to gather plants for medicine. Lycia, my wife, held my horse, for I had taken her with me since we were on our way to her sister, not half a day's march

from here. I was in the woods, collecting herbs, when I heard the bellowing and ran on, reaching the clearing to see my horse down and the aurochs charging the other. I was in time to snatch my son to safety and Lycia fled as the aurochs charged. It was then you came, God and the saints be praised!"

Goderedd and Euric lifted the wounded man on one of the led horses, and an hour's ride brought them to the herbalist's house, a strongly fortified little place on the brow of a cliff. Closer examination of the man's wound showed that it was not dangerous, and, after resting the night there, Goderedd rode on.

Flavius and Lycia he never saw again, but, many years after, Orestes presented himself at Attila's camp, declaring himself bound to the chief by gratitude. He became the great Hun's secretary and his ambassador to the court of Constantinople.

How, afterwards, Orestes became the actual ruler of Rome, and how his son, Romulus Augustulus, became the last of the Emperors of Rome, is a tale beyond the limits of this story. But as Goderedd, Attila's envoy, was the means

of saving Orestes' life in boyhood, so was Attila's greatness, thirty years later, the cause of Orestes' rise to power.

How Goderedd came to Tergeste (Trieste) and learned of a plot against the Prefect of Illyricum; how he was welcomed and feasted by friends of Mirkhond in Patavium (Padua); how Euric saved his life in a tavern affray at Mantua; how the officials of the Imperial City of Mediolanum (Milan) suspected him and he had to escape by night; how—to evade pursuit—he made his way over the Maritime Alps in the company of a band of freebooters; how Stryg was mauled by a bear in the dense woods that then clothed the region between Dinia (Digne) and Avenio (Avignon); how Goderedd was received by the Prefect of the great Roman city of Arles, to which he was to return in very different circumstances, with one of Attila's sons, later; and how he came with all honors to the court of Atawulf, in Narbonne, are parts of Goderedd's personal story which must be passed by.

He reached Narbonne at Christmas-tide, a few weeks before the marriage of Atawulf to the Roman princess Gallia Placidia. Strange

things were to happen to Goderedd, there, things which reacted upon Attila and upon Rome, things which loomed large in the troubled history of that troubled time.

CHAPTER V

A SHAMEFUL TRIUMPH

It was with a brilliant escort and almost with the honors of an imperial embassy that Goderedd set out from Arles, for the Prefect of that city was well aware of the growing power of the Huns, and felt that it would be wise policy on his part to show their envoy every courtesy. The Goth boy's entry into Narbonne was equally imposing.

For two miles outside the walls of Narbonne stretched the camp of Atawulf. Goderedd was tremendously impressed by it. The thousands of tents, all uniform in size, scrubbed spotless white, dressed rigorously in even rows with wide spaces between, the arms piled before every fifth tent—two men slept in each tent; the large tent for the centurion at the head of each row of fifty tents, and, beside it, the special engines of war for siege purposes; the section for the kitchens, bakeries, and provision mat-

ters, all well drained and scrupulously clean; the sentries posted everywhere; and the air of vigilance and order—all formed an astonishing sight to Goderedd, accustomed to the disorder, filth, and lack of discipline which were characteristic of a camp of the Huns. He saw, at once, there could be no surprising such a camp as this. A trumpet alarm, in the dead of night, could bring every man in the camp into the ranks in a couple of minutes.

Fully five miles away from the city the party was challenged, and a horseman was sent at full speed to advise the Prefect of the Camp, first, and King Atawulf, afterwards, of the coming of an envoy. By the time that Goderedd and his escort reached the camp, a cohort had been turned out to provide fitting military honors, and Goderedd rode through the gates of the walled city of Narbonne with a line of soldiers on either hand.

The young Goth was the object of not a little curiosity. As yet, few people in the West of Europe had heard of Attila, save as one of the most savage of the Hun leaders, but all had heard of Ruas, King of the Huns, and this was the first time that an envoy of the Huns had

come into Gaul. No one knew whether the envoy brought tidings of peace or war. In those days, it was just as likely to be one as the other—the Huns might even be within marching distance!

Narbonne was, in those days, a small and strangely built city, still containing some of the hide-roofed shelters of the barbarians who had first settled there, a large number of wooden huts, and, perhaps, a couple of hundred houses built after the pattern of a Roman villa, with a central court open to the sky. There was not, to speak strictly, any kingly palace, and Atawulf was not much more richly lodged than would have been an ordinary citizen of Rome.

Goderedd had stayed a week as the guest of the Prefect of Arles, and this had prepared him, in a measure, for the court of Atawulf; indeed, the Prefect's house was far more luxurious than that of the Visigothic King. Atawulf, desirous of pleasing his Roman followers, and seeking the position of a noble of the Roman Empire, had tried to banish from his surroundings everything that was not Roman and that suggested the Goth and the barbarian. He received Goderedd with an assumption of Roman man-

ners which contrasted ill with his brusque gesture, loud voice, and giant frame. Though he admitted the boy to instant audience, he did not even attempt to show his utter disregard for the Huns.

When Goderedd had given his message—his public message, that is to say, for he had another to be given privately—Atawulf answered roughly,

“This Attila of yours, is he a king?”

“No, King Atawulf,” said Goderedd. “King Ruas rules the Huns.”

“Then, why should he send a messenger to me?”

“For courtesy.”

“Courtesy from a savage!” Atawulf laughed outright.

Goderedd flushed, but checked his rising anger. He was inexperienced, and did not know whether it was his duty as an envoy to protest or to remain silent.

“This Attila,” continued Atawulf, “he is a heathen, doubtless?”

“He is not a Christian, King,” the boy admitted.

“How dare he send a messenger to me!”

This time Goderedd could not remain silent.

“I am sent by King Ruas and by Attila,” he said. “The Huns speak by me. King Ruas rules a country ten times larger than that of King Atawulf, and three hundred thousand spears follow him. One does not say ‘dare’ to the King of the Huns, and I do not hold it in my duty to accept the word.”

Goderedd, his heart knocking at his ribs for his temerity, expected an explosion, but Atawulf only laughed.

“The cockerel has already learned to crow!”

It was clear that he only thought the better of the young fellow for his show of courage.

A slightly built man, seated on the dais beside Atawulf, but on a lower step, then leaned toward the King and spoke in a low voice warningly. Atawulf interrupted him.

“By Saint Cunegonde, Attalus, you ask too much! Must I be badgered by every heathen who chooses to send an infant to me with a message? Talk to him, yourself, if you will!”

He rose, as though to storm out of the hall, but a glance from Attalus checked him. The Visigothic King sat down again with a laugh. Thus was Atawulf ever, rage and laughter; for

an ill-taken jest he would have a man slain; he would pardon a traitor for the sake of a jest.

Though Goderedd did not realize it at the time, this was the same Attalus who once had been prefect of Rome, and whom Alaric had raised for a short time to a puppet emperorship because of his social gifts and friendship. He had been the most brilliant conversationalist, story-teller, musician, and banqueting-companion in Rome, and had become Atawulf's boon comrade, as he had been that of Alaric. Always, in the back of his mind, was the memory that he had been Emperor; always the hope that he might be, again. In such a position, every alliance might be of service, and Attalus saw the folly of needlessly insulting an envoy of the Huns.

Cleverly, without in any way offending Atawulf, who sat there tugging at his beard, Attalus considered Goderedd's message, flattered him on his position as an envoy, despite his youth, showed a thorough understanding of the power and importance of the Huns, and conveyed the impression that everything could be arranged favorably, without having committed Atawulf to a single action. Goderedd was not

misled, but, as his message did not call for any immediate response, and as Mirkhond had hinted that a lengthy stay in Gaul would do him no harm, he agreed apparently to everything Attalus had to say.

Not till the end of the audience did Atawulf speak again.

“See to it, Lord Attalus,” he said, “that this young champion of the heathen be well lodged, and that there be no stint of gold and slaves. Let him see that Atawulf does not live in a leaking tent, and eat raw horse-flesh!”

Goderedd, with some difficulty, repressed a smile. The “leaking tent” of King Ruas, as he remembered it, was a wooden hall—canvas-roofed, it was true—but big enough to have put Atawulf’s house in, and with room to spare. The interior was hung with curtains dyed with Tyrian purple, priceless in those times, the bare earth was hidden in a profusion of Persian carpets, and no utensil could be found that was not of solid hammered gold. As for “raw horse-flesh,” though Attila still lived simply, King Ruas had a dozen cooks for his special service.

Atawulf’s orders were swiftly carried out, and, before night, Goderedd was comfortably

housed, with a full staff of household slaves; among the articles sent into the house by the King was a small casket full of gold pieces. Goderedd accepted this quite naturally, since, in those days, gold was only to be procured by pillage, or as a gift from king or noble.

Having shown himself so rough at the commencement, Atawulf characteristically changed both in manner and conduct. Scarcely was Goderedd installed in his house than the Visigothic King invited himself to a banquet there, came in roistering good-humor, slapped Goderedd on the back, swore eternal friendship, and was carried home drunk. Next morning, at daybreak, he was on horseback at the head of his troops for a foray against the Vandals, rode like a madman and fought like a fury, as daring as he was indefatigable. A Goth of the Goths was Atawulf, with all the strength and weaknesses of his race.

Attalus, himself, presented Goderedd to Gallia Placidia, in terms of the highest praise. They were scarcely needed. The Roman princess, soon to be Atawulf's queen, liked the boy from the first moment, and put him quite at his ease. Gallia Placidia was tall and stately for a Roman, firm and gentle in manner, having sus-

tained with dignity and poise her capture by the Goths and her subsequent wanderings.

“I will not detain you from affairs of state, Lord Attalus,” she said, after an hour or so had been spent in courtesies. “I have heard much about Attila, but never yet have I met any one who has seen him.” She toyed idly with a parchment on the stone table. “It will interest me to hear more.”

This was a dismissal, and Attalus bowed himself out with perfect understanding.

When he had gone, Goderedd stepped forward a little closer.

“Princess,” he said, “I have a message for you, alone. No one can hear?”

“No,” she said, “no one. From whom is your message? From Attila?”

“No, Princess. From my Lord Mirkhond.”

The Roman lady did not make any gesture of surprise, but Goderedd felt the intensity of her concentration.

“The mage Mirkhond is a wise friend,” she said. “Also, he has a noble mind.”

“I will tell him that you said so, Princess. This is his message:

“‘To the Empress Gallia Placidia—’”

“Did you say ‘Empress’?”

Goderedd bowed and repeated:

“ ‘To the Empress Gallia Placidia, from the mage Mirkhond, honored salutations and well-augured greetings. I send you Goderedd, the Amaling, to be the friend and confidant of the mother of emperors. When comes the moment of your deepest humiliation, prepare yourself for a throne.’ ”

For several minutes Gallia Placidia did not speak. She was studying the phrases, one by one.

“You are an Amaling?” she said, at last.

Goderedd colored. Now that he actually had given the message, it seemed a vain one.

“It is so, Princess. So, at least, I have ever been told.”

“If Mirkhond says so, it is true. You are of royal blood, then. But ‘friend and confidant!’ Goderedd the Amaling, these are big words.”

The young fellow looked at her.

“I can but try to deserve them, Princess.”

She looked very kindly at him.

“Mirkhond understands; he always understands. I am lonely, here. Tell me about yourself.”

Again Goderedd flushed, and stammered some commonplaces.

Gallia Placidia smiled gently. She saw the boy was in difficulties.

“Tell me about your mother,” she suggested.

The boy’s head went up. Here, he could speak. He told the whole story, the Hun raid, the slaying of his mother, the vengeance, and his gratitude to Attila.

“I should have liked to have known Orfrida,” said the Roman princess, when Goderedd had finished the tale.

It may have been policy, or real feeling. In either case, Gallia Placidia won Goderedd’s devotion and loyalty from that moment. He took, from the very first, the position of “friend and confidant” which Mirkhond had suggested, and few were the days that Goderedd did not spend at least a couple of hours in the Princess’ presence.

Nothing could have been more useful to him. Brought up in a Hun camp, the young fellow was ignorant of a thousand little things which were the daily life of a cultured court—even such a semi-cultured court as that of Atawulf—and Placidia helped him and taught him,

much as an elder sister might have done. She soon learned, too, to value Goderedd's solid common sense, and he learned, through her, all the intrigues and plottings of the Eastern and Western Empires.

Gallia Placidia had suffered much since her capture by Alaric, though both the conqueror and his successor, Atawulf, had treated her with respect. She told him—what he did not know—that the refusal of the Emperor Honorius to make a treaty with Atawulf was due to the influence of Constantius, who had taken Stilicho's place as commander-in-chief of the armies. Honorius had promised Placidia's hand to Constantius, but Atawulf would not give her up. And now, half by force, half by persuasion, he was to marry her.

“He is very rough,” said Placidia, confidentially to Goderedd, with a slight grimace, “but it is better to be Queen than captive. And I hate Constantius!”

Atawulf went to extreme pains to make the occasion as brilliant as possible, that it might really be regarded as an imperial wedding. It was a curious medley of Roman pagan and Roman Christian customs, but everything that sug-

gested Goth or barbarian was rigidly excluded.

The bride-cake was eaten at sunrise, in the presence of ten witnesses, which was pagan; the wedding ceremony was celebrated by the bishop, which was Christian. The Queen wore flowers in her hair, which she had plucked that very day, also pagan; the ring was blessed with Holy Water. Christian clergy escorted the newly married couple from church to palace, chanting a liturgy; but the Queen put oil and wool on the doorposts, and the King lifted and carried her across the threshold and gave her a torch and a goblet of water. Lavish gifts were made to the populace, and, to the last detail, everything was carried out as though the little Gallic town of Narbonne were Imperial Rome.

“All this is an imitation in a mirror,” said the Queen to Goderedd, in an aside. “Pinning an eagle’s tail to a sea-gull does not make the sea-bird an eagle. Atawulf does not understand. It is glory that makes greatness. Rome has the glory of ages, Narbonne has none.”

Goderedd, who had made himself well liked by Atawulf and was known to be a loyal friend to the Queen-Elect, was given an honorable

place in the wedding festivities. At the banquet, he was seated at a table on the lower step of the dais with the Roman prefect of Arles, the High Chief of the Alains, Attalus, the Visigoth princes, and envoys sent from the Vandals and the Burgunds.

The Visigoth king was dressed as a Roman Christian patrician, and his seat was placed on a dais a few inches lower than that of his bride, to show that, as the sister of the Emperor, he considered her imperial rank higher than his kingly crown. Among the presents were a hundred golden bowls, filled with precious stones. The chorus—an essential part of the ceremony among Romans of high rank—was led by Attalus, the former emperor.

Besides being in the confidence of Placidia, Goderedd had carefully sought to learn the general feeling of the Visigoths as to this marriage. As envoy, it was his duty to send a full report to Attila, and this he intended to do by Stryg. Wulfric, one of the Visigothic princes, a blunt old warrior, expressed curtly the sentiments of the army:

“Look you, Goderedd,” he said, “this mar-

riage is a sword without a hilt. No one can hold it. Why should Atawulf, a Goth, behave like a Roman ape?"

Earlier in the day, Attalus had given him the ideas of the Romans in the army.

"The legions will not acclaim Queen Placidia," he said gravely. "As a captive, she was still a Roman and the Emperor's sister; as Queen, she is only a barbarian's wife."

Goderedd, too, was quick to see that this marriage would not help Atawulf's position with the Emperor, and the events which followed swiftly proved the rightness of his judgment. The commander-in-chief, Constantius, who wished to marry Placidia, himself, was furious when the news of this marriage reached Ravenna, and only waited his chance for revenge upon the Visigothic king.

As it was a chief part of Goderedd's mission to bring about a tentative agreement between Attila and Atawulf—part of Mirkhond's plan for strengthening the Hun's fame in Western Europe—the young envoy saw clearly that he should not urge this alliance, until Atawulf's position to the Roman Empire was clearly established, one way or the other. It was neces-

sary, therefore, for him to remain at the Visigothic court.

Goderedd felt that it was to Placidia that he owed his chief duty, for his oath to become the guardian of Attila's sons could not bind him until at least one son was born to the Hun chief. He became, therefore, the official courier of the Queen, and, in her interest and that of Atawulf, made several journeys to the Emperor's court at Ravenna, and to the court of the Vandal kings, at Barcelona. For many years thereafter, his fate and that of the Queen were closely linked.

The ambition of Attalus was the next move in this great world-drama. He wished to become Emperor again, and persuaded Atawulf to proclaim him as such, in place of Honorius, on the ground that Honorius had once been deposed, on the orders of Alaric. Technically, this was absurd, for only the Roman Senate had the right to proclaim an emperor. Attalus, thus, was nothing more than a usurper, an open rebel to Honorius and to the Empire. This gave Constantius his opportunity for revenge upon the barbarian king who had married the woman Constantius desired.

His first move was a masterly one. He ordered the African provinces to stop sending wheat to the ports of Gaul, thus starving Atawulf's army. With mercenary troops, control of the food-supply is essential—it is this which explains the great Vandal invasion of Africa that came a few years later.

Constantius landed, with a substantial army, and marched upon Narbonne. Since Attalus was now an alleged emperor, he must seem to command an army. But the troops would have none of him, for he was neither a Goth, like themselves, nor yet a properly appointed emperor. They deserted, hundreds at a time.

Attalus fled, tried to escape by sea, but was captured by a Roman fleet and sent to Ravenna as a prisoner. Honorius ordered that two of the usurper's fingers be cut off—since no mutilated person might sit on the throne of the Cæsars—and banished Attalus to the Lipari Islands, where he died in poverty and exile.

With Attalus thus disposed of, Constantius continued his march upon Narbonne. Atawulf's army was by far the larger, but it had no steady supply of food, since all the wheat-ships had been stopped. Atawulf and Placidia were com-

pelled to retreat along the coast, crossing the foothills of the Pyrenees into the country of the Vandals (Spain). He swept the Vandals before him, besieged and captured Barcelona, and made that city his royal residence. Constantius, having driven the Visigoths from Gaul and re-established the imperial power there, returned to Ravenna. Placidia was still out of his reach. Goderedd, as an envoy, took no part in the fighting, but remained close beside the Queen in every moment of danger.

In Barcelona, Placidia bore a son. The baby was christened Theodosius, for Goderedd had told Atawulf of Mirkhond's prophecy that the Queen should be a mother of emperors. But the child died a few months afterwards, and, a year later, Atawulf was murdered. With his dying breath the king bade his brother take the throne, and urged him to send Placidia back to Ravenna, charging Goderedd with the mission.

The dying king's orders were not heeded. The Goths would have nothing to do with Atawulf's brother, who, also, had adopted Roman ways; they wanted a Goth of their own rude manners for a king. They chose a rough barbarian named Sigeric.

The very day after his election as king, Sig-eric ordered the slaughter of all the six children of Atawulf (by a former wife), an act of cruelty which met with grim disapproval. Two days later, he ordered a march of triumph through Barcelona and all the country round, in honor of his coronation. Of that triumph, there is much to tell.

Though Placidia was in deep grief for the sudden murder of her husband, dead only four days, the barbarous Sigeric ordered her to take part in his triumph, with the intention of marrying her himself, by force, without any regard to her recent widowhood. The Queen refused, and Sigeric sent this curt message:

“King Sigeric does not ask the opinion of women. A royal order speaks obedience or death.”

“Tell him—Death!” said the Roman woman, proudly.

Goderedd, who had been summoned by the Queen to hear the messenger, intervened.

“If Queen Placidia will permit—?”

“Speak, my friend.”

“Then would I say to King Sigeric that no messenger, who is not royal, can carry a mes-

sage from a queen to a king, but that you will give him his answer personally.”

“You hear!” said Placidia. The messenger saluted and left.

“Queen,” said the young fellow, “do not oppose Sigeric at this time. Remember the prophecy of Mirkhond: ‘When comes the moment of your deepest humiliation, prepare yourself for a throne.’ ”

“I had forgotten,” said the Queen. “There is wisdom in your counsel, Goderedd.”

Accordingly, when Sigeric stormed into the Queen’s palace, he was received with icy courtesy. To his fiery barbarian rudeness Placidia opposed a calm superiority, which galled him to the last pitch of his self-control, but, in Goderedd’s presence, he dared not go too far, for he knew that every unwise word would be repeated in Rome and distant Scythia.

“King Sigeric shall be obeyed,” said she, “since it is a royal order. Let him consider whether a grief-stricken queen’s obedience will add to his triumph!”

Raging within, for this submission gave him no excuse for violence, Sigeric left the palace in an even worse temper than he had come.

The triumph was set for the next day and all the troops were gathered to take part in it, for Sigeric's chief desire was to show himself, crowned, to all the soldiery. But he rode out, black-heartedly, determined to punish the Queen openly for her thinly-veiled contempt.

A few hundred yards from the palace, he turned upon her, ordered the widowed Queen to dismount, and to walk on foot behind his horse.

Goderedd, who, as the Queen's courier and confidant, was riding beside her, confronted the barbarian.

"King Sigeric!" he said bluntly. "Such an order is unworthy both of a Goth and a Christian King."

Sigeric flashed out his sword, but Goderedd only backed his horse a pace or two, shifting his shield to readiness but leaving his own sword sheathed.

"Who touches me," he said, quietly, "touches a million Huns."

The furious king pressed forward, blade upraised, but a stern hum of disapproval from every side warned him not to go too far. The Goths were a free people, and the Goth soldiers

were proudly insistent on their right to liberty of thought and action.

“Do the Huns deny a king’s right to give orders in his own kingdom?” stormed Sigeric.

Goderedd found himself in a trap. In his chivalry for the Queen, he had certainly exceeded his rights as an envoy. But he had learned, long ago, from Mirkhond, that an action impresses an army more than any subtlety of word.

“No, King,” he said, speaking loudly, that all might hear. “I speak not, now, for Attila. I speak for myself. I speak as a Goth, in this matter, for I think as a Goth!”

Gravely and meaningly he dismounted from his horse, and set himself, on foot, beside Gallia Placidia.

“Ride, King Sigeric,” he said. “Where a woman walks, a warrior is not shamed to walk; where a queen of the Goths goes afoot, no Goth is shamed to go afoot.

“Ride, King Sigeric. The Sister of the Emperor, the Queen of Atawulf, and the envoy of a million Huns go on foot. Glory in your triumph. Goths will understand!”

A roar of acclamation, beginning low and spreading widely as the news carried, greeted

these words. The young fellow's act just caught the hot and chivalrous temper of the Goths, the only people, in those times, who still retained the Northern respect for woman. The cleverness of the trick pleased them, too, for Sigeric could not order Placidia back to horse again without admitting that he had been publicly rebuked and corrected by a mere youth.

The newly crowned king rode on furiously, but the news of Goderedd's deed ran ahead of the procession. Few were the cries of "Hail, King Sigeric!" that met his ears as he rode in his shameful triumph; many were the cries of: "Hail, the Queen!"

Goth generals and captains broke from the rude line of march and spurred forward to shout boisterous encouragement to Goderedd, all the twelve long miles of that way. Before the palace was reached again, Placidia was almost fainting with exhaustion, and was forced to lean heavily upon Goderedd for support. Her state excited the pity of the Goths, and the triumphal procession ended in a rumble of muttering among the warriors. Sigeric reached his palace in black vexation and vindictive hate.



“WHERE A QUEEN OF THE GOTHS GOES AFOOT, NO GOTH IS SHAMED TO GO AFOOT!”—Page 123.

Four days later, he was assassinated. His reign had lasted just one week.

Walya, one of the Visigoth princes, was made king in his place. From the first, Walya declared himself an open enemy of Rome, but he showed every deference to Placidia. He summoned Goderedd to his presence on the day of coronation, and, in the presence of his generals, approved the young fellow's courage during Sigeric's triumphal procession.

“I send, to-day, a courier to Attila,” he said, “to tell how his envoy has honored the court of the Huns from which he comes, the court of the Visigoths to which he has come, and the court of the Emperor Honorius in respect to an imperial princess, by a deed which was worthy of a warrior and a Goth!”

Shield rang on shield, as the Goths approved the new king's words.

Strong as had been Goderedd's position in the court of Atawulf, it was tenfold stronger now. Walya offered to make the young fellow a noble—little dreaming that Goderedd was an Amaling, and therefore of birth more royal than his own—but Goderedd declined. Honors, he

answered, should come only from the Hun chief to whom his oath of allegiance was passed.

Walya showed himself an able general. He held his own for some years against the imperial troops, and he drove the Vandals out of Spain, conquering the entire peninsula. But a single season of bad crops did what the Romans and the Vandals together could not do. Famine threatened his armies. He was compelled to equip a fleet, in a reckless endeavor to seize the Roman wheat-provinces in Africa.

As with Alaric, so with Walya. A storm destroyed his ships, and the pressure of hunger upon his army drove him to make peace with Rome. On the receipt of corn from Africa, he formally surrendered to Honorius, and sent Placidia back to Ravenna under the charge of Goderedd, now an experienced soldier and courtier, though only twenty-two years old.

Walya, no longer a rebel, but commander of all the armies in Spain, soon forced the entire country to accept the imperial rule, and sent the two leading Vandal kings to the triumphal procession which Honorius celebrated in Rome.

Constantius, however, fearing that Walya in

Spain, and the Vandals, in Africa, might some time make an alliance against Rome, which would imperil the wheat-provinces, persuaded the Emperor to give to the Visigoths all the southwestern part of Gaul, the richest part of the country. In 418, the Goths marched out of Spain to occupy this favored land, and to make Toulouse their capital.

The year following, Walya died. He was succeeded by Theodoric the Visigoth—(not Theodoric the Great), against whom Attila's sword was sharpened some twenty years later.

Goderedd had reached Ravenna some little time after Walya's surrender. He was received with every honor by the Emperor Honorius and was offered a high post in the imperial court. Goderedd declined. News had come to him that Attila was married and had a son. His oath called him back to Scythia.

Upon Placidia's earnest request, however, he stayed in Ravenna until her marriage to Constantius, who was then made joint emperor with Honorius. Placidia thus became an empress, as Mirkhond had prophesied.

Then, rich in honors and in fame, at the head

of five hundred picked lances, given him by the two Emperors as a personal body-guard and following, Goderedd set back across Eastern Europe to the camp of the Huns. Upon his arm clanked the three armlets of Attila.

CHAPTER VI

A NIGHT OF TREACHERY

“LORD GODEREDD, a Hun rides, belly to ground as though pursued!”

The leader of the advance guard of Goderedd's little troop fell back and saluted.

“He has a force behind him, Andagis?”

“No, Lord; he is alone.”

“A messenger, then. Halt, men, and welcome him.”

With a clash and clatter of accouterments, the five hundred horsemen came to a halt, and Goderedd rode forward a few paces.

The Hun did not check his speed till within a few yards of the young Goth, then drew rein and stopped like a thunderbolt checked in its path.

“Goderedd!” he cried. “Attila is in danger. Ride!”

Without waiting for further explanation, Goderedd turned in his saddle and waved to his following.

They broke into a stretching gallop, the steppe-bred horse of the Hun, though winded, easily keeping the pace of the heavier chargers of the southlands.

“Speak!” said Goderedd. “What is the danger to Attila? Speak clearly, for I have scarce heard the tongue of the Huns these seven years.”

“Attila rides back from Media, with heavy spoil. He hastes to wife and child. The army marches with baggage three days to the rear. Badun Khan, the Mongol traitor, raids the camp this night, while Attila sleeps. He promises his Mongols all the spoil. With Attila dead, Badun Khan will make himself king.”

“Who told you?”

“Aëtius, the African.”

“A Roman prisoner! He is in the conspiracy, most likely.”

“He pretends to be, to foil the Mongol chief. Badun Khan offers him the command of the army. He sends me. He says a Roman hostage may not break his word nor betray his captor under any conditions.”

“You have heard of my coming, then!”

“Three days ago a swift rider came, God-

eredd. Aëtius told Badun Khan last night that you were still two days' ride away. To-morrow you would be ambushed. Badun Khan vows your death."

Goderedd considered this statement carefully, as his experience in diplomacy had trained him to do. He knew something of this Aëtius, son of Boniface, Count of Africa. Aëtius had been taken as a hostage by Alaric the Goth, freed, then seized as hostage again in a Hun raid.

On the face of it, the story was not at all improbable. The Mongols were the most rebellious of the heathen tribes gathered loosely under Attila's banner, and, during Goderedd's absence, they had plunged into Europe in such large numbers as to become a serious menace to the Huns.

"Badun Khan has many men?" the young Goth asked.

"Beyond the Mother Mountains (Ural Mts.) the blades of grass are more easily counted. In the camp but a few; not more than four thousand. King Ruas is far away. Bleda, the brother of Attila—"

"I know Bleda!" interrupted Goderedd.

“Then you know a water-viper. If Attila be slain, the power of Badun Khan and Bleda will swell like a dead horse.”

“Bleda is in the plot, then?”

“It is not known.”

Goderedd nodded. Bleda would surely plot his brother's death, but as surely would cleverly avoid openly embroiling himself therein.

“Is there time for us to reach the camp?” he asked, anxiously.

“Badun Khan will not strike before the moon goes down, near morning. If your horses are good—”

“They are the pick of the stables of the Emperor.”

The Hun spat in contempt of all horses other than the wild ponies of the steppe, crossed, as they were, with pure Arabian blood.

“Where is Mirkhond?” queried the young Goth.

“He comes, slowly, with the main army.”

“Has Attila been warned?”

“No. Aëtius said not. As a messenger, he trusted only me.”

“Why did he choose you?”

“I am Rorik, nephew of King Uldin, brother of Rhekan, the wife of Attila.”

“Of royal blood, then! My homage, Rorik!” Goderedd drew his sword half out of the scabbard and presented the hilt to the Hun, who touched it in acceptance. “Yet it seems to me that, had you ridden to Attila instead, he could have waited until the army came, fallen upon Badun Khan, and stamped the traitor to pulp under his horse’s feet.”

“You have forgotten Attila. He would not have waited for a thousand like Badun Khan. My ride would be as a lance without a point. Should he wait, the Mongols would slay Rhekan, his woman, and Ellak.”

“Ellak? That is the son of Attila?”

“His son.”

“That must not be!” cried Goderedd excitedly. “My oath forbids it!”

He turned to his little troop of cavalry.

“Men! Before the moon goes down to-night, we must be at the camp of Attila. A night attack against the Mongols, and work for every sword!”

The men clashed shields with stern delight.

Picked men all, fighting was their pleasure as well as their trade.

“Two pieces of gold for every man, and honor besides. On!”

They shouted, raising their lances in air as salutation, and galloped forward.

Rorik turned in the saddle and scanned the group with a critically approving eye.

“What men?” he queried.

“Veterans all,” said Goderedd, “lances taken from the cavalry arm of the legions of the auxiliaries, and given to me by the Emperors Honorius and Constantius for a personal following. They are ready to take service under Attila.”

“You will speak them,” said Rorik. “I, myself, will give a piece of gold for every Mongol head blackening in to-morrow’s sun.”

Goderedd translated, and the men shouted anew. This was war as they liked it: a dash in the night, the wild confusion of a startled camp, the soft shock of steel in flesh, the death-cries, the danger, the lust of battle, and gold to be had for the winning. That their foes were heathens only made their joy the fiercer. They broke out into the half-Christianized saga-

chants of the North, for, Romans though they called themselves, nearly all were of Celtic or of Gothic blood.

They rode on steadily for some hours. Then Rorik led them to a tiny settlement of Huns, where were food and wine for the men, hay and grain for the horses. Goderedd chafed at the delay, for the memory of his oath spurred him on, but he knew that a Hun would never misjudge distance or a horse's speed. The soldiers, full-fed, slept till nearly evening, wakening fresh and eager for a night of bloody work.

“What is the plan of attack, Rorik?” queried Goderedd, when they were on the way, again.

“You command!” said the Hun.

“I am Attila's man, and know what is your due. The nephew of King Attila commands.”

“No,” answered Rorik. “I am a Hun; I fight Huns' ways. Your men are legionaries. They need their own leadership.”

“Since you order it, Rorik. How does the camp lie?” And the two men entered into a discussion of tactics.

The task before them was not an easy one. With but five hundred men against two thousand, no encircling movement could be tried,

nor could the little band dare to make a stand, though, as Roman cavalry, they were more heavily armed than the Asiatic swordsmen. Even to divide the troop into two was dangerous, but this was necessary. As they rode on in the moonlight, the plan was matured in all its details.

A hundred men, under Atagis, Goderredd's chief lieutenant, were to stampede the Mongol camp a few minutes after the murdering band under Badun Khan had ridden away. This was to prevent the sending of any Mongol reinforcements. Since the number of the attackers was so small, they were not to make a halt for any prolonged fighting, merely to cut their way through the camp, wheel to the right, and pursue a course parallel to that taken by Badun Khan. This would bring them to the rear of the Mongols.

Three hundred and fifty men, under Rorik, were to ride straight for Attila's camp, and to remain hidden just over the brow of the hill until the Mongols could be heard coming. They were then to charge them in full flank, the slope of the hill aiding them, thus preventing Badun

Khan from forming in battle line. If possible, they were to cut their way through, in order to join the rest of the company upon the further side.

Goderedd, with fifty men, would, at the same moment, ride directly to the tent of Attila, wakening the mighty leader, rescuing Rhekan and Ellak, and would circle the camp to the point of contact with the conjoined parties. Attila, leading, would then take command.

So exact was Rorik's judgment of distance and pace that Atagis' men arrived at their post just a few minutes before the setting of the moon. There was scarcely an hour left to daylight. The horsemen were near enough to hear the distant sounds of the Mongol camp, yet far enough away that any slight jingle of a horse's trappings could not be heard to betray their presence to the enemy.

Not more than a quarter of an hour did they have to wait, just time to breathe the horses. Soon, torches blazed in the camp to light the saddling and departure.

Atagis ordered his men to horse. The hard-bitten mercenaries jested as they mounted, but

in hoarse whispers. In a few moments, the distant torches twinkled out.

Badun Khan had ridden forth for his black night's work.

Without any sound other than hoof-beats, the Roman lances plunged into and through the Mongol camp, surprising many unarmed men still standing in groups after the departure of Badun Khan. So sudden was the surprise, so violent the charge, that the Mongols had no time for resistance. Back through the camp again, and yet again, only the third time meeting with any fighting, and each time they dashed through, one or two Mongols fell to every trooper.

Satisfied, but utterly silent—for they did not wish to betray the smallness of their numbers—the troop wheeled to the right and rode on, having lost but two men in the half-hour's fighting.

Badun Khan, unconscious of what was passing in his rear, rode on swiftly, his heart filled with assurance and hope, for it seemed certain that Attila could not escape him. His scouts had brought word that the great conqueror had left his army and ridden on with only a hand-

ful of men. There were not a thousand people in the Hun camp, women and children included, and Badun Khan had issued orders that no prisoners should be taken, nor any wounded left.

The Mongol chief had no reason to suspect that his plot might be known, and he did not wish a single survivor to remain to tell the tale. True, Aëtius knew, but the Roman—in order to allay the khan's suspicions—had spoken with such seeming hate of Attila, that Badun Khan was far from imagining that the hostage would try to save the life of his captor.

Savagely rejoicing, the khan came just within sight of the tents of the camp when, out of the darkness, suddenly rang the rhythm of hoof-beats, and, without a battle-cry, into the midst of the unsuspecting Mongols came the heavily armed and superbly disciplined cavalry of the empire.

Against so compact and unprepared a mass of men, a lance could not fail to strike a foe, even in the dark, and three hundred of the Asiatics fell at the first onset. The Roman swords were out and hewing before the Mongols could recover from the first shock.

Badun Khan did not dare to stop and fight, for the tent of Attila was only a scant half mile away. Unless he reached there in complete surprise, unless he caught Attila sleeping, his plan was foiled, for he would not dare to face Attila awake.

While he was yet a few hundred yards away, a trumpet-call rang through the camp, and up between the irregularly pitched tents thundered Goderedd, fifty men at his back, galloping at topmost speed and shouting the alarm, some striking flint and steel to light the torches.

Attila, though heavy with sleep, was out of his tent in an instant, sword in hand.

“It is Goderedd, King Attila!” shouted the Goth. “Badun Khan attacks! Here are spare horses for Rhekan and your son. I fulfill my oath!”

Lightning-swift was Attila. He understood all, instantly. He dashed into the tent, lifted Rhekan in one arm, snatched the baby from the rug on which it was lying and tossed it into Goderedd’s arms, while he fairly threw the woman on a horse. One spring, and he was in the saddle himself.

As the first torch blazed, down upon the royal

tent charged Badun Khan—with how many men behind him, there was no saying.

“Ride!” thundered Attila to Goderedd, and turned to face the Mongols, all alone. “Ha! Badun Khan! You are welcome. Attila! Attila!”

The war-cry rang out in the chief’s own harsh and terrible tone.

Badun Khan, stricken cold by the apparition of his dreaded enemy seen for an instant in the torch’s gleam, involuntarily checked his horse, then, terrified, wheeled and sped into the night. He dared not face the sword which he knew must be awaiting him.

Grimly Attila watched him disappear, then turned and followed Goderedd to the outskirts of the camp.

“Rorik may be hard pushed, King Attila,” said Goderedd as his chief joined him, and, in a few words, explained how he had planned the charge.

Attila said only, “How hungry must Badun Khan be for death!”

He made no comment on the fate of Rorik, but rode round the camp to take the Mongols in the rear.

Goderedd fell back beside Rhekan.

“Give me the boy!” said she.

“Royal Rhekan,” Goderedd replied, “I ask your grace, but, on the field of battle, my right to Ellak is greater than your own. Long years ago it was decided.”

The first grayness of dawn was coming into the sky. The woman, stern-visaged, sallow, uncomely, with lank hair unbound, but strong of feature and intelligent, came close to the boy and stared at him keenly.

“I have heard the tale. So you are Goderedd. A Goth! Give me the boy!”

“No!”

“If Attila command?”

“Not even then, until the danger be past.”

The wife of Attila pushed back her streaming hair and stared at him in the slowly increasing light.

“He is my son,” said she, and turned in her saddle to summon Attila.

“Do not call!” warned Goderedd. “King Attila will endorse my oath.”

The woman clutched the young Goth’s arm and fixed him with her gaze. He returned glance

for glance. Uncouth she was, slant-eyed and swarthy, looking at her worst in all the disarray of recent sleep, but there was the fire of power in her eyes and an untamed dignity in her gesture. Something of the sorceress she had in her, something of the gift of reading character.

“Keep the child,” she said, at last. “I am content.”

Soon, very soon, dawn crept up the sky, and the gray light showed, as a blotch, the hundred lances riding toward them under Atagis. They had scarcely reached Attila when the rest of Goderedd’s troop, under Rorik, came plunging up the slope out of the fast-fading darkness, hotly pursued by Badun Khan and nearly two thousand Mongols. Badun Khan’s men reined up in confusion at the sight of Attila.

The Roman ranks had been seriously thinned in the hot encounter, but, at the sight of Goderedd, the troopers galloped forward, wheeled behind him without a word of command, and formed in line of battle.

Attila ran his eye down the line once. His curious magnetic power stirred every man, as with a draught of heady wine.

“It was well done. I say it. Attila! More blood, good hounds; more blood! On! Crush them!”

Goderedd stared, his sword in hand, the baby on his bridle arm. Badun Khan had two thousand lances to their four hundred, and the Mongol camp, with two thousand horsemen more, was but a few miles away.

“Does Ellak join the charge, King Attila?” he queried. “I do not leave him. It is my oath!”

The Hun’s yellow teeth showed between the thin hairs on lip and chin. He laughed discordantly—it was more a croak than a laugh.

“Charge, Goderedd! Let my firstborn smell his first blood from a horse’s back!”

He turned.

“Who follows Attila? Who rides where Doom rides? Who rides with Attila?”

Hot with fighting, delirious with battle frenzy, lifted to blood-eagerness by the spell of the Hun’s wizardry of leadership, the soldiers yelled in fury,

“Attila! Attila! Lead us, Attila!”

The dread chieftain, with neither shield nor armor, dressed just as he had risen from sleep, said not another word but loosed the reins of

his horse. The squadrons of the empire followed him with as much wildness as though they had been the maddest of his own picked band.

Badun Khan could be seen trying to bring his men to order from their sudden halt, but the terrible cry went on before:

“Attila!”

Panic, soul-searing panic, the black demon of deadly fear, rolled upon that Mongol host like a vapor-blast of certain doom. Courage was sucked from them, their nerves grew limp.

Not knowing rightly why, acting as though in the grip of nightmare, the Mongols turned their horses and fled, striking each other down in the terror of unreasoned flight. Though two thousand to four hundred, they scattered in utter rout, Badun Khan among them.

Never checking his gallop, Attila snatched the baby from Goderedd, holding Ellak aloft in his left hand as though the child were a banner, his sword flashing in his right.

Down into the fleeing host he charged, and struck one man so that his skull was cloven in twain. Another and another and yet a fourth fell before that blade. Then, drawing rein, he

flung up his hand to call a halt. The Roman troopers, accustomed only to the trumpet-call, did not see the gesture; they were thick in the fighting. Goderedd's trumpeter sounded the halt.

On the instant, the well-disciplined troop halted, wheeled, and, at a word of command from Goderedd, snapped sharply into squadron column formation.

Attila grunted approval, and handed the child back to Goderedd.

“Enough for now. Drive a rat to a corner and it will turn and bite,” said he. “But, before the summer sun turns the grass brown, there shall not be a Mongol rat alive this side of the Mother Mountains. Who worries the rats with Attila?”

Wild yells responded; shield clashed on shield. The four hundred men would have faced ten thousand at that moment, and ridden into certain death with mad abandon, though they had never seen Attila before that day.

Such was the man!

CHAPTER VII

THE FLAMING SWORD

THEY cantered back, slowly, to where Rhekan was waiting, and Goderedd gave her back the child.

“There is no danger, now,” he said simply.

Aëtius, who had been hidden behind the flap of Attila’s tent with drawn sword ready to transfix Badun Khan should the Mongol chief reach there before Goderedd, and who had not found a horse in time to join the charge, had ridden up to cover Rhekan’s defense and was sitting beside her, grimly, with naked blade.

At Goderedd’s words, he smiled. He knew the story of the prophecy, and guessed much of what had happened.

Attila exchanged a few words with Rhekan, in a low voice, then turned to Goderedd.

“How came you here by night? How knew you that the Mongols would attack? Speak straight, and speak swiftly!”

“King Attila has forgotten Goderedd, or he would not say ‘Speak straight!’” the young Goth replied with dignity. “It was Aëtius who sent the warning, and Rorik who bore it.”

“Speak, Rorik!”

The Hun desired nothing better than an opportunity to show what he had done for his king and his brother-in-law, and he shot a grateful glance at Goderedd for giving him the chance to tell the tale. He explained Badun’s plot in all its details, and told how Aëtius had refused the command of the army offered him by the Mongol khan, though seeming to accept it.

“By the Gods of Night, Aëtius, the doing of a man! A thousand spears are yours, Aëtius, and freedom.”

The Roman was about to reply, when Attila checked him with a gesture.

“The word is said, and never does Attila swallow a once-spoken word. But if I ride to plunder Rome, Aëtius, as one day I shall do—what then?”

“If I am free, King Attila,” said the Roman, sturdily, “I will face you in battle, as, all these years, as a hostage, I have faced you in friendship.”

“For that word, you shall have two thousand spears. Aëtius, you are free, to ride when and where you will.”

“A further boon, King Attila!”

“Speak!”

“Before I ride to Rome, my sword must find out Badun Khan. He dishonored me with his offer.”

“I give the boon. You shall have a command in the campaign. Rorik, Attila does not forget. Goderedd, for thanks, you—”

The young Goth dared to interrupt.

“King, it is my oath.”

“A good word; I shall remember it. Rorik, ride to the camp; bring what is needed. I camp at midday. Send a swift messenger to Mirk-hond. Goderedd, ride beside me; what of Honorius?”

So, as they rode on slowly—keeping far-flung outposts in case Badun Khan should summon courage for a second attack—Goderedd gave a rough sketch of his stay in Atawulf’s court, of his friendship with Placidia, and how it came about that the two Emperors had given him a troop of five hundred spears.

Before noon, the baggage train overtook

them, and the King's tent was pitched. The site seemed taken at hazard, but Goderedd noted that the place was really shielded by the steep banks of an insignificant stream. A trifle, only, but enough to show the Goth that Attila had become so sure a strategist that even a noonday halt was picked with an eye to defense.

Neither then, nor that night, was there any alarm. Though, counting the warriors in his camp, Badun Khan could rally four thousand men, he dared not fall upon four hundred, if Attila were leading them.

Next morning the little party rode on eastward, and, shortly before noon, descried the advance guard of the army, riding swiftly, pennons fluttering at every lance. Mirkhond rode beside the general, at the head.

The army of wild horsemen swept onward, with piercing yells and shouts of:

“Attila! Our Attila!”

They wheeled about the royal party like a cloud in the grip of a whirlwind, then gathered into roughly ordered companies. There was no such precision of training as in the Roman army, but there was a savage discipline which

was but little less effective. Goderedd noted it with satisfaction.

Mirkhond, though old and growing feeble, still sat his horse well. He rode direct to Attila.

“Hail, King, in safety. Never a Mongol blade shall make a scratch on Attila. It is written!”

“How long does Badun Khan live?” queried Attila, abruptly.

“Not long. But where a crow falls, a raven rises.”

The Hun frowned. Prophecy was only prophecy, but the mage’s predictions rarely failed.

“You have words waiting in your throat, Mirkhond. Speak!”

“This, King Attila. Hordes of Mongols have crossed the Mother Mountains. Why, now may be seen. They wait the word of your death.”

“That will be a long waiting,” said Attila.

“Not so. The word is on its way.”

“By the Gods of Night! Who sent it?”

“I, King Attila.”

“You have sent messengers?”

“Yesterday.”

Goderedd smiled appreciation. He saw the plan at once. The Mongols were to fall into their

own trap. Mirkhond, being two days' march to the east, had lured the Mongols on with false tidings of Attila's death. These messengers would reach the hordes before any courier from Badun Khan, and, naturally, Mirkhond had sent a flying column of scouts to intercept and slay any such courier. The Mongols, then, in full assurance of success, and supposing the dread conqueror to be dead, were sweeping down into the steppe-lands, almost into the jaws of Attila.

“The Mongols be many?”

“As stars in winter. And Bleda waits behind, as Rorik has told you.”

“The moon shall shine red from looking upon blood,” quoth Attila, grimly.

That he might fail never occurred to Attila, but Goderedd, accustomed to the ever-changing fortunes of the Visigothic kingdom, felt the Hun position to be serious. The Mongols would number a quarter of a million fighting men, at least.

Attila's conquests in Media and in Persia had enormously extended his power eastward, but the campaign had been costly in men. Besides, he had been forced to leave several strong garrisons to hold the territory. The returning

army did not number more than sixty thousand horsemen, all told. This would have been of little importance were it not for treachery, but with Bleda in secret opposition, backed by the Mongol host, the great conqueror had no troops on which he could depend, save his little army of sixty thousand men.

The Mongols were to the north of him, Bleda to the west, the Black Sea, Caucasus Mountains, and Caspian Sea to the south, and his east could easily be cut by a Mongol drive southward over the Kirghiz steppes. Ruas might support him, but it would be difficult to get a messenger safely across the entire width of Bleda's territory. Goderedd had been allowed to pass, because Bleda wished to catch him in the same trap.

Attila could not grasp a political situation as quickly as Mirkhond or Goderedd, but no other man living could seize a military question with such decision and certainty. He turned to the general who was beside Mirkhond.

“Take the Blue warriors, Gulus—” the Hun army was divided into corps distinguish by the pennons on their lances, “occupy and hold the hills of Bityug. Let neither sun nor stars see a

moment's idleness. I follow. The camp must be impregnable. Make earthworks as I did at Rhagae. Command both rivers."

"I ride, King Attila!" was the general's sole response.

Five minutes later, so thorough was the organization of the Huns, despite their seeming wildness, ten thousand horsemen set out across the steppe to the northeast. The campaign against the Mongols was begun.

To follow all the incidents of that campaign, which lasted twelve long years, would be a mere repetition of incessant skirmishes and battles, serious enough, but without influence on the fate of Europe.

Badun Khan held Attila at bay for nearly a year, then fell by the sword of Aëtius, who, thus released from his oath, accepted the freedom he had been promised and a small body-guard, but declined the two thousand lances, since the Huns had need of every man. He parted from Attila the best of friends, and the conqueror's last words to him were:

"Let us next meet in battle!"

A few words suffice to tell of Aëtius' doings

in the next few years. He arrived at Ravenna to find Constantius dead and Honorius on his death-bed. Placidia had borne a son to Constantius, and, on the death of Honorius, the infant was crowned as Emperor Valentinian III. Thus had Mirkhond's prophecy come fully true, Placidia was the mother of an emperor. The empress-mother took the reins of power, and Aëtius—warmly commended to Placidia by Goderedd—was given the command of all the armies in Gaul. He saved the Roman city of Arles, then besieged by Theodoric the Visigoth, and took Theodoric's chief general captive. Both Aëtius and Theodoric were to enter Attila's life, later.

The death of Badun Khan in no way weakened the Mongols. As Mirkhond had said: "Where a crow falls, a raven rises." In the khan's place came Lakla Khan, the Grand Khan of the Mongols, who had at his back the terrible mountaineers from the regions now known as Afghanistan and Beluchistan. The Mongols counted three-quarters of a million people, of whom half a million were warriors. Theirs was more truly a migration than that of

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the Huns, for they advanced slowly, taking and holding the country as they came. Attila the Hun, the enemy of Europe, unwittingly was Europe's best defender against the Mongols.

Mirkhond's prophecy concerning Attila also had come true. Two more sons were born to him, Gungis and Vhernak. By reason of his oath, Goderedd remained always at the camp on the Bityug, having the title of General and chief command of the encampment. With his knowledge of Roman warfare, he made the camp impregnable. The formidable earthworks built under his direction are visible to this day.

Yet, valiantly as Attila might fight, superb as was his leadership, no force could resist the slowly advancing Mongols. Year by year they grew nearer; year by year, the camp was more seriously menaced. It seemed but a matter of time until the Huns, under Attila, would be swamped or driven back upon the hostile country of Bleda.

King Ruas would do nothing to help. He had his own plans of conquest. Every year he sent raiding armies into the Eastern Empire. No less than three times had he halted under the walls of Constantinople, being bribed to retire,

each time, by fabulous payments of gold from the weakling Emperor.

Soon it became evident that the great camp on the Bityug was in utter danger. The Huns must make their last stand. Lakla Khan was approaching in person. The defenses constructed by Goderedd on the Khoper and Voronezh River rendered it hopeless for Lakla Khan to attack, either from the east or west. The only road of access for a hostile army was by Penza and Tambov.

The Huns dared not allow the Mongols to reach the plains of South Tambov, the pastureland of the hundreds of thousands of horses of Attila's host; the crucial battle must be fought to the northward. There, the undulating plain of Tambov is crossed by deep ravines and broad valleys with ridges of stony outcrop, highly obstructive to an advancing army. In such a broken country, generalship, rather than numbers, might decide the fortunes of war. Attila had picked his ground with strategical mastery.

It is incorrect to describe the Battle of Tambov as a single engagement. The fighting lasted for almost a month, continuously, the Mon-

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gols being caught in one trap after another and cut to pieces by guerrilla tactics, with very little loss to Attila.

The ground was difficult for mass attack, easy for defense. A hundred archers, protected by a temporary earthwork, could decimate a large force crossing an unbridged ravine, and then escape without harm. The Mongols dared not pursue, for fear of ambush. Even so, they found themselves ambushed four times in that month, and each ambush cost them nearly ten thousand men. Sixty or seventy thousand Mongols fell during this advance, before there was a single pitched battle.

Yet Lakla Khan pushed onward steadily, and, at last, entered the flatter grass-lands of the south, his forces diminished in numbers and in fighting spirit, but a formidable army still. The summer was intolerably hot, and the horses of the Mongols were over-ridden, thin, and ill-fed. The Huns, with the vast and well-watered prairies of Tambov behind them, had fresh mounts for every man. In cavalry warfare, the horse is almost as important as the man.

Said Mirkhond, at last:

“The day of battle comes, King Attila! Await

a night of storm. Three days have dust-clouds shown the hot simoom; winds from the north will come to drive them back.”

The Hun broke out in furious expostulation at this delay. He wished to charge immediately, and it irked him to wait. He was in a savage humor, and, more than once that month had threatened to behead the Persian. Mirkhond, day by day, persisted in prophesying victory, yet, day by day, the Mongols advanced. But Attila did not dare to give the death order. He feared Mirkhond, still, and rarely went against the Persian's advice, however much it galled him.

Harassed by light attacks, Lakla Khan drew nearer to the great Hun camp, slowly and warily, for he feared a trap.

Two days later, at daybreak, a glance at the sky told Mirkhond that the time set by the Fates had come. He went straightway to the king's tent.

“The battle is for to-night!” he proclaimed simply.

Attila made no response, asked no question. The rest was his affair. Only to Rorik, Gulus, Goderedd, and a few other trusted generals did

he hint his plans. The troops were bidden rest. Camp-followers brought to the camp the vast bands of remounts which were held in readiness. Minor commanders examined every man's horse and each man's arms. The Huns knew well that, on that night's doings, their lives depended. The Mongols would give no quarter.

Towards late afternoon, the sky grew covered with a faint orange haze, the atmosphere was heavy, the air deathly still, the heat terrific. Here and there, dust-whirls danced. The dry grass stood stark upright, like the bristles on an angry cat, sure evidence of a terrestrial overcharge of electricity and of a coming storm.

“At the first roll of thunder, ride!” said Mirkhond.

The word was passed to all the army, and the Huns rejoiced. Nature-worshipers and heathen, most of them, the belief that the Gods of Storm would do battle for them against the Mongols was a soul-stirring encouragement. Thus believing,—as Mirkhond had foreseen—the worse the night the better would the Huns fight, for an assurance of victory is worth more to an army than half a dozen extra battalions.

The weather grew more and more lowering. The sun went down blood-red, ruddy streaming plumes of cloud preceding the black line of storm which rose on the northwestern horizon to meet the sinking sun.

It was not until nearly night that the first roll of thunder came, a sudden and portentous crash, which rumbled in the heavens for fully two minutes afterwards. Every man in the Hun army sprang to horse, for, though, in his campaign in Media and Persia, Attila had learned how to handle infantry, and had a legion of foot-soldiers in his army, the Huns were at their best on horseback.

Goderedd took charge of one of the regiments, composed mainly of Ostrogoths, armed as heavy cavalry on heavy horses, and trained by the young Goth according to the Roman fashion. These troops—eight squadrons of five hundred men apiece—had neither the speed nor the mobility of the Huns, but their fighting power was deadlier and their superior weight gave a terrible impetus to a charge; they were trained to serve as infantry, also. To put the matter in modern terms, the Huns were hus-sars, while Goderedd's cavalry acted as heavy

dragoons, able to fight afoot or on horseback.

The legion of infantry, mostly of Goth or mixed blood, held the outermost defenses of the camp, ready to check the enemy should the cavalry encounter turn unfavorable to the Huns.

A moment or two after that roll of thunder, the Hun army was on the march. The odds against them were about four to one, fifty thousand men against two hundred thousand. This was partly equalized by the fact that the Huns were fighting on ground of which they knew every inch—a matter of the highest importance to cavalry on a dark night—they had the advantage of choosing their own moment for the attack, and their horses were fresh. To cap all, they had for their leader the greatest cavalry strategist of ancient times—Attila.

Several hundred men, all lightweights (a few pounds of extra weight makes an enormous difference to a light-built horse's speed), lightly armed, and mounted on the swiftest horses of the army, were sent forward with trumpeters and unlighted torches far to the south of Lakla Khan's forces. Arriving on position, they were to light their torches, sound the advance, and charge upon the left wing of

the Mongols, but, after the first shock, they were to turn and flee as though routed.

Lightly armed, knowing the ground, and on swift horses, they could escape pursuit, and one wing of the Mongol army might thus be tempted to wheel to face them, lest this should be a feint prior to the main attack. The same tactics were employed on the other wing. Whether the decoy succeeded or not, in any case it would spread the Mongol line and thus weaken it.

The decisive moment came. Far to the south, sparks of light showed the decoy troops coming to the charge.

Attila waited five minutes longer, and then the word to advance at a full gallop ran along the line, fully ten miles long. At exactly the same minute, the whole line of the Huns thundered down upon the Mongols, yelling like savages.

From both sides a cloud of arrows flew, followed by a shower of darts, giving just time to set lance in rest.

The night was pitch-dark, heavy thunderclouds blotting out moon and stars, and not until the armies were within a few spears' length

could they see each other, though each knew the enemy's approach by the deafening tumult of the mutual charge.

Lakla Khan, though not such a strategist as Attila, was not to be caught by such a simple ruse as the feint attack upon the wings of the army, and his men were ready to resist the charge. The Mongols spurred forward also, and the two armies crashed with a shock that shook the steppe. Men slain by the first flights of arrows and darts had no time to fall from their horses before the armies met.

No man on either side could see, in that darkness, to use a shield or to direct a lance. Men stabbed, thrust, or slashed, indiscriminately. Only by the position of a horse's head could Mongol or Hun determine friend from foe.

Then, the first terrific contact established, by prearrangement the Huns in the center wheeled to right and left, doubling behind the second line of fresh troops, and into the wide gap, thus formed, came charging Goderedd and the heavy cavalry.

They crashed through the Mongol line with appalling slaughter, but almost without resist-

ance, for, so equally balanced had been the result of the first onset, so shaken was the Mongol line, that it was powerless against the second hammer blow delivered by heavier and better-armed fighters. The reserve line of the Mongols kept its formation for a moment, but, not being in motion, suffered terribly from the crashing impetus of Goderedd's charge.

The heavy cavalry broke through. The Huns, riding in a double-ranked wedge, poured into the gap. They followed their orders, blindly, for, in that darkness, no one could see what was transpiring. Attila's genius had foreseen all. The Mongol army was cut in two.

Such tactics, admirable in themselves when successful, possess a very serious danger—they leave a thin line of troops nipped between two hostile armies, and, therefore, open to attack both in front and rear. By daylight, the Mongols would have seen this instantly, and the heavy cavalry might have been annihilated, but Attila had planned the charge exactly for the conditions of that night. The Huns knew what had happened because they knew what was supposed to happen; the Mongols were at a loss.

Goderedd's men dismounted instantly and formed two compact quadruple lines, facing in either direction, ready for the return shock, which was not long in coming. Lakla Khan, for all the darkness, had grasped the Hun maneuver and knew the crushing reply.

But he had not counted on meeting infantry, when the charge of a moment before had been a cavalry charge. Experience has shown that a cavalry charge is useless against infantry, if the infantry be well posted and prepared. Moreover, at night, the moral effect of a cavalry charge is lost.

The short broad-bladed spears of Goderedd's men were long enough to take every oncoming horse in the chest, and to bring horse and rider to the ground. Those of the Mongols, who did charge or leap their horses into the ranks of the infantry, were hampered rather than helped by their long lances, and the Goths cut them down without mercy.

The *mêlée* was at its height when the storm burst with unparalleled fury, and the Mongols saw, in the rapid flashes of the lightning, the Hun army coming in another rush. The Mongols had no time to set their horses in mo-

tion, and Attila struck for the third time with all the smashing effect of momentum. The Huns bored deep into the ranks of the enemy, hewing at flesh like fiends.

“Attila!”

Then the heavens opened and belched forth fire. The long-brooding tempest raged in elemental frenzy. The thunder rolled incessantly, and with so continuous a roar that all the sounds of the battle were drowned and men seemed to be fighting in utter silence. Neither war-cry nor death-cry could be heard, and the violet glare rendered the pandemonium a soundless nightmare.

Flash succeeded flash, thunderbolts crashed to earth with a stunning shock, globes of ball-lightning fell from the skies and ran about the ground under the horses' hoofs, exploding suddenly and adding to the terror and confusion.

Then—so say old records—a column of lightning formed between the earth and sky, produced by the continuous discharge of negative and positive potential, a veritable pillar of fire, lighting the vast arena of blood and strife with a brilliance as sharp as the light of day and twenty times more violent. Under that light,

blood ran black, and added to the horror of the sight.

The Mongols—to their credit be it said—stood their ground valiantly. In a delirium of savagery, equal to that of their foes, they fought like demons. Despite the violent charges, the Huns had not dislodged them. Lakla Khan had not given back a step.

No longer was the battle that of army against army, but man to man, and here, numbers told. Save where Goderedd's men were holding their own, all lines had broken, and the slaughter was individual.

Everywhere was confusion and disorder, coils and clumps of struggling men, heaps of dead and dying—horses and men intermingled, the swirls and eddies of a sea of struggle whipped by the winds of death. Only, in the neighborhood of that pillar of fire, all men had shrunk away, and there was clear ground for a hundred yards on every side.

“Attila!”

Bursting through the encircling Mongols, Attila thundered forward, crossed the clear stretch, and plunged—or so it seemed to the as-

tounded armies—into the very core of that shaft of dazzling light.

A cry of horror uprose from the Huns, so universal, so piercing that it rose above the shaking rumble of the thunder.

A second—it seemed to the Huns an hour—passed before Attila emerged from that Pillar of Fire, holding in his hand a sword that seemed alive, gleaming like the lightning itself. It flashed like a living flame, making circles of fire in the air as he whirled it, and seemed to send tongues of violet incandescence from edge and point.

Shaking the fiery blade above his head, he flung himself, single-handed, into the thickest of the fray.

Before him, the Mongols screamed and fled. A few let fall their weapons and waited for death, paralyzed with fear. Attila cut a swath through the serried mass, scarcely checking his horse's speed, leaving a line of writhing men or corpses in his wake.

“Attila!”

Lakla Khan, some twenty men around him, stood his ground and, towards him, Attila

charged, the Huns from every side hewing their way towards him.

He gestured them to halt—every movement could be clearly seen in the unnatural glare of that column of violet light—and, alone, he rode against Lakla Khan and his twenty.

A thunderbolt crashed to earth a few yards from the Mongol khan. He sat superbly still.

A moment later, Attila, still alone, his sword a shaft of lambent flame, swept on the twenty men. Of that single-handed fray, nothing could be seen but falling men and rearing horses, and the Sword, like a tongue of demoniacal fire, darting here and there.

Then Attila reined back.

Alone, upon a little mound, sat Lakla Khan, his twenty men dead at his feet.

The thunder rolled unceasingly; the shaft of lightning made a path from black sky to the blood-blackened earth below.

Then, from the mound, slowly rode down Lakla Khan. For the first time he drew his sword.

A shock ran over the field. Men halted, with sword poised in air, or javelin in the act of thrusting through an enemy's chest. Breath-

less, both sides stood, as though stricken motionless by sorcery, to see that fight.

Attila reined back his horse, back and back, to give the Mongol khan a fair chance for a rush. Then, at the same instant, both warriors charged.

There was a flash of fire, and a flash of steel!

Attila swept beyond and turned, the Khan likewise. There was no maneuver of horsemanship. Both men dashed in, and, for some minutes, the sword-blows fell so fast that none could follow them.

Then Attila reined back again, the Sword held high above him, motionless, but glowing like a blazing meteor.

Lakla Khan faced him, for a long, long minute, then slowly bent over his saddle-bow, huddled, and fell forward on his horse's neck, dead.

Attila spurred forward, put his arm around the khan, and kept his foe from falling.

“Attila!”

A thunder-peal, louder than all, shook earth and sky, and seemed to the Huns the acclaim of the Storm-Gods for their victory.

Goderedd waved his men to their horses—

no word of command or trumpet-call could be heard in that wild tumult of the elements—and, at every point, the battle began anew, if battle it could be called which had turned in one swift moment to massacre.

Leaderless, panic-stricken, convinced that the very Spirits of the Air were fighting for the Huns, the Mongols scarcely sought to defend themselves. Few fled. With Asiatic fatalism they felt that their end was come, and faced death stolidly, fighting in sullen despair.

The carnage lasted the whole night through, and when, at dawn, Goderedd rode back with the remnant of his regiment, he found Attila in the same place, holding the dead Lakla Khan upon his horse.

“Dig him a grave deep enough for horse and man,” said Attila, “that he may ride therein as a dead king should ride. As he died in honor, so shall he go to his ancestors in honor. None shall carry his body, none but I shall touch his body, nor shall his foot be put upon the soil. Let him ride to his own place in the World of the Dead! The Storm-Gods will have it so!”

To-day, halfway between Tambov and Lipetsk, may still be seen the tumulus wherein

remain, upright, the bones of Lakla Khan, still seated on his horse, and, on the top of the great mound, lies a flat stone in which is roughly chipped the outline of the Flaming Sword.

CHAPTER VIII

DARING THE DYING

THE succeeding years passed swiftly for Goderedd, in the camp of the Huns. Ellak had been twelve years old at the Battle of Tambov, Gungis, a year younger, and Vhernak, nine years old. During the three years following, Ellak became Goderedd's shadow and rarely left his side, although, indeed, all three boys were in his constant company.

Very different were the characters of the three. Ellak, now nearly sixteen years of age, rash, daring, and quarrelsome, had all the impetuosity of his father and was a born fighter, the best javelin-caster in the camp and of incredible endurance on the chase, but Goderedd could see that the boy would never have his father's sense of leadership nor his power. Gungis, the second oldest, had the Hun's cunning and shrewdness; he listened eagerly to all Goderedd's instructions in statecraft, but it was impossible to put into his mind any sense of

honor or the value of an oath. Vhernak, the youngest, was the finest character of the three, and had inherited from his father the magnetism which makes a leader of men; he was immensely popular and the favorite of the whole army.

Goderedd had long foreseen the difficulties which would arise when these three boys should grow to manhood, for there would certainly be an intense rivalry between them, and each would strive to supplant his brothers in his own special way.

Between Attila and Bleda, so far, there had been no open clash. The defeat of Lakla Khan had given Attila an enormous prestige, but the millions of Asia were unconquered and the menace of a Mongol invasion was an ever-constant one. Attila was forced to lead incessant raids across the Urals and into Turkestan. Persia and Media had been subjugated, but they were only held in hand by the maintenance of a Reign of Terror. This gave Attila a restless and loosely held empire, stretching from the borders of Mongolia to the Black Sea, but it was a rulership of fear, only to be maintained by constant fighting.

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King Ruas had become old and feeble, and all the western part of the Kingdom of the Huns was practically in the slippery hands of Bleda. As the Huns possessed no sense of developing a territory or establishing a stable form of government, as they would pay no heed to agriculture or to pastoral life, and as their sole idea of rulership was that of theft and pillage, this enormous and unwieldy Hun kingdom remained in a state of savagery. The money needed to support the armies was secured by raids and slave-captures, by the sacking of towns and cities, and by constant threats upon Constantinople for the purpose of extorting enormous sums of tribute from the incapable emperor, Theodosius II.

In the Western Empire, during this time, events moved smoothly under the wise administration of Gallia Placidia, who reigned as Empress-Mother during the minority of her son, Valentinian III; her policy was ably seconded by Aëtius, now in command of all the armies of the Empire. The Vandals, who had been driven into Africa by Atawulf, were swiftly becoming masters of all the African provinces under their famous king Genseric or

Gaiseric, who was to play an astounding and savage part in the history of the next half-century.

Attila's camp had been moved from the Bit-yug to a point on the Volga River sixty miles south of the present city of Kazan, and which, many centuries after, became the capital of the migrating Bulgarian hordes. Here, Attila was far enough away from the frontiers of Bleda's territory to insure him against surprise, and he was admirably placed to control all Eastern Russia, Persia, and Turkestan.

The life in Attila's camp had now attained a high scale of barbaric luxury, but Attila himself, Rhekan, and their three sons, maintained a simple mode of living. The great Hun conqueror held a savage contempt for the weakening effect of luxury, and insisted that Goderedd should keep the boys in constant activity. Youngsters as they were, they had ridden with Attila to the very boundaries of his empire, Goderedd always beside them.

Then, one day, a messenger came riding at topmost speed with a message from King Ruas. The old king was now so feeble and so ill that his life could not be a matter of more than a

few weeks. Bleda was already at the king's bedside, said the messenger, and there was not a doubt that he intended to have himself proclaimed king, thus forcing Attila either to pay him homage or to be declared a rebel.

Leaving Rorik with the main armies to hold the western conquests, Attila set out at once with a picked body of twenty thousand men, under the combined generalship of Gulus and Goderedd. He took with him Rhekan and their three sons, for Mirkhond declared that the presence of the boys at King Ruas' camp was essential. He even went so far as to hint that one of them might be the means of saving Attila's life, though the mage either could not or would not say how this was to happen.

They rode through Bleda's kingdom as through a hostile country, but the army of twenty thousand had swollen to thirty thousand and more before they reached the capital of the Huns. Something of this was due to the fame of Attila—though Bleda had done his best to stifle all reports of his brother's conquests—but even more was due to the fame of the Flaming Sword. To the Huns, easily impressed by the supernatural, the Sword was a certain

sign that Attila was their chosen future king.

The Huns declared their idol to be the favorite of the Storm-Gods and vowed that the Sword was forged of lightning; the Scythians held it to be the sword of the war-god, Mars, and told another story of its finding, so as to claim it as their own; the Goths believed that the Sword had been sent down from heaven, and laid stress on the fact that Attila had become a Christian, at least in name.

In this conversion—if it could be called such, since Attila's character was no whit changed thereby—Goderedd had been a most important factor. It had not been brought about without some trouble and considerable danger, for Attila was resentful of advice. There had been one especially dramatic moment, when Goderedd had insisted to the king that his three sons must be brought up as Christians. Only the sight of the armlets on the Goth's arm had saved him from the king's wrath. Rhekan, too, had bitterly resented this lapse from heathendom, but Goderedd's influence was too strong to be overcome. The Goth had always been so helpful and loyal to the Hun chieftainess, and so stern and efficient a guardian of her sons

during the periods of Attila's absences on his campaigns—often a year long at a time—that the boys regarded him almost as a second father.

If hostility had been evident among the tribes in Bleda's kingdom, the feeling was quite otherwise as they approached the great central camp—it was more a roughly built city than a camp—of the Huns. For miles around the soldiers flocked to see the famous conqueror, and Attila rode up to King Ruas' gorgeous tent of purple silk in a cyclone of shouting.

The old king, cavernous-eyed, thin-lipped, propped up on pillows, sat in state on his couch to receive his nephew, the greatest warrior of his race, whom he had not seen for nearly fourteen years. The tent was full of counsellors and generals when Attila, the Sword girded at his side, entered. He was followed by his three sons and by Mirkhond and Goderedd, the mage in Persian robes, Goderedd fully armed and helmeted.

Attila went forward, drew the Sword, and presented the hilt to King Ruas in token of homage. The old king looked at it curiously.

Then, with a questioning glance of permission at Attila, he grasped it feebly and drew it from the scabbard.

The Sword began to glow with light, as when its master held it.

Attila smiled grimly, a gleam of yellow teeth behind the sparse beard.

“The Flaming Sword knows a true Hun, King Ruas!” he said. “See! It glows!”

The king took a firmer grasp of the Sword, and, as every one present saw, the touch of it seemed to give him vigor. He sat almost upright upon his couch and whirled the blade about his head, as in the days of his strength. But the spurt of force was brief, and, in a moment, he sank back, gasping, returning the blade to Attila.

The enfeebled monarch was exhausted, but his cold and cruel eyes still held a vivid speck of light. He had dominated the Huns for thirty years, and, during that time, he had never raised his voice, made a friend, nor forgiven an enemy. Death itself was not more remorseless than Ruas, King of the Huns, nor more sudden. His words were few, his orders fatal. His silence was almost as dangerous as his speech.

He spoke at last, low, clear, icy.

“I have held the Sword. It is the sword of a king, Nephew Attila!”

Bleda, standing at the foot of the couch, scowled at the words, the more so as a stern hum of approval ran round the circle of the counsellors. King Ruas' saying was an almost open declaration that Attila should be regarded as a rightful claimant to the throne.

Then the King's eye fell on Goderedd, and he raised himself on one elbow.

“A Goth! Helmeted! In my tent!”

Sheer surprise kept the old monarch from giving the order to slay.

Goderedd advanced, drew his sword, and saluted, Roman fashion.

“Hail, King Ruas! I am Goderedd.”

The counsellors gasped. No excuse, no obeisance! Was the Goth mad?

“I remember,” said the King. “My envoy to Atawulf. A pity you must lose your head by sundown.”

“I shall not lose it,” said the Goth. “I have learned the thoughts and ways of kings.”

Ruas looked, and waited.

“I am here to guard the sons of Attila,”

Goderedd continued. "You know the story, King. Where enemies are, I retain my arms."

"Enemies!"

"The word of a lance, King Ruas; enemies!"

The King's glance traveled round the circle slowly, then rested a while on Bleda, who gnawed his lip, but dared not speak. Then the glance shifted to Attila, and back again to Goderedd.

"Hun law," said the king. "No man stays helmeted in the royal tent."

"Laws are made by kings, not for kings," answered the Goth, stoutly.

No one had ever seen King Ruas smile, but there came a flicker in his eyes.

"More," went on Goderedd, "I should doff helmet instantly, King Ruas, were you alone. With those that are here, no!"

"It is my will, also!" put in Attila curtly, with that swift and fiery command which was a part of his magnetic force.

Ice and fire exchanged glances.

"You speak freely, Nephew!"

The words dropped slowly.

"I fight freely, King!"

The words were as a flame.

Slowly King Ruas turned his head towards Bleda.

“Your word!”

“It is Hun law that it is death to disobey the King,” came the reply, given sulkily.

The chilling eye dwelt long on Bleda’s uneasy face.

“A lizard hiding beneath a stone!” The phrase cut with contempt. “You speak for yourself through me. I have little love for lizards, Nephew!”

Ruas then looked pensively at his executioner, but turned his head away without giving the sign of doom. He fixed his gaze again upon the Goth.

“Goderedd! You have heard. It is death to disobey the King.”

“I have always known it, King Ruas. But the King has not given an order.”

“And if—”

“I shall die, helmeted.”

Attila’s deep-set eyes glowed, and his hand found the hilt of the Sword.

King Ruas saw the movement. Nothing escaped those cold and piercing eyes.

“Rich stomachs, both of you!” His voice took an edge that boded danger.

Goderedd felt instinctively that there would soon be a killing, though it was impossible to tell on whom the King’s doom would fall.

“Hear me, King Ruas,” he said boldly. “You know well that I have been faithful to you and to Chief Attila, in the court of Attila and in the emperor’s court. I hold my oath upon my arm—” he shook the three bronze armlets. “What king is he who would bid a warrior break his oath? Not Ruas, surely! That is for lesser men!”

“You have a sharp stroke of the word, Goth!”

“And I of the sword,” quoth Attila.

Unmoved, the King peered at him curiously.

“You dare me, in my own tent, Nephew?”

The Sword flashed out.

It was a sufficient answer.

“They did not lie who spoke about you, Attila.” There was a pause as he glanced from Attila to Bleda and back again. “Lizard and tiger, brothers!”

He sank back on the cushions, a froth of blood at the lips, but his eyes did not leave Attila.

“You should have been my son, Nephew, instead of that scrap of parchment, Kirdu! Let it be!”

There was a silence while Douros, the King’s physician, wiped the blood from the cracked lips. Then the King’s eyes passed to Mirkhond, and the mage came forward.

“How long, Mirkhond?”

The Persian felt the King’s pulse and looked long into the narrow eyes.

“Not long, Great King.”

“Death is in the tent?”

“A true word.”

Again the King’s eyes sought out Attila.

“Behold one foe, Nephew, that the Flaming Sword cannot reach: Death! How long, Mirkhond?”

“Before the second sunrise, or sooner, King.”

The eyes did not flinch.

“Arrow-words, Mirkhond. Lift me, Douros! Warriors, hear! The King speaks. To my son Kirdu send my curses and the jewels of my crown; not the crown. Let him rot in Constantinople; he has deserted the tents of the Huns. Melt the crown and make two circlets.”

Pain and weakness rang in the voice, but the tone held steady from sheer will. "The kingdom I leave to my brother's sons, Attila and Bleda, both. It is said! Let it be written!"

Gently Douros lowered the dying man upon the cushions.

Bleda came forward quickly.

"Shall Attila have the east, and I the west?"

The cold eyes pierced him narrowly. The lips did not move. Bleda waited for an answer, but waited vainly.

"Has the King's word been heard?" came the quiet voice from the bed.

A murmured assent ran round the circle.

"Go, all! Leave my physicians and my scribe."

Attila stepped forward, once more presented the hilt of the Sword to the King, then strode out first, thus claiming and asserting precedence. Ellak made as though to follow on the heels of his father, but Goderedd seized the boy's shoulder and held him back.

"Bleda has also been named for king," said the Goth, reprovngly.

"He is a traitor!" said the boy, hotly.

Bleda, passing at the moment, heard the

word and spun upon his heel. His dagger flashed out on the instant.

Goderedd, in mail, stepped forward.

“I am still helmeted, King-Elect Bleda,” said he, clearly.

For a second Bleda dared him, then turned furiously and stamped out of the tent, to come face to face with Attila.

“I have an order for you, Bleda!” So overmastering was Attila’s personal power that the arrogance passed unnoticed. “There is no division of the kingdom while the King lives. There shall be no question between us, till he be dead.”

“And after, Brother!”

“I will determine. Go!”

The counsellors pouring out of the tent heard, and clustered.

Attila raised a finger.

“Open a way!” he thundered. “Bleda, go!”

No man alive, save Mirkhond, had ever faced the glare in the eyes of Attila when once it upflashed in anger. Bleda faltered, turned, stumbled, and almost ran.

Attila watched him go, then strode away to

his horse, Goderedd and the three boys following.

Gungis was the first to speak.

“I doubt that Bleda will live long,” he remarked musingly.

Attila wheeled on him. He knew his son’s sly and revengeful spirit.

“No treachery, Gungis!”

The boy made no reply, but his eyes did not lose either their craftiness or thought.

CHAPTER IX

THE POISONED GOBLET

CLOSE, close was the watch that the followers of Attila kept upon their chief and his camp. A double circle of sentinels was posted; all the ground between was burned clear of grass and brush, and sand was strewn thickly thereon. Even on the darkest night that pale-hued stretch would gleam clear. Not even a rat could cross it, unseen, much less an assassin in Bleda's pay.

Two days later came the expected burst of shouting and wailing which announced the death of King Ruas. Straightway Attila marched out, the Flaming Sword girded at his side, a strong body-guard of picked men before and behind. Bleda, at the head of an even larger body of men, met him at the place set aside for the death-feast of the dead king.

Already a high table had been erected on a low, flat mound for the two kings-elect, who,

according to Hun usage, would take the meal on horseback; low tables had been placed for a few generals and counsellors of either party; the ground was strewn confusedly with vessels and with food, for most of the warriors preferred to eat when sitting or sprawling.

It was the custom of the Huns to celebrate the crowning of a new king by an enormous banquet, at which the body of the dead king presided, laid in state on a funeral pyre, his rigid hand touching a goblet of mingled blood and wine. On this occasion, two goblets were beside the dead king, one on either side. His favorite war-horse, saddled and bridled, was tethered to the pyre.

Two circlets of hammered gold had been roughly made from the metal of the old king's crown, and these lay on silver shields on a table of lapis lazuli set on a rough wooden platform, under a silken canopy dyed with Tyrian purple and mended with rags. The vessels on the tables and on the ground were of gold and silver, of horn and common wood, indiscriminately. Spoils of richest value clinked against the roughest utensils of a camp. Much was showy and gaudy; all was soiled and bedrag-

gled. The means for luxury were there, but degraded to a clumsy and sodden barbarity.

Slaves from every nation had labored at the cooking, all night long, and dainties fit for an emperor's table stood beside smoking joints of half-roasted horse-flesh. Here, were Oriental sweetmeats; there, bears' paws boiled in fat. Magnificent sturgeon from the Volga made dish-fellows with stinking marsh-eels and crabs soaked in rancid butter. Golden pheasants smoked beside mud-hens—which latter it took the stomach and the nose of a Hun to endure. Salads of raw vegetables were heaped on the bare ground in piles and beside each pile was a jar of mulsum—semi-fermented grape-juice mixed with soured honey—with which every feast began. Huge fires blazed, where kids and sheep were roasted whole, the entrails not even having been removed. Rich wines were drunk from ox-horns, and sour mares' milk from sacramental chalices battered out of shape. The Huns gorged all, drank all, nor ever seemed to distinguish one dish from another. Unlike the Romans, the Huns had no music at their feasts, but rarely was there any drunkenness—quantity of food was the prime essential.

This was Goderedd's first sign of a Hun coronation, and it disgusted him profoundly. The Romans, for all their decadence, had courtly ways; the Goths, though over-fond of drinking, were not gluttons. The barbarism of the Huns nowhere showed itself more clearly than in this voracious gorging, without regard to cleanliness or order.

Toward the middle of the feast, at a given signal, all men stood. The moment for the coronation had come. A heathen priest, standing close to the pyre, slashed upward with a sword and cut the throat of the dead king's horse. The poor beast fell, dead.

Attila and Bleda, in their saddles, lifted the circlets of gold from the shields and placed them on their heads. The whole plain rang with shouts and acclamations, for the lines of guzzling feasters reached almost as far as eye could see. The camp-ground fairly shook, some crying "Bleda!" and others "Attila!"

Then the dead king's cupbearer took from the dead king's hands the two goblets of blood and wine.

Mirkhond, at a table to one side of the platform, watching closely, saw the cupbearer's

sleeve pass over the goblet of Attila and hesitate there an instant.

“Poison!” he cried, but, in the frantic tumult of the shouting, no one heard him but those who were close by.

“Poison!” he cried, again.

Ellak, whom had been standing beside the mage, leapt forward a step, snatching to hand a javelin.

Poising the weapon, he hurled it with all his might across the heads of the feasters. The keenest caster among the Huns, he could not miss at that distance. The point of the javelin struck the gold goblet held high in Attila’s hand and sent it crashing.

At the flash of the steel, the shouting ceased suddenly.

Attila whipped out the Sword.

“I cast the javelin, I, Ellak!” shouted the boy, in the silence, before even a question could be asked. “Poison!”

The cupbearer stooped to snatch up the goblet, but Gungis was there before him. Some drops remained.

He handed it to his father.

Attila whirled upon his brother-king, the Sword in hand.

“Drink this, Bleda, my brother!”

Bleda answered haughtily,

“Why do you turn to me?”

“That shall we see! Bring me a slave!” quoth Attila.

One of the kitchen scullions was seized and hustled to the king.

“Drink this!” said Attila. “They say that it is poisoned. Only a few drops are left. Whether poisoned or not, after drinking I give you freedom, and a purse of gold besides. Drink!”

The slave turned white at the demand, but he knew that refusal would mean death, in any case. He lifted the goblet to his lips and drank the remaining drops.

For several moments, all men watched, for the potion seemed to have no effect. Then, suddenly, the slave's face distorted in pain, and he fell to the floor, convulsed and struggling.

Mirkhond was already at the King's side with a bowl of mare's milk, the staple drink of the feast.

He forced the slave's lips open, and made him swallow a long draught of the milk. Vomiting followed, and, so small had been the amount of poisoned wine left in the goblet and so quickly had the remedy been given, that, very shortly, the crisis was past, and the slave, tottering, got to his feet.

"It is red mushroom, King Attila," said Mirkhond, "I know the symptoms well. A mouthful would have killed."

He reached for the other goblet, which Bleda had set upon the table when challenged by Attila. The mage smelt it, tasted a drop.

"There is no poison in King Bleda's cup!" he said, meaningly.

The uproar was resumed. Again rose cries of "Bleda!" and of "Attila!" Weapons were drawn, and there would have been instant fighting had not the thunder of the the voice of Attila been heard above the din.

"Continue the feast!" he roared. "Set light to the pyre! King Ruas shall not see his death-guests leave the banquet, hungry! Send for an armorer to fetch his forge, and quickly! The cupbearer shall taste hot iron before us all and

tell us what he knows. There is a sauce to spice your meat, my warriors!"

The rough Huns yelled in wild approval.

Bleda's glance turned sideways a moment to where sat his chief counsellor, Onegesius, a Greek. A minute later, the Greek had slipped away from the table. In the tumult and the riot none saw him go, save Gungis.

Stealthily, unobserved, partly covered by the smoke rising from the funeral pyre on which was burning—with a smell of crisping flesh—the body of the dead king, Onegesius crept behind the horses of Bleda and Attila to where the cupbearer lay, cowering.

A swift stroke of the knife across the throat, and the cupbearer had gone to that land where no torture would force him to tell his tale.

Glancing up, Onegesius saw Gungis watching him. He showed no indecision. He had studied the boy's character. He put a finger to his lip.

Gungis considered. This was making him a confederate in villainy, but, at the same time, he realized Bleda's wisdom in silencing his tool, and he could not help a certain admiration for the craft and cunning of Onegesius.

A few moments later, an armorer came running, a slave behind him carrying a portable forge, and another a vessel with glowing charcoal.

“Fetch the poisoner!” ordered Attila.

Several men ran.

A babble of voice rose.

“Dead!”

“He has been slain!”

Attila turned in his saddle and looked down. The glare of the pyre, faint in the late afternoon sun, showed the still flowing blood. The man was dead, his throat cut from ear to ear.

“Who did this?” he roared, his hand on the hilt of the Sword. He wheeled on Bleda, who met his glance. Attila stormed inwardly, but he knew that his brother had not left the saddle.

Onegesius and Gungis exchanged glances. The boy had considered his own position. He was not the oldest son, and was little liked by his father. Ellak would undoubtedly succeed to the throne, and Ellak loved him even less. He would have to make his own way in the world—better to have his uncle Bleda’s interest than his hate! The lad’s mind, naturally treacherous,

saw the gain of holding a guilty secret over Bleda and Onegesius. Time enough to employ the knowledge when it might serve him—it could not serve him now. A secret told is a secret wasted.

Attila's anger was blasting, but he choked it down.

“Throw the poisoner to the crows!” he said. “And take that forge away, lest I heat irons therein for other men!”

He glared at Bleda.

“Poison and throat-slitting! A royal banquet!” Attila's strident laugh rang over the plain. “Feast! Feast all! Bring me a soldier's food!”

Not a morsel did he touch of the dainties on the royal table, and not a word did he speak to Bleda, but his eyes never left his brother's face.

Bleda, scorched under that gaze, did not eat. From time to time he drank great draughts of wine to calm the fever and the fear within, but he dared not speak.

So ended the death-feast of Ruas, King of the Huns.

CHAPTER X

ONE ARMLET GONE

THE morning after the feast found Attila in one of his coldest moods. He had determined on his action. Though proofs might be found to fasten the poisoning of the goblet upon Bleda, he quelled every investigation.

Attila saw clearly that any attempt to refuse to Bleda his half-share of the throne would only begin a civil war among the Huns. In so loosely held an empire such a fratricidal war might be fatal. The subjugated peoples—such as the Ostrogoths, Tetraxides, or Gepids—would be only too glad to seize the chance of a conflict in rulership to make themselves free. That might ruin the empire. Bleda, ripe with vengeance and with hate, would side with any one against his brother, even though it wrecked the power of the Huns.

Without a day's delay, Goderedd was sent as a special courier to notify the Emperor Valentinian III of the death of Ruas, and of

the crowning of Attila and Bleda. Bleda could not object to this choice. It was evident that Goderredd, by reason of his friendships at the court of Ravenna, and especially with the Empress-Mother, was clearly the messenger to send. It was made a part of his mission, also, to express the willingness of Attila to renew the treaty which had existed between King Ruas and the Western Empire.

Ellak accompanied him. The presence of a son of Attila lent honor and distinction to the embassy, and the Hun conqueror was eager that his eldest son might have an opportunity to learn something of the ways of courts.

Goderredd was received with open honors and evident pleasure by Gallia Placidia and the Emperor. Apartments in the imperial palace were prepared for him and for Ellak, and the Goth was delighted to find himself again in the frank confidence of the Empress-Mother. She had much to tell him, and Goderredd was able, once again, to gather up all the threads of that tangled skein of intrigue and plotting which made up the history of those times. Ellak was received as was fitting to his princely rank, but he disliked the court intensely. The young

fellow had the savage Hun strain strong in him, and, before a week was past, he was eager to return to the freedom and wildness of a camp.

In vain did the Empress Placidia try to learn from Goderedd what would be the conditions of the treaty that Attila desired to make. Ruas had been a hard bargainer, and it was not likely that Attila would be less so. Yet it was clear that any treaty with Attila would be better than none, for Goderedd admitted freely that that great Hun leader had vast ambitions.

In those days, court officials—usually Greeks—were sent as envoys and ambassadors, but Goderedd urged strongly that the head of the embassy to Attila should be a soldier. Accordingly, Gaius Flaccus was named, and the embassy set forth, bearing rich presents for the two Hun kings. Goderedd and Ellak returned with the Roman envoys.

With his characteristically abrupt fashion of settling everything to suit himself, Attila sent a messenger to the approaching embassy, naming for a meeting a place on the open plain. Goderedd wondered, for, so far as he knew, there was neither city nor camp there.

What was the amazement of the envoys, as they approached the meeting-place, to find a group of horsemen awaiting them, but neither a banqueting-hall, nor even a tent pitched!

In this summary fashion, Attila had prevented all disputes and quarrels concerning precedence, which Bleda might have used as a cause for trouble. On horseback, all men were equal. Bleda fumed inwardly, for a council on the open plain gave him no opportunity for secret and treacherous conversations with the ambassadors, on which he had hoped and counted.

When he saw Attila and Bleda awaiting them, Goderedd was dumfounded for a moment, then the true reason flashed upon him. Spurring beside Gaius Flaccus he declared his belief that this uncourtly reception could not be intended as an insult to Rome, but was probably due to Attila's desire to avoid contention with his brother-king.

“It pleases me not,” said Gaius. “Two heads have two tongues.”

Attila and Bleda, on horseback, were seated side by side when the ambassadors reined up, and Bleda took the first word, depending on his

well-known eloquence to give the impression that his authority was the greater.

“Nobles, and honorable citizens of Rome, you are welcome—” he began, and launched into a flowery speech.

When he had ended, there was silence.

Gaius looked at Goderedd with a questioning glance, for Attila had not spoken. The Goth imperceptibly shook his head.

Attila stared straight over his horse’s head, and said no word.

A less experienced man than Gaius Flaccus might have been discomposed by such a curt reception, instead of the endless debates and banquets usual to such a mission, but, thanks to his conversations with Goderedd along the way, he had a fair inkling of the real position in the Hun kingdom. He settled back comfortably in his saddle, to wait.

Attila lost patience, first.

“You have no tongue, Roman?”

“It is the custom, King,” said Gaius, calmly, “for a king to be the first to speak.”

“My brother Bleda has spoken—at length!”

“Truly!” said the Roman, but he said no more. He had no intention to commit his em-

bassy to a broil by any precipitancy at the start.

Bleda took up the tale.

“It is our wish,” he began in bland tones, “to enter anew into friendly relations with Rome—”

“Does King Bleda speak also for King Attila?” interrupted Gaius.

Bleda looked sidewise at his brother, who continued to stare over his horse’s head. It was most embarrassing. He had screwed up all his courage to be the first to speak, and now the Roman envoy refused to accept him as sole spokesman.

Goderedd shifted uneasily in his saddle. He knew Attila well, and was quite aware that the King would not speak until the decisive moment. Attila’s ways were often unexpected, and always abrupt.

“I have a message from Valentinian Cæsar to two kings,” said Gaius, in a voice that was level and collected. “I await their attention.” He slightly emphasized the pronoun.

“You may speak, Roman!” came Attila’s harsh order.

In brief and soldierly fashion, Gaius de-

livered his formal message of greeting, addressing himself principally to Attila.

For the first time Attila looked at him.

“Twenty words, only, instead of lengthy speech. It is well. But, Roman, I have seen you before!”

“At Marcianopolis, King. I led the Fourth Legion.”

“Ah! You may tell Valentinian I am content with his envoy. To a soldier, I will speak. These are the offers of friendship that the kings of the Huns make to Rome—” and in short phrases he outlined the terms of a most exorbitant treaty.

“Does King Attila speak for King Bleda?” queried Gaius stoutly.

“I said the ‘kings’!” repeated Attila.

“Soldier to soldier, Attila,” said Gaius, dropping the title, “I have a soldier’s orders. Orders from the Emperor. I cannot take the word of one king for both.”

“One sword is enough for both,” came the swift reply. “It is with my sword that Rome will have to deal.”

“Yet must I have my answer. King Bleda, are these terms to your liking?”

Bleda dared not say “No,” greatly though

he resented being made to submit to an agreement in which he had not even been consulted.

“I agree to them,” he said reluctantly.

“Then can I answer,” said Gaius. “The terms are not such as I can carry to Cæsar!”

Attila looked at him with real approval. This was but the beginning of the bargaining, as both sides knew, and, before evening, all the details were settled, Bleda having no part in the discussion.

The agreement, known to history as the treaty of Margus (not far from the modern Belgrade), was greatly in favor of the Huns. The yearly tribute formerly paid to Ruas was doubled, fugitives on both sides were to be surrendered, free markets—open to Hun and Roman alike—were to be established both in the empire and in the Hunnish kingdom, and any tribe with which Attila might be at war was excluded from alliance with Rome. In return, Attila guaranteed the frontiers of the empire from Hun and Mongol invasion, permitted the free enrollment of Huns in the Roman forces, and granted ten thousand men to the imperial army, on the sole condition that these troops should be attached to the armies in Gaul, under

the leadership of the general Litorius, himself a Hun.

The conference was nearly ended, and the sun was not far from its setting, when a cloud was seen upon the horizon, which resolved itself into an army at full gallop. The horsemen, in their hundreds, wheeled once around the group, shouting madly, and dismounted. Almost by magic, tents shot up, huge fires were built, bales of baggage unpacked, and, by the time the first stars had begun to gleam, a banquet and all accommodation was ready. But, at the banquet, as Goderedd noted, on either side of every man of the Roman embassy sat or lay one of Attila's trusted warriors, nor could any spy or emissary of Bleda slip in a single word.

The banquet was nearly ended, when Vhernak rose and asked permission to speak.

“A boon, King Attila, my father!”

The king looked kindly at him. Vhernak was his youngest and his favorite son, and he was willing to grant him anything.

“Ellak has been to Rome. Gungis has been to Constantinople. I have never seen the cities of the empire. Let me go with the soldiers to Litorius!”

Attila looked at his son approvingly. He had great hopes in the future of Vhernak, in spite of Mirkhond's veiled predictions, and he was very willing that his youngest son should be, for a time, out of Bleda's reach. The boy was young and reckless, and Attila knew that Bleda would not hesitate at murder. There was less danger for his other two sons. It would take a clever head to circumvent Gungis, and he intended to take Ellak with him on his next campaign against the Mongols, to learn the art of war.

It was true that Vhernak was ignorant of the ways of the Roman Empire. A stay in the court of Ravenna and in the discipline of the Roman Army might develop the boy a good deal. For the moment, there was no serious war in Gaul. Goderedd's guardianship was of great value, for he was not only a friend of the Empress-Mother, but also of Theodoric, whose comrade he had been when he was an envoy to the court of Atawulf.

"It is said!" Attila agreed. "Ride, Vhernak! Goderedd rides with you."

A few weeks later, Goderedd, in command of the ten thousand men that Attila had promised to the Emperor, set off for Ravenna,

delighted to find himself again at the imperial capital. He put his army corps under the command of his old friend Aëtius, and, with Gaius Flaccus as a willing guide, made his first visit to Rome. He was welcomed by Maximinius, the sub-prefect, but Placidia soon summoned him back to court.

Vhernak, who had his father's gift of popularity with soldiers, rapidly became a favorite with the Roman army, though it was in vain that Goderedd tried to win the Empress' favor for the boy. Although not so rude in character as Ellak, the boy was a true Hun and only at his ease in the air of a camp. For over a year Vhernak stayed in Italy, visiting various military garrisons, and making himself at home wherever he went. Gradually he became accustomed to the comparatively luxurious life of an officer in a Roman camp, but he never lost his desire for the wilder life of the steppe. No one was more delighted than this thirteen-year-old boy when, at last, Aëtius announced that he would take the armies to join Litorius in Gaul, for the Visigoths were growing restive again and needed a sharp lesson.

The smashing defeat which Aëtius had ad-

ministered to Theodoric at Arles had kept the Visigoths in order for a time, but, when Aëtius left Gaul, they began to revolt again. Litorius, the Hun, on whom the command of the Roman armies in Gaul had fallen, was perpetually harassed with a guerrilla warfare which was costly in money and men.

At last the Visigoths dared to try to retake Narbonne. This was not to be endured. Aëtius mustered an enormous army, taking six legions (thirty-six thousand men) with him as well as fifteen thousand auxiliaries, made a junction with Litorius, and marched swiftly upon the Visigoths besieging Narbonne. It took Aëtius exactly two hours to raise the siege, and the Visigoths retreated, fighting stubborn rear-guard actions as they went.

This was not enough. Aëtius determined to bring Theodoric into submission. He was almost as great a general as Stilicho, and Theodoric was a much weaker foe than Alaric the Goth. Rome's honor was involved. In consultation with Goderedd and Litorius, he determined to besiege Toulouse, the Visigothic capital, and thence to march across their kingdom to the sea.

On the march a messenger came riding.

“Lord Aëtius, the Empress Placidia bids me tell you that Petronius Maximus has been made Prefect of Rome and seeks your disgrace. The Empress bids you return with all speed, leaving the campaign in Gaul to Litorius.”

Aëtius swore most soldier-wise, for Petronius Maximus was a bitter personal enemy. Though the general did not know it, then, Maximus was to be his doom. Had he been a prophet, he would have seen that, a year later, Maximus was to murder the Emperor and place himself on the throne of the Cæsars, only to be murdered himself, three months after, when fleeing from Genseric the Vandal. But he could not see the future, and obeyed the Empress' order, leaving the full command to Litorius.

In some ways, Litorius was worthy of the trust; in others, not. A daring leader, a gallant fighter, an able strategist, Litorius was still a Hun and had a Hun's uncontrollable temper and lack of judgment. He felt—and with some reason—that the combined armies which he led were so powerful that Toulouse would not even dare to try to resist him.

To Theodoric, also, the Visigoths' case

seemed hopeless. The disciplined legions under Litorius were more than twice as large as the rougher warriors of Theodoric. The Roman army, moreover, possessed siege artillery. Every century had a ballista or catapult, able to throw a stone of one hundred and fifty pounds weight a distance of four hundred yards, and every cohort had an onager or scorpion drawn by oxen, of more than double the power. Each legion had an engineer corps, with scaling ladders, trenching materials, and all the requirements for building siege towers. Under the threat of this powerful and thoroughly-equipped army, Theodoric sent an embassy to Litorius to ask for terms of honorable surrender.

This embassy was headed by Orientius, Bishop of Auch, and a large body of clergy. Litorius received them with insolent discourtesy. Goderedd was present with the generals, and also Vhernak.

“Most Noble General Litorius,” the Bishop began, “I am a bearer of a message from Theodoric, King of the Visigoths. As a Christian king, he does not wish to see useless blood shed between Christian men. He desires to know

upon what honorable terms Toulouse may be surrendered.”

“His head,” said Litorius, “and his four sons to grace Cæsar’s triumph.”

The Bishop could not believe that he had heard aright.

“Most noble general,” he said, “we are speaking of honorable surrender!”

“I am not,” said the Hun. “No surrender is honorable. Tell Theodoric that I will have his head, whether it be sent to me or no. If not, when I take Toulouse, I will determine whether to leave any person alive in it, or no.”

“You forget,” said Orientius, “that you are speaking to a Christian bishop.”

“See you, Bishop,” said Litorius. “When Toulouse is in ashes, we will speak of Christianity, not before.”

Goderedd interrupted.

“Litorius,” he said, bluntly, “this will be the will neither of Aëtius, nor of the Emperor.”

“It is mine!”

“Yet surely—”

“Do your men rebel?”

“They are under your orders, whatever those orders be.”

“Well said. And you?”

“I am not under your orders. Nor is Vhernak, the son of Attila. But I warn you—this saying shall do you harm.”

“I can guard my own head,” said the Hun. “As for your threat, my soothsayers have told me that I shall go in triumph through Toulouse.” He turned to Orientius. “The embassy is answered.”

The bishop returned sadly with Litorius’ answer, and with the further news that a son of Attila accompanied the host. But the Hun’s savagery changed the Visigoth temper. No one spoke further of surrender.

Theodoric put off his kingly robes, dressed as a penitent, walked barefoot through the streets to the church where Orientius was bishop, and spent much of the night in prayer. The Goths were inspired by the King’s piety, and clamored to be led against the Roman army. A sally, in force, was decided.

An hour before dawn, all the Visigoths were gathered behind the gates.

At Theodoric’s orders, the bells of all the churches rang peacefully, as though calling the people to the morning service. The Roman sen-

tinels smiled. Much good, they thought, would prayers do the Visigoths when the siege began! Litorius was awake. The sound of the church-bells only filled him with the more contempt for the Visigoths.

Suddenly, all the gates of the city opened simultaneously, and the Visigoths swept upon the Roman camp with a rush. The Romans were taken absolutely by surprise, for they looked for nothing but a new embassy of surrender. So sudden and so powerful was the blow that the camp was thrown into confusion, and Litorius was taken prisoner. His soothsayers had spoken truth, he would go through Toulouse in triumph, but in Theodoric's triumph, not his own.

Goderedd and Vhernak were still sleeping when the camp was rushed. The Goth had barely time to snatch his weapons and to rouse Vhernak, planning to find some place of safety. But, at the first onset, an arrow struck Vhernak in the neck, wounding him mortally. He fell at Goderedd's feet. Goderedd stood above him and fought off all assailants, until the fury of the attack swept by.

It was a sally, not a battle, and, having cap-

tured Litorius, the Visigoths were more than content.

Riding back to the city gates, Theodoric saw the figure of Goderedd, at the edge of the camp, standing alone amid a ring of dead.

“Bring that man here!” ordered the King.

A couple of Visigoths advanced to execute the command, but Goderedd raised his blade.

“Before I kill you both, send Theodoric to me!” he said commandingly.

One Visigoth looked at the other, but Goderedd spoke with authority and they knew that the King would prefer a hostage to a corpse. One man returned.

Theodoric spurred forward.

“Surrender! One sword against an army!”

Goderedd lowered his blade.

“I am not fighting for the living, Theodoric the Balthing, but for the dead. Come closer. Have you forgotten Goderedd?”

“Goderedd?” Theodoric searched in his memory. “Ah! The Hun envoy. With Atawulf. That is long years ago, but I remember. Come, you are my captive.”

“Do you take prisoners of the dead?”

“You are not dead, Man!”

“No, but the son of Attila is. He lies beneath.”

The Visigoth King stroked his long beard.

“I would not have had it so,” he said. “He shall have the burial of a king’s son. But his body must be carried through the streets of Toulouse, first.”

“For your triumph, Theodoric?”

“You have said.”

“The dead have paid their debts, King Theodoric. No fault was it of Vhernak’s that he was the son of Attila. To parade the dead for your own vanity, Theodoric, is the act neither of a Balthing nor a Christian.”

“By St. Hilda! You speak plainly, God-erred.”

“I did to King Sigeric!”

“That I remember, too.”

“So, plainly, Theodoric, I will tell you why the son of Attila shall not grace your triumph—” and he told the story of the armlets, given twenty-five years before.

“Now the saints forbid that I should make a warrior break his oath,” declared the Visigothic King, when the tale was finished. “You

have not left the boy, living; it shall not be my doing that you leave him, dead. What is your will, Friend Goderedd?"

"A silver coffin for Vhernak, King Theodoric, and a guard of a dozen Visigoths of your personal following, to tell Attila how died his son. I will answer for their safety anywhere in the Roman Empire or in the Kingdom of the Huns."

"What, beside?"

"Let Bishop Orientius see that all is fitly done. And he shall see that one of these armlets is placed in the coffin."

"It shall be done with every honor. More—since Litorius is disgraced—I will make terms of peace with Rome."

And, next day, when all the rites were over, King Theodoric, bareheaded, and the Roman general, second in command to Litorius, grasped arms in token of amity across the little silver coffin.

"Tell Attila this!" said Theodoric. "If his son has not lived to make war, he has lived to make a peace."

CHAPTER XI

A TRAITOR'S DOOM

GODEREDD expected little less than death at Attila's hands, for having been unable to shield Vhernak from the fatal arrow in the sally of the Visigoths at Toulouse, but both his oath and his honor forced him to return. There were, none the less, serious difficulties in his path.

Bleda's weakness as a warrior king and his strength as a crafty diplomat had practically necessitated the division of the Hun kingdom as before. It was compulsory that Attila's sword should defend the kingdom against Mongol invasion; it was not the less necessary that Bleda should keep the courts of Rome and Constantinople in a grip shrewd enough to compel the payment of tribute.

With only twenty men at his back, and with the silver coffin containing the body of Vhernak in his care, Goderedd did not dare to pass through Bleda's kingdom. The casket might be

allowed to pass ; it was sure that he would not be.

To reach Attila's camp in Scythia, therefore, only two routes were available. Either he must go through Constantinople, cross the straits, and follow the southern coast of the Black Sea, or traverse the Caucasus Mountains; or else travel far to the north through the country of unsubdued Goth tribes, whose cupidity could not but be excited by the silver coffin. He chose the latter, fearing less the robber instinct of the warlike Goths than the treacherous plottings of Byzantines and Orientals.

It would be long and needless to tell all Goderedd's adventures amid the Goth tribes through whose territory he passed: Burgunds, Alains, Franks, Sueves, Belges, Scands, Esths, and many others. By one tribe he was received with hostility and suspicion; by another, with welcome.

The Alains, remembering the defeat of Radagais by the Huns, were eager to revenge themselves upon the body of Attila's son, and Goderedd escaped from their hands in a manner that bordered on the marvelous. The Alain country lay so far to the north that the tribesmen feared neither Rome nor Theodoric. Five

months he was a prisoner there, and it was due, alone, to a mother's pity for the unburied Vhernak that he was able at last to elude his guards.

The farther north that Goderedd went, the less was he known and the less did the wild tribesmen fear either the Empire or the Visigoths. That he won through, at all, was due to his boldness, for he succeeded in awakening the sense of honor in these savage Goths, and more than one tribal chief personally accompanied the cortège for one day's march. Not once did a robber band—and Goderedd met several—touch the silver casket. They were reckless enough of life, but death was a thing they held in respect. Yet it took a year of toilsome adventuring before Goderedd reached Attila's camp at last.

The great conqueror rode out to meet the body of his son and greeted Goderedd with favor, to the young Goth's immense relief. Theodoric had been more than as good as his word. He had sent a letter to the Emperor of the East, at Constantinople. Theodosius, in turn—on the advice of his sister, Pulcheria—had sent a courier with the letter to one of Attila's garrisons in Persia, whence it was hurried to At-

tila himself. The news thus was received nine months before Goderedd's arrival, and the fate of the silver coffin had been shrouded in mystery during all that time.

Since his son's death was thus an old story, Attila and Rhekan had nothing but gratitude toward Goderedd for having succeeded in bringing Vhernak's body to the homeland, in the face of such dangers.

A huge funeral pyre was built and the body of Vhernak, still in its coffin, was placed thereon. A horse was sacrificed, and all pagan and Christian rites sumptuously performed. The pyre was lighted at the setting of the moon. The heat melted away the silver, and burned the inner coffin of wood. Next morning, when the ashes of the fire were cold, the bronze armlet which Mirkhond had placed upon Goderedd's arm, twenty-six years before, was found embedded in the precious metal. Here was a solemn evidence that Goderedd had kept his oath.

Ellak, now twenty years old, had become a famous warrior, his father's right hand on the frontier. He no longer stood in need of Goderedd. He could take care of himself, for, though

he would never be such a leader of men as Attila, he was scarcely less vigorous a fighter, and even more powerful in frame.

Gungis' life had developed very differently during the years that Goderedd had been in the west. He had gone to Constantinople, where he had become a close friend of his cousin Kirdu, the only son of King Ruas, now an official in the Byzantine court. Few people really liked Gungis, for he was secretive and sly, but the young fellow had made himself feared in the court, for he knew how to have a finger in every conspiracy without risking his own neck.

The truth was that Gungis had designs upon the Eastern Empire and he believed that the Imperial throne would be more easily attained by craft than by warfare. He was especially anxious to win the favor of Pulcheria, the Emperor's sister, one of the finest characters in early Byzantine history. She had held the reins of power during her brother's minority, and was still the dominating factor in the few good things accomplished by Theodosius II. In this courtship, Gungis made little progress, save in one regard. He opened Pulcheria's eyes to

Bleda's treachery, and thus seriously weakened his uncle's power.

The tale of Gungis and his plottings belongs rather to Byzantine history than to that of the Huns, and would be incomprehensible without a close and detailed account of the intricate political and religious conspiracies and counter-conspiracies that ravaged that tormented capital. It may be omitted here, but one characteristic piece of scheming gave Attila his opportunity to leap into world fame, and has its place in this story.

Six years had passed since Goderedd's return. They had been busy years: years of fighting in the east and in the north; years of organization in Scythia and the steppe-lands. The Goth tried his uttermost to instil into the Huns some sense of the need of organized government. He urged the establishment of agricultural settlements, but the Huns would neither sow nor reap; he sought to raise herds, but the Huns would neither tend the flocks, tan hide, nor work leather. He planned towns and markets, but the Huns preferred tents which could be moved when the garbage smothered them;

and all commerce they disdained. As for laws—they would have nothing but their own savage customs.

It was up-hill work. The more he strove at it, the more Goderedd became convinced that the Huns could not take root in Europe. Robbers and slayers they were; robbers and slayers they would remain. Mirkhond warned him that his reforms would tend to hurt the Huns rather than help them, but Goderedd, eager to better the people of his adoption, could not see why.

One thing was certain: just as surely as the Huns showed themselves incompetent of advance, so surely were the subject nations of Ostrogoths and Gepids capable of it. They welcomed Goderedd's counsels, the Huns rejected them; they developed, the Huns stood still. Ten years later, this simple fact was to change the whole course of European history. Progress twists the efforts of men to its own ends.

Goderedd was keen to see the value of Gungis as a permanent representative at the court of the Eastern Empire. Distrusting Bleda, he established an irregular service of couriers by boat around the Black Sea coast from the Crimea to Trebizond, and thence by the im-

perial road through Anatolia, thus evading all contact with Bleda's territories. He visited Gungis and Theodosius more than once, thus keeping touch with Gungis according to his oath, and, besides, he won Pulcheria's approval. Through her, he succeeded in having one half of the Hun tribute paid to Attila, instead of all of it to Bleda, as before.

Bleda, finding his power ebbing and suspecting both Gungis and Goderedd, determined to force his way into Constantinople and to marry Pulcheria. For such a project as this, Attila's help was essential. The taking of Constantinople, even could it be compassed, would require the combined effort of all the armies of the Huns, and Attila, alone, could direct such a host.

For a year, messengers went to and fro between Bleda and Attila, and, at last, Attila agreed. He was convinced that, at the last moment, he could snatch the fruits of victory from Bleda, and, perhaps, take Pulcheria for himself.

Young Gungis saw the matter differently. He planned to have the Huns slay Theodosius and then, by betraying both his father and his uncle, he could pose as the savior of Constantinople

and be rewarded with the throne and the hand of Pulcheria. Bleda, Attila, and Gungis—all three—were agreed on seizing Constantinople for the Huns, but each wanted the imperial throne for himself.

Neither one of the three counted seriously on Goderedd. He was known to be loyal to Attila, and he was known, also, to dislike conspiracy. But the plotters made a mistake in not realizing that Goderedd saw through the plans of each. He had little trust in Gungis, none at all in Bleda, and, in this matter, he could not endorse Attila's ambition. He had proved that the Huns could not be civilized.

Remembering the coronation banquet—and a thousand other things—Goderedd realized that the capture of Constantinople by the Huns would only result in spreading barbarism throughout the world, and that the Byzantine Empire, feeble as it was, yet was far in advance of all that the Huns would do. Thus, while loyal to the Huns, he was secretly antagonistic to their victory. Such was the state of affairs when, in 445, Attila, Bleda, and Gungis met to plan an attack upon Constantinople.

It was the first meeting of the two kings since

the coronation, and each was watchfully suspicious of the other. The meeting was entirely secret, with only five persons present. These were Bleda, and his chief counselor Onegesius, the Greek; Attila, with Goderedd for his chief counselor—Mirkhond was ill; and Gungis, who preferred always to be his own counselor. The meeting was a strange one for an alliance, since each was trying to divert the other's plans, without the purpose being seen.

In debate, the advantage was undoubtedly, with the wily Bleda and the smooth-spoken Onegesius. Against this were set the personal violence and power of Attila, and the keen but straightforward diplomacy of Goderedd. Gungis satisfied his own plans by drawing both parties into an alliance, at the same time sowing seeds of discord which he would ripen, later.

The meeting began calmly enough, but, very shortly, the sheer dominance of Attila's personality made everything hinge around him. Gungis played directly into the hands of his father, having first induced Bleda to commit himself. When the council was ended, Bleda realized that his own eagerness for the imperial throne had put him in a false position. Attila,

as acknowledged leader of all the armies, would be considered as the chief, if not the only, king; Gungis, with his intimate knowledge of affairs in Constantinople, would certainly checkmate him there.

Back in his tent, brooding, he sent for Onegesius, counselor, confidant, secretary, valet—anything that he might command. The Greek hurried in. Bleda stormed at him for their failure in the council, and Onegesius did not even make excuse. He knew that Bleda's rages were of no importance. The king was only worthy of a hearing when he commenced to plot.

"He must be got rid of!" declared Bleda, at last.

"Which?" queried the Greek, softly. "Or shall we say, which first?"

"What are you a Greek for, if you cannot tell which to slay first?"

Onegesius stroked his smooth face.

"Truly, King Bleda, it is not so easy. Let us suppose that Attila—ah, disappears, then your campaign against Constantinople fails."

"Gungis, then."

"That would be much simpler," purred Onegesius, "though Lord Gungis is not easily

caught asleep. But I fear that Attila would suspect our doings, if Gungis should die suddenly, and Goderedd would certainly revenge him."

"Goderedd, then!"

"Easiest of all, King Bleda, but not particularly useful. Gungis and Attila would remain, all the more on their guard."

Bleda thought for a few moments.

"Goderedd first," he decided. "It will be easier, then, to put Gungis out of the way."

"And how, King?"

"Choose your own way. But see that it be done quickly."

The Greek lifted his eyebrows slightly, and left the tent.

Gungis had not been idle since the closing of the council. He had come secretly from Constantinople, but he had not come alone. His body-guard was small, some fifty men, but most of them were spies rather than warriors. He sent one of these men, swiftly, to the tent of Onegesius, while the Greek was speaking with the king. Already his plans were made.

Clearly, the one thing for him to do was to play on the greed and ambition of Onegesius. Listening carefully to every word of the coun-

cil, Gungis saw clearly that Bleda must be the one to suffer, and that the key of the situation lay, therefore, in the Greek's hands.

Onegesius, returning to his tent after his talk with Bleda, found a large purse of gold thrown on the fur-covered couch. The crafty Greek considered. Bleda would have given it openly, Attila had no reason to bribe him, Goderedd would never have sent it. The gold must have come from Gungis. He sought the young Hun in his tent, and found him lying awake.

"He is a clever warrior," said Gungis, as the Greek entered, "who can tell in a battle whence an arrow comes."

Onegesius answered,

"Not all archers shoot golden arrows."

There was no need for lengthy parley with a man of the Greek's quickness, and Gungis came to the point at once.

"Onegesius," he said, "in crossing a stream, which does a wise man choose—the weak plank, or the stronger one?"

"It is understood," said the Greek, not wishing to mention names. "Let us consider the stronger bridge—if there is no toll to pay."

“It is there for the using. All men will use it if the weak plank break.”

Onegesius considered. Bleda's desire to murder some one, any one, was a confession of weakness. If the weak plank should break, as Gungis put it,—in other words, if Bleda should be slain—his own position, as Bleda's chief counselor, would be gone. Gungis' suggestion that he should work secretly for Attila appealed to Onegesius, for Bleda's death would make Attila the sole king of the Huns. True, in that case, Onegesius would have Mirkhond and Goderedd for rivals, but Mirkhond was old and feeble, and the Greek considered himself more than a match for Goderedd.

“I will use the strong plank,” he said. “And my Lord Gungis?”

“When the river is crossed, the march begins anew,” came the reply. “Whoso knows the path in unknown country has an advantage.”

The Greek nodded. By betraying his own master, he was sure of the favor of Attila, or that of Gungis, or both. Attila would be sole king; Gungis was powerful in Constantinople.

“I shall be glad to be shown the path,” he decided.

Between two men like Gungis and Onegesius, both accustomed to the indirect fashion of dealing which was customary in the Byzantine court, enough had been said. The Greek bowed himself out of the tent.

He had scarcely gone out of sight when one of Gungis’ spies slipped in.

“Lord Gungis! You have been heard! I saw a man creep from under the edge of your tent when Onegesius left!”

Gungis turned on his elbow.

“You did not shoot?”

“The arrow struck, but the man ran on.”

For a second or two Gungis thought rapidly. The spy, undoubtedly, must be of Bleda’s party. If so, there was no time to lose.

“Quick!” he said. “Overtake Onegesius, and tell him!”

The spy disappeared and caught up to the Greek within a hundred yards. A few words were enough to explain the situation.

Onegesius did not even stop to think. He saw, instantly, that his own neck was in danger. He hurried to Bleda’s tent, only stopping on his

way to unstring a bow outside a soldier's tent. Whatever happened, he must get to Bleda before the wounded messenger.

As the king's chief counselor, with access to the king at all times, the sentinels let him pass without any other word than a low caution that the king was sleeping.

Onegesius wakened him, without ceremony.

"King Bleda, wake!" he said hurriedly.

"There is something to be told."

Bleda, ruffled from sleep, peered at the Greek.

"Speak!" he said, trying to rouse his dormant faculties.

"I am this moment come from the tent of Gungis," said Onegesius—it was essential that he should tell this before any messenger came.

"He sent me a purse of gold. I went to see what was his plan. He plots your death. I humored him."

The Greek breathed more freely. The messenger might come, now, if he would. There would be nothing further to tell than what had already been told.

Bleda lay back on the cushions. He was too suddenly awakened to think clearly, yet. Then he laughed dully.

“I also plotted his death,” he said. “We think alike.”

“That is understood, King. But we must act carefully. Gungis is clever.”

Bleda moved impatiently. The news was most unwelcome. Gungis was known as a consummate plotter. The king tossed on his couch uneasily.

Onegesius came nearer.

“Let me set the cushions straight,” he said. As the household confidant of the king he served him constantly in these petty offices.

Willingly the king raised himself a moment, asked the Greek for a goblet of sherbet, and lay back on the cushions again. In the dimness of the tent, he did not see the bowstring which Onegesius had deftly laid on the cushions under the king’s neck.

“Then,” said Bleda, “you will have to dispose of Gungis before Goderedd. Understand me, Onegesius! That is your affair.”

“Goderedd is not dangerous, and Gungis cannot be slain, here. Attila is here.”

“What, then? Find a way!”

“I have thought of a plan,” said the Greek, coming nearer and slightly behind the king,

“but the sentinels must not hear. Gungis may be decoyed away by—”

As he stooped to speak to Bleda in a lower voice, suddenly he seized both ends of the bowstring, crossed and pulled them tight.

Bleda tried to rise, to struggle, but the Greek put his knee on the king's chest. The bowstring checked his breath. The victim tried to cry out, but no sound came. Onegesius' hands were small, but sinewy, and they held the bowstring tight.

Before two minutes were passed, the struggles weakened, the limbs relaxed. The Greek held firm.

Still pulling the bowstring, Onegesius continued to speak, as though he were conversing with the king, now in a low voice, now louder, that the sentinels might hear a seeming conversation. For complete assurance, he did not relax the string for fully ten minutes, by which time Bleda was surely dead.

Then, still speaking, he walked toward the opening of the tent. At the entrance, he turned and spoke again to the dead.

“You are obeyed, King Bleda. I will give the order.”

He stepped out, then turned again swiftly, as though he had been called back.

“You are heard, King; I will give the order.”

Leaving again, he went to the sentinels, and said quietly,

“A messenger may come to-night, a false messenger. If he gives the word, let him pass you, then stab him in the back. There are assassins in the camp. Keep close guard on the rear of the tent. You heard, yourselves, King Bleda give the order.”

“We heard him, Lord Onegesius,” said the sentinels.

And the Greek went quietly to his tent and slept the sleep of a perfectly callous traitor, not once thinking of the blackened corpse lying on its kingly bed.

CHAPTER XII

THE PRINCESS' RING

“MY Lord Maximinius, I pray you be seated!”

The aged exarch, an important official in the court of Theodosius at Constantinople, with a friendly salutation seated himself, reclining, on a cushioned couch of ivory in the dressing-chamber of Honoria, granddaughter of Theodosius the Great.

“It is no secret,” she continued, “that you have been named to lead an embassy to Attila. At least, so my secretary has given me to understand.”

“The Emperor has so decided, Most Illustrious Princess,” he answered.

Honoria, who, like most Roman and Byzantine ladies of her time, spent the greater part of the day at her toilette and the rest of it in intrigue, sent away her slaves and lowered her voice.

“You have never seen this Attila?”

“No, Princess.”

“But you know his reputation?”

“I know him as well as a man may know some one whom he has never seen. His counselor and confidential courier, Goderedd, a Goth, was my guest during his stay in Rome, before Theodosius invited me to his court. We spoke much of Attila.”

“Goderedd—the friend of the Empress-Mother, Placidia? I have heard of him. And what does Goderedd say of the King of the Huns?”

“Much. That he is a man of immense personal power, ugly, domineering, ambitious, and dangerous. Also, that he will be Master of the World, some day.”

“It is much my own opinion. Maximinius, I am weary of being an exile and a prisoner!”

The exarch glanced around the room, which bore every evidence of luxury in its richest form. Honoria caught his glance and spoke petulantly.

“This city, where eunuchs and monks are the masters, is exile! I was bred a Roman, like yourself.”

“It is not Rome, that is true,” Maximinius admitted.

“And I am a prisoner. Half a day’s ride from the Walls, I am stopped by the orders of Theodosius. I may see only such persons as Pulcheria pleases, and I am not a woman of ice, like her! Is not that being a prisoner?”

“The Most Illustrious Pulcheria is virtue personified,” the exarch admitted. “Let us admit that this is rare in Constantinople and makes her, perhaps, a little over-strict. Then, too, the enemies of the Princess Honoria have wicked tongues.”

He took good care not to express his knowledge that the scandals concerning Honoria—and which had led to her exile from Rome to Constantinople—were fully justified. Honoria was a woman as daring as she was striking. It was her unhappy fate to be born at a time when two exceedingly stern and chaste women—the Empress-Mother Placidia, and Theodosius’ sister, Pulcheria—held the reins of power over both the Western and the Eastern Empires. Honoria had good reason to chafe under their restraint, and Maximinius, who had known Honoria ever since she was a child, sympa-

thized with her. The conversation, however, was a dangerous one, and the exarch tried to turn it into safer channels.

Honorina was not to be put off by any triviality. She had sent for Maximinius with a definite purpose and was not to be diverted in her intentions. At the first pause, she returned to the subject abruptly.

“Let us speak again of this embassy,” said she. “You must know, Maximinius, that, some years ago, I sent a message to Attila. He, at least, is a man; not like some of these effeminate Greeks who pester me like so many gnats.”

The exarch knew it perfectly. It was his business, as a courtier, to know all the intrigues which passed, but there was no need for him to say so.

“You have often honored me with your confidence, Honorina. But I do not recall your telling me of any such message.”

“Oh, let us talk frankly, Maximinius,” she retorted, impatiently. “You know it, of course. It was when I was still in Rome. But this you may not know: a year ago, the eunuch Chrysapius came to me, disguised, with Attila’s acceptance of my proposal. This is not for all

ears to hear. But," she smiled ingratiatingly, "Lord Maximinius is certainly my oldest and truest friend."

"My own daughter is not more dear to me," said the Roman. "Come, Honoria, tell me just what is in your heart."

"Heart!" she laughed cruelly. "What is the market-value of a heart in Constantinople—a couple of bezants or the price of a basket of fruit! This is not heart, Maximinius, but reason—and revenge. I am betrothed to Attila, and I have asked him to come and rescue me."

"From whom? From Theodosius? From Valentinian? That, Honoria, is treachery to the Empire!"

"And has not the Empire been treacherous to me? Is my life nothing? Is Honoria a nun or a slave to be forbidden to come and go as she pleases? I ask your help, Maximinius, though but in a little thing. When you see Attila, give him this ring, and tell him that I await his coming."

He looked at it.

"The old ring of the Cæsars!"

"The ring of the Empire."

Maximinus hesitated.

“Honoriam,” he said, bluntly, “do you see what you are asking? I go as the ambassador of Theodosius to arrange terms of peace, yet you bid me give Attila your ring, bidding him come to rescue you—whether you be in Constantinople or in Rome. That means invasion and war, with one empire if not with both. Such a double part fits not with my honor.”

“Then the Lord Maximinius is not Honoriam’s friend!”

“If you bid me choose between Honoriam and Rome, I should choose—Rome.”

“You see that I have reason to trust you,” said Honoriam, quietly. “How many Greeks would answer me so? Every other man I know would pay me compliments to my face, swear fidelity on the bones of the saints, and then run straight to betray me to Pulcheria or the Emperor. I hate Pulcheria!”

The old statesman sat plunged in thought for a few moments. Then he smiled gravely.

“As a Roman,” he said, “I cannot refuse the request of a Roman imperial princess; as an exarch, I should not go against the wishes of the granddaughter of Theodosius the Great; as a friend, it is difficult not to do anything that

Honorina asks me. This I can do. I can take the ring to Attila and repeat your words. I will not urge the matter, and, if Attila questions me, I will tell him all my thoughts. You must grant, Honorina, that I can do no more."

The woman rose and knelt beside him, throwing her lightly draped arm across his knee.

"You have never failed me," she said, gratefully.

"Nor will I now, Honorina, but it is an evil doing, of which I see not the end. You have pledged your word to Attila?"

"I have pledged it."

"The dice are thrown, then. The future must decide. Give me the ring."

"When do you go, Maximinius? I heard—tomorrow."

"It may be to-morrow. I await only the Emperor's orders."

"And you will not say a single good word for me to Attila?"

"Silly child! All that honor permits me I will say. Honorina's credit will not be dimmed by my words, nor her beauty by my description."

He rose.

“You have considered what this may bring, Honoria?” he added gravely.

“All!”

“Then more words will be thrown to the winds. I will bring you Attila’s answer. Farewell!”

Thus it happened that in all honor, and yet with warring motives and messages, Maximinus set out for Attila’s camp. Bad faith was a thing which had no place in the old Roman’s heart, and nothing was farther from his mind than that the Emperor Theodosius might be making use of his rugged honesty as a cloak for Byzantine trickery.

The doings of that strange and treacherous embassy are told in extensive detail by Priscus, a rhetorician and scribe who accompanied the embassy—it is almost the only historical document extant written by a man who had seen and known Attila personally. The account is too long and too full of political detail to be quoted at length, but Priscus’ description of Attila’s camp, as it was at that time, is striking and characteristic.

“After having crossed several large rivers,”

he wrote, "we came to the town where lived King Attila, a town almost like a vast city, with walls of planks so neatly joined together that it was almost impossible to see the joints. Vast dining halls spread over the plain, with doors curiously decorated. The vast area of the court itself was encircled by a wall, and its very size showed that it was the royal palace. There dwelt King Attila, king of all those barbarian peoples, surrounded by his army; such was the dwelling he preferred, he who had his choice among numberless conquered cities."

Attila, in characteristic fashion, refused to receive the ambassadors until all the endless preliminary discussions should be ended. He disliked talk. Day after day passed in debate. The three chief Roman envoys were Maximinius, Vigilans, and the scribe Priscus. The five chief counselors of Attila were the eunuch Chrysapius—who had been sent to Honoria, Onegesius—who had thus been rewarded for his murder of Bleda, Orestes—the boy who had been saved from the aurochs by Goderedd, Mirkhond, and Goderedd. The debates were long, not because the embassy was complicated

in itself, but because each of the participants was working for himself rather than his master.

Vigilans, almost from the first, drew marked attention to himself. Though not the head of the embassy, he set out to make trouble. He aroused the anger of the Huns by the statement that there could be no real discussion between the Emperor and Attila.

“Theodosius,” he said, “partakes of the nature of a god; Attila, that of a man.”

That council, after a heated wrangle, broke up in confusion.

“Goderedd,” said Mirkhond to him, when the meeting was dispersed, “what think you of Vigilans?”

“He is a fool with a bad temper.”

The mage shook his head.

“You Goths!” he said. “Never will you understand an Oriental. Ask Onegesius to come here.”

The Greek presented himself shortly. Though sure of his own superior cunning, he was conscious of the Persian’s superior wisdom. Mirkhond put him the same question.

“Vigilans? He is Janus, with a face looking

two ways. He has some reason for wishing to appear rough and over-honest."

Mirkhond nodded. He had been sure that the wily Greek would not have been blind.

"And Chrysapius?"

"Assumes a pretense of too little interest when Vigilans is speaking. Why?"

"Onegesius," said the mage, "I like not your character, and you hate me. It is understood. But there is no subtler mind than yours in Attila's camp."

The Greek almost purred. This was the very first time that Mirkhond had ever done him justice.

"Vigilans' mind," said the mage, "is an easy one to read. The reason for his coming I have read. He comes to murder Attila."

Goderedd started. Onegesius did not.

"And Chrysapius?"

"Is too careful ever to betray even his inner thoughts," said the mage. "You, Onegesius, being cleverer than both, will be able to find out the plot."

"I will find it, Lord Mirkhond!"

The mage's confidence was not ill-placed. With a clew to Vigilans' purpose, the Greek

made the way smooth for constant meetings between the envoy and Chrysapius, and secured definite evidence.

“Why do you not tell Attila, yourself?” queried Goderedd, when Onegesius put the evidence before him.

“He does not trust me enough,” said the Greek, who knew that telling the truth occasionally was his best way to prepare the ground for future lies. “But if Mirkhond or you will expose the plot, he will believe you.”

That evening there was a special banquet, and, for the first time, Attila announced his intention to be present. Even the Romans, accustomed to the luxury of the Byzantine court, were amazed at the splendor of the table appointments, the costliness of the vessels, the richness of the robes of the Huns, and the extravagance of the gifts.

Attila, alone, would have none of this luxury. His own eating and drinking vessels were made of wood, his dress—so Priscus declares—was of the simplest stuff, without even a single jewel. His large head was bare—the hair already turning white, he had grown heavier with advancing age, his squatness and dispropor-

tionate chest were aggravated by a stoop, and the fiery magnetism of his youth had diminished. Yet was he still the embodiment of driving power.

He sat alone, on a high dais, and watched the feasters with a cold and disparaging eye. Upon Vigilans and Chrysapius his glance rested often. The Roman envoy, uneasy, drank heavily; Chrysapius grew paler and paler. Under Attila's gaze, first a suspicion, then fear, then terror, and, at last, an inner panic took possession of him. An arrant coward at heart, he felt his self-possession and his brain reel in the cold fire of Attila's eyes.

Toward the end of the feast, the King of the Huns raised his hand.

There was instant silence.

And these were the words of Attila, as Priscus recorded them:

“Attila, son of Mundzuk, and Theodosius are the two sons of noble fathers. Attila remains worthy of his sire, but Theodosius is degraded, for, in paying tribute to Attila, he is thereby declared a slave. And now this perverse and wicked slave lays a secret plot against his master. In no light can this be regarded as

other than a thing foul and unjust, and Attila will not cease to proclaim the iniquity of an Emperor afraid to deliver up to justice the murderers his gold has suborned!"

This was as a stone hurled by a catapult in the midst of the feast.

Maximinius leaped to his feet.

"Attila, King of the Huns," he cried, "if you can prove that this embassy was sent by Theodosius for purposes of murder, my head is yours!"

"It is my right to take it," said the Hun.

"Better that than dishonor! Who are my accusers?"

"My words were for the miscreant Theodosius. At Attila's table is no place for accusation or discussion. The proofs are sufficient for me. That is enough."

"Right or wrong, King Attila, it is my duty, in the Emperor's name, to give you the lie."

"You do not, Maximinius," said the Hun, "and I have not heard the word."

He turned to Mirkhond.

"Speak! But name no names!"

The murmur which had risen round the tables

at Maximinius' speech hushed to absolute stillness as the mage rose.

With clearness and precision, the mage set forth the plot in all its details, as Onegesius had found it out. He proved that one of the Roman envoys had been bribed by the Emperor with fifty pounds in weight of gold. He proved that certain archers were ready posted to send a volley of arrows at Attila as he left the banquet hall. He proved that one of Attila's own counselors was in the plot and had been rewarded with a promise of a high post in the imperial household. No names were mentioned, but it was clear who were the traitors.

"Vigilans—" thundered Maximinius, but Attila checked him.

"I have said that there shall be no names. If the conspirators betray themselves, that is another matter."

Again he looked at the mage.

"Mirkhond!"

The Persian advanced a step. He did not say a word, but fixed his eyes on the eunuch Chrysapius. All men followed that glance. Vigilans, his jaw dropping, stared.

The wretched eunuch tried to look away. Impossible! The direful power of the Persian mage held him, like an insect lured to a torch's flare.

His lips opened, and he tried to speak. No word came.

He stumbled to his feet and staggered forward, not seeing where he went. His hands picked nervously at his dress, his face went gray, his lips white, his nostrils pinched. His feet dragged, as though paralyzed.

Inch by inch he stumbled on.

With a wild gesture he frantically dashed his hand across his brow, threw up the other hand as though to ward off the mage's eyes.

A stronger will than his drew him on.

So they faced each other—would-be murderer, and mesmerizing mage. The soul of one was naked to the gaze of the other, and he knew it. With a supreme effort he turned his eyes away, only to catch the not less terrible gaze of Attila.

His nerves snapped. With a cry that sounded non-human, Chrysapius fell to the floor, struggling, convulsed, foaming at the mouth, screaming wild words which convicted him utterly.

Then the creature subsided into moaning unconsciousness.

Mirkhond looked at Vigilans, and then at Attila with question, as though to ask whether he should serve the Roman the same way.

“No!” said the Hun.

The single word broke the spell of silence.

Maximinius, still on his feet, drew his sword and threw it at Attila's feet.

“I resign my exarchate!” he said, hoarsely. “I make myself a prisoner. On my oath, I knew nothing of this.”

Mirkhond looked long at him.

“That is true,” said the mage.

“I have never doubted it,” said Attila. “Goderedd, restore to Lord Maximinius his sword. The dishonor is not his. Maximinius, you will come to my council-house at sunrise, armed. I shall be there, alone, without the Sword. We will discuss the treaty. Are you satisfied?”

“Your trust, King Attila—”

The Roman choked on the words. Almost the tears were in his eyes at this splendid recognition of his unstained honor.

Attila raised his voice.

“Warriors all! You have heard. This em-

bassy comes from Theodosius with fair words of promise and with intent of murder. Hear, all! Though dishonored, fit companions for the corpse-eating kites, they are still the guests of Attila. It is my will that to-morrow they shall go in peace. See you to it!"

He left the hall, but Maximinius followed him.

"This night, King Attila, I watch at the door of your chamber."

Attila answered not a word.

At dawn, the Hun king found the Roman there, with sword drawn. He passed him without a greeting and went to the council hall. Seated upon his throne, he changed to instant friendliness.

"Maximinius," he said briefly, "I have said my belief that you had nought to do with this treachery. Let it be forgotten between us. For the treaty, I accept the terms, save that I refuse the title of Duke of the Empire, which Theodosius bade you bring. My full reply shall be given at the head of my armies at the gates of Constantinople. The embassy is answered."

"Remains yet another matter, King Attila."

"Another murder plot?"

“Not unless war be murder. I bear this message to King Attila. The Most Illustrious Princess Honoria—”

“Ah!”

“The Princess Honoria, kin neither in mind nor spirit to Theodosius or Valentinian, to whom you are betrothed—according to her word—sends you this ring and bids me tell you that she waits.”

“No more than that?”

“No more, King, but it is much. I told the Princess that it did not fit my honor to bear a message from the Emperor, urging peace, and the ring from an Imperial Princess, urging war. But Honoria is a woman, commanding, beautiful, such as even Rome rarely breeds, living in exile and restraint, seeking the Master of a World for mate.”

“What is the ring?”

“The ring of the Cæsars. The imperial ring of Old Rome. What is your answer, King?”

Attila took the ring, looked at it closely, and slipped it on his finger. Mirkhond's prophecy, made so many years before, came back to his memory: “You shall wear upon your finger the destinies of Rome!”

“Tell her,” said Attila, “I come!”

An hour later, the Roman embassy rode forth. It numbered one more than at its coming.

Mouthing and gibbering, frothing at the lips, now rising in his stirrups and now huddled upon his horse's neck, tightly bound, maddened for life and lunatic with fear, sat a figure of doom, insanity in his gestures and an abiding horror in his eyes.

It was Chrysapius, the eunuch.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DECISIVE BATTLE

WHETHER because of Theodosius' intended treachery, or because Fate had struck the hour, Attila now set his eyes definitely on the conquest of the world. To the east, he had pushed his empire to the frontiers of China, he held Persia, and all the region now known as Russia, the Balkans, Hungary, Austria, and Poland. Three points for conquest remained: Gaul, Rome, and Constantinople.

The Eastern Empire was a difficult nut to crack. Though feeble and decadent, Constantinople could not be taken by force by an army of Huns and barbarians. It was surpassingly strong and impregnably fortified; as the greatest commercial city in the world, situated on two seas, it could not be starved out.

Rome—to which both Honorius and his own ambitions beckoned him—was easier to take, as Alaric the Goth had shown. But a direct attack on Rome was dangerous. It would leave an

invading army exposed to attack simultaneously from Gaul, Ravenna, and Constantinople, and the wheat-ships from Africa would be stopped, unless he made alliance with Genserich, the Vandal.

Gaul, therefore, was the first point of attack. Attila began by tricky policy. He tried to set the Visigoths and Rome at war with each other, thus giving him the chance to fall upon both. But he lacked envoys worthy of the task. Chrysapius was mad, Onegesius must remain in Scythia, Mirkhond was too old, and Goderedd refused a mission of trickery. It was the first breach in his friendship with Attila. Orestes was sent, failed in his mission, and never returned. Valentinian wrote to Theodoric, warning him that it would be necessary for Visigoths and Romans to fight together for "the republic of peoples" against the Hun. Theodoric, on the advice of the bishops, pledged himself to lead the Visigoths, in conjunction with the Roman armies, against Attila.

The plan of Attila was as simple as it was grandiose. Ellak should hold the east. Gungis should hold Scythia. Attila, himself, with the

bulk of the armies, would sweep across Europe, conquer Northern Gaul, thence overrun Southern Gaul and destroy the Visigothic kingdom, and so, with no enemies behind him, conquer, first, the Western Empire and, then, the Eastern. It was, in brief, a march of destruction from Russia through what is now Germany to France and thence back through Italy to Constantinople, sacking Rome on the way. The track of the Hun was to be a black circle of death around the whole of Europe. A more audacious plan of conquest has never been conceived.

Attila had become the Enemy of the World. In appalling arrogance, he declared that no human being, save he, should wear a crown in any land. He declared himself: "By Divine Power, King of the Huns and All Peoples, the Eternal Fear of the World, and The Scourge of God." This latter title pleased him most, and all the decrees of his later years were issued under the title of: "Attila, Master of the World, the Scourge of God." Mirkhond's prophecy was coming true.

In 450, both Placidia and Theodosius died,

leaving the two empires in confusion. It was the moment for that supreme attempt at conquest, whose danger was so great that it shook the world and left the name of Attila the Hun forever a term of dread and a symbol of destruction.

In the autumn of that year, Attila left his headquarters in Austria with an army of four hundred and fifty thousand men and marched up the Danube, ravaging Bavaria and Swabia. He made his winter quarters at Regensburg (not far from the present Nuremberg). The winter was spent in reducing all the Germanic tribes to tribute, the small armies sent upon this task having simple and brief orders: tribute, or the sword for every person and the torch to every hut. These tribute-demanding columns swept all the shores of the Baltic and reached the North Sea at Holland. During this winter, Attila's empire reached its greatest extent, from Holland to the frontiers of China.

One serious check to Attila's plans was the hostility of the Burgunds, masters of Switzerland, and the two Burgundies (Savoy and Eastern France). The envoy sent to demand tribute returned with his ears cropped off, and

then had his head itself taken off by Attila. The Burgunds either misunderstood Attila's plans—or understood them too well. They refused to allow Attila to pass through their territory, and, especially, to cross the Rhine.

This crossing was a crucial point in the whole campaign. The Burgunds and Alamans held the Rhine from Basle to Mainz and all the region between was covered with heavy forests. It might be possible to force a crossing at Basle, but, beyond, lay the infertile and rugged country of the Jura and Vosges Mountains. A huge army needs food. Attila, the strategist, therefore, decided to cross the Rhine near Coblenz and to thrust his enormous body of men forward into the rich and fertile country around Treves and the valley of the Moselle.

To hold the Burgunds in play, he sent Theodimir the Ostrogoth, with fifty-six thousand men, to force the Rhine at Basle. That fight is worth the telling, but it must be passed by. Theodimir crossed, captured Basle and Colmar, and, later, occupied Strasbourg.

Attila crossed the Rhine between Bonn and Coblenz with three hundred and fifty thousand men. The crossing—there were nothing but

small boats available—took a week of hurry, day and night. Coblentz had but a small garrison and fell at once. Treves, a rich city, had none and was given over to the pillage of the army. Metz dared to resist for two days, and, as punishment, all its inhabitants were put to the sword and the city burned to ashes. The whole country was ravaged, slaughter and rapine ran unchecked.

The conqueror was now ready for his swift charge on Gaul. The northern army, under Andagis, Goderedd's former lieutenant, centered on Rheims. The left, under Wolomir, took Toul, Epinal, and Neufchatel. The center, under Attila, attacked Verdun, which resisted even more sternly than Metz, but experienced the same fate.

Rich with spoil, and sated with slaughter, the three armies joined and occupied the entire plain of Champagne, ideal for military purposes and rich in food-supply for the army. Attila pitched his great camp near Châlons-sur-Marne, its bishop, St. Alpin, securing the conqueror's clemency on its surrender. Rheims was entered three days later by Andagis and Attila.

For a week there was a general review of the army, while strong scouting parties were sent in advance in every direction. One of these approached Paris, then known as Lutetia. According to tradition, the city was saved by the courage and piety of a young girl: Saint Geneviève.

The news of the Hun approach had thrown the whole city into terror. Geneviève, already beginning to be known as a saint, told the people that she had seen the vision of an angel, who told her that Attila would never enter Paris. A solemn procession was held in the streets, and a huge four-wicked candle, borne before the statue of the Virgin, blew out constantly though there was not a breath of wind. According to the legend, St. Geneviève declared that she saw a demon, with the face of a Hun, blowing out the light. The candle was lowered, and St. Geneviève—without tinder or steel—lighted it by blowing on it with her breath. A fearful gale of wind arose immediately, but the candle, thus miraculously lighted, burned without a flicker.

This miracle—for so it was taken—convinced all the people of Paris. At St. Gene-

viève's bidding, all thought of flight was abandoned, large quantities of provisions were brought within the walls, and a strong barricade was built on the south road. The Hun scouts came as far as this barricade, but no farther. They reported to Attila that the city had been provisioned and fortified. As it lay out of the line of march, no attack was made on Paris, according to the promise of the angel of the girl's vision. St. Geneviève became, and still is, regarded as the patron saint of Paris.

Very different were the happenings at Troyes. That city opened her gates to the conqueror. The captain of the Hun detachment, sent to occupy the town, allowed his soldiers to pillage it. The bishop of Troyes, St. Loup, sent a deputation of seven clergy in solemn procession, carrying a copy of the Gospels, to beg Attila's favor. The conqueror received them kindly enough, but the horse of one of his generals, taking fright, threw its rider to the ground, killing him. Attila, in sudden terror, declared the clergy to be magicians, slew six, and bade the seventh return with the news. St. Loup himself headed another embassy, won Attila's favor and his friendship. For this friend-

ship he came to be regarded as a traitor to Rome and the Church—the strange events of his later life, with Attila's host, do not belong to this story.

From Troyes, Attila marched forward with ^{220,000} ~~twenty-two hundred thousand~~ men, leaving a reserve army at Châlons-sur-Marne under Theodimir, and setting strong detachments at every river crossing and strategical point on his line of march. He passed by Sens and Montargis, intending to concentrate his main attack on Orleans, the key to the River Loire and all northwestern Gaul. Orleans was one of the most strongly fortified cities of Gaul, at that time. It possessed a double wall flanked by tower, a triple series of wide and deep water-ditches fed by the Loire, high palisades, formidable earthworks, and was well provisioned for a siege.

Aëtius had doubted that Attila would advance so far and so fast. He was convinced that the Hun army would be weakened in its passage through Germany and through the territory of the Burgunds. The passage of the Rhine was an astounding feat, for, in those days, when boats were small and wide streams could not be bridged, a large river was an impassable ob-

stacle to an invading army. The Roman armies regarded the Rhine and the Danube as boundaries not to be crossed.

It was not until Attila was actually in Champagne that Aëtius perceived the fulness of the danger, and his military genius rose to the great occasion. He realized, as did Attila, that Orleans was the key to Northern Gaul. Sangiban, at the head of ten thousand Alains, was bidden assume command of the defense of the city, and the famous Eighth Legion, composed exclusively of Gauls, was sent thither under forced marches. All non-combatants were ordered to leave the town, the defenses were enormously strengthened, and three months' provisions were placed within the walls. There were thus twenty thousand picked troops in Orleans, ready to resist all assault.

So quickly and thoroughly had Aëtius acted that all this was accomplished four days before Attila arrived before the gates of the city, on June 24, 451. Attila summoned the citizens to surrender, but St. Aignan, the bishop, who went out to answer the summons, proved himself as warlike as Attila himself, and declared that every man would perish beneath the walls

rather than surrender; he even, for a moment, shook the indomitable Hun by his thundering denunciations and threats of hell-fire.

The siege began. A month was spent in the manufacture of huge catapults, in the construction of earthworks, in the building of movable towers, in the fashioning of scorpions which threw barrels of flaming tar over the high double walls. When the assaults began, the resistance of the defenders of Orleans was heroic, but, day by day, night by night, the siege-towers drew nearer and higher, more and more of the defenders were slain, and the constant fires, started in the town by the tar-barrel projectiles, made fearful headway.

Still Aëtius did not come. He had the audacity to take time to set the whole country from the Pyrenees to the Rhine in battle order. He had bidden his various armies not to rally upon Orleans until Aug. 12, thus deliberately forcing that beleaguered city to defend itself against Attila for a month and a half without aid.

Sangiban, finding himself unable longer to continue the siege, begged St. Aignan to go to Aëtius and hasten him to the city's relief. In

the bishop's absence, Sangiban—historians differ whether this was a ruse to gain time, treachery, or necessity—opened parley with Attila for conditions of surrender. Hostages were exchanged, and the city was ready to open its gates to the Hun when St. Aignan returned and put an end to all talk of surrender.

Two days later, on the very day appointed, the armies of Aëtius appeared at three different points on the horizon. There was not the difference of an hour in their arrival, for Aëtius had not wished to run the risk of a miscalculation. Attila must be struck with a single blow, or not at all. The Roman general had known that a six weeks' siege would weaken the morale of an attacking army, that all the available food-supply in the neighborhood would be exhausted, that—since there was little knowledge of sanitation among the Huns—camp fever would have probably begun.

The battle of Orleans was short and needs little description. Attila, though still with about one hundred and eighty thousand men, engaged in the encirclement necessary for a siege, was vulnerable at all points. He had to face a simultaneous thrust by three armies

amounting to one hundred thousand men, fresh and superbly led. At the same time, the garrison of Orleans, now reduced to some eight thousand men, made a sally.

Attila was too able a general to give battle from a poor position. He raised the siege at once, devoting all his energies to returning his army in good order, and commanding the rear-guard himself. He fell back along the long road he had come, to join his reserve army at the great camp near Châlons-sur-Marne, and to select his own ground for the battle which should decide the fate of Europe—and perhaps the world. It would decide where the World Trail of the Huns should end.

The generalship of Aëtius shone out strongly at every point in this campaign. He had foreseen that he would be able to raise the siege of Orleans with only one hundred thousand men, and he had risked his whole plan on waiting till every tribe in the three Gauls was ready. He had foreseen that Attila must retreat, and the line of that retreat.

From every side, therefore, Roman, Gaul, Goth, and Celt troops harassed and worried the rearward march of Attila. The Seventeenth Le-

gion, garrisoned at Paris, together with ten thousand Bellovacs, decimated the Gepids which Attila had left to hold one of the Seine crossings. The Burgunds, under Gunthigar, hurried up through Besançon and Dijon and nipped the Huns from the south.

At Mery-sur-Seine, the retreating army was forced to cross the Seine under a heavy cross-fire of arrows and catapult-stones. Under Attila and Wolomit the Huns charged. Five times they were beaten back, but they succeeded finally in gaining the heights, and Attila's army crossed, but it left fifteen thousand dead and half its plunder on the further bank. The army reached Châlons-sur-Marne, at last, exhausted with fighting and marching, and, above all, disheartened by defeat. The retirement from Orleans was the first defeat ever sustained by Attila in all his conquering career.

It was now necessary for Aëtius to attack from another direction. He was forced to go a long way round, behind Rheims, over a country where every farm had been burned, every morsel of food taken, every bridge destroyed. This two weeks' delay enabled Attila to fortify his position and to choose his line of battle. On

Sept. 3, Aëtius arrived within three miles of Attila. The battle of Châlons-sur-Marne, one of the Decisive Battles of the World, was about to begin.

As in many great battles of early times, there were numerous advance engagements. One of these is famous. Chlodomir, son of Chlodio, the first king of the Franks—who should himself have been king and who had joined Attila in the hope of regaining his kingdom—found himself opposed in the battle-line by his uncle Merovech, the King of the Franks, serving under Aëtius. He flung himself on the usurper in a hand-to-hand combat. Both wounded each other so terribly that, weak from loss of blood, neither was able to stand upright, but, at the last, Merovech summoned enough strength to drive his sword into his nephew's heart, and fell, terribly wounded, beside him. Chlodomir's followers threw themselves on the Franks and Salians, five times their number, and were killed to a man.

On the tenth of September, the Gauls—who had circled to the northward—joined Aëtius. Both armies were now ready.

Attila's battle-line was one hundred and

twenty-five thousand men, his line of reserve seventy thousand men, camp and convoy, thirty-five thousand men, making a total force of two hundred and thirty thousand men, of which thirty-five thousand were cavalry. Attila, now, was using infantry in the Roman fashion, having abandoned the Hun horsemen rushes of earlier and wilder times, such as he had used at the Battle of Tambov and the Flaming Sword. The right was commanded by Theodimir, the Ostrogoth; the left by Wolomir, his brother; the center by Attila, Ardaric the Gepid, and Goderedd.

On the Roman side, Thorismund, son of King Theodoric, held the right wing with forty-four thousand Visigoths; the center comprised fourteen thousand Alains under Sangiban, twenty-eight thousand Gauls under Gundebald, and fifty-three thousand Roman legionaries, the whole under Aëtius and Theodoric; the left wing was composed of twenty-seven thousand Franks under Merovech, who led, despite his wounds, and twenty thousand Burgunds under their king, Gunthigar. This made one hundred and eighty thousand men in the battle-line, of which nineteen thousand were cavalry.

But the Roman reserves were fully sixty thousand men more, not including camp and convoy. The Swiss Burgunds, Alamans, and Sarvates formed a further reserve.

Attila's force in the field, therefore, was slightly superior in numbers, but his reserves were less, and he was fighting in a hostile country. In point of strategy, Attila and Aëtius were equally matched.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, the Roman army advanced, threatening a small hill which overlooked Attila's forces; the Huns advanced also. Shortly before three o'clock the shock of battle came, simultaneously all along the line, for Aëtius' troops were mainly barbarians, better at attack than defense.

The earth trembled and quaked as the armies clashed. The blare of trumpets, the smash of weapons and shields, and the cries of fury rose to a tumultuous and screeching tempest of sound. The battle raged all along the line, a *mêlée* described by a contemporary historian as "furious, obstinate and horrible." For one whole hour there was no movement back or forth; neither side gave back a step. Men fell where they fought, and, dying, slashed upwards

at the legs or bowels of their foes. The Roman legions met their equals. The Belges of the Seventeenth Legion and the Celts of the Sixth, accounted among the most valiant legions of Rome, were cut to pieces where they stood, overpowered by the fury of the Ostrogoths and Huns. The Roman line was breaking at this point, when Merovech—his wounds not yet closed from that direful duel with Chlodimir—hurled his Franks into the fight, himself at their head.

The Huns gave way, foot by foot, for fifty yards, not more. Ardaric rallied his Gepids, and the Huns advanced again. Suddenly, no one knew why, a thrill ran through the Roman ranks, a presentment of victory, one of those blind mob instincts which so often decided the fate of battles in those old days, when every fight was a combat hand-to-hand. The whole Roman army surged forward. Attila, by superhuman efforts, kept his line from breaking, and retired half a mile to his main line of defense. This gave Aëtius the chance to seize the little hill, and the Roman cavalry cut off the Hun retreat to Verdun, but suffered heavily itself.

Two hours' fighting and twenty thousand

dead was the result of the first phase. The Huns had retreated, but only to a stronger position.

The second phase of the battle saw an even fiercer carnage. Aëtius thrust at three points simultaneously. A small stream running through the plain became so full of blood that it ran gore. To quote the same contemporary historian: "the wounded who crept thither to cool their parched throats found themselves drinking the blood which had poured from their own veins." For two long hours, the armies fought desperately across this rivulet. Attila forced the Romans back, at heavy loss. Attila sounded the retreat for a half-hour's halt. The Huns had won the second phase; they had held their line.

A flanking movement, led by Thorismund, crossed the stream higher up, wheeled, and cut heavily into Attila's defenses. Aëtius charged with the entire army again, and the charge carried. The stream was taken, the defenses overpassed, and the Huns fell back in some disorder, only held in hand by the generalship of Attila, Ardaric, and Goderedd.

Aëtius launched his cavalry in pursuit, King Theodoric himself at their head. But the Visi-

goths had no experience with the horsemen of Attila, certainly the greatest cavalry leader of ancient times. With the great conqueror himself at their head, the Flaming Sword glowing in his hand, the Huns turned; the evening light illumined as grim a cavalry slaughter as was ever seen in the old wild times of the young Attila. Into the *mêlée* suddenly charged the combined squadrons of heavy cavalry from each of Attila's three armies under Andagis, Goderedd, and Wolomir. This was Goderedd's pet force, trained by him in Roman fashion.

It charged as dusk was falling, only five thousand men strong, but the pick of the Hun heavy cavalry, at that time the finest in the world. Theodoric fell, pierced by a javelin hurled by the arm of Andagis, and the brave and wise King of the Visigoths—he who had sent back the body of Attila's son in all honor—was trampled under the charge and counter-charge of horses' hoofs. Thus was the prophecy of Attila's soothsayers fulfilled that "the greatest foe shall go to the Land of the Dead this day." Attila had hoped that it might be Aëtius. When night fell, only a remnant of the Roman cavalry remained.

Such was the mighty battle of Chalons-sur-Marne, sometimes known as the Battle of Mauriac or the Catalaunian Fields.

As after-events showed, it must be called a Roman victory, but there was no assurance of it upon the field of battle, that night. The losses were almost equal, at least thirty thousand dead on either side, with, perhaps, a slight advantage to the Romans. The wounded lay unheeded; there was no taking of prisoners.

Attila had been driven from his line of defenses, and his army cut into three parts. But, so able a strategist was the Hun, each of these three armies had retired to a position so strong that it would require the whole Roman force to dislodge it. The weakest was the center, where was Attila, himself.

The Roman army was terribly weakened by the death of King Theodoric. The Visigoths refused to fight again until their monarch had been buried with all honors. Aëtius dared not wait. A day's delay would give the Huns time to strengthen their already powerful positions. He decided to attack the Hun center and to dislodge Attila.

That night, Attila ordered a huge funeral

pyre to be built, right in the middle of the forward line of attack. If the second day's battle should turn adversely—as it certainly would have done had the Visigoths been in the fray—it was his declared purpose to light the pyre with his own hand and to climb on it himself, directing his troops from the burning pile until the flames consumed him. Never would he submit, nor allow himself to be slain by human hand!

Next morning, Aëtius attacked this third of Attila's army, not more than sixty thousand men, with about eighty thousand, mostly disciplined legionaries, Gauls and Celts. Four times the Romans charged, four times they were beaten back, with terrific loss. Attila's vengeance was terrible. The funeral pyre was left a mile behind as the Huns smashed forward savagely, regaining much of the position they had lost the day before. The second day's battle was clearly in favor of the Huns.

For several days more the attacks continued, but scarcely more than skirmishes on a large scale. The Huns held firm.

Yet it had become sure that Attila was doomed. The Hun army, in hostile country, was

encircled by the distant tribes, mustered a month before by Aëtius and which he had not yet found necessary to summon to the battle-line. Every day, the food-supply diminished. The Burgunds, and Alains, behind them, had cut off the line of retreat to Germany; the Franks and the Alamans held the north; the Roman army, still of strength equal to that of Attila, could harass the Huns incessantly, and cut them up piecemeal when they beat a retreat, as the lack of food would soon force them to do. But it was noticeable that, day by day, the Roman attacks slackened.

“King Attila,” said Goderedd—he was almost the only man who had dared approach the Hun since the retreat from Orleans—“the Romans cannot defeat you. It is sure, also, that our army is not strong enough, now, to defeat all the peoples of the world, together. And, in a week’s time, there will be neither wheat nor cattle.”

“Speak!”

“Send me as your envoy to Aëtius. He has shown himself a good foe; I believe him a good friend. More, I doubt much that he desires to continue the battle.”

“Go!” said Attila. “But while there is wood to burn, remember that Attila will not be shamed!”

Goderedd received from Aëtius a ready and even an eager welcome. The Goth had judged rightly. The Roman situation had become as difficult as that of the Huns. The Gauls and Celts, while keen to save Orleans, had little interest in Champagne, far from their own territories. The Visigoths realized that all menace to their kingdom was ended, and Thorismund, the new king, was afraid that his brothers would seize Toulouse in his absence. The Burgunds had no desire to bear the brunt of Attila’s rearward march as a retreating, vengeful, and destroying army. Attila’s retreat would lift all peril to Rome.

“I understand Attila’s desires,” said Aëtius, talking confidentially to Goderedd as an old friend. “He knows that he is defeated. Provisions cannot reach him. In a few weeks he will be forced to a surrender, which, as you tell me, means his death by his own hand on a funeral pyre. That, I do not wish. Of his own will, he set me free when I was a hostage. If I save his pride, I save his life; it is but fitting.

“Hear, Goderedd! I will retire from the field, and leave him in possession. His army will hail him as victor, therefore, though he, and I, and you know that it is not so. I will give orders to the Alains, Alamans, Franks, and Burgunds that his line of rearward march be not impeded to the Rhine, and that he be allowed to cross unhindered, also that his army be provided with food, for which he must pay.

“Yet you understand well, Goderedd, that I am here to defend the Empire. In return for the withdrawal and disbandment of the armies, I must have Attila’s word that he will never attack Gaul again.”

“I will take it on myself, Aëtius, to make that promise for Attila.”

“Then to-morrow I draw off my troops and send the necessary couriers. In three days, the road will be clear to Scythia.”

Less than a week later, the armies of Attila set forth on their long march eastward.

Thus was forever stayed the Hun invasion of Western Europe. That battle marked the end of the great world trail which stretched its black and blasted line of death and destruction from Mongolia to Gaul.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DEATH BRIDE

ON the long march homeward, Mirkhond died. The mage had grown old, but he had never lost his power over Attila. His ruling passion—that of the desire for power—was in him to the last. Almost his last words were:

“If I were not so near to death, I should go to Genseric, the Vandal!”

He refused the ministrations of St. Loup, the bishop who had accompanied Attila, and, by sheer will-power, kept himself alive until the sunrise—expiring, almost happily, as the first rays shot over the eastern horizon. At heart, he had been a sun-worshiper, always.

Attila heard this dying statement with a sinking at the heart. Forty years of close association with the Persian had taught him the accuracy of the mage's predictions. If Mirkhond were so ready to leave him, it was because the astrologer had seen that the star of Attila

was setting, that the Mastery of the World was to pass to other hands.

The conqueror knew it to be true. His defeat at Orleans and at Chalons-sur-Marne had robbed him of his confidence in his army; the dying prophecy of Mirkhond robbed him of confidence in himself. He tasted the bitterness of the vanquished. The mad flame of the Hun was a flame of straw, and was dying down fast.

He reached Scythia with less than half the army with which he had set out, more savage, more ruthless, and more silent than ever. South Germany was a black ruin where he passed. In vain, from time to time, did Goderedd try to make appeal to the better instincts of the Hun, to the flashes of honor which he had shown in his days of power. All were gone, now. Attila had reverted to primal savagery.

Gungis greeted him with evil news. On the death of Theodosius, Pulcheria, the emperor's sister, had been called to the imperial throne, on the condition that she should take a consort. She had remained unmarried to the age of fifty years, for her country's sake; now, as a matter of form, she married Marcianus, a man advanced in years and a stern and famous soldier,

as rigid in morals and as honorable as herself.

Marcianus made an emperor of very different caliber from the weakling Theodosius. He dismissed all the useless officials of the court, put a stop to wasteful luxury, and, within a week of his crowning, ordered that no more tribute should be paid to the Huns. This was the easier, since Attila, far away on his attempted conquest of Gaul, could not retaliate.

Gungis had not submitted altogether tamely. He had led several punitive expeditions into Thrace, but, though the young leader had been clever enough never to return empty-handed, he had sought only to satisfy his army with spoil, and to fill his own coffers. He had raided a score of unoffending towns, but he had not dared to face Marcianus.

Sore to his inmost heart by his defeats in Gaul, infuriated by the cessation of tribute—which the Huns had come to regard almost as their natural right, and on which they depended—Attila gathered his armies anew, even robbing the hosts needed for guarding the Asiatic frontier to do so, and pushed angrily on Constantinople.

Marcianus was a soldier, not a Byzantine

courtier, and the dread name of Attila did not frighten him. He accepted the gage of war, but would not risk a Hun approach to the Imperial capital. Attila was no longer the Attila of old. The spirit of destroying genius, which had breathed a united demon soul into vast roving hordes of murderers, had lost its creative fire. At Adrianople, and again at Hermanli, Marcianus drove back those Huns, that, for a century, the Eastern Empire had deemed invincible.

Honorina, during the confusion after Theodosius' death, had made her escape to Rome. Attila remembered his betrothal, and looked again at the ring of the Cæsars upon his finger. He had failed in Gaul, he had been beaten by that very Eastern Empire which he had most despised. Rome! He would conquer Rome! He would make the greatest city in the world one vast human slaughter-house and a sheet of flame!

He set out with an army of three hundred thousand men, gathered from Scythia and the east, wild and undisciplined tribes from the frontier, an army very different in training and in character from the well-organized troops

which he had led into Gaul. This was the Hun host at its worst, brutal, savage, cruel, violent, murderous. He led them across the Julian Alps, himself the most barbarous murderer of them all.

Milan, Verona, and Turin opened their gates, but their surrender served them little. They suffered as terribly as if they had resisted; pillage and slaughter, rapine and torture ran unchecked. Aquilea was not taken until after a long siege, and its destruction was so complete that it barely existed afterwards, save as a name. The inhabitants of Padua fled to the tiny islands of the marsh lagoons and there they built brushwood shelters—thus began Venice, one day to be Mistress of the Adriatic.

Attila was eager to march straightway upon Rome, but he dared not leave Ravenna at his back, and Ravenna, in her ring of marshes, was almost impregnable. There were other hindrances, also. His wild army, little disciplined, free to pillage on every side, became weakened by drunkenness and vice; malaria and camp fever wrought havoc in the ranks; so constant were minor misfortunes and petty troubles that

Attila was convinced that an evil fate overhung him.

He was suspicious, too, of Aëtius' indifference to the onward march of the Huns. The great Roman general did not offer battle, and Attila suspected a trap. This was only partly true. Since Placidia's death, Valentinian had gone from bad to worse, and Aëtius distrusted him. The distrust was mutual, as was seen a year later, when Aëtius asked the hand of the Emperor's daughter for his son Gaudentius, and was slain by the Emperor himself as a result of false reports spread by Petronius Maximus, himself to be assassinated by Maximus, a year later.

Strategically, too, Aëtius desired to see Attila break his power against the defenses of Rome. He could then fall upon the Hun army, in its disordered state, and make an end of Attila.

Valentinian, however, feared for his capital and for his empire. The Emperor was still blinded by the terror of Attila's name. Any treaty, however shameful, was better than disaster. To save the empire, and to save Rome,

he sent an embassy to Attila headed by no less a person than Pope Leo the Great, one of the strongest characters who ever sat on the papal throne. The embassy presented itself before Attila upon the banks of the little river Mincio, not far from Ferrara.

Never had Attila beheld such a blaze of pomp and splendor. The wealth of the empire, the fame of Rome, and the authority of all Christianity faced a breaking Attila, and a disorganized and sickened army.

Leo I. was the first of the great popes to consider himself immeasurably superior to all kings and emperors, the first to hold the doctrine that all crowns must be given by his hand. To him, Attila was nothing more than a heathen and a barbarian with a lifetime of crime upon his head. He showed no deference to the conqueror in his approach. Robed in white, the triple tiara on his head, with four of his scarlet-robed cardinals beside him, the prelate opened speech in characteristic fashion.

“Impious man!” he began. “Have you so little wit as to set yourself against the Saints of Heaven? You dare to call yourself ‘The



“YOU DARE TO CALL YOURSELF ‘THE SCOURGE OF GOD.’
BY HIM SHALL YOU BE SCOURGED. LOOK IN THE
SKY AND TREMBLE!”— *Page 290.*

Scourge of God.' By Him shall you be scourged. Look in the sky and tremble!"

Then, so says tradition, Attila, looking upwards, saw the figure of St. Peter, wrathful, stretching from earth to sky, a sword of fire in his hand.

"I see," the Pope went on, "unnumbered devils in your ranks, whispering to your deluded soldiers, urging them to march on to their deaths and welcoming them to hell. I see God's own scourge whipping you to your death! Return and repent! It is the Church's word!"

Strange speech for an ambassador! It shook the superstitious Attila to his vitals. To his fevered eyes—he was ill, himself—the figure of St. Peter loomed over him with the sword of Doom.

He summoned up his courage to reply, but Leo the Great loosed upon him a torrent of fiery words. Possessed of extraordinary eloquence, absolutely convinced himself of his divine mission, believing in all sincerity that he wielded the powers of Heaven and Hell in his own person, the Pope scorched and withered the shaken Hun with phrases that blistered mind and soul.

The Attila of three years before would have cut off the Pope's head with his own sword, those of the four cardinals as well, and would have ridden on, laughing stridently; the twice defeated Attila, no longer sure of himself, riding under the burden of Mirkhond's dying words, trembled before the Pope.

He began to speak, haltingly, of a possible treaty. The Pope would hear none of it. Scarcely would he allow Attila to speak.

“Treaty!” he thundered. “What treaty can there be between God and a foul-souled and impenitent infidel! Think you, Hun, that the Church will listen to a single word from your blasphemous lips? Do you know that the armies of the Church are ready to stamp your diseased carrion-eaters into the mire of these marshes? That I, alone, if God be willing, can bid the earth open its mouth and swallow all your host? Treaty! You will hear the terms I give you. You will hear them humbly, Hun, and ride back thankful that the Church thus gives you time to think of your load of sin and to repent!”

With such a man there could be no discussion. Leo the Great, having cowed Attila to

subjection, dictated drastic terms. Once the Hun intervened—

“The dowry of Honoria—” he began.

“Honoria the wanton! Bitter as Dead Sea fruit has been her life on earth, bitterer still shall it be in the hereafter. You shall have her, Hun, in hell; and help her to spend her dowry of eternal fire!”

A beaten man, a shamed man, a man with the serpent of disgrace gnawing at his heart, Attila turned his armies next day back toward the plains of Scythia. Before his soldiers he kept up a show of fictitious courage, saying that he “could fight men, but not a lion and a wolf together” (Leo the Great and the Wolf of Rome). Yet the army recognized defeat, and retreated all the more willingly that the Pope—wisely not pressing despairing men too far—permitted it to carry back to its own land the rich spoil gathered from the sacking of the cities of Northern Italy.

Across the Julian Alps, again, crept the humiliated army. For weeks together, Attila did not utter a single word, his only close companion being Goderedd, who never left his side. The one-time Master of the World was terribly

changed. He, who, his whole life long, had been abstemious and of simple habits, drank more and more heavily. The command of the army devolved upon Goderedd.

Ardaric, the Gepid, who had been present at the papal embassy, and who had heard the scathing denunciations of the Pope, drew off with his army as soon as the Danube was crossed, and, in his own country, began to plot against Attila. The results of that plotting found fruit the direful year following, when Ellak, trying to keep the dismembered Hun empire from utter ruin, was slain in battle with Ardaric. Gungis died in the same fight, and Goderedd as well. Ardaric, remembering the Goth's oath, buried all three in the same grave, for the Gepids did not burn their dead.

But that grim happening was not yet. For a few months still, the Empire of the Huns existed. The name of Attila held all the rising revolts from daring to show their heads. It was in Dacia (Bulgaria and Roumania) that Attila pitched his last camp.

The reason was a strange one. The Dacians, warriors of the finest type, had always been a thorn in the side of the Roman Empire, and, two

centuries before, had won their independence and held it in the teeth of all invasions. They had accepted Attila's overlordship and had paid tribute, but they never sent a man to his armies. Now, they resented bitterly the presence of the defeated conqueror. A detachment of Huns pillaging near Sardica (Sofia) was set upon by the Dacians and wiped out utterly.

For a moment, the old fire flashed up in Attila. At the head of a small body of troops, horsemen all, he struck across the country, burning and slaying as he went, but with heavy loss, for the Dacians were superb in guerrilla warfare and the mountainous districts were ill-fitted for cavalry.

In one such village, not far from his main camp, Attila saw a trooper of his host dragging from a hut a red-haired girl of surpassing beauty. He struck off the warrior's head and bade his followers bring the girl to his tent. Her name was Ildico.

Rhekan, the mother of Attila's three legitimate sons, was long dead; Honoria had ever been but a mirage. Mirkhond's prophecies of the evil fate awaiting his two remaining sons caused the Hun conqueror to fear that his line

would become extinct. He decided to marry Ildico, for his soothsayers prophesied that "Ildico would give him that which no woman had ever given him before." Attila took this to mean that she would give him sons who would succeed him. The prophecy proved true, but not as he interpreted it—far, very far, from that!

For the week before the marriage, Attila seemed almost his old self. He spent each day in the saddle, routing the Dacians everywhere he went. The Flaming Sword flashed its vengeance far and wide. Little he thought and little he cared that these were Ildico's kinsmen whom he was slaying. Goderedd's protests and warnings he laughed away, with his harsh and croaking laugh.

The day of the wedding came. Not a single Dacian chief appeared.

The portents were unfavorable. The horse which was bearing Ildico stumbled, and almost threw its rider. The soothsayers gave evasive answers. One, more daring than the rest, said curtly:

"There is but little difference between a white girl and a ghost."

They were his last words. Attila brained him with the Sword.

The banquet was wild and rude. The wine ran freely.

Ildico, crowned, covered with jewels, sat white and silent. Pale of skin she was, looking all the paler in her gorgeous robes and with her long and glorious hair, with all the hues of sunset in it. Her arms and neck were bare, the skin seeming deathly white amid the swarthy Huns. Never was seen a whiter bride. There was something spectral in her whiteness and her silence.

Around the banquet-table wheeled in endless circling a triple ring of horsemen, fully armed, excited with drink, shouting lustily,

“Attila! Attila! To marriage and to battle, Attila!”

Goderedd watched the king, watched Ildico, and liked it not. If only Mirkhond were there, to read the girl's inmost thoughts! But Mirkhond was not there. He lay in a lonely grave beside the distant Rhine, with Genseric's name the last upon his lips.

Ghostly white was Ildico. To all the courtly words of Goderedd she answered nothing. The

Goth, despite himself, shivered. Who, but Death, would wed a ghost?

Attila was unnerved, bewitched. This pale creature had roused in him a savage passion, utterly alien to his usual coldness where women were concerned. The King was wild, exultant, triumphant. He shouted, laughed, drank, and even jested.

Goderedd watched him soberly. So behaved men whom the Goths called "fey," men on whom the shadow of a doom was falling.

The feast was nearly ended when the four chosen warriors leapt from their horses to lead Ildico to the bridal tent.

She walked before them, slowly, head erect, regardless of the thunderous and drunken shouting and the ribald jests. Never, the Huns all swore, had a lovelier woman been seen.

Suddenly, some one in the host cried in the Latin tongue:

"Hail and Farewell, Attila!"

The words brought back old memories of Rome.

Attila leapt to his feet. The Sword flashed out. The battle-fire thrilled anew through his veins.

“Rome! Enough of these Dacian mountains! Rome! Warriors, we ride again on Rome! An end to all Christian magic! Death to all Christian priests! Tear every Christian limb from limb! Summon my armies! Rome! This night, alone, for revelry! To-morrow we ride on Rome!”

His body-guard, men who had ridden with him all their lives, hard-bitten veterans who had fought by his side in Gaul, flashed into wild enthusiasm.

This was their Attila, their dread-inspiring conqueror! The savage blood within them boiled.

In Attila's voice was the old magnetic ring. The Flaming Sword glowed in his upstretched hand like an emblem of slaughter.

“The Sword!” they yelled. “The Sword!”

The power, the fire, the dynamic wizardry of supreme grip upon the hearts of men, descended upon Attila anew like a diabolic flame. The lines of weariness left his face. His eyes glowed as in the old days when no human being could sustain his glance.

All felt it. All knew it. Attila, the real Attila, was back. The last two years were at once for-

gotten. As of old, they felt that they could not fail. The blood-lure seized them.

“Death to all Christians! On to Rome!”

One of them, shouting, raised his ax and crashed it into the skull of the priest who, an hour before, had married Attila to Ildico.

The Hun king roared approval.

“A good stroke!” he shouted. “One night more, Huns all, and then to Rome!”

In a delirium of clamor, shield clashing shield, the war-cries ringing furiously, they escorted the King to his tent.

Goderedd followed closely. A dull presentiment hung over him. Many a time before had he watched outside the tent of Attila, when peril threatened. That night, he would watch again.

Not far away, roared the mad riot of the banquet.

Inside the tent, the voice of Attila. Goderedd listened well, but never once did he hear the voice of Ildico in reply.

Later, stillness.

The night long, stillness.

Morning.

With dawn the eager horsemen came clatter-

ing with shouts of triumph to greet the new-wedded king.

“Rome! Lead us, Attila! Rome!”

The curtains of the tent parted.

At the opening stood Ildico, her long red hair unbound, white-robed, but with her feet dyed red.

A breath of terror seemed to come from the tent. The horses whinnied; the men reined back.

There was a dreadful silence.

Goderedd brushed by Ildico.

The shaft of morning light shot clear to the bridal couch, stained a dark red, and shone on a blackening pool upon the ground.

The soothsayers had told true. Ildico had given the mighty Hun “what no woman had ever given him before.”

Upon the couch lay Attila, the Flaming Sword still deep in his heart,—dead!

THE END

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