

CHAPTER XI

THE HUNT AND THE KILL

We reached our rooms, meeting no one in the passages, and there made our preparations. First we changed our festal robes for those warmer garments in which we had travelled to the city of Kaloon. Then we ate and drank what we could of the victuals which stood in the antechamber, not knowing when we should find more food, and filled two satchels such as these people sling about their shoulders, with the remains of the meat and liquor and a few necessaries. Also we strapped our big hunting knives about our middles and armed ourselves with short spears that were made for the stabbing of game.

"Perhaps he has laid a plot to murder us, and we may as well defend ourselves while we can," suggested Leo.

I nodded, for the echoes of the Khan's last laugh still rang in my ears. It was a very evil laugh.

"Likely enough," I said. "I do not trust that insane brute. Still, he wishes to be rid of us."

"Yes, but as he said, live men may return, whereas the dead do not."

"Atene thinks otherwise," I commented.

"And yet she threatened us with death," answered Leo.

"Because her shame and passion make her mad," I replied, after which we were silent.

Presently the door opened, and through it came the Khan, muffled in a great cloak as though to disguise himself.

"Come," he said, "if you are ready." Then, catching sight of the spears we held, he added: "You will not need those things. You do not go a-hunting."

"No," I answered, "but who can say--we might be hunted."

"If you believe that perhaps you had best stay where you are till the Khania wearies of Yellow-beard and opens the gates for you," he replied, eyeing me with his cunning glance.

"I think not," I said, and we started, the Khan leading the way and motioning us to be silent.

We passed through the empty rooms on to the verandah, and from the verandah down into the courtyard, where he whispered to us to keep in the shadow. For the moon shone very clearly that night, so clearly, I remember, that I could see the grass which grew between the joints of

the pavement, and the little shadows thrown by each separate blade upon the worn surface of its stones. Now I wondered how we should pass the gate, for there a guard was stationed, which had of late been doubled by order of the Khania. But this gate we left upon our right, taking a path that led into the great walled garden, where Rassen brought us to a door hidden behind a clump of shrubs, which he unlocked with a key he carried.

Now we were outside the palace wall, and our road ran past the kennels. As we went by these, the great, sleepless death-hounds, that wandered to and fro like prowling lions, caught our wind and burst into a sudden chorus of terrific bays. I shivered at the sound, for it was fearful in that silence, also I thought that it would arouse the keepers. But the Khan went to the bars and showed himself, whereon the brutes, which knew him, ceased their noise.

"Fear not," he said as he returned, "the huntsmen know that they are starved to-night, for to-morrow certain criminals will be thrown to them."

Now we had reached the palace gates. Here the Khan bade us hide in an archway and departed. We looked at each other, for the same thought was in both our minds--that he had gone to fetch the murderers who were to make an end of us. But in this we did him wrong, for presently we heard the sound of horses' hoofs upon the stones, and he returned leading the two white steeds that Atene had given us.

"I saddled them with my own hands," he whispered. "Who can do more to speed the parting guest? Now mount, hide your faces in your cloaks as I do, and follow me."

So we mounted, and he trotted before us like a running footman, such as the great lords of Kaloon employed when they went about their business or their pleasure. Leaving the main street, he led us through a quarter of the town that had an evil reputation, and down its tortuous by-ways. Here we met a few revellers, while from time to time night-birds flitted from the doorways and, throwing aside their veils, looked at us, but as we made no sign drew back again, thinking that we passed to some assignation. We reached the deserted docks upon the river's edge and came to a little quay, alongside of which a broad ferryboat was fastened.

"You must put your horses into it and row across," Rassen said, "for the bridges are guarded, and without discovering myself I cannot bid the soldiers to let you pass."

So with some little trouble we urged the horses into the boat, where I held them by their bridles while Leo took the oars.

"Now go your ways, accursed wanderers," cried the Khan as he thrust us from the quay, "and pray the Spirit of the Mountain that the old Rat and his pupil--your love, Yellow-beard, your love--are not watching you in

their magic glass. For if so we may meet again."

Then as the stream caught us, sweeping the boat out towards the centre of the river, he began to laugh that horrible laugh of his, calling after us--"Ride fast, ride fast for safety, strangers; there is death behind."

Leo put out his strength and backed water, so that the punt hung upon the edge of the stream.

"I think that we should do well to land again and kill that man, for he means mischief," he said.

He spoke in English, but Rassen must have caught the ring of his voice and guessed its meaning with the cunning of the mad. At least he shouted--"Too late, fools," and with a last laugh turned, ran so swiftly up the quay that his cloak flew out upon the air behind him, and vanished into the shadows at its head.

"Row on," I said, and Leo bent himself to the oars.

But the ferry-boat was cumbersome and the current swift, so that we were swept down a long way before we could cross it. At length we reached still water near the further shore, and seeing a landing-place, managed to beach the punt and to drag our horses to the bank. Then leaving the craft to drift, for we had no time to scuttle her, we looked to our

girths and bridles, and mounted, heading towards the far column of glowing smoke which showed like a beacon above the summit of the House of Fire.

At first our progress was very slow, for here there seemed to be no path, and we were obliged to pick our way across the fields, and to search for bridges that spanned such of the water-ditches as were too wide for us to jump. More than an hour was spent in this work, till we came to a village wherein none were stirring, and here struck a road which seemed to run towards the mountain, though, as we learned afterwards, it took us very many miles out of our true path. Now for the first time we were able to canter, and pushed on at some speed, though not too fast, for we wished to spare our horses and feared lest they might fall in the uncertain light.

A while before dawn the moon sank behind the Mountain, and the gloom grew so dense that we were forced to stop, which we did, holding the horses by their bridles and allowing them to graze a little on some young corn. Then the sky turned grey, the light faded from the column of smoke that was our guide, the dawn came, blushing red upon the vast snows of the distant peak, and shooting its arrows through the loop above the pillar. We let the horses drink from a channel that watered the corn, and, mounting them, rode onward slowly.

Now with the shadows of the night a weight of fear seemed to be lifted off our hearts and we grew hopeful, aye, almost joyous. That hated city

was behind us. Behind us were the Khania with her surging, doom-driven passions and her stormy loveliness, the wizardries of her horny-eyed mentor, so old in years and secret sin, and the madness of that strange being, half-devil, half-martyr, at once cruel and a coward--the Khan, her husband, and his polluted court. In front lay the fire, the snow and the mystery they hid, sought for so many empty years. Now we would solve it or we would die. So we pressed forward joyfully to meet our fate, whatever it might be.

For many hours our road ran deviously through cultivated land, where the peasants at their labour laid down their tools and gathered into knots to watch us pass, and quaint, flat-roofed villages, whence the women snatched up their children and fled at the sight of us. They believed us to be lords from the court who came to work them some harm in person or in property, and their terror told us how the country smarted beneath the rod of the oppressor. By mid-day, although the peak seemed to be but little nearer, the character of the land had changed. Now it sloped gently upwards, and therefore could not be irrigated.

Evidently all this great district was dependent on the fall of timely rains, which had not come that spring. Therefore, although the population was still dense and every rod of the land was under the plough or spade, the crops were failing. It was pitiful to see the green, unearned corn already turning yellow because of the lack of moisture, the beasts searching the starved pastures for food and the poor husbandmen wandering about their fields or striving to hoe the iron

soil.

Here the people seemed to know us as the two foreigners whose coming had been noised abroad, and, the fear of famine having made them bold, they shouted at us as we went by to give them back the rain which we had stolen, or so we understood their words. Even the women and the children in the villages prostrated themselves before us, pointing first to the Mountain and then to the hard, blue sky, and crying to us to send them rain. Once, indeed, we were threatened by a mob of peasants armed with spades and reaping-hooks, who seemed inclined to bar our path, so that we were obliged to put our horses to a gallop and pass through them with a rush. As we went forward the country grew ever more arid and its inhabitants more scarce, till we saw no man save a few wandering herds who drove their cattle from place to place in search of provender.

By evening we guessed that we had reached that border tract which was harried by the Mountain tribes, for here strong towers built of stone were dotted about the heaths, doubtless to serve as watch-houses or places of refuge. Whether they were garrisoned by soldiers I do not know, but I doubt it, for we saw none. It seems probable indeed that these forts were relics of days when the land of Kaloon was guarded from attack by rulers of a very different character to that of the present Khan and his immediate predecessors.

At length even the watch-towers were left behind, and by sundown we found ourselves upon a vast uninhabited plain, where we could see

no living thing. Now we made up our minds to rest our horses awhile, proposing to push forward again with the moon, for having the wrath of the Khania behind us we did not dare to linger. By this evening doubtless she would have discovered our escape, since before sundown, as she had decreed, Leo must make his choice and give his answer. Then, as we were sure, she would strike swiftly. Perhaps her messengers were already at their work rousing the country to capture us, and her soldiers following on our path.

We unsaddled the horses and let them refresh themselves by rolling on the sandy soil, and graze after a fashion upon the coarse tufts of withering herbage which grew around. There was no water here; but this did not so much matter, for both they and we had drunk at a little muddy pool we found not more than an hour before. We were finishing our meal of the food that we had brought with us, which, indeed, we needed sorely after our sleepless night and long day's journey, when my horse, which was knee-haltered close at hand, lay down to roll again. This it could not do with ease because of the rope about its fore-leg, and I watched its efforts idly, till at length, at the fourth attempt, after hanging for a few seconds upon its back, its legs sticking straight into the air, it fell over slowly towards me as horses do.

"Why are its hoofs so red? Has it cut itself?" asked Leo in an indifferent voice.

As it chanced I also had just noticed this red tinge, and for the first

time, since it was most distinct about the animal's frogs, which until it rolled thus I had not seen. So I rose to look at them, thinking that probably the evening light had deceived us, or that we might have passed through some ruddy-coloured mud. Sure enough they were red, as though a dye had soaked into the horn and the substance of the frogs. What was more, they gave out a pungent, aromatic smell that was unpleasant, such a smell as might arise from blood mixed with musk and spices.

"It is very strange," I said. "Let us look at your beast, Leo."

So we did, and found that its hoofs had been similarly-treated.

"Perhaps it is a native mixture to preserve the horn," suggested Leo.

I thought awhile, then a terrible idea struck me.

"I don't want to frighten you," I said, "but I think that we had better saddle up and get on."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I believe that villain of a Khan has doctored our horses."

"What for? To make them go lame?"

"No, Leo, to make them leave a strong scent upon dry ground."

He turned pale. "Do you mean--those hounds?"

I nodded. Then wasting no more time in words, we saddled up in frantic haste. Just as I fastened the last strap of my saddle I thought that a faint sound reached my ear.

"Listen," I said. Again it came, and now there was no doubt about it. It was the sound of baying dogs.

"By heaven! the death-hounds," said Leo.

"Yes," I answered quietly enough, for at this crisis my nerves hardened and all fear left me, "our friend the Khan is out a-hunting. That is why he laughed."

"What shall we do?" asked Leo. "Leave the horses?"

I looked at the Peak. Its nearest flanks were miles and miles away.

"Time enough to do that when we are forced. We can never reach that mountain on foot, and after they had run down the horses, they would hunt us by spoor or gaze. No, man, ride as you never rode before."

We sprang to our saddles, but before we gave rein I turned and looked behind me. It will be remembered that we had ridden up a long slope

which terminated in a ridge, about three miles away, the border of the great plain whereon we stood. Now the sun had sunk behind that ridge so that although it was still light the plain had fallen into shadow. Therefore, while no distant object could be seen upon the plain, anything crossing the ridge remained visible enough in that clear air, at least to persons of keen sight.

This is what we saw. Over the ridge poured a multitude of little objects, and amongst the last of these galloped a man mounted on a great horse, who led another horse by the bridle.

"All the pack are out," said Leo grimly, "and Rassen has brought a second mount with him. Now I see why he wanted us to leave the spears, and I think," he shouted as we began to gallop, "that before all is done the Shaman may prove himself a true prophet."

Away we sped through the gathering darkness, heading straight for the Peak. While we went I calculated our chances. Our horses, as good as any in the land, were still strong and fresh, for although we had ridden far we had not over-pressed them, and their condition was excellent. But doubtless the death-hounds were fresh also, for, meaning to run us down at night when he thought that he might catch us sleeping, Rassen would have brought them along easily, following us by inquiry among the peasants and only laying them on our spoor after the last village had been left behind.

Also he had two mounts, and for aught we knew--though afterwards this proved not to be the case, for he wished to work his wickedness alone and unseen--he might be followed by attendants with relays. Therefore it would appear that unless we reached some place whither he did not dare to follow, before him--that is the slopes of the Peak many miles away, he must run us down. There remained the chance also that the dogs would tire and refuse to pursue the chase.

This, however, seemed scarcely probable, for they were extraordinarily swift and strong, and so savage that when once they had scented blood, in which doubtless our horses' hoofs were steeped, they would fall dead from exhaustion sooner than abandon the trail. Indeed, both the Khania and Simbri had often told us as much. Another chance--they might lose the scent, but seeing its nature, again this was not probable. Even an English pack will carry the trail of a red herring breast high without a fault for hours, and here was something stronger--a cunning compound of which the tell-tale odour would hold for days. A last chance. If we were forced to abandon our horses, we, their riders, might possibly escape, could we find any place to hide in on that great plain. If not, we should be seen as well as scented, and then----No, the odds were all against us, but so they had often been before; meanwhile we had three miles start, and perhaps help would come to us from the Mountain, some help unforeseen. So we set our teeth and sped away like arrows while the light lasted.

Very soon it failed, and whilst the moon was hidden behind the mountains

the night grew dark.

Now the hounds gained on us, for in the gloom, which to them was nothing, we did not dare to ride full speed, fearing lest our horses should stumble and lame themselves, or fall. Then it was for the second time since we had dwelt in this land of Kaloon that of a sudden the fire flamed upon the Peak. When we had seen it before, it had appeared to flash across the heavens in one great lighthouse ray, concentrated through the loop above the pillar, and there this night also the ray ran far above us like a lance of fire. But now that we were nearer to its fount we found ourselves bathed in a soft, mysterious radiance like that of the phosphorescence on a summer sea, reflected downwards perhaps from the clouds and massy rock roof of the column loop and diffused by the snows beneath.

This unearthly glimmer, faint as it was, helped us much, indeed but for it we must have been overtaken, for here the ground was very rough, full of holes also made by burrowing marmots. Thus in our extremity help did come to us from the Mountain, until at length the moon rose, when as quickly as they had appeared the volcanic fires vanished, leaving behind them nothing but the accustomed pillar of dull red smoke.

It is a commonplace to speak of the music of hounds at chase, but often I have wondered how that music sounds in the ears of the deer or the fox fleeing for its life.

Now, when we filled the place of the quarry, it was my destiny to solve this problem, and I assert with confidence that the progeny of earth can produce no more hideous noise. It had come near to us, and in the desolate silence of the night the hellish harmonies of its volume seemed terrific, yet I could discern the separate notes of which it was composed, especially one deep, bell-like bay.

I remembered that I had heard this bay when we sat in the boat upon the river and saw that poor noble done to death for the crime of loving the Khania. As the hunt passed us then I observed that it burst from the throat of the leading hound, a huge brute, red in colour, with a coal-black ear, fangs that gleamed like ivory, and a mouth which resembled a hot oven. I even knew the name of the beast, for afterwards the Khan, whose peculiar joy it was, had pointed it out to me. He called it Master, because no dog in the pack dared fight it, and told me that it could kill an armed man alone.

Now, as its baying warned us, Master was not half a mile away!

The coming of the moonlight enabled us to gallop faster, especially as here the ground was smooth, being covered with a short, dry turf, and for the next two hours we gained upon the pack. Yes, it was only two hours, or perhaps less, but it seemed a score of centuries. The slopes of the Peak were now not more than ten miles ahead, but our horses were giving out at last. They had borne us nobly, poor beasts, though we were no light weights, yet their strength had its limits. The sweat ran from

them, their sides panted like bellows, they breathed in gasps, they stumbled and would scarcely answer to the flogging of our spear-shafts. Their gallop sank to a jolting canter, and I thought that soon they must come to a dead stop.

We crossed the brow of a gentle rise, from which the ground, that was sprinkled with bush and rocks, sloped downwards to where, some miles below us, the river ran, bounding the enormous flanks of the Mountain. When we had travelled a little way down this slope we were obliged to turn in order to pass between two heaps of rock, which brought us side on to its brow. And there, crossing it not more than three hundred yards away, we saw the pack. There were fewer of them now; doubtless many had fallen out of the hunt, but many still remained. Moreover, not far behind them rode the Khan, though his second mount was gone, or more probably he was riding it, having galloped the first to a standstill.

Our poor horses saw them also, and the sight lent them wings, for all the while they knew that they were running for their lives. This we could tell from the way they quivered whenever the baying came near to them, not as horses tremble with the pleasureable excitement of the hunt, but in an extremity of terror, as I have often seen them do when a prowling tiger roars close to their camp. On they went as though they were fresh from the stable, nor did they fail again until another four miles or so were covered and the river was but a little way ahead, for we could hear the rush of its waters.

Then slowly but surely the pack overtook us. We passed a clump of bush, but when we had gone a couple of hundred yards or so across the open plain beyond, feeling that the horses were utterly spent, I shouted to Leo--"Ride round back to the bush and hide there." So we did, and scarcely had we reached it and dismounted when the hounds came past. Yes, they went within fifty yards of us, lolloping along upon our spoor and running all but mute, for now they were too weary to waste their breath in vain. "Run for it," I said to Leo as soon as they had gone by, "for they will be back on the scent presently," and we set off to the right across the line that the hounds had taken, so as not to cut our own spoor.

About a hundred yards away was a rock, which fortunately we were able to reach before the pack swung round upon the horses' tracks, and therefore they did not view us. Here we stayed until following the loop, they came to the patch of bush and passed behind it. Then we ran forward again as far as we could go. Glancing backwards as we went, I saw our two poor, foundered beasts plunging away across the plain, happily almost in the same line along which we had ridden from the rise. They were utterly done, but freed from our weights and urged on by fear, could still gallop and keep ahead of the dogs, though we knew that this would not be for very long. I saw also that the Khan, guessing what we had done in our despair, was trying to call his hounds off the horses, but as yet without avail, for they would not leave the quarry which they had viewed.

All this came to my sight in a flash, but I remember the picture well. The mighty, snow-clad Peak surmounted by its column of glowing smoke and casting its shadow for mile upon mile across the desert flats; the plain with its isolated rocks and grey bushes; the doomed horses struggling across it with convulsive bounds; the trailing line of great dogs that loped after them, and amongst these, looking small and lonely in that vast place, the figure of the Khan and his horse, of which the black hide was beflecked with foam. Then above, the blue and tender sky, where the round moon shone so clearly that in her quiet, level light no detail, even the smallest, could escape the eye.

Now youth and even middle age were far behind me, and although a very strong man for my years, I could not run as I used to do. Also I was most weary, and my limbs were stiff and chafed with long riding, so I made but slow progress, and to worsen matters I struck my left foot against a stone and hurt it much. I implored Leo to go on and leave me, for we thought that if we could once reach the river our scent would be lost in the water; at any rate that it would give us a chance of life. Just then too, I heard the belling bay of the hound Master, and waited for the next. Yes, it was nearer to us. The Khan had made a cast and found our line. Presently we must face the end.

"Go, go!" I said. "I can keep them back for a few minutes and you may escape. It is your quest, not mine. Ayesha awaits you, not me, and I am weary of life. I wish to die and have done with it."

Thus I gasped, not all at once, but in broken words, as I hobbled along clinging to Leo's arm. But he only answered in a low voice--"Be quiet, or they will hear you," and on he went, dragging me with him.

We were quite near the water now, for we could see it gleaming below us, and oh! how I longed for one deep drink. I remember that this was the uppermost desire in my mind, to drink and drink. But the hounds were nearer still to us, so near that we could hear the pattering of their feet on the dry ground mingled with the thud of the hoofs of the Khan's galloping horse. We had reached some rocks upon a little rise, just where the bank began, when Leo said suddenly--"No use, we can't make it. Stop and let's see the thing through."

So we wheeled round, resting our backs against the rock. There, about a hundred yards off, were the death-hounds, but Heaven be praised! only three of them. The rest had followed the flying horses, and doubtless when they caught them at last, which may have been far distant, had stopped to gorge themselves upon them. So they were out of the fight. Only three, and the Khan, a wild figure, who galloped with them; but those three, the black and red brute, Master, and two others almost as fierce and big.

"It might be worse," said Leo. "If you will try to tackle the dogs, I'll do my best with the Khan," and stooping down he rubbed his palms in the grit, for they were wet as water, an example which I followed. Then we gripped the spears in our right hands and the knives in our left, and

waited.

The dogs had seen us now and came on, growling and baying fearfully. With a rush they came, and I am not ashamed to own that I felt terribly afraid, for the brutes seemed the size of lions and more fierce. One, it was the smallest of them, outstripped the others, and, leaping up the little rise, sprang straight at my throat.

Why or how I do not know, but on the impulse of the moment I too sprang to meet it, so that its whole weight came upon the point of my spear, which was backed by my weight. The spear entered between its forelegs and such was the shock that I was knocked backwards. But when I regained my feet I saw the dog rolling on the ground before me and gnashing at the spear shaft, which had been twisted from my hand.

The other two had jumped at Leo, but failed to get hold, though one of them tore away a large fragment from his tunic. Foolishly enough, he hurled his spear at it but missed, for the steel passed just under its belly and buried itself deep in the ground. The pair of them did not come on again at once. Perhaps the sight of their dying companion made them pause. At any rate, they stood at a little distance snarling, where, as our spears were gone, they were safe from us.

Now the Khan had ridden up and sat upon his horse glowering at us, and his face was like the face of a devil. I had hoped that he might fear to attack, but the moment I saw his eyes, I knew that this would not be. He

was quite mad with hate, jealousy, and the long-drawn excitement of the hunt, and had come to kill or be killed. Sliding from the saddle, he drew his short sword--for either he had lost his spear or had brought none--and made a hissing noise to the two dogs, pointing at me with the sword. I saw them spring and I saw him rush at Leo, and after that who can tell exactly what happened?

My knife went home to the hilt in the body of one dog--and it came to the ground and lay there--for its hindquarters were paralysed, howling, snarling and biting at me. But the other, the fiend called Master, got me by the right arm beneath the elbow, and I felt my bones crack in its mighty jaws, and the agony of it, or so I suppose, caused me to drop the knife, so that I was weaponless. The brute dragged me from the rock and began to shake and worry me, although I kicked it in the stomach with all my strength. I fell to my knees and, as it chanced, my left hand came upon a stone of about the size of a large orange, which I gripped. I gained my feet again and pounded at its skull with the stone, but still it did not leave go, and this was well for me, for its next hold would have been on my throat.

We twisted and tumbled to and fro, man and dog together. At one turn I thought that I saw Leo and the Khan rolling over and over each other upon the ground; at another, that he, the Khan, was sitting against a stone looking at me, and it came into my mind that he must have killed Leo and was watching while the dog worried me to death.

Then just as things began to grow black, something sprang forward and I saw the huge hound lifted from the earth. Its jaws opened, my arm came free and fell against my side. Yes! the brute was whirling round in the air. Leo held it by its hind legs and with all his great strength whirled it round and round.

Thud!

He had dashed its head against the rock, and it fell and lay still, a huddled heap of black and red. Oddly enough, I did not faint; I suppose that the pain and the shock to my nerves kept me awake, for I heard Leo say in a matter-of-fact voice between his gasps for breath--"Well, that's over, and I think that I have fulfilled the Shaman's prophecy. Let's look and make sure."

Then he led me with him to one of the rocks, and there, resting supinely against it, sat the Khan, still living but unable to move hand or foot. The madness had quite left his face and he looked at us with melancholy eyes, like the eyes of a sick child.

"You are brave men," he said, slowly, "strong also, to have killed those hounds and broken my back. So it has come about as was foretold by the old Rat. After all, I should have hunted Atene, not you, though now she lives to avenge me, for her own sake, not mine. Yellow-beard, she hunts you too and with deadlier hounds than these, those of her thwarted passions. Forgive me and fly to the Mountain, Yellow-beard, whither I go

before you, for there one dwells who is stronger than Atene."

Then his jaw dropped and he was dead.