

HIGH CHIVALRY *by* ACHMED ABDULLAH

THE STORY SO FAR:

LORD CARMYON, penniless, is living in Paris after the war. He meets the lovely Sultana Evelyn, whose reign in Kivastan, a small principality of Asia, is threatened by a rival sultan. Mustafa Bek, son of this rival, is refused by Evelyn. Carmyon and his world war buddies, Prince Tamerlanoff and Hector Aristide L'Hommedieu, offer the sultana their services, but she has no money. At Mustafa's suggestion the three kidnap him, obtain a heavy ransom, and split it with him. Evelyn leaves for Kivastan by one route and the Musketeers by another. The Musketeers are arrested as they leave the ship at Calcutta. Carmyon escapes; the other two are thrown into jail. Carmyon finds Evelyn at the home of a friend of her father. Through the mysterious work of this friend, the jail is set on fire, and Hector and Tamerlanoff escape. It is announced that both they and Carmyon have perished. Disguised, the three set out with Evelyn for Kivastan. With their secret in danger of being discovered, they flee through a secret pass in the hills. Meanwhile, Mustafa starts for home by way of Russia, knocks out the pilot of a Russian plane, and acts as his own aerial chauffeur.

INSTALLMENT X.

On—Toward Kivastan!

THROUGH the stark, glaring sunlight of the days, through the velvety, star pricked gloom of the nights, through the gaunt shadows of the volcanic hills which flanked the road and danced among the dwarf aloes and pines and stunted acacias, through the soft, rhythmic thud of the dromedaries' padded feet and the insolent, steely crackle of the seven rogues galloping along with naked blades at their thighs, through every dust whirling mile toward the Central Asian frontier, there grew in Lord Carmyon the feeling that this remote northern land was claiming him, welcoming him; that it was rising about him—he spoke of it to the young sultana, riding by her side—in an enormous tide of stone which was trying to blot from his mind all memory of home, of England, of Europe.

He was keyed up to a sort of grimly happy expectancy when, early one morning, they reached the border. There the small town of Kushk, Afghanistan's last outpost toward Turkestan and Siberia, cut athwart the trail with stout, crenelated battlements built for defense; with blue-gray field pieces, stamped with the name of Krupp-Essen, squatting aloft on the corners like hunchbacked goblins of war that guarded the cardinal points of the compass and the converging caravan roads; with bearded, keen eyed, fur capped sentinels everywhere, straight back toward the farther Tartar steppe which was framed on the north by a sudden leaping up of hills, ragged, red, keen as a sword thrust. For here, too, the aftermath of the world war had passed; had passed with the bolshevik revolution surging south and east from Moscow, and Red Russians and White Russians fighting for supremacy and loot and—let us hope—a few ideals, nor always respecting the truce of the Afghan border. . . . "but," explained one of the sentinels, "Red Russians or White—what did we care? To both we gave the father and mother of a thrashing. Allah!—with naive arrogance—are we not of the Afghan race? Is there a son of Adam who can resist our wrath?"

Nor was it an unjustified boast. The history of Afghanistan is indeed that of mountaineers never beaten in war; always—and always against great odds—ferociously and successfully fighting for their independence. Not only against the Russians. Too, against the Persians during their past days of imperial pomp and glory; and against the British, who time and again invaded the hills, to be chased back to India time and again with bloody noses. . . . or, as the Afghans put it rather more crudely: "with the points of our daggers piercing the seats of their trousers—and they eating dirt—and the vermin of disgrace and cowardice crawling in their beards and their turbans. . . . wah!—may they be cursed and their children and their unborn children's children!"

O, yes—there was reason for the boast. Reason for the superb self-assurance of the men who stalked about, all armed; some with rifles on their broad shoulders, others with sheathed *tul-wars* hanging on long chains from their embroidered waist-shawls and trailing behind them on the pavement with staccato, truculent sounds, while still others carried bare, bright blades by short slings of cotton passing under their left armpits. But the town itself was not much to boast of: just a mass of chalky, flat, uneven rooftops stretching in a dead white Moslem monochrome, blotched here and there by cheap bazaars and topped by the minarets of mean, unimpressive mosques. . . . decidedly, Afghan truculence was superior to Afghan sense of beauty.

There was, of course, a caravanserai where the young sultana and her retainers were directed by one of Shukri Ali's local agents who came to meet them, introducing himself as Saadi Mirza.

He was a Persian and, doubtless, quite a dandy according to his home standards. For he wore a voluminous, silken robe in stripes of pistache green and pale mandarin yellow; a red rosebud was stuck over his right ear; his brown beard was carefully clipped and oiled; a delicate odor of attar of geranium was about his purple bordered handkerchief; his fur cap was of finest, curliest astrakhan; and his colorful waistshawl a masterpiece of Teheran workmanship. Of Teheran elegance, too, spoke his lisp, stilted diction, his frequent and pious allusions to Hassan and Hossain, his patron saints, and the enormous diamond—though it was slightly off color—which twinkled on his left thumb.

Toor Gar Khan eyed the Persian with decided disapproval; eyed the glittering jewel with decided approval.

"Here," he exclaimed rudely, greedily, "is a diamond which, within the hour, would be gracing the thumb of my father's only son were it not that we are both servants of Shukri Ali—may honor attend his beard!"

Saadi Mirza did not reply. He smiled patronizingly, tolerantly, exactly as a Londoner would at the boorish antics of a Yorkshire yokel come to town to gaze at the sights; and turned to Evelyn.

"I have made all necessary arrangements—" he said, salaaming deeply—"may I find favor in your eyes, *yah sultana katoon!*" Word came to me from Shukri Ali a few days ago. . . .

"That's the first I heard of a telegraph line crossing Afghanistan," Lord Carmyon interrupted dryly; and the other rejoined, just as dryly:

"Telegraph lines are not needed where words wing swiftly from mouth to ear."

"Is there no danger—ah—to use your own kind of smiles—of leaky tongues?" smiled the Englishman. "Tongues do not leak when a dagger so quickly can cut them out."

"My word!" laughed the other. "Old Bill of Hohenzollern should have taken lessons from



She stared at him as if trying to read his very soul.

Shukri Ali—in efficiency—and atrocities!"

"Doubtless, *sahab*. And profitably."

Again the Persian turned to Evelyn:

"Your rooms at the caravanserai are the best there—though not very luxurious, I am afraid."

He spurred on his pony and led the way, the young sultana's cavalcade following him.

"This afternoon," he added presently, "a Turkoman chief will call on you—to discuss certain matters, *yah sultana katoon!*"

A FEW minutes later they reached the caravanserai. The rooms assigned to Evelyn and her suite were clean and comfortable enough. Otherwise the place was typical—regrettably so—of its sort: with the usual huge, central room where the guests sat cross legged and chattered and smoked and spat during the day and snored at night; the usual earthen floor saturated with damp, clotted refuse; the usual windows without glass but covered with torn paper which permitted the offensive odors of humans to escape, then evened matters by permitting the equally offensive odors of garbage and cattle to enter. At the back, surrounded by high walls, stretched an immense courtyard where there were a number of springless Afghan carts, shaggy Tartar ponies, and splay footed, single humped Bactrian camels that strained at their heel ropes and bit whomever they could reach. Ill-natured, awkward, with big, large pored noses and dull, concealed eyes, they reminded Lord Carmyon, who was looking out on the courtyard from the window of the room which he shared with the other two musketeers, of certain elderly, aristocratic dowagers back home in England who, possessing no money and very little brain, had at least one inalienable asset: the consciousness of social superiority.

In one respect the place was different from the ordinary Afghan caravanserai. For—doubtless because of the town's close proximity to the steppes and plains of Central Asia—few of the guests were Afghans. Most of them were nomad Mongols from the north, smiling, copper-complexioned, jolly, swashbuckling camelers and horse traders, bow-legged from years spent in the saddle, dressed in felt and leather, crowned by floppy tam-o'-shanters. And their boots! Indeed—from Moscow to Peking, from the arctic tundras to the Himalayas—by his boots shall ye know the Mongol. Clumsy, loose affairs, with upturned toes, cumbersome soles, giving to him that shuffling walk which is his birth-right—as is his riotous sense of humor, his aggres-

sive independence, his capacity for absorbing alcohol, the rawhide *nagaika* whip tied to his left wrist, his silver mounted hunting knife and the flint and tinder purses slung on silver chains around his waist.

There was commotion amongst them and loud, welcoming shouts of:

"Naam! Naam!"

as, early in the afternoon, a man rode into the caravanserai yard, astride a peak-withered roan stallion; and, a few minutes later, the Three Musketeers were summoned to the sultana's room to meet the horseman.

He was the man of whom Saadi Mirza had spoken—Feofar Khan, the Turkoman chief, a ruddy bearded giant, well over six feet of brawn and muscle; seeming all the taller for an owl's gray wing that jutted at a slant above his immense, shaggy fur cap and almost scraped the rafters; seeming all the broader for the bandoleers, studded with ivory cartridge cases, that crossed his thick chest; seeming all the more savage for his bellying voice.

He had a smattering of Hindustani and Persian. But most of the time Prince Tamerlanoff—half Tartar himself, thus familiar with the Tartar as well as with the Turki language—interpreted.

Nor were the man's words hard to interpret. No gliding smiles here. No flowery phrases. No chiseled tricks of speech. No compliments exquisitely turned.

Greetings over, salaam—nor very graciously—bowed before Evelyn, he asked her the simple question:

"How much, *yah sultana katoon!*"

He knew what was wanted of him; his tribe and the allied, kindred Turkoman tribes whom he represented, were to go to war, to reconquer Kivastan. Had he been a German he would have saved his face by speaking about *kultur*; had he been a Frenchman he would have mentioned the time honored mission of the *grande nation* to civilize barbarians; had he been an Englishman he would have spoken convincingly about Great Britain's historical duty to protect smaller nations. Yes—had he been a European he would have made some sort of excuse to cloak his greed—even to himself.

But Feofar Khan was honest in so far that he was no hypocrite.

"I judge by the deed of the hand and not by the word of the mouth," was his own way of putting it.

War to him was war; a crimson fact; a thing not of glory but of gain, of loot. One made war to get loot—and the richer the loot the more enjoyable the war.

There was, could be, no other reason. Why lie about it? And here, in the campaign for the reconquest of Kivastan, not only loot, but also straight pay, mercenaries' pay, was to be earned.

Pay for work to be accomplished! The Turkoman felt positively virtuous at the thought; decided to reward his virtue by driving a profitable bargain.

Indeed, he who first said—to be ever after quoted and believed—that the mind of the oriental is a subtle and tortuous maze, while the mind of the occidental is a prosy and straight thoroughfare where the truths stand all in a row, neatly patterned and labeled and holding each other by the hand, surely never had the illuminating experience of talking with the former about money matters. For in these, as in all materialistic issues, the eastern mind is as direct and chilly as a question of the rule of three, as drab as a problem in abstract dynamics.

Thus Feofar Khan's calm, laconic query:

"How much, *yah sultana katoon!*"

They discussed the terms; presently agreed. Exact sums were stipulated. Daily pay for each tribesman. . . .

"I can raise ten thousand mounted rifles within the week," said Feofar Khan, "and all brave men, eager to show their skin to flying lead and the nomads' speary warring!" Higher pay for the *panjabashees*, the commanders of fifty, and for the *yuzbashees*, the captains of a hundred. Certain allowances for the horse and camel grooms, the Tartar women who served as sutlers, and the other camp followers. Stipends for the Moslem priests who—blasphemous irony, quite lost on Feofar Khan—would encourage the living by proclaiming *jehad*, holy war for the faith, and shrive the dying.

"Speaking about those who will die in battle," demanded the Turkoman, "how much blood money for their families? And how much blood money for the wounded?"

"O!" came Evelyn's low exclamation; and suddenly to Lord Carmyon, in a whisper: "I won't go through with it—I can't."

"Child," he replied, "you must remember it wasn't entirely by preaching the golden rule that your ancestors ruled a turbulent central Asian land. . . ."

"Where they had no right to be! They were intruders, foreigners! So am I!"

"They were intruders no more than the Tartars who came here from the north, the Mongols who came from the east, the Persians who came from the west. Your ancestors ruled with justice, fairness, decency—didn't they?"

"Yes," proudly; "not even their enemies would deny it."

"And Iskandar Bek, I understand, uses rather more primitive methods."

"I know. Still"—she shuddered—"bloodshed. I should have thought of it before. But I tried not to—tried deliberately—I'm so ambitious, so stubborn. And now—no, no, Freddie—I can't—I just can't."

"Look here," argued Lord Carmyon, while Tamerlanoff and L'Hommedieu were engaging Feofar Khan in conversation, "was there ever an ideal, a real, big, fine ideal which has been achieved without blood? The French revolution—the struggle of the American colonists for liberty—the long fight of the Dutch against the Spaniards! Besides, Iskandar Bek is only a cat's-paw for the Russians—they're waiting to swallow both Kivastan and Mervistan. But when you're again on the throne

"The British refused to interfere."

"They'll pipe a different tune when you're once more the sultana. A British sultana, dear. Imagine the reflected national glory and vanity. Public opinion will come to your help—will force the government's hand. Kivastan—and Mervistan—will be secure—balanced between Russian aggression and British jealousy, and vice versa. I'm not much of an imperialist myself. I believe in the rights of small nations. Y'see—and he blushed a little because he was so very serious—"I'm a soldier of fortune—right-o—but I'm not altogether hard boiled."

There was a short silence.

Then she inclined her head.

"All right, Freddie."

So blood money was discussed; was discussed, at least by Feofar Khan, in terms of barter and

trade, as if he were an honest, portly merchant, offering a reasonable discount on a large order of dry goods.

AS to war material, White Russians running away from Red Russians, and the other way around, had left behind enough rifles, ammunition, light field guns, and everything else needed, to outfit a couple of brigades.

Point by point, they settled the staid business of making war, and Feofar Khan rose. He said that he would return straight to the *aul*, the chief of village, of his tribe. Let the sultana and her retainers meet him a week from today at Kizil-Yurt, in the heart of the *Dasht-i-Kavir*, the Green Salt Steppe, three days' trek northwest from Kushk. There the warriors would be ready and waiting to swear fealty to her.

"Fealty," commented Lord Carmyon after the Turkoman had left, "on a cash, a strictly cash basis! My word—I don't feel half as romantic as I did in Paris!"

"The world moves," smiled Tamerlanoff. "Forward or backward? A viewpoint. But romance died when the first Chicago traveling salesman sold a Ford car and a Gillette safety razor to the last emperor of China."

"No!" exclaimed the Gascon. "I'm as ready as the next man to blame America for all the world's ills. But as to romance—it died when the pleasant red wines of France gave way before Scotland's yellow, throat-stinging brew—"

"Which," interrupted the young sultana with a laugh, "is not only an insult to my Caledonian race, but also an untruth all around. For, if romance were dead, would I be here with my Three Musketeers?"

And, indeed, they found romance enough—romance of the far, exotic places—a few days later, when Evelyn's cavalcade set out for the Green Salt Steppe.

A short distance from Kushk it stretched immense and brittle, with wind flayed rocks towering like sentinels, with a far horizon of soft curves and blue vapors, and here and there tufts of black trees and green trees. Revolution and counter revolution had left few marks. Only very occasionally a low circling of kites and carrion hawks where mounds of skeletons bleached in the sun—skeletons that cared not a tinker's curse if they were White Russian or Red Russian—skeletons as peaceful and serene as the tight little villages of Kirgiz and Tartar folded completely into narrow valleys where small rivers ran and whence rose the odor of hard, russet grain and great, ruddy melons.

There were in these villages vivid bits of life and color; a pig-tailed Kirgiz ambling flat-footedly, carrying a pair of earthen teapots or curd bags on the ends of a long pole; another Kirgiz shuffling along on a pious errand with a sheaf of silver papers to burn before the dead of his clan; a Buddhist priest with shaven poll and orange robe, chanting his incantations at a wayside shrine mottled with the sculptures of intensely Chinese dragons; a tiny, naked, berry brown girl child urging on a diminutive donkey with violent shouts of: "Ho! butcher's meat! May Allah confound the father of your unclean head!"; a feudal Uzbek landlord among his peasantry, bestriding a nervous stallion which, like many a stout Sussex or Galway squire, he most decidedly could not afford; a Moslem Tartar, clad in loose, pigeon-blue trousers and deep violet coat, bowing toward Mecca in evening prayer, gleaming like a statue against the lacquered gold of the rye stubble; a loitering, swaggering Cossack, left behind by the White Russian army, wondering if he should forswear the saints of the Orthodox church and blend easily into this comfortable pagan life; a melancholy Jew, left behind by the Red Russian army, which he had served in the commissary department, dreaming nostalgic dreams of Kieff's dirty streets and smoky saloons.

There was in these villages hospitality offered, curds, milk, cheese, fruit; and always a friendly peasant to ride along for a mile or two and set the young sultana's caravan on the right road toward Kizil-Yurt—until, finally, on the fourth day, they heard, from across the brow of a low rolling hill, the neighing of horses, the pessimistic grunting of camels, the braying of donkeys and mules, the crackle of steel, the stir of voices—all the confused symphony of a nomad camp making ready to ride forth to war.

A few minutes later they reached Kizil-Yurt, which covered the long, wedge shaped cleft of the valley.

Hundreds of tents were pitched there. Tents looking like great mushrooms in the sun glare that plopped into the valley as a stone drops into a deep pool. Tents of all sorts: some of camel's hair, others of stiff, black felt, of soft, white felt, of skins cunningly worked, of green hides, varying according to the tribes to whom they belonged. Women were bending over billy-pots, stirring savory stews. Other women were chattering, bickering, laughing. Half naked children played about everywhere. For no nomad goes to war without his family and, be he a wealthy chief, who knows the silken vices of Bokhara and other grand towns, without his painted dancing girls and dancing boys to while away the hours between battles and between treks.

The fighting men were a panorama of half central Asia's rowdyish breeds. Turkomans mostly, burly, bearded, fur capped men of the steppes. But there was also a sprinkling of Afghans and Kirgiz, of Buriats and Kalmicks, even of Yarkandis and Kashgaris from beyond the borders of Chinese Turkestan—hawkish, lawless marauders all, who had gathered here like vultures to the reek of carrion.

Near each company of a hundred men, recognizable by triangular flags with crude devices fluttering from tall poles, the small, shaggy, wild-eyed Tartar ponies jerked at their pegs and the camels crouched in rows, their halters running upon ground ropes stretched between iron pins, their broad, leathery lips moving sideways as they chewed great clots of boiled pulse or long, withered strips of knot grass.

In the center of the camp towered a huge, domed tent of striped silk. It belonged to Feofar Khan; and there he received the young sultana and the Three Musketeers. There, shortly before the noon hour, the lesser chiefs came and salaamed and swore fealty.

That same afternoon the bull-like roar of the long stemmed Tartar war trumpets gave orders to strike camp; orders blared forth again and again until the sound seemed to make a solid

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