

CHAPTER IX

THE COURT OF KALOON

Horrified, sick at heart, we continued our journey. No wonder that the Khania hated such a mad despot. And this woman was in love with Leo, and this lunatic Khan, her husband, was a victim to jealousy, which he avenged after the very unpleasant fashion that we had witnessed. Truly an agreeable prospect for all of us! Yet, I could not help reflecting, as an object lesson that horrid scene had its advantages.

Now we reached the place where the river forked at the end of the island, and disembarked upon a quay. Here a guard of men commanded by some Household officer, was waiting to receive us. They led us through a gate in the high wall, for the town was fortified, up a narrow, stone-paved street which ran between houses apparently of the usual Central Asian type, and, so far as I could judge by moonlight, with no pretensions to architectural beauty, and not large in size.

Clearly our arrival was expected and excited interest, for people were gathered in knots about the street to watch us pass; also at the windows of the houses and even on their flat roofs. At the top of the long street was a sort of market place, crossing which, accompanied by a curious crowd who made remarks about us that we could not understand, we reached a gate in an inner wall. Here we were challenged, but at a word from Simbri it opened, and we passed through to find ourselves in

gardens. Following a road or drive, we came to a large, rambling house or palace, surmounted by high towers and very solidly built of stone in a heavy, bastard Egyptian style.

Beyond its doorway we found ourselves in a courtyard surrounded by a kind of verandah from which short passages led to different rooms. Down one of these passages we were conducted by the officer to an apartment, or rather a suite, consisting of a sitting and two bed-chambers, which were panelled, richly furnished in rather barbaric fashion, and well-lighted with primitive oil lamps.

Here Simbri left us, saying that the officer would wait in the outer room to conduct us to the dining-hall as soon as we were ready. Then we entered the bed-chambers, where we found servants, or slaves, quiet-mannered, obsequious men. These valets changed our foot-gear, and taking off our heavy travelling robes, replaced them with others fashioned like civilized frock-coats, but made of some white material and trimmed with a beautiful ermine fur.

Having dressed us in these they bowed to show that our toilette was finished, and led us to the large outer room where the officer awaited us. He conducted us through several other rooms, all of them spacious and apparently unoccupied, to a great hall lit with many lamps and warmed--for the nights were still cold--with large peat fires. The roof of this hall was flat and supported by thick, stone columns with carved capitals, and its walls were hung with worked tapestries, that gave it

an air of considerable comfort.

At the head of the hall on a dais stood a long, narrow table, spread with a cloth and set with platters and cups of silver. Here we waited till butlers with wands appeared through some curtains which they drew. Then came a man beating a silver gong, and after him a dozen or more courtiers, all dressed in white robes like ourselves, followed by perhaps as many ladies, some of them young and good-looking, and for the most part of a fair type, with well-cut features, though others were rather yellow-skinned. They bowed to us and we to them.

Then there was a pause while we studied one another, till a trumpet blew and heralded by footmen in a kind of yellow livery, two figures were seen advancing down the passage beyond the curtains, preceded by the Shaman Simbri and followed by other officers. They were the Khan and the Khania of Kaloon.

No one looking at this Khan as he entered his dining-hall clad in festal white attire would have imagined him to be the same raving human brute whom we had just seen urging on his devilish hounds to tear a fellow-creature and a helpless horse to fragments and devour them. Now he seemed a heavy, loutish man, very strongly built and not ill-looking, but with shifty eyes, evidently a person of dulled intellect, whom one would have thought incapable of keen emotions of any kind. The Khania need not be described. She was as she had been in the chambers of the Gate, only more weary looking; indeed her eyes had a haunted air and

it was easy to see that the events of the previous night had left their mark upon her mind. At the sight of us she flushed a little, then beckoned to us to advance, and said to her husband--"My lord, these are the strangers of whom I have told you."

His dull eyes fell upon me first, and my appearance seemed to amuse him vaguely, at any rate he laughed rudely, saying in barbarous Greek mixed with words from the local patois--"What a curious old animal! I have never seen you before, have I?"

"No, great Khan," I answered, "but I have seen you out hunting this night. Did you have good sport?"

Instantly he became wide awake, and answered, rubbing his hands--"Excellent. He gave us a fine run, but my little dogs caught him at last, and then----" and he snapped his powerful jaws together.

"Cease your brutal talk," broke in his wife fiercely, and he slunk away from her and in so doing stumbled against Leo, who was waiting to be presented to him.

The sight of this great, golden-bearded man seemed to astonish him, for he stared at him, then asked--"Are you the Khania's other friend whom she went to see in the mountains of the Gate? Then I could not understand why she took so much trouble, but now I do. Well, be careful, or I shall have to hunt you also."

Now Leo grew angry and was about to reply, but I laid my hand upon his arm and said in English--"Don't answer; the man is mad."

"Bad, you mean," grumbled Leo; "and if he tries to set his cursed dogs on me, I will break his neck."

Then the Khania motioned to Leo to take a seat beside her, placing me upon her other hand, between herself and her uncle, the Guardian, while the Khan shuffled to a chair a little way down the table, where he called two of the prettiest ladies to keep him company.

Such was our introduction to the court of Kaloon. As for the meal that followed, it was very plentiful, but coarse, consisting for the most part of fish, mutton, and sweetmeats, all of them presented upon huge silver platters. Also much strong drink was served, a kind of spirit distilled from grain, of which nearly all present drank more than was good for them. After a few words to me about our journey, the Khania turned to Leo and talked to him for the rest of the evening, while I devoted myself to the old Shaman Simbri.

Put briefly, the substance of what I learned from him then and afterwards was as follows--Trade was unknown to the people of Kaloon, for the reason that all communication with the south had been cut off for ages, the bridges that once existed over the chasm having been allowed to rot away. Their land, which was very large and densely

inhabited, was ringed round with unclimbable mountains, except to the north, where stood the great Fire-peak. The slopes of this Peak and an unvisited expanse of country behind that ran up to the confines of a desert, were the home of ferocious mountain tribes, untamable Highlanders, who killed every stranger they caught. Consequently, although the precious and other metals were mined to a certain extent and manufactured into articles of use and ornament, money did not exist among the peoples either of the Plain or of the Mountain, all business being transacted on the principle of barter, and even the revenue collected in kind.

Amongst the tens of thousands of the aborigines of Kaloon dwelt a mere handful of a ruling class, who were said to be--and probably were--descended from the conquerors that appeared in the time of Alexander. Their blood, however, was now much mixed with that of the first inhabitants, who, to judge from their appearance and the yellow hue of their descendants must have belonged to some branch of the great Tartar race. The government, if so it could be called, was, on the whole, of a mild though of a very despotic nature, and vested in an hereditary Khan or Khania, according as a man or a woman might be in the most direct descent.

Of religions there were two, that of the people, who worshipped the Spirit of the Fire Mountain, and that of the rulers, who believed in magic, ghosts and divinations. Even this shadow of a religion, if so it can be called, was dying out, like its followers, for generation by

generation, the white lords grew less in number or became absorbed in the bulk of the people.

Still their rule was tolerated. I asked Simbri why, seeing that they were so few. He shrugged his shoulders and answered, because it suited the country of which the natives had no ambition. Moreover, the present Khania, our hostess, was the last of the direct line of rulers, her husband and cousin having less of the blood royal in his veins, and as such the people were attached to her.

Also, as is commonly the case with bold and beautiful women, she was popular among them, especially as she was just and very liberal to the poor. These were many, as the country was over-populated, which accounted for its wonderful state of cultivation. Lastly they trusted to her skill and courage to defend them from the continual attacks of the Mountain tribes who raided their crops and herds. Their one grievance against her was that she had no child to whom the khanship could descend, which meant that after her death, as had happened after that of her father, there would be struggles for the succession.

"Indeed," added Simbri, with meaning, and glancing at Leo, out of the corners of his eyes, "the folk say openly that it would be a good thing if the Khan, who oppresses them and whom they hate, should die, so that the Khania might take another husband while she is still young. Although he is mad, he knows this, and that is why he is so jealous of any lord who looks at her, as, friend Holly, you saw to-night. For should such an

one gain her favour, Rassen thinks that it would mean his death."

"Also he may be attached to his wife," I suggested, speaking in a whisper.

"Perhaps so," answered Simbri; "but if so, she loves not him, nor any of these men," and he glanced round the hall.

Certainly they did not look lovable, for by this time most of them were half drunk, while even the women seemed to have taken as much as was good for them. The Khan himself presented a sorry spectacle, for he was leaning back in his chair, shouting something about his hunting, in a thick voice. The arm of one of his pretty companions was round his neck, while the other gave him to drink from a gold cup; some of the contents of which had been spilt down his white robe.

Just then Atene looked round and saw him and an expression of hatred and contempt gathered on her beautiful face.

"See," I heard her say to Leo, "see the companion of my days, and learn what it is to be Khania of Kaloon."

"Then why do you not cleanse your court?" he asked.

"Because, lord, if I did so there would be no court left. Swine will to their mire and these men and women, who live in idleness upon the toil

of the humble folk, will to their liquor and vile luxury. Well, the end is near, for it is killing them, and their children are but few; weakly also, for the ancient blood grows thin and stale. But you are weary and would rest. To-morrow we will ride together," and calling to an officer, she bade him conduct us to our rooms.

So we rose, and, accompanied by Simbri, bowed to her and went, she standing and gazing after us, a royal and pathetic figure in the midst of all that dissolute revelry. The Khan rose also, and in his cunning fashion understood something of the meaning of it all.

"You think us gay," he shouted; "and why should we not be who do not know how long we have to live? But you yellow-haired fellow, you must not let Atene look at you like that. I tell you she is my wife, and if you do, I shall certainly have to hunt you."

At this drunken sally the courtiers roared with laughter, but taking Leo by the arm Simbri hurried him from the hall.

"Friend," said Leo, when we were outside, "it seems to me that this Khan of yours threatens my life."

"Have no fear, lord," answered the Guardian; "so long as the Khania does not threaten it you are safe. She is the real ruler of this land, and I stand next to her."

"Then I pray you," said Leo, "keep me out of the way of that drunken man, for, look you, if I am attacked I defend myself."

"And who can blame you?" Simbri replied with one of his slow, mysterious smiles.

Then we parted, and having placed both our beds in one chamber, slept soundly enough, for we were very tired, till we were awakened in the morning by the baying of those horrible death-hounds, being fed, I suppose, in a place nearby.

Now in this city of Kaloon it was our weary destiny to dwell for three long months, one of the most hateful times, perhaps, that we ever passed in all our lives. Indeed, compared to it our endless wanderings amid the Central Asia snows and deserts were but pleasure pilgrimages, and our stay at the monastery beyond the mountains a sojourn in Paradise. To set out its record in full would be both tedious and useless, so I will only tell briefly of our principal adventures.

On the morrow of our arrival the Khania Atene sent us two beautiful white horses of pure and ancient blood, and at noon we mounted them and went out to ride with her accompanied by a guard of soldiers. First she led us to the kennels where the death-hounds were kept, great flagged courts surrounded by iron bars, in which were narrow, locked gates. Never had I seen brutes so large and fierce; the mastiffs of Thibet were but as lap-dogs compared to them. They were red and black, smooth-coated

and with a blood-hound head, and the moment they saw us they came ravening and leaping at the bars as an angry wave leaps against a rock.

These hounds were in the charge of men of certain families, who had tended them for generations. They obeyed their keepers and the Khan readily enough, but no stranger might venture near them. Also these brutes were the executioners of the land, for to them all murderers and other criminals were thrown, and with them, as we had seen, the Khan hunted any who had incurred his displeasure. Moreover, they were used for a more innocent purpose, the chasing of certain great bucks which were preserved in woods and swamps of reeds. Thus it came about that they were a terror to the country, since no man knew but what in the end he might be devoured by them. "Going to the dogs" is a term full of meaning in any land, but in Kaloon it had a significance that was terrible.

After we had looked at the hounds, not without a prophetic shudder, we rode round the walls of the town, which were laid out as a kind of boulevard, where the inhabitants walked and took their pleasure in the evenings. On these, however, there was not much to see except the river beneath and the plain beyond, moreover, though they were thick and high there were places in them that must be passed carefully, for, like everything else with which the effete ruling class had to do, they had been allowed to fall into disrepair.

The town itself was an uninteresting place also, for the most part

peopled by hangers-on of the Court. So we were not sorry when we crossed the river by a high-pitched bridge, where in days to come I was destined to behold one of the strangest sights ever seen by mortal man, and rode out into the country. Here all was different, for we found ourselves among the husbandmen, who were the descendants of the original owners of the land and lived upon its produce. Every available inch of soil seemed to be cultivated by the aid of a wonderful system of irrigation. Indeed water was lifted to levels where it would not flow naturally, by means of wheels turned with mules, or even in some places carried up by the women, who bore poles on their shoulders to which were balanced buckets.

Leo asked the Khania what happened if there was a bad season. She replied grimly that famine happened, in which thousands of people perished, and that after the famine came pestilence. These famines were periodical, and were it not for them, she added, the people would long ago have been driven to kill each other like hungry rats, since having no outlet and increasing so rapidly, the land, large as it was, could not hold them all.

"Will this be a good year?" I asked.

"It is feared not," she answered, "for the river has not risen well and but few rains have fallen. Also the light that shone last night on the Fire-mountain is thought a bad omen, which means, they say, that the Spirit of the Mountain is angry and that drought will follow. Let us hope they will not say also that this is because strangers have visited

the land, bringing with them bad luck."

"If so," said Leo with a laugh, "we shall have to fly to the Mountain to take refuge there."

"Do you then wish to take refuge in death?" she asked darkly. "Of this be sure, my guests, that never while I live shall you be allowed to cross the river which borders the slopes of yonder peak."

"Why not, Khania?"

"Because, my lord Leo--that is your name, is it not?--such is my will, and while I rule here my will is law. Come, let us turn homewards."

That night we did not eat in the great hall, but in the room which adjoined our bed-chambers. We were not left alone, however, for the Khania and her uncle, the Shaman, who always attended her, joined our meal. When we greeted them wondering, she said briefly that it was arranged thus because she refused to expose us to more insults. She added that a festival had begun which would last for a week, and that she did not wish us to see how vile were the ways of her people.

That evening and many others which followed it--we never dined in the central hall again--passed pleasantly enough, for the Khania made Leo tell her of England where he was born, and of the lands that he had visited, their peoples and customs. I spoke also of the history of

Alexander, whose general Rassen, her far-off forefather, conquered the country of Kaloon, and of the land of Egypt, whence the latter came, and so it went on till midnight, while Atene listened to us greedily, her eyes fixed always on Leo's face.

Many such nights did we spend thus in the palace of the city of Kaloon where, in fact, we were close prisoners. But oh! the days hung heavy on our hands. If we went into the courtyard or reception rooms of the palace, the lords and their followers gathered round us and pestered us with questions, for, being very idle, they were also very curious.

Also the women, some of whom were fair enough, began to talk to us on this pretext or on that, and did their best to make love to Leo; for, in contrast with their slim, delicate-looking men, they found this deep-chested, yellow-haired stranger to their taste. Indeed they troubled him much with gifts of flowers and messages sent by servants or soldiers, making assignations with him, which of course he did not keep.

If we went out into the streets, matters were as bad, for then the people ceased from their business, such as it was, and followed us about, staring at us till we took refuge again in the palace gardens.

There remained, therefore, only our rides in the country with the Khania, but after three or four of them, these came to an end owing to the jealousy of the Khan, who vowed that if we went out together any more he would follow with the death-hounds. So we must ride alone, if at

all, in the centre of a large guard of soldiers sent to see that we did not attempt to escape, and accompanied very often by a mob of peasants, who with threats and entreaties demanded that we should give back the rain which they said we had taken from them. For now the great drought had begun in earnest.

Thus it came about that at length our only resource was making pretence to fish in the river, where the water was so clear and low that we could catch nothing, watching the while the Fire-mountain, that loomed in the distance mysterious and unreachable, and vainly racking our brains for plans to escape thither, or at least to communicate with its priestess, of whom we could learn no more.

For two great burdens lay upon our souls. The burden of desire to continue our search and to meet with its reward which we were sure that we should pluck amid the snows of yonder peak, if we could but come there; and the burden of approaching catastrophe at the hands of the Khania Atene. She had made no love to Leo since that night in the Gateway, and, indeed, even if she had wished to, this would have been difficult, since I took care that he was never left for one hour alone. No duenna could have clung to a Spanish princess more closely than I did to Leo. Yet I could see well that her passion was no whit abated; that it grew day by day, indeed, as the fire swells in the heart of a volcano, and that soon it must break loose and spread its ruin round. The omen of it was to be read in her words, her gestures, and her tragic eyes.