

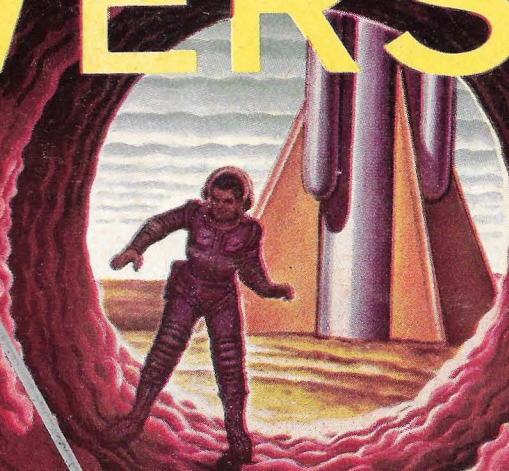
# FANTASTIC

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## CITY OF THE TIGER

AN EXCITING SHORT NOVEL

BY

JOHN BRUNNER

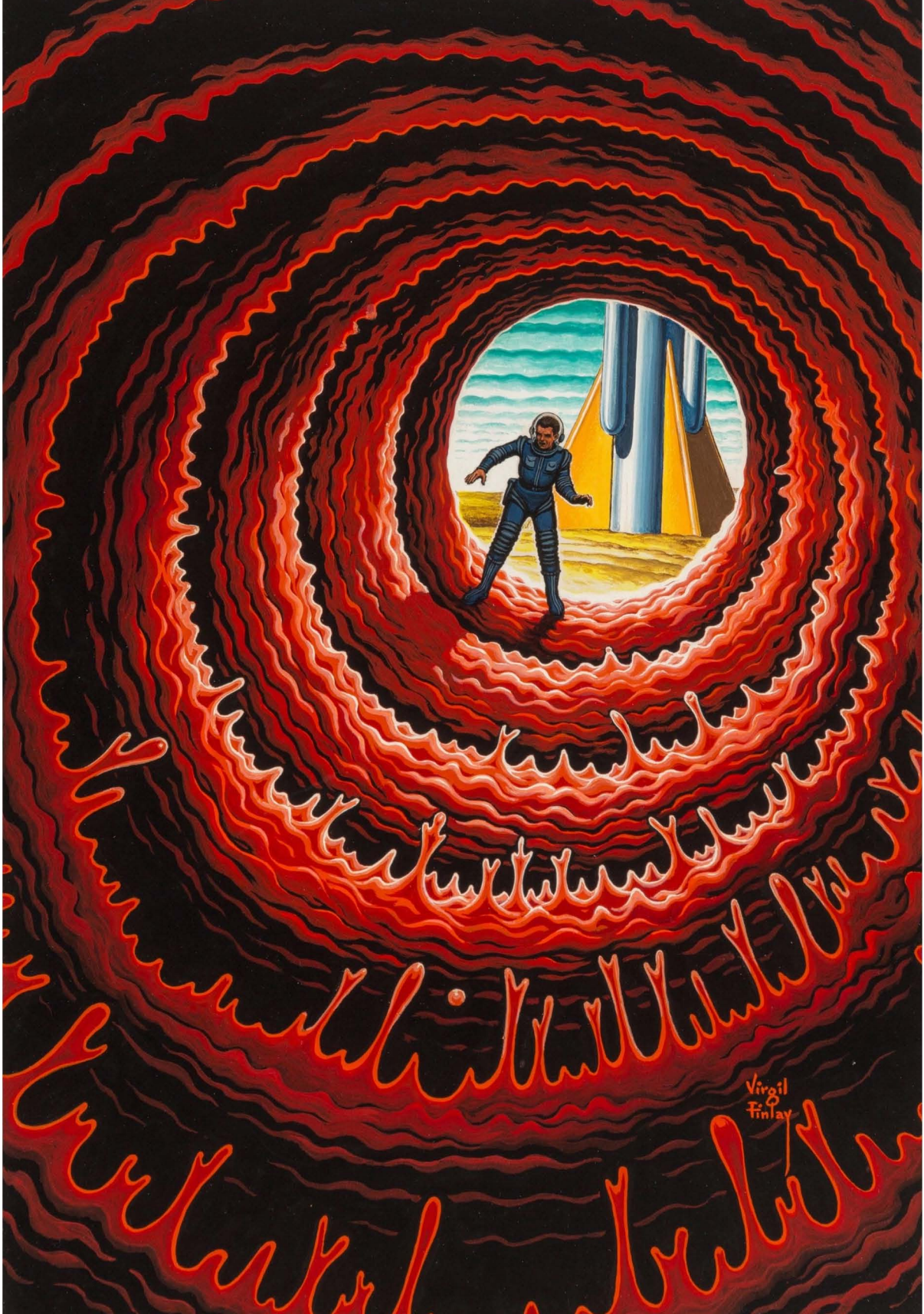
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# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE®

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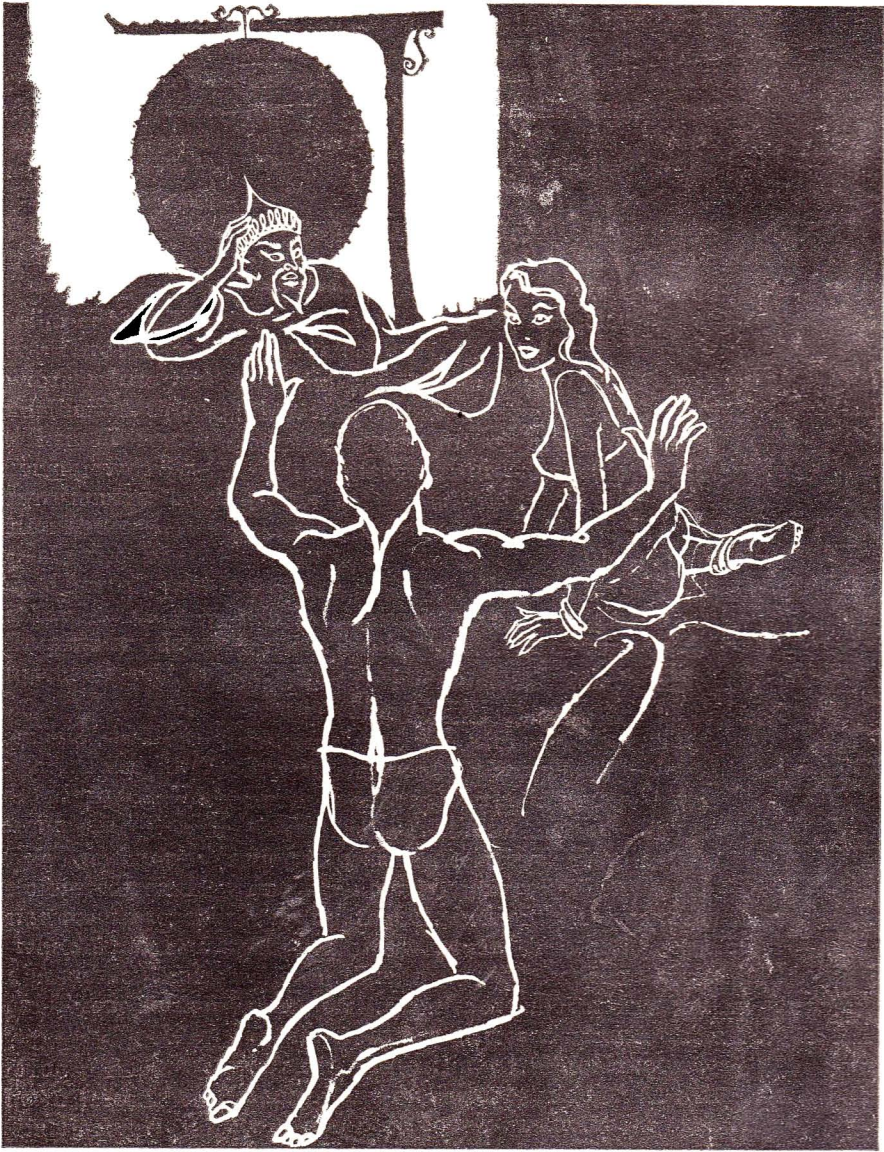
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SAVE YOUR CONFEDERATE MONEY, BOYS .. . . . .	4
<i>by Rosel G. Brown</i>	
HALLOWEEN FOR MR. FAULKNER ..	12
<i>by August Derleth</i>	
I'VE BEEN TRYING TO TELL YOU ....	19
<i>by Gordon R. Dickson</i>	
CITY OF THE TIGER .. . . . .	28
<i>by John Brunner</i>	
PLANET OF WASTE .. . . . .	57
<i>by Lester del Rey</i>	
THE ANTS OF IRELAND'S EYE .. . . .	66
<i>by Wenzell Brown</i>	
PHYSICS OF SPACE .. . . . .	69
<i>by Dr. Leslie R. Shepherd</i>	
THE GLADIATOR .. . . . .	78
<i>by Thomas Pyne</i>	
NEW IN SCIENCE .. . . . .	90
<i>by Van Rowe</i>	
MINOR OFFENSE .. . . . .	92
<i>by Daniel F. Galouye</i>	
THE COMANLEIGH .. . . . .	104
<i>by Myrle Benedict</i>	
A MANY LEGGED THING .. . . . .	116
<i>by Eric Frank Russell</i>	
FANNOTATIONS .. . . . .	122
<i>by Belle C. Dietz</i>	
THE SINISTER FLAME .. . . . .	124
<i>by Y. ibn Aharon</i>	





# city of the tiger

by JOHN BRUNNER

HE GREW slowly aware of a gentle rocking motion, like that of a boat on a choppy sea, but less yielding. For a while he let his body go with it, unresisting.

After a time, other things impinged on his consciousness: cold, that ate into his hands and feet, and a firmness about his body; distant shouting; and a smell that is like no other smell that ever was.

Finally a booming bass shout from a few feet away jarred him into wakefulness, and he opened his eyes. "This, then, is Tiger City?" he said.

"From the way you were sleeping, Hao Sen," said the man with the bass voice, "it could as well have been the city of your ancestors that you were traveling to. It surprises me you do not fall off!"

"Starlight would never let that happen," said Hao Sen, reaching forward to scratch the top of his mount's head. "Eh, darling?"

The magnificent she-camel he rode

answered him with the derisory curl of the upper lip which passes for expression among camels, and both men laughed.

"What have you to do in Tiger City, Kuo Ming?" Hao Sen added, checking his belongings with the routine of many years' experience. They were all there: the brazier and charcoal and the cooking pot; the block of tea-dust and the cake of milk; the cape of camelskin that served him as coat and blanket; the long pike with the jointed haft that drew apart into two; and most important of all the short broad sword that was his special pride, safe in its brass and leather scabbard at his side.

"I have money to spend," said Kuo Ming negligently, patting the pouch at his belt. It jingled pleasantly.

"And after?"

"Who knows? There's a rumour that the emperor intends to levy an army against the bandits of the hills southward—"

"Camel-droppings," said Hao Sen bluntly. "Since I can remember he has been saying that, and still there is a call for caravan guards—without which, where would we be, you and I? Would you join such an army to go deprive yourself of your living?"

He reined Starlight to a halt as the whole long snaking caravan paused before the gates of Tiger City.

Though night was almost fully on them, and stars twinkled through the frosty air, there was still a faint stain of blue on the western sky where the sun had sunk behind the mountains, and in the dusk they could discern the black walls of the city ahead clearly enough to make out the black puppet shapes of soldiers marching back and forth along the ramparts. Above the gate was a balcony, on which guttering torches revealed rows of round shields bearing the stylised black and yellow emblem of a tiger's head.

The travellers, footsore and tired from six days' hard marching, were silent in the gathering dark. They numbered mostly traders, with some itinerant families and wandering entertainers. Now they paused and rested on their heavy burdens—bundles tied up in once-gaudy cloths, yoked shoulder-loads of personal belongings. One old woman just ahead had nodded to sleep almost before she halted. Those more prosperous urged their mules or camels onward slowly, hoping to reach the city gates a few yards ahead of their rivals.

Together Kuo Ming and Hao Sen did the same, and their steeds moved in the slow ungainly walk that, speeded to a gallop, can wear down the most tireless of horses. They rode along the flank of the caravan, sitting their mounts easily, heads up and shoulders squared, an occasional torch new-lit by a traveller glinting on their harness and helmets.

"And you?" said Kuo Ming when

they had gone a little way. "What do you do here in Tiger City?"

"I have an—errand—to perform," said Hao Sen. "After that, who knows?" He broke off to exchange a ribald greeting with another of the soldier mercenaries who had escorted the caravan through the bandit country of the hills behind them. This man's camel had a sore pad, and for the past day he had limped beside her like a common wayfarer. His mood was irritable and his answer crude.

The city ahead grew more distinct, and the sound of its busy-ness, which carried in the still air, came more strongly to their ears. "Ah!" said Kuo Ming, stretching himself a little with satisfaction. "Tiger City! Many times I have been here, yet every time I have found something new."

"Hao Sen," said a soft voice from one of three travellers standing on the track, all wrapped indistinguishably in furs against the cold and huddled in the tiny amount of shelter afforded by their flea-bitten mule. He pulled Starlight over to the group, reached down from her lofty back, caught up the girl who had addressed him in one strong arm, and kissed her chilly face soundly.

One of the men beside her said in a jocular tone, "Much more of that, Hao Sen, and we shall begin to suspect that your intentions toward our sister are honourable."

"And is not the fair Lin Ten almost enough to wean my affections away from my one true love?" countered Hao Sen, lowering the girl back to her feet.

"You have a true love?" said the second man, who, in spite of his frosty fingers, was juggling with four little coloured balls while he spoke. "I thought men-at-arms such as you had no time for lasting attachments."

"I mean of course the one female who shares all my wandering,"

laughed Hao Sen, and jerked his thumb at Starlight's head. The beast turned and curled her lip again in what looked for all the world like a sneer of contempt.

"You go too far comparing our sister to a camel," said the juggler.

"There is *no* comparison," asserted Hao Sen. "And that, O moon of my delight, is a compliment."

"Thank you," said Lin Ten gravely. "For whatever the other likenesses may be, I cannot curl my lip as she does. Look." She demonstrated, and achieved only an enchanting *moue*, which Hao Sen kissed away. Then, bidding them goodnight, he eased Starlight onward.

"You'll see us in the market-place tomorrow?" the juggler called after him.

"Assuredly!" Hao Sen shouted. "But expect small pay for your performance!"

He urged Starlight into her racing gait for the short distance separating him from Kuo Ming. When they fell in together again the latter grumbled, "The one woman in this caravan worth a second glance, and you cut her out for yourself."

Hao Sen looked down at himself with some complacency. He was tall among the others of this race—just short of two metres—broad-shouldered, deep-chested and strong in the arm. His face was squarely handsome, with a short crisp beard that was now spangling with frost.

He answered peaceably, "Can I help it that she is attracted to me?"

Kuo Ming boomed out a deep resounding laugh, and said nothing more as they forced a passage through the walkers slowly filing into the gate of the city. They exchanged soldierly insults with the men-at-arms lounging on the balcony over the entrance, saluted the master of the caravan who sat his camel next to a high officer of the city guard and watched the motley procession

going by. It was this master's custom to pay his guards not when they entered the city but when they came in sight of it, so they had spoken their last with him for the time being.

Then they were pressing through the gate, and neither of them noticed the officer of the guard tilt one finely-plucked eyebrow at them as they passed, and then fall deep in talk with the master of the caravan.

Tiger City! To many people the name was like magic—and of course in a sense it was magic, for at its founding the emperor had wisely decreed that the name of the second most powerful beast in all the world should be bestowed on it as a charm against ill-wishing. But to most people the magic was of a less subtle kind, implying glamour and excitement and gaiety and a press of men and women.

At once Kuo Ming and Hao Sen found themselves in the middle of the city's kaleidoscope, lit by enormous flaring torches at the eaves of the low stone houses. Here and there in the narrow alleys charcoal braziers glowed deeply red, and people paused beside them for a little warmth before rejoining the hustling throng. There were sharp-eyed merchants awaiting the coming of the caravan, hoping to snap up bargains before they had to haggle in the competition of the open market; stallholders, spreading their wares on low wooden trays, selling hot rice and steaming tea to the cold and weary newcomers; nobles strolling casually among the crowd for a thrill, their confidence being accounted for by the heavy swords at their sides and the presence of tall broad men-at-arms who followed them like trained dogs; jugglers, conjurers, entertainers of all sorts; dancing girls swaying to high thin piping music, their bodies white with cold in their thin open-fronted jackets and cotton



trousers; and the street-walkers shrewdly sizing up the passers-by. On one corner an itinerant story-teller was loudly recounting the fable of Young Ryin and the dragon, halting at the most poignant moments to demand further payment from his listeners; on another, an aged greybeard bent almost double over a lute.

Noticing the way Hao Sen gazed about him, Kuo Ming seemed struck by a thought. "Have you never been to Tiger City before, Hao Sen?" he inquired wonderingly, and Hao Sen shook his head.

"Well, then," Kuo Ming exclaimed, "you have much to look forward to! First, let us find a tavern before the rabble fills every room that is to be had. Last time I was here I found lodgings in a good house, with few fleas and a fine line in dancers, but I had words with the landlord regarding his daughter, and he waits for my return with a bowl of poisoned rice. This time I wish to try the tavern of the Silver Fountain, but I have no idea on what street it is to be found."

He swung down from his saddle to shout at the greybeard with the lute. "Which way lies the tavern of the Silver Fountain, venerable sir?"

The greybeard did not reply, and Kuo Ming was on the point of shaking his sword under his nose to teach him better manners, when Hao Sen interrupted him. "He may be deaf, Kuo Ming. Why not ask that lotus-flower yonder?"

"Deaf?" grumbled Kuo Ming. "A deaf musician?" But he followed Hao Sen's pointing arm and needed no further convincing, for the lotus-flower was young and slender and had long lustrous black hair and dark almond eyes and lips like a glowing coal. He urged his camel a few paces towards her and repeated his question about the tavern.

The girl looked him up and down and answered casually. "On the

Street of a Thousand Felicities, near the market."

"Know you the street, Hao Sen?" Kuo Ming demanded with a wink. Hao Sen obediently shook his head, and he turned back to the girl with a helpless shrug. "You see, blossom of the water-lily? My friend and I are strangers, and would surely run astray in looking for the street. Would you not condescend to guide us?"

The girl laughed with a high clear sound like temple bells, and said, "Who could fail to take pity on your ignorance, soldier? Who could resist your pleading?"

"Many," muttered Kuo Ming ruefully under his breath, but only Hao Sen read the movement of his lips. He swept the girl up into the saddle before him, and said, "Which way, then, O beautiful as rare jade?"

"Straight from here, along the Street of Many Kites," the girl answered, and leaned back against his chest as the camels trotted forward.

During the ride, Hao Sen's mind was busy analysing and absorbing impressions of the city; without seeming to, his eyes took in every detail as they followed the tortuous route to the Street of a Thousand Felicities. This one was ablaze from end to end with gaily-coloured paper globes.

They found the inn without trouble, and gave their camels into the charge of the stable-boy. Kuo Ming swung the girl to the ground and dropped lightly after her, and they entered the low-ceilinged, stuffy main room of the inn, which was full of a smell of people and wine and the smoke of the open fires that burned on the floor. Joss-sticks smouldering in front of gilded idols in niches in the wall thickened and sweetened the air almost to the limit of breathability.

Hao Sen purchased one of the sticks from the nodding, toothless vendor at the door, lit it, and placed

it at the feet of the plump-bellied god of laughter, whose round face was eternally fixed in a wide-mouthed bellow of merriment.

"Why do you choose laughter?" asked Kuo Ming, setting a stick of his own before the patron god of travellers in recompense for a long journey safely completed.

"Is it not written that if thou laugh three times a day and be glad, thy stomach, the father of affliction, shall never trouble thee?"

"Where is that written?" said Kuo Ming with a frown of puzzlement. "It is not among the sayings of K'ung Fu Tze."

Hao Sen shrugged, trying to pass it off, and cursing himself under his breath. "It is something I have heard said, nonetheless, and I pay heed to it, for by following it I have found it true." He broke off to return the bow of a plump man, almost the colour of a ripe lemon, who bent before them.

"My humble greetings to you honoured gentlemen," he said. "The resources of my lowly establishment are yours to command."

"We wish accommodation, food and drink," said Hao Sen shortly, and the lemon-coloured man bowed again, naming a price. Hao Sen beat him down to half, ordered bowls of hot fish, rice and wine, and seized the chance afforded by the departure of three swaggering merchants to find them a place to squat beside the fire.

They tackled the food and drink with the serious voracity of active men who have been cold and rather hungry for a week on end, and the girl matched them bowl for bowl, her chopsticks sometimes moving so fast the eye could barely follow them.

Kuo Ming regarded her with astonishment. "Have you not eaten for so long, bloom of the peach?" he inquired, and she shook her head. When her mouth was empty enough to talk with, she replied.

"Times have been lean in Tiger City these three months, and your caravan is the first we have seen in all that time. The emperor himself has come hither with an army, and they have sat and eaten and drunk their fill without doing anything about the bandits who have plundered us."

Hao Sen leaned forward. "Yet we saw no sign of a bandit on our journey! Why should this be?"

"The winter is passing, of course," said the girl. "For two months of every year the only road to this city which is open is that from the north-east, which runs through the worst-plagued districts. Yours is the first southern caravan of the spring."

"And it is along the north-eastern trail that the bandits gather thickest at any time," said Kuo Ming, nodding. "Yes, I understand."

"The next caravan to follow your route will not have such an easy time of it. The bandits follow mountain passes, and they will still be snow-bound, but as soon as a thaw sets in, they will take the road and harass the southern trail again."

"What does the emperor's army, then?" demanded Hao Sen. "Have they not guarded the north-eastern road?"

The girl shook her head again; the gesture made her hair swoop round her shoulders like a raven's wing. "Two caravans have been lost completely, and I have heard it said that some of the soldiers, disgusted with their idleness and tired of doing nothing more than patrol the streets, have themselves turned bandit."

Kuo Ming chuckled reminiscently. "And I am not over-surprised," he said. "I remember—well, no matter."

"Were you not talking of joining this army?" Hao Sen put in maliciously. "It is then your ambition to police the streets of the town and go to bed drunk every night?"

"Perhaps the second," said Kuo Ming, glaring. "Not the first."

"Well," Hao Sen commented, setting his fourth rice-bowl empty on the floor, "ours was a rich caravan and reached here intact. Perhaps things will be more lively tomorrow."

"Indeed yes!" The girl smiled. "Tomorrow's market will be the finest for a very long while."

Kuo Ming yawned hugely. "Well, one will need to rise early to see the best of it. For myself, I am not over-worried. A mercenary like me has small need of goods which clutter the back of one's camel."

He leaned back, putting out his left hand to support himself, and an instant later let out a yell of annoyance. "Why do you not look where you put your feet, oaf?" he bellowed, and scrambled up to face a thick-set, pompous man in a gorgeously embroidered robe.

"Feet belong on the floor," said the man who had trodden on his fingers. "Hands don't. Let me past."

"Why, you walking bundle of crow-carrion!"

The pompous man's eyes glinted dangerously. "I am not accustomed to such words from a common soldier. Make your apology, and be quick about it."

"I will *not* apologise!" He let his hand fall to the hilt of his sword. The pompous man watched the movement unblinking, and his composure discomfited Kuo Ming, who hesitated and asked, "Who are you, anyway, that you're so arrogant?"

"I am the wizard Chu Lao," said the pompous man solemnly, and Kuo Ming threw back his head and laughed.

"If you're a wizard, friend, why do you not conjure yourself a place to lodge better than this flea-ridden hole? Why must you come here associating with us rabble?"

"You amuse me," said Chu Lao bluntly, and shook the sleeve of his

robe. From it struck a snake, black and vicious and as long as a man's height. Kuo Ming let out a yell of terror and jumped backwards, not fast enough to prevent the reptile dropping across his shoulder and coiling round his arm. The other people in the inn stopped talking and eating and edged away as far as they could until, seeing that the snake was fully occupied with Kuo Ming, and that Chu Lao was standing with his arms folded and a slight smile on his face, they let out a roar of amusement at the soldier's ineffectual attempts to deal with his problem.

Hao Sen, watching with narrowed eyes, reflected on the situation. A wizard. Interesting. Now the question was: a wizard who could actually (he did not take the trouble to ask himself what he meant by actually) work magical effects, or someone nothing more than a conjurer? The trick with the snake could have been either; indeed, a snake was as good a weapon as any in some cases, and possibly Chu Lao carried it as a pet which offered personal protection. Warm in the full pouch of his sleeve, it would lie comfortably torpid, but would resent being disturbed.

At length Kuo Ming managed to get hold of the snake behind its head; one gigantic squeeze with his thumb and forefinger, a cracking noise as the bones of its skull were crushed, and it began to writhe itself loose from its hold. He unreeled its sinuous length furiously, and the crowd, reading real anger in his expression, stopped chuckling at his plight.

As if it were a whip, he slashed it at Chu Lao's face; the wizard was faster than he, caught its tail in mid-air and made it vanish—presumably into the same sleeve that it had occupied when living.

"A snake this time," he said. "Perhaps it will be a dragon next time—



and you will be even less happy with it."

He took advantage of the space which had cleared around them to stalk past Kuo Ming and disappear into the smoky recesses of the tavern.

Kuo Ming, rubbing his still-sore fingers, sat down and grew voluble in his description of what he would like to do to Chu Lao next time they met. Hao Sen paid no attention; after a while, he got to his feet, yawning ostentatiously, and bade them good-night.

The room to which he was taken was no more than a cubicle partitioned off at the rear of the house by wooden screens; still, they were opaque enough to afford visual, if not auditory, privacy. He defeated the landlord's attempt to sell him the use of a dancing-girl for the night, and then squatted down on his camel case by the light of the smoky lamp.

For some time he sat cogitating, his eyes unfocused. At length he stretched himself and undid his belt, taking from a pouch attached to it a dozen miscellaneous objects: a coin, an opium pipe, a length of cord, a small wooden box, and other things.

Now how—?

He thought back carefully over basic principles, and selected the length of cord as the most likely choice; then a possibility of danger occurred to him, and he changed his mind. Suppose this one turned out to be poisonous? He did not want to be defeated by his own ingenuity, and he knew that in his present situation, he was as much at his own mercy as at anyone else's, although he was quite alone.

He turned the objects over, puzzling, seeking some sort of likeness or superficial similarity, of nature which would aid him in his experiment. Then an idea struck him. Inside the wooden box was a piece of crystal. It was warm in the room, but

the crystal, which had been insulated from the heat by the box and the thick leather of his belt, still retained a little of the chill it had acquired during a week of below-zero journeying.

He took it up meditatively, and set it in the bowl of the opium pipe. Then he spoke a gentle word to it, and put the pipe towards the lamp as though he were about to warm a piece of opium for smoking. He concentrated; he had—he had to have—an excellently disciplined mind.

In a few moments he knew that his task was far harder than he had expected; he knew that Chu Lao was a very dangerous man, for he was a real wizard, and moments before he flung it at Kuo Ming the snake was probably no more than a thread from the frayed hem of his sleeve.

For the one word he had whispered to the rock crystal was "ice", and now, with the warmth of the lamp, it was melting and trickling in a thin stream of clear water through the mouthpiece of the pipe.

He slept badly that night; his brain was whirling with new possibilities, and for a while he even considered going back where he had come from. Tiger City was dangerous.

Nonetheless, the sun was up somewhat before himself, and when he descended to the main room by the rickety wooden ladder which served as steps to the sleeping gallery, there was no sign either of Kuo Ming or his girl. He paid the landlord for his night's lodging and reserved his place for the next night in case he should need it, and went out into the street.

It was a clear, cold morning; the air, thick though it was with city-smells, was still cleaner than that inside the tavern, and he drew deep breaths as he turned towards the market-place. He had no trouble lo-

cating it—the clamour which rose from it was sufficient guide.

The market-square was a broad stretch of hard-beaten earth in front of the biggest of the many temples in Tiger City. Before the main portal was a flight of ninety-nine wide steps, of which the lowest dozen were now monopolised by traders in meat and fish. Its many pagoda roofs were painted brilliant hues of sky-blue, crimson and gold, and ornamented by hundreds of hundreds of fantastically complicated carvings. A faint aroma of burning incense drifted from it to mingle with the smells of the market.

For a while he simply wandered through the press of bargainers haggling with the newly-arrived merchants from the caravan. He exchanged greetings with a fur-trader whom he recognised, and with a seller of gods from the south, and with a group of hard-faced mule-sellers whom he had travelled beside the whole of one day. For a while he paused to listen to a singer accompanying himself on a crude dulcimer, but the song was a dull one, and he moved on to join the group about a thick-set gypsy with a performing dragon.

The dragon was a poor specimen, half-starved and less than three-quarters grown, its scales patched with a mildew-like fungus disease, but its vicious three-inch teeth were still clean and white and very sharp, and it bared them in ineffectual snarls. The gypsy was making it move its legs in a kind of clumsy dance, goading it with a sharply-pointed *ankh* which he heated at intervals in a brazier.

Hao Sen studied the baleful look in the beast's eyes. This, he suspected, was one dragon which was not going to stand much more such treatment. He said as much to the gypsy, who answered with a string of curses and then ignored him.

A little uneasily, Hao Sen made sure that his sword was running free in its scabbard, and walked away. Close by, a barber had set up his stool and his stove, on which steamed a pan of hot water, and was calling for customers. Hao Sen touched his beard, for he was not a little vain of his appearance now, and then took the stool, telling the man to trim his beard and comb out his long, soft, plaited hair.

The task was finished, and the barber was importuning him to have his nostrils and ears cleaned also, when there was a scream. He leapt to his feet, seeing a wave of catastrophic panic begin to break across the market like a bore in a river-mouth. Shouting began, and in a moment it made sense.

"The dragon! The dragon!"

The barber incontinently joined the rush, forgetful of what Hao Sen owed him; the buyers and sellers alike streamed outwards from the square, overturning booths, scattering merchandise and trampling old people and children underfoot. But Hao Sen was not minded to join them; rather, he wished to go the other way, and by shoving and pushing he shortly managed to break into the clear space surrounding the dragon.

The beast itself was no longer the sullenly submissive thing he had seen before; it was an incarnation of menace, and stood on three of its sharp-taloned legs above the inert body of a man in gay silk clothing, slashing at his face. Hao Sen at once recognised one of the jugglers he had met on the trail, the brothers of Lin Ten. But that meant that she herself—

He scanned the neighbourhood, and saw her lying in the ruins of a merchant's stall, where the crowd must have trampled her down. She seemed unharmed, though unconscious, for he could tell by the way her hair stirred over her mouth that

she was breathing, and she moved slightly even as he looked. But she was in deadly danger, for the dragon was tiring of the motionless body as a plaything, and its yellow eyes were hunting for a new prey.

Its gaze passed over the body of its master, who lay with his head buried in a pile of red-hot coals from an overset brazier, ignored Hao Sen, who stood with his sword unsheathed and watched it warily, and looked still further.

Hao Sen knew something of the ways of dragons. He knew that, although they might be half-crazed with fear or pain, they would not attack unprovoked. But they hunted man as they would hunt anything else—for food. And this dragon was hungry.

In a few seconds it would start to move among the bodies on the ground, for it hated to eat any but living prey—if it could, it would never do more than stun a victim before it fed. And if it found Lin Ten—

Hao Sen shrugged, and wished for his long pike, which would have spitted this dragon in mid-rush, but that was far behind him at the tavern. Besides, though it was not good policy to take the offensive against a dragon, this time it would have to be done, and for that a sword was wieldier than a pike. Luckily, the disease which patched its hide would have made vulnerable points in its armoured body.

As he had feared, the dragon now began to move, its body rippling from nose to tail. It sniffed at the nearest carcass. Hao Sen stepped closer, moving sideways at the same time, to get it if possible away from Lin Ten.

Its head came up after dismissing the corpse which had drawn its attention, and for the first time it considered him as prey. Its nostrils twitched. But it was weak with starv-

ation, and went on looking for unconscious food.

By now the square was virtually empty, and from the comparative safety of the temple steps and the mouths of the streets a crowd watched anxiously.

The dragon tried more corpses without success. Then with a burst of energy which took him completely by surprise, it scuttered past him and was snuffing at Lin Ten.

Hao Sen's patience snapped; he seized the broken shaft of a tent from close at hand and hurled it like a javelin at one of the mildew-weakened spots in the beast's plated skin. The disease must have made it abnormally sensitive, for though the sharp wood barely made a noticeable gash, the creature howled with pain and spun round to charge at him.

On the first attack, he had time to throw himself aside and let it go past him, but the second time it had mastered the smart of its superficial injury, and although he dodged again it cunningly curved its tail in mid-air so that it caught his shoulder and spun him round, gasping. The whole dragon must have weighed as much as a man, and its tail was thick, muscular and spiny.

But it had misjudged the length of its leap, and it fell into a tangle of cords on a rope-seller's stall, which delayed it long enough for Hao Sen to recover his balance and devise a tactic to meet its next pounce. This time, instead of leaping sideways, he flung himself backwards, in the same movement bringing up his sword point foremost so that it sank deep into the dragon's underbelly.

The hilt was wrenched from him with such force it nearly sprained his wrist, and the violence of the impact made his helmet ring on the frosted ground. Shrieking with pain, the dragon scabbled with its clawed hind feet and triple lines of pain



told him where the blind slashes had penetrated his leggings.

He brought up one booted foot with all his force and kicked at its belly close to the place where the sword had stuck fast, its point buried in a rib-cartilage. That hurt the dragon, severely enough for it to waste a few moments trying to double its neck back under its body and pull the blade out with its teeth. Dark blood leaked down the hilt, but slowly.

Hao Sen rolled half clear, and risked losing his fingers in a desperate attempt to gouge out one of its eyes. But his hand touched only the bony skull, and then it had pinned him to the earth again.

This time it did not make the mistake of standing directly above him and leaving its belly exposed; it stood off to one side, holding him with one foot while bending its head towards his throat.

Just in time he got his right arm, palm upwards, straight against its lower jaw, so that to bend any further the dragon would either have to tire him out or dislocate his elbow. But he could not hold out for long. At any time, even now, a dragon this size was a match for an unarmed man, and before the sword in its vitals drained enough of its strength to dull its determination, it would have fatigued his arm to the point of bending.

No, this could not go on for long.

Hao Sen took time to curse himself elaborately for a stupid fool. Then he cursed the dragon, but before he had finished there were running footsteps in the market-place.

The pressure on his arm relaxed perceptibly, for the dragon was turning its eyes to see what was coming now. A familiar voice cried out; a bright sword crashed down on the dragon's skull with a jar that ran clear down his arm. Instantly he went limp, as if dead, knowing that

the dragon would at once turn to face the new adversary.

It did. The moment the weight came off his chest, he rolled over and stood up. Summoning the last reserve of strength in his body, he grasped the dragon's tail as it faced his rescuer—he saw briefly that it was Kuo Ming—heaved, and lifted it bodily off the ground. For one fantastic second it seemed that it was trying to climb down its own tail to get at him, and then he began to spin on his heels, the weight on his arm giving place to an outward tug.

Four times—five—six times the market whirled giddily; the dragon's blood splattered an ever wider circle on the earth, and it cried in a voice of terrible agony. Then he added one last ounce of violence to its course, swinging it upwards, and let go.

Across the ruined cord-seller's stall it flew, above the spilt chest of coins of a money-changer, and fell, its head twisted at a strange angle, against the lowermost of the temple steps.

Then Hao Sen fainted.

He was unconscious only for a few seconds, and he recovered to see the familiar and very welcome face of Kuo Ming bending over him. He was saying admiringly, "Ah, but that was a bold trick, Hao Sen!"

"The dragon!" Hao Sen demanded, struggling to regain his feet. "What of the dragon?"

"Dead," said Kuo Ming with much satisfaction. "I did not even have to give it a final stroke, for its fall broke its neck. Here, let me help you." He hoisted Hao Sen bodily to his feet. "You feel well enough?"

Hao Sen nodded. "But what of Lin Ten? She was lying—" He tried to regain his sense of direction, achieved it, and immediately identified the spot.

Kuo Ming hastened across to her, examined her swiftly, and gave Hao

Sen a reassuring nod as he came up. "She's unhurt, barring that bruise on her head. Look, she's wakening."

Hao Sen barely noticed that the square was again filling with people, some going to wonder at the dead dragon, some to see the man who had mastered it, until some of the latter offered him congratulations. "Go see to the injured!" was his curt response, and he himself got a wet cloth and applied it to Lin Ten's brow.

"Hao Sen," said a soft voice, and he glanced up to see the girl's brother. This was—Lin Soo, that was it; the other juggler, of course, was dead.

"She lives," he said roughly. "Though not your brother."

"I know. I saw him die," said Lin Soo. "And I had thought my sister dead also. But you have saved her, and henceforward, whatever you require of her or me, is yours for the asking."

"Attend to your sister till she is better," said Hao Sen, a little embarrassed. "I'll go and find my sword."

Still swaying a little on his feet, he made his way over to the dead dragon, amid the exclamations of the curious and the moans of stall-holders whose goods had been ruined in the panic. He rolled the beast on to its back, and braced his foot against its breastbone, grasping the protruding hilt.

A glance told him that his effort was wasted, and he let go again. In its final fall, the hilt had been bent almost to a right angle with the blade, and even if it were straightened it would never be reliable again: it would fracture in use.

"Are you not the companion of that man whom I threatened with a dragon?" a familiar voice inquired of him, and he looked up to see Chu Lao the wizard pushing through the crowd.

"I am," Hao Sen admitted. "Was this dragon of your doing, then?"

The wizard half-laughed. "Think you *my* dragons are disease-patched yearlings? *My* dragons are a match for ten men, let alone two. But it was a good fight, and a neat trick by which you overcame him. Your sword, I see, has suffered."

Hao Sen nodded, his eyes on Chu Lao's face.

"Draw it out," said the wizard. "If you can."

Hao Sen gave him a brief glare, put his hand to the hilt again, and heaved. The blade came away with a sucking sound, and blood crept from its tip.

Fastidiously the wizard drew his robe aside, and then told Hao Sen to hold the blade before his body. Hao Sen did so, and Chu Lao made a ring of his forefinger and thumb, which he passed the length of the blade, from tip to hilt.

The blood curdled and fell away, leaving the metal clean and bright; the dented edges became sharp and even. When the wizard's hand reached the place where it was bent on itself, the sword quivered in Hao Sen's hand. He grasped it with all his strength, and it sprang suddenly to straightness, singing.

"It is better than new," said the wizard negligently, and made his way off into the crowd.

Now why do that?

Obviously, out of the people Hao Sen had met so far on this trip, Chu Lao was the most significant. Was it possible that Hao Sen's action in killing the dragon had stamped him also as a significant person? Well, that was inevitable, of course; one could not hide one's individuality in a place like this.

But to have received special attention in that way meant that he had drawn too much attention. He would either have to be bold about it and

openly admit the fact—and he felt that it was too soon to do that—or relapse into the background and trust to Chu Lao and anyone else of major significance whom he ran across to ascribe it to chance.

Well, one thing was certain; if he wanted a sword he could rely on, he would still have to get himself another, for what Chu Lao's magic could do by way of strengthening this bent blade, it could certainly undo. He knew from last night's experiment that he could probably reinforce or counter-charm the blade, but he dared not use magic openly, for that would instantly confirm his real significance as an individual.

What would be the logical thing to do? Answer: give this sword to Kuo Ming in gratitude for saving his life.

When he returned to the place where he had left his friend, he found Lin Ten recovered and standing by herself. On seeing him, she prostrated herself, going on her knees before him and vowing eternal indebtedness. He dissolved the mood by picking her up and kissing her, and demanded to be led to the tavern to have a drink and recover his strength.

"And, Kuo Ming," he said, "do you recall that wizard with whom we had words last night?"

Kuo Ming nodded, and Hao Sen explained what had happened. "So—since your intervention saved my life—take it," he finished, and handed over the newly beautiful sword.

He overcame the other's protestations, accepted Kuo Ming's old weapon in exchange, and went off with him to the tavern, leaving Lin Ten and Lin Soo to seek the body of their brother and take it up for burial.

In the tavern, Kuo Ming retailed the story of the fight twice over with embroidery, and the landlord said he was flattered to have such a distinguished man-at-arms as Hao Sen lodging with him and told him that

he could have his room and board for today without payment.

Whereupon Hao Sen promptly went off to the room to squat on his camel cape and consider the situation.

It was his custom to order the people he met, so far as he could, in relative significance, but he had seldom been forced to do it so soon after his arrival. Now it seemed imperative, for he had been caught up in such a web of tangled circumstances that he needed time to think them out.

Chu Lao he had already nominated as most important. Add to him, the emperor, the commander of the city guard, and the master of the caravan, relative seniority unspecified. In all likelihood the emperor would also be a wizard, and so might one or more of his generals—assuming that this army of his had any objective reality.

Kuo Ming next? After all, he had saved Hao Sen's life, which made him at least superficially significant. But the difficulty there was that the reflex response to impending death in Hao Sen's mind might well have *created* that significance in the moment of need. Did the same thing go for Lin Ten and Lin Soo? He did not think so; he suspected that their protestations of gratitude might be individual.

But their brother was dead. And that complicated things.

He stretched out on the cape at full length, mentally reviewing—his memory was nearly perfect—everything that had happened since he came to Tiger City. The complete analysis took him some hours; it left him very little wiser than when he started.

No, he could do no more than see what happened next.

Effectively, that was nothing, for he passed the three days following in peace, undisturbed by anyone ex-



cept the landlord of the tavern and Kuo Ming, who took him around the town to show him the sights and embarrassed him exceedingly by introducing him to everyone they met as the dragon-killer.

After the three days, he judged himself fairly safe; apparently no one had realised his individual significance. Therefore he would be able to investigate somewhat further, and the first person to call for his attention would be Chu Lao.

He debated for a long time as to the best manner of tackling his problem. Ultimately, of course, it was simple: to eliminate the most significant individual involved, to take on the central motivation himself, and—piece by piece—to destroy it. The intrusion of real wizards, who could operate real magic, trebled the complexity of the task, for magic might work according to any laws or none—though broadly speaking there were two principles which were never transgressed.

But the worst aspect of the appearance of real magic in Tiger City was that it protected the most significant person very thoroughly indeed. It meant that the man wielding the real power might not be the emperor, might not be a general or chief counsellor, might be—the greybeard on the street playing the lute.

He resolutely bet himself that human vanity was against the last possibility, and went to talk with the landlord of the tavern.

Two pieces of gold bought him the knowledge he wanted, and he added two more in the hope that it would guarantee the man's forgetfulness of what he had asked. Another piece went to Kuo Ming's girl on the understanding that she kept him very thoroughly occupied and if possible drunk that night, and he considered he had prepared as thoroughly as he could.

It was well after midnight when

he left the tavern—not the one where Kuo Ming was drinking—in which he had installed himself until the crucial time arrived. It was some distance from the market-place, in a quiet district, which meant that it was not over-well patronised and he risked being remembered; but by the same token the streets were empty and the only light came from a moon two days short of its first quarter.

Silently, his feet muffled in fur boots, he made his way towards Chu Lao's home.

As Kuo Ming had tauntingly suggested on the occasion of their first meeting, the wizard had somewhere better than a flea-ridden tavern for his abode; he had something near to a palace, in fact, standing on its own in a garden through which a brook ran chuckling. It was beautifully laid out; there were lawns, bowers and paths which were thickly shadowed but afforded Hao Sen all the more concealment for that.

The wall around gave him no trouble; a convenient tree stretched a branch towards him, and he hoisted himself up and dropped inside the grounds. He paused, listening keenly, and heard nothing.

Across the garden he fled like a shadow, until he came to the rear of the house, and there studied the blank wall facing him. Wooden shutters closed the windows against the cold night air; the doors, beyond question, would be heavily barred. He pondered; then he saw a flicker of light through a chink in a shutter, and put his eye to it.

Beyond was a kitchen; the stove, with its many different fires to suit the needs of a skilled chef preparing a meal of many courses, was dying into darkness. A single lamp shone dimly, revealing that there was no one, not even a kitchen-maid, within sight.

He had to take a risk, and immediately.

From his pouch he fumbled the little wooden box which had contained the crystal. The catch worked smoothly, and it opened and shut without a squeak. He wondered if the same would hold for the shutter, but he had to try it.

Withdrawing to safety ten paces away, he looked at the shutter and the window which it closed. Then he took up the lid of the box, whispering to it and concentrating fiercely.

Every shutter that he could see—and there were half a dozen within a few yards—began to creak open.

Hastily he shut the box again and waited for someone to be awakened and come looking for him. Nothing of the sort happened; at length he did what he should have done in the first place, and broke a piece of wood off the bottom of the shutter he was interested in, where it was rubbed into splinters against the sill of the window, to put in the box. This time he got the results he wanted, and clambered stealthily into the kitchen.

The draught made the lamp gutter alarmingly, and he was startled to see what looked like a tall man moving in the shadows behind him. A second glance reassured him; it was a statue carved in stone, and the movement of the flame was all that made it seem to be alive.

He noiselessly reconnoitered a small room leading off the kitchen, finding a gentle snoring which came from a youth of twelve dozing in a corner. Safe enough; he was probably so overworked he wouldn't hear anything short of thunder.

He returned to the centre of the kitchen, and looked for the entrance to the rest of the house. It was opposite him, behind the statue, and completely in darkness. He would have to go carefully.

He gave a final glance into the alcove where the boy was asleep, and started to creep towards the exit.

The statue raised its arm to bar his way.

He froze instantly, possibilities crowding his mind. This was not a statue, but a guard dressed as one; no, for he could see distinctly that the arm it had raised to bar the exit did not wrinkle at the elbow as would clothing or canvas. It remained as smooth and round as before. Therefore this was a statue, and he had been stupid to remember to use magic for his entrance and forget that it was probably also employed to guard the house.

It made no further move for a while, and he wondered: what sense does it use to track me? Something that is independent of special organs, for it must be solid stone. He pondered, and decided that it was probably hearing, for the vibrations conveyed through the air and the ground would provide sufficient information for it to recognise a stranger.

He stepped backwards, and it followed him with a single huge stride, raising its arm to strike across where his body might be presumed to be. He barely escaped the blow, but when he froze again it also halted.

It could move very swiftly, then. That was worse still. He had half-hoped it would be slow and ponderous, which would enable him to elude it long enough either to get into the body of the house or out through the window again.

He turned his head, barely daring to breathe, and saw that standing against the wall was a large jar with a dipper hung to the rim. It was directly below the flaring lamp, which made him suddenly hopeful that it might contain oil. He thought he could see a few drops shining on its sides which confirmed the suspicion. In any case, he would have to try.

Judging his movements exactly, he leapt for the jar and overset it with a splash; the heavy liquid it con-

tained was oil, and the statue's ponderous foot slipped and slid as it strode forward. On the second stride it lost its balance, and came down with a thunderous crash, breaking into two pieces across the waist.

He seized the lamp from the wall as a cry from the alcove told him that the boy had been awakened, and dropped it into the pool of oil. Bluish flames spread at once across its surface; thick black smoke chokingly veiled his departure.

Outside, he dashed across the lawns and paths with more attention to haste than to concealment, while lights flared up and shutters were flung open in the house behind him. He had memorised the route which led to the convenient tree, and he followed it directly.

He was within a few paces of the wall when it began to grow.

It stretched upwards until it was more than twenty feet taller than before, thicker and apparently stronger—that its substance might in fact be more tenuous because more expanded. He drew his sword and slashed at it, finding his guess confirmed. The wall was now tough, but he could hack chunks from it if he was determined enough.

He carved a hole large enough to let him through, sheathed his sword again, and dived head foremost through it. As he dived, so the wall began swiftly to shrink to its original size, and before he was all the way through the hole—big enough for his shoulders when the wall was expanded—was too small for his feet, so that he was caught by the ankles with his face in the dirt.

He was still stuck in that ignominious position when Chu Lao and his retainers came to find him, cursing, and striving vainly to break loose.

On the whole, Chu Lao behaved in a very restrained fashion. He decided (or affected to decide) that here

he had no more than a case of a common soldier with ideas above his station, who had been sufficiently ungrateful regarding the favour done for him in the matter of the sword to come burgling.

Accordingly, he sent for the city guard, and delivered Hao Sen to them bound hand and foot and looking much the worse for his night's experiences. Face down across the back of a camel he was brought to the gate of the city and there thrown into a cell built in the solid wall. A single barred window, far too small to afford anything but a glimpse of the outer world, was the only other opening beside the door.

A one-eyed man with muscles like a horse was his jailer, and sat on a low wooden bench beyond the door, staring unblinkingly at Hao Sen as though he was an unidentified germ in the field of a microscope. Hao Sen ignored him.

Plainly, he berated himself, he had been over-confident. Now he was in the tightest possible corner, with a choice of two alternatives. One was to attempt to escape by magic, in which case he ran the risk of overreaching himself and finding that someone else knew more about its laws in Tiger City than he could guess at. That, effectively, would finish him. The other choice was to wait until they executed him, and he fancied that least of all. He had been executed once before, on a much earlier trip and in entirely different surroundings, and it was not an experience he wanted to repeat.

Of course, it would apparently eliminate him, and perhaps make a second try simpler. But it would involve delay, and every day that passed was a serious waste of time. It would not be possible for him to come back at once after his execution; he would have to wait, or someone else would have to take his place and laboriously go through all the



stages of investigation he had already performed. And that would be a blow to his vanity, too.

No, magic it would have to be. But he was sorely handicapped by the fact that everything had been taken from him except his clothing; even the pouch on his belt had been emptied. Without money or weapon, even assuming he did get free, he was going to be labouring under major disadvantages.

The one eye of his jailer stayed firmly fixed on him; he did not dare start right away. Disciplining his tumultuous mind as well as he could, he lay down on the palliase in the cell and composed himself to an uneasy doze.

A question ran all the way through it: was it pure chance that Chu Lao should be the instrument of his downfall, or was the wizard indeed the most significant person in Tiger City?

Bright sun and a blue sky showed beyond the window when he woke up. His jailer was standing at the door, holding a bowl of hot rice and a mug of water to the grille. Hao San got quickly to his feet and reached for them.

"What will happen to me today?" he ventured, seeing that the jailer was somewhat less unprepossessing by daylight than he had been last night.

The man answered in a coarse country dialect which Hao Sen barely understood, but he managed to make out that he was to be tried, at least, before execution. In that case, he reasoned, he might as well delay until the trial was over, for it would yield him further knowledge and might prove useful.

When he had eaten, there was nothing to do but sit on the palliase and stare at the wall, or at the jailer, who took up his post again patiently. The patch of light from the window had crept three-quarters of the way

round the wall before anything happened.

Then there were footsteps, and an officer of the guard whose face seemed familiar to Hao Sen came tramping down the corridor towards the cell. With him were two muscular men-at-arms.

"Is this the man who was found breaking into the wizard's kitchen?" demanded the officer; Hao Sen now recalled that he was the one who had been talking to the master of the caravan as it entered the city. The jailer nodded, and the officer addressed Hao Sen directly.

"On your feet, you! The emperor heard about your exploit in killing the dragon, and wants to have a look at you before you're put to the sword."

The jailer opened the door; it creaked protestingly.

"Going to behave yourself?" said the officer, in a not unfriendly tone, and Hao Sen nodded. "That's right! More dignified to enter the emperor's presence on your own two feet than dragged by these fellows." He indicated the two men-at-arms with him.

A gesture to the jailer, and the officer, with Hao Sen beside him, began to tramp back the way he had come. As he strode along, he talked casually.

"Heard about what you did to that dragon myself. Sounds quite remarkable. Brave. Never been able to understand why brave men in general, saving the names of the greatest heroes, haven't got more brains. Now take yourself, for example. I don't know if you knew whose house you were trying to break into, though if you did you must have even less sense than I suspect. Still, I presume you found yourself short of cash—happens to all you mercenaries after you've been in town for a short while. That's why I think the emperor's idea of keeping the army in Tiger

City for a few months is a good one. Usually a soldier set down on the Street of a Thousand Felicities is as able to look after himself as a new-hatched fledgling. His money goes, he wakes up in the morning with an aching head—just not used to city ways. So he goes off and does something stupid, like burgling a wizard's home.

"Now if I'd been in your position, I'd simply have got hold of a companion or two and gone around the market pointing out that you'd just performed a major service to the people of the city, and wouldn't they like to recognise the fact with a small gift? You'd soon have found someone who did feel grateful enough to toss in a few cash, and after that the others would feel dishonoured if they didn't copy." He shrugged. "Still, it's foolish telling you now."

They had passed through several passages during this long speech; at this point they emerged into daylight and found themselves on a steep flight of stairs leading from the top of the ramparts to the ground. A detachment of soldiers waited patiently at the foot; they fell in around Hao Sen and the officer and proceeded to escort them through narrow alleys for a mile or more.

They emerged into the grounds of an imposing building, but instead of entering it, they crossed a lawn towards a summer-house whose nearest side was open to the fresh air. Twenty paces away, the soldiers halted, and Hao Sen felt himself thrust to the ground. As well as he could, he followed the movements of the officer beside him, who was performing the elaborate imperial kowtow.

Stealing a glance upward, he saw that a slender man with sharp black eyes was facing them from a couch half-covered by his vast and gorgeously decorated silk robe; around

him stood slim girls and stout officials, and behind his head, almost exactly framing it, hung a huge bronze gong.

On his left, on a lower couch, sat the wizard Chu Lao.

"You may advance," said one of the officials in a fat and wheezy voice when they had performed their obeisance, and—prodded by the men-at-arms—Hao Sen did so.

"So this is our dragon-killer." The emperor spoke thoughtfully. "A man presumably of more brawn than brain. What do you know of him, Chu Lao?"

"Very little, august majesty," the wizard answered. "I crossed a companion of his in a tavern a few nights ago; I saw him kill the dragon—with some assistance from this same companion. And last night he was caught escaping from my house after breaking in."

"And for what reason did you do this stupid thing?" the emperor said, speaking directly to Hao Sen.

Hao Sen thought furiously. "I was in drink," he said humbly. "And there was a certain kitchen wench... It was not for the purpose of stealing—the honourable wizard will testify that I had money in my pouch when I was trapped."

The emperor glanced at Chu Lao, who seemed taken aback. "I do not know," he admitted, and gestured to a retainer of his own who stood somewhat apart from the emperor's companions. This man stepped forward, bowing.

"Indeed, there were several gold pieces from the south in his pouch, which I do not recollect seeing the like of."

"That alters things somewhat," admitted Chu Lao. "I had not thought to inquire."

The emperor's sharp black eyes searched Hao Sen's face. "I like the look of you," he said suddenly. "You would make me a good soldier. For

your effrontery you deserve punishment, but I am not one to deal over-harshly with mere fools. I give you a choice: go free, and be a soldier in my army, or stand your trial and face certain conviction."

Hao Sen looked at the wizard, not at the emperor; he was almost certain now that the emperor was of little importance. It was worth taking a very great risk to be sure.

"I am a fighting man," he said boldly. "I should not like to join an army that does nothing but sit in a walled town eating up, drinking and smoking away the resources of the populace!"

There was dead silence, except for a hiss of amazed horror from the officer of the guard at Hao Sen's side. Then the emperor leaned forward where he sat.

"It is of *my* army you are speaking?" he demanded. Hao Sen nodded. The emperor's face darkened.

"And that from a man who breaks into a house after a—a kitchen wench! Take this—this insolent windbag away!"

Immediately the men-at-arms seized him, and before he was forcibly turned on his heel and frog-marched back the way he had come, Hao Sen had a glimpse of Chu Lao studying him with an expression of amused triumph.

No more than an hour later he was back in his cell, with the one-eyed jailer patiently watching him again. He returned to his place on the palliase and leaned against the wall.

So it was Chu Lao he had to face. And time was getting very short. Tonight at the latest, he would have to make his bid to conquer him.

The hours crept away slowly; at dusk, the jailer lit a torch a few paces down the passage, and returned to his post to eat a handful of rice and sip some tea, but there was nothing for Hao Sen. Then he composed himself to rest, closing his eye but

seeming not to sink more than fractionally below the surface of sleep. The least noise from Hao Sen brought his eyelid up, as the prisoner proved to his own complete satisfaction.

That was the first obstacle, then: to put the one-eyed man completely to sleep.

Hao Sen cogitated. So abstract a concept might prove his most difficult task yet. But many men must have slept—some of them deeply—on this filthy pile of straw under him now. He took one of the straws, the longest and straightest he could find, and whispered over it; then he poked it through the grille of the door, and gave it a flick with his finger.

It twisted as it flew, but it struck its goal; it brushed lightly across the jailer's face, and he relaxed on the instant, his mouth dropping open and determined snores rising from it.

Hao Sen clattered at the door; the jailer made no move.

Satisfied, he turned his attention to the window. By pulling himself up to the sill and chinning himself, he could see that he was twice the height of a man or more from the alley which ran outside. The bars were thick, solid bronze; the embrasure itself was far too narrow for his shoulders.

But there were the straws in the palliase, and he could pull the bars loose with them.

He chose six straws which matched the bars for length near enough, tied them with hairs from his coat until they formed a rough imitation of the barrier in the window. He hauled himself up with one hand and clung there, sweat running on his face with the violence of the effort, while he held the straws against the bars.

Closing his eyes, he concentrated, whispering. And the bars broke with such suddenness that he fell sprawling to the floor. The hand with

which he had been holding himself up now grasped only straws; the hand which had held the straws clutched the bronze grating.

He reassured himself that the jailer had not been disturbed even by the noise of his crashing fall, and set about finding an answer to his final problem: how to enlarge the embrasure and get through it.

The chief quality of the hole in the wall seemed to be its vacancy now; but it would be hard to expand the hole and compress the surrounding stone to make way for it. Better, perhaps, to destroy the mortar which held the stones in place.

He worked a crumb or two of it loose, cupped it in the palm of his hand, and rubbed it until it was friable, speaking to it the while in a gentle whisper. The sound of dust falling from between the stones above him told him that he was having some success.

He scrambled up to try tugging loose the first stone below the embrasure, and found himself looking directly into the eyes of someone outside the window.

"Hao Sen! Hao Sen! Is that indeed you?"

It was Lin Ten's voice.

When he recovered from his astonishment, he whispered to her urgently. "Yes, indeed it's Hao Sen. But how—what are you doing here?" He craned his neck and managed to look down at the ground, discovering that she stood on her brother Lin Soo's shoulders and he in turn on someone else's, though whose Hao Sen could not discern. It was a trick he had often seen them practising on the journey, with the other brother—he who was now dead—taking the full weight.

"We heard what had happened to you, and Kuo Ming sought out one of the city guards who knew where you were. So we came. But is there

anything we can do? You are shut so fast in this prison!"

"You can save me breaking my neck when I jump to the ground," said Hao Sen. "I shall be free from here in another few moments. Here, if you can, help me push some of these stones loose."

"What's happening up there? This is tiring work!" came a furious whisper from below, and the voice identified the lowermost of the three as Kuo Ming.

"Hola, my old friend," Hao Sen whispered back. "A few more minutes and it will be done."

With Lin Ten pushing so vigorously she all but lost her balance, the loosened stones came free rapidly, and Hao Sen soon judged the aperture wide enough for him to get through. Telling Lin Ten to drop to the ground, he backed his body carefully into mid-air, placed his feet on Lin Soo's shoulders, and then lowered himself to the earth.

As soon as he was standing beside her, Lin Ten flung her arms about his neck, and he was surprised to find that the cheek she pressed to his was wet with tears. "Oh, I was so frightened that we might not be able to save you!" she exclaimed. "What did you do to be imprisoned, Hao Sen?"

"I'll explain later," he promised, gently disengaging her and turning to face Lin Soo and Kuo Ming, the latter of whom was rubbing his shoulders with a rueful expression.

"I was never an acrobat!" he complained. "Well, my friend, now you're out, what are we going to do with you?"

"Come away as soon as we can and as far as we can," Hao Sen answered. "I laid a charm on my jailer, but I do not know far how long it will keep him sleeping. Which way do we go?"

"We know all the alleys," said Lin Soo. "Through there to the right,



I know a tavern where no one will ask questions."

Smoky, disreputable, the tavern proved ideal for Hao Sen's intentions, and over cups of wine he explained what had happened to him. When he again referred to the charms he had used in his escape, Kuo Ming interrupted.

"I did not know you were a wizard, Hao Sen! If you have the art, why are you a soldier like myself?"

"Because I like not magic!" said Hao Sen emphatically "Is it right that one selfish man should be able to command all the doings of a whole people? To command the emperor himself?"

The others exchanged glances. Lin Soo voiced their common thought. "I do not see you as a man who makes such accusations wildly, Hao Sen. You have knowledge to support them?"

"I have," said Hao Sen grimly. He recounted what had happened when he was brought before the emperor and Chu Lao. "You have all heard," he concluded, "how the emperor's army sits idle here in Tiger City, while the bandits ravage the country and rob the caravans. Think you that the emperor is doing this willingly? Not so! I am convinced that Chu Lao is pandering to his vanity by keeping the emperor in this town, at his own beck and call, heedless of the needs of the populace."

"It fits," said Kuo Ming heavily. "It is certain that the army is discontented. I have drunk with many of the men-at-arms since we came here, and they are all sick of doing nothing."

"But what can we do about it? Chu Lao is a very powerful wizard," Lin Ten pointed out. "Would it not be dangerous to cross him?"

Hao Sen hesitated for a moment, and then brought out his suggestion.

"What say you to turning bandit for a while?"

Kuo Ming was the first to answer. "With such an emperor and such an army as we have in Tiger City, a bandit's life should be an easy one. I remember—well, no matter." He coughed, and hid his confusion in his wine-cup.

Lin Soo glanced at him, and then back at Hao Sen. "There is something more than a desire for plunder in your proposition," he said shrewdly. "Explain."

Hao Sen did so, and they listened with rapt attention.

"It is much to ask," he finished. "But it might prove worth it."

"If it was no more than a passing whim, we would still fall in with you, my sister and I," Lin Soo stated. "Have you forgotten our vow to you? But it is a bold plan, and may well serve. You, Kuo Ming? How say you?"

The bass-voiced soldier set his wine-cup down. "As you may perhaps have guessed, I was not always a respectable mercenary as you see me now. I once passed a brief time with the H'ung H'udze—the Red Bandits... I think I could call back to mind sufficient of what I learned then to serve us in good stead."

He looked at Hao Sen. "You will need Starlight," he said. "Likewise a sword, since I see yours was taken from you. I think I run least risk if I show myself around the town now. I will meet you at the broken place in the wall to the east—Lin Soo also knows it—at dawn. If your charm on the jailer lasts the night, we should be well into bandit country before they discover we have left the city."

He rose smoothly to his feet and was gone.

The north-eastern road lay between very steep hills, on whose summits the snow was still crusted thick. Dawn mists swirled around the legs of their camels as they put the miles behind them, and it was not

long before the shape of Tiger City was completely blotted out.

They halted at about mid-day, and made a fire to warm themselves. Squatting around it, they discussed their best choice of direction.

"As I read the situation," said Kuo Ming, to whom they looked for information garnered from drinking companions and the soldiers with whom he had talked in the city, "the bandits have been much emboldened throughout the winter by the inactivity of the army, so much so that whereas they formerly only ventured as close as three days' march from any great town, they have been seen less than one day's march even from Tiger City. There can be few passes open even yet, in this sort of country, but when we find one the chances are that we will come across bandits simply by following it."

"That is what we must do, then," said Hao Sen. "But we must not be precipitate in our action. I need a little time to practise my skill in magic, for Chu Lao knows very much more than I, and the chances of finding a first-class wizard content to live a bandit's life when there is so much more wealth and comfort in the city are small."

He plucked a brand from the tiny fire, blew on it and muttered a couple of words; the licking tongue of flame which clung to it burst out into a jet like a blowlamp, ten meters long, and boiled the snow from the crevice between two rocks. He dropped the brand again, and his companions looked at him with awe.

"Where did you get your skill in magic, Hao Sen?" asked Lin Ten timidly.

"Far to the south, many years ago," said Hao Sen, and thought what an interesting double meaning the perfectly factual statement contained.

Of course, there were probably no bandits at all. But his own individual significance was at least as great as

Chu Lao's, and he had by now decided that with him were the three other most significant persons he had yet met.

Between them, they should be able to finish the task.

Somewhere, deep in his mind, he found himself regretting that it should be over so soon. The regret mingled with a contrasting pride at having—despite his own arrant carelessness at one or two points—mastered the situation so thoroughly in that brief space of time.

Had Chu Lao really made himself over-c o n s p i c u o u s? Or—nagging doubts assailed him—had he himself been too hasty in jumping to the conclusion that he had identified the most significant person?

Human vanity was on the side of his decision, he told himself. After all, in a place such as Tiger City (and he had been to many, most of them less impressive), there could be only a few major foci of significance at any one time; he had seen towns, when he was much less experienced and had to undertake comparatively simple tasks, where one might turn one's head and find that a house was nothing more than a shell, uninhabited and ruinous.

Yes, the chances were in his favour.

He got abruptly to his feet. "I scent bandits," he said. "Let us take the first hillside pass which we find open, and I think we will meet what we want."

They re-mounted as they had been before: Lin Ten astride Starlight, clinging with her arms around Hao Sen's waist, and Lin Soo, teeth chattering, behind Kuo Ming. Before they departed, Kuo Ming scooped snow over the site of their fire, and they took care not to let their mounts tread anywhere but on hard-frozen ground which would not show a spoor.

It was logical that they should

soon come up with bandits, given the postulated situation; Hao Sen scanned the trail ahead and gestured that they should swing off to the right between two rocks and scramble up a cleft. The winding path soon took them out of sight of the road, and Hao Sen was just thinking, "Somewhere around here?," when a cold voice commanded them to halt.

Two bearded men, wrapped in heavy skin jerkins, were regarding them from a higher point of vantage. Each of them bore, strung and levelled, a bow with a red-feathered arrow.

"Tsien Po!" said Kuo Ming suddenly, and flung up his arm towards the nearer of the pair. "Surely the gods of luck are with us!"

Uncertainly, the man he had addressed lowered his bow, though his companion did not follow suit. "That is my name," he admitted. "And you—are you by chance Kuo Ming?"

"That I am!" chortled Kuo Ming in his bass voice. "Sick of belonging with an army that sits in towns and has no bigger prey than a fat-bottomed street-walker! But who would have thought that we would chance directly across the H'ung H'udze when we grew tired of idleness and decided to take a share in the rich pickings the emperor is nowadays permitting?"

The other man spoke out of the side of his mouth. "He is known to you, Tsien Po?"

"He is. He was a good swordsman once. He turned caravan guard when times were bad some years ago, and went south."

"And I'm a good swordsman still," Kuo Ming boasted. "I have prevailed on these people with me to quit their soft way of living and return to a life of sport and adventure. He who rides beside me is Hao Sen, not only a soldier and a killer of dragons"—plural, now, noted Hao Sen wryly—

"but a skilful wizard into the bargain."

Tsien Po hesitated. "The Chief may not be kindly disposed towards a man who left his band when times were lean and now wishes to wriggle his way back," he said warningly. Hao Sen spoke up.

"Any man would welcome news such as we bring," he said calmly. "For we have come to offer him the chance of sacking Tiger City."

The man whose name they did not know drew his breath in sharply. "A bold design! To sack a city is a thing which has much occupied the Chief lately. If you truly have the key to Tiger City, you will be welcome. My name is Ho Chan."

"We are honoured to become acquainted with the distinguished Ho Chan and Tsien Po," said Hao Sen. "But we crave more the privilege of encountering your leader."

The two bearded bandits exchanged glances. They seemed to come to a decision simultaneously, and dropped from their higher rock to the cleft below. "Through here," they said together.

A few minutes brought them to the bandit encampment, and Hao Sen was both surprised and pleased to see how extensive it was. Hide tents to the number of two or three hundred—almost the amount of a small army—were grouped in a bowl-like depression among the hills; riding camels and pack-mules were tethered beside them, and women went between camp fires with bowls of food and buckets of snow to melt for drinking water.

There was one tent larger than all the others, which even had a certain barbaric magnificence; part of its door-flap was a badly weather-stained Turkey carpet, and dull brass ornaments and charms hung from its poles.

"Wait here," said Ho Chan curtly, and pushed his way inside.

They attracted surprisingly little attention as they dismounted stiffly and stood with Tsien Po awaiting the reappearance of Ho Chan. A few curious glances was all that they received.

Then the flap of the tent swung aside again, and Ho Chan came out with another, smaller man in garish clothes, whose hair was foppishly long and heavily oiled. Brass earrings gleamed through the locks of it. He was wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, removing some sort of oily broth from his lank moustache.

"You I remember, Kuo Ming," he said abruptly. "And you have brought a wizard with you? I like not wizards."

His eyes fastened contemptuously on Hao Sen. "Show me a trick," he commanded, and Hao Sen nodded without speaking. He walked brazenly to the side of the tent and detached from it a polished metal mirror; holding it so that it cast its reflection of the tent from which it was taken to a point on the ground a few yards to the side, he muttered an improvised charm.

Another tent, slightly distorted but quite recognizable, sprang into being alongside the original.

"A good trick," agreed the Chief grudgingly. "What purpose does it serve?"

"You know that the emperor's army grows fat and lazy sitting on its behind in Tiger City," said Hao Sen.

"Of course. One could hardly overlook the fact," said the bandit leader with heavy irony.

"Suppose now that I were to double—treble—quadruple the apparent size of your band? Suppose it should seem that the city was besieged by thousands and not by hundreds? Do you think such an army would not panic?"

An avaricious gleam showed in the

Chief's eyes. "Come into my tent," he said grandly. "For once I meet a wizard who speaks sound sense."

Before night fell, they had come to an agreement. Hao Sen felt it hardly worth while to haggle about conditions, since this stroke they were planning would put a permanent end to Tiger City if he had sized up the situation correctly, but for the sake of appearances he bargained for a respectable share of the loot.

They feasted and drank with the bandit tribe around the fires when their plan was settled, and then the Chief ordered the best and most wind-proof of his tents vacated for them. Sounds of laughter and shouting still rose from around the camp as Hao Sen threw himself down happily on a heap of soft furs. In a way, it was an admission of weakness to go outside the city in his search for the solution, but now he was sure he had found the key.

He was on the verge of drifting into a contented slumber when the flap of his tent lifted and dropped, and a warm lithe form stretched out beside him on the furs.

Later, he regretted more than ever that his task was nearly done.

Effectually, of course, it would not matter whether the army panicked or not. The reflection crossed Hao Sen's mind as he watched the bandits form up preparatory to marching on the final leg of their approach to Tiger City. The army meant nothing. What was necessary, was to put Chu Lao sufficiently off his stroke—to disconcert him by demonstrating that there was more to the world than simply Tiger City—and to take advantage of his even momentary loss of self-control. The one thing that made the problem seriously complicated was the fact that Hao Sen was having to work in accordance with his opponent's rules. But he was used to that.



And it was at least an even chance that Chu Lao knew very little more of the real laws governing the conflict than Hao Sen did.

The gongs began; the banners were lifted up; the barbarian army of conquest took the trail.

Hao Sen had insisted on leaving Lin Ten behind in the camp, although Kuo Ming had been surprised at his attitude, pointing out that it would be useful to have her along to bandage him if he was wounded and in general to console him. Hao Sen had laughed it off with reference to his magical invulnerability—something he was only too acutely aware did not yet exist and might only exist for a few seconds some time in the not-so-distant future.

Now he eased Starlight into a gentle walk alongside Kuo Ming's mount, a few places behind the Chief in the procession. "How does it feel to be taking the warpath as a bandit again?" he inquired.

"Much as it ever did," said Kuo Ming, idly following the beat of the gongs by drumming with his fingers on the pommel of his saddle. "How do you feel, doing it for the first time?"

"Much as you did, I imagine," Hao Sen answered, and they both laughed.

Hao Sen had chosen the hour before dawn for their final approach, arguing that for the night-watch to see an army of tents and banners facing them as soon as it was light would play havoc with their already low morale. More to the point (though he did not mention this openly), for Chu Lao to be called from his bed and find his city besieged would render him that much more apt to lose his head.

So, with the first hint of sunlight staining the sky, the bandits deployed all round the city, pitching tents and taking their mirrors to do with them as Hao Sen had instruct-

ed. He did not want to risk duplicating men—such experiments were likely to backfire—but banners and other inanimate objects he intended to copy wholesale.

When the first shout of amazement went up from the sleepy guards on the gate-houses and the ramparts, there seemed to be thousands of tents in view.

"Good work, wizard," said the Chief with satisfaction. "Now let us see if you can fight as well as you can throw a spell!"

He turned his camel and yelled at his main war-party, and with gongs beating thunderously the armed men galloped towards the eastern gate.

Kuo Ming and Hao Sen followed, Kuo Ming eager for action, Hao Sen wishing to get as close to the city as he could. He scanned the walls keenly to tell whether—so far—there were any signs of the panic he hoped for.

The attackers drew up in half-moon formation facing the gate, to await the arrival of the first reply from the besieged. It took the form of the officer of the city guard whom Hao Sen had met before, shouting at them to demand who they were.

The Chief signalled to a bowman beside him, who sent a red-feathered shaft whining into the wood of the tiger-head shields ranged on the balcony.

"We are the H'ung H'udze!" he shouted. "The Red Bandits! Tell your idle and dissipated emperor that he has one half-day to surrender his city to us. When the sun crosses the zenith, we shall attack."

The officer shouted back a coarse insult, and could be seen having a hasty discussion with one of his aides. Hao Sen caught the Chief's eye.

"It is not good for them to be able to study our formation unmolested," he remarked.

"Well taken," nodded the Chief,

and a hail of arrows drove the officer and his companions from the balcony.

The morning leaked slowly away. Every time a head showed above the ramparts, a watchful Bowman loosed an arrow, and before noon there were twenty or thirty memorials to the incautiousness of soldiers accustomed to idleness bleeding down the walls.

Impatiently, Hao Sen rode back and forth around the city, wondering if this mere inaction betokened confusion on Chu Lao's part, and whether he ought to seize his chance now. He might, for all he knew, have missed his opportunity.

But he would know soon—and even as he quieted his restless mind, the boom of the great war-gongs thundered out. The first flight of fire-arrows soared over the ramparts into the city, and menacingly the army of bandits began to close in.

Suddenly, there was a response from the city. A figure clad in full armour strode on to the balcony over the east gate, and shouted loudly for the attention of the bandits. The Chief rode cautiously forward, and halted at such a distance that only a superbly well-aimed arrow could find him.

"Your emperor wishes to surrender?" he yelled.

"Are you the leader of this band?" the armoured man cried.

"I am!" the Chief agreed, and Hao Sen, seized with a sudden premonition, urged Starlight hard forward. As he began to move, the armoured figure—whom he guessed would be Chu Lao, confident of his ability to protect himself—signalled a Bowman who had been crouching out of sight behind the wall. This man let off his arrow almost without aiming it; it flew high and straight and true, obviously enchanted so that it would not miss.

Alarmed, the Chief spun his camel on its hind legs, but the action would

have been in vain—the arrow swerved to compensate, and a howl of horror went up from the bandits. Rising in his saddle, hoisting his shield aloft, Hao Sen seemed almost to fly the last few paces, and the shaft sank deep into his shield scant feet from the Chief's broad back.

Before the audience in and outside the city could recover from their amazement, he had loosed the arrow from its place, caught up the bow laid across the Chief's saddle, and sent it whining back towards the city. Perhaps the word he had spoken was not enough; perhaps the man in armour was not really Chu Lao—in any case, this time the spell was weak, and the arrow fell a man's height short of the balcony.

The seeming miracle acted as a signal to the bandits, and under the protection of a shower of arrows aimed at the balcony they charged towards the gate. The armoured man had ducked from sight; his place was taken by a group of men-at-arms who proceeded to put down a withering fire on the attackers.

Hao Sen ignored the thanks, grudgingly given, of the Chief. Things were not going quite as he had anticipated. Instead of a confused panic reflex, the defenders seemed to be settling down to a concerted plan of action. Hao Sen was sure—naturally—that the bandits would do their utmost; he was not worried that they would prove coward or inefficient at their task. But he had always to remember that he was working in accordance with Chu Lao's rules, not his own, and Chu Lao might well have his own ideas of the relative abilities of his army, even after three months' soft living, and a bunch of nomadic bandits.

He wondered what had driven a person like Chu Lao to this course. Personal inadequacy of some kind was the standard answer—desire for power? Kuo Ming was comparatively,

simple: a need for colour and violent action explained him sufficiently. But what could be regarded as inadequate about the ruler of Tiger City?

Two hours passed, and the bandits withdrew an arrow-shot from the city, leaving fewer dead than could be clearly seen hanging on the ramparts, while under cover of their bowmen a group of pack-mules were driven towards the gate with loads of brush and dried wood. Several men fell as they struggled to heap the stuff against the heavy wooden gate, but at length the Chief gave the signal, and fire-arrows were showered on the inflammable pile.

A peal of thunder burst out in the clear sky, and it suddenly began to pour with rain. Hao Sen had visions of the clouds depriving him of his illusory additions to the number of tents, but that fear was spared him, for the rain lasted only a few minutes, and then the city gates were hurled wide over the smouldering sodden brushwood to let out the vanguard of the defenders. Mounted and on foot, they charged forward yelling, and the fight spread by degrees all round the city.

It was tough work; particularly around a huge and gorgeous silk banner bearing an embroidered tiger was there a violent melee. Seeing this, Kuo Ming shouted to Hao Sen that they should work their way towards it, and Hao Sen gave himself up to the sheer exhilaration of physical combat.

The time for arrows was past; now it was sword, axe and occasionally pike. He let Kuo Ming lead the way, finding that they worked well together as a team; Kuo Ming would distract the attention of a soldier who was proving too much for a bandit, and Hao Sen's long pike would reach past the hindquarters of Kuo Ming's camel, swipe sideways and drive down. Four or five times they repeated the same tactic, and

Kuo Ming grinned back over his shoulder at his companion to shout something congratulatory and incomprehensible.

Then they were pressing close to the tiger-gaudy banner, and Hao Sen knew that Chu Lao was aware of his presence. Starlight stumbled and cried when there was no one near her, and twice her feet seemed to be tangled by invisible ropes.

Now he could see his opponent plainly, his round face shiny beneath his pointed metal helmet, ear-flaps giving him polished metal cheeks. Idiotically, he rose in his saddle and screamed Chu Lao's name; the wizard flung up his arm and shouted a command, and half a dozen of his closest personal guard thrust their way forward.

"With me, Hao Sen!" cried Kuo Ming, and he waved the sword that the wizard had repaired for Hao Sen after the death of the dragon. He swung it at the helmet of the nearest of the enemy, and in that moment Chu Lao bethought himself of the spell he had wrought—and countermanded it.

Instead of crashing through the soldier's neck, the blade in Kuo Ming's hand bent, before it struck, so that the hilt was at right angles. The startled man-at-arms whose life had so narrowly been spared wasted no time wondering about the fact—merely cut the throat of Kuo Ming's camel. One of his companions thrust upwards over his shoulder with a pike, and Kuo Ming slid to the ground over his mount's head, coughing blood.

Purposefully, the other guards made for Hao Sen.

He, seeing there was too much risk in staying mounted now, leapt from his saddle; relieved of his weight, Starlight kicked furiously, and heavy pads knocked the two foremost of the attackers flying, ribs bruised, wind knocked out of them.

"O wondrous beast!" whispered Hao Sen.

But the distraction afforded before the camel was herself slashed to the ground with wild sword-cuts was only enough for him to take a few steps towards Kuo Ming's body. One thing was clear to him now. there was a law governing Chu Lao's magic which was the same as for all magic, and it had not been broken. He had to get his hands on a sword—not the one he held, though it was straight and still keen, but the bent, apparently useless one which Kuo Ming even in death clung fast to.

It seemed that the three strides separating him from the twisted weapon were the longest journey he had ever had to undertake. He slashed and thrust and caught blows on his shield; twice glancing swords made his helmet ring, and twice he himself felt his sword-point slow and then free itself in a way which meant it had cut clean through human flesh. A dismembered arm seemed for one wild moment trying to catch hold of him by the beard; he beat it aside with his shield.

Then he made his dive for the bent sword, wrested it from Kuo Ming's dead grasp, and straightened up. Taken aback by his unexpected action, the attackers gave him a moment's respite.

"Chu Lao!!" Hao Sen shouted. "Chu Lao! I name your city!"

The wizard, as if struck by a premonition, wavered where he stood; all over the battlefield men seemed to lose heart for the fight and turned to see what would happen. Hao Sen rushed on.

"The city is Tiger City! That tiger is your city! The tiger is less powerful than the dragon!"

All eyes turned towards the city; how it happened could not clearly be seen, but where it had stood was a green-eyed striped cat, crouching

and snarling, its claws unsheathed and huge beyond imagining.

"My Tiger!" cried Chu Lao. "That is my tiger!"

"And this sword has drunk of a dragon's blood!" Hao Sen shouted. "*This sword is my dragon!*"

He whirled the blade once around his head and flung it sparkling into the air; as it twisted, it changed, and as it fell it fell on four gigantic taloned feet. It raised its spiny head and waved its monstrous tail; from its open jaws it roared defiance at the tiger.

It reared up; it slashed, and its talons added stripes of blood to the tiger's striped hide; it bit, and rivers of blood stained the earth. Vainly the tiger's claws tore at its impenetrable scales; there was no chance for it. In moments it fell, with a thud that shook the world. The world was riven apart, and with it, Hao Sen's mind. For an instant he saw the tents of the bandits, the gory ground, the men-at-arms and the dying, and then—

*—and then he was Gerald Howson, Psi. D., curative telepathist first class, World Health Organisation.*

*As he always had been.*

The nurse waited until his eyes were fully open and taking in the room around him before she began to detach the artificial feeding machine which had kept him alive during his journey. She said nothing; she had attended to Howson before, and knew he disliked being spoken to directly he returned.

For a long time after he awakened he lay quite still, until the door of the ward slid back and Pandit Singh came in. His green hospital gown swished quietly as he approached the bed.

"Congratulations," he said at length. "It must have been tough. But they're coming out of catalepsy

now, one by one, and I think they're all going to be all right."

Howson didn't look directly at the doctor's serious brown face; instead, he glanced through the window at the great white towers of Ulan Bator. "Yes, it was tough," he admitted. "But not quite in the way you mean."

The nurse brought a chair to the bedside, and Pandit Singh sat down. "Gerry, there's something I want to ask you—off the record, before you have to do your report. It's been puzzling me. What makes these people do it? Why do they react that way? Do you know?"

"You mean, what impels a transmitting telepathist to invite people to join him in a fantasy world, and why do they accept a subordinate position in it apparently less attractive than their real existence?" Howson smiled faintly. "Odd you should ask me that. It was occupying me on this trip. The stock answer is personal inadequacy, isn't it?"

"Yes, but that's not the quarter of it!" Pandit Singh spoke emphatically. "Hugh Choong—the nucleus of this lot—we need men like that. He's a first-class psychiatrist and one of our top industrial disputes arbitrators into the bargain. There's nothing patently inadequate about him—he handles two of the most difficult jobs in the world with supreme confidence!"

"No wonder his Tiger City was such a polished job," murmured Howson; then, noting the expression of noncomprehension on the Indian's face, he added, "Tell you later. No, there was nothing incompetent about his fantasy-building. He must have a superlatively disciplined mind. And yet, as you say, he preferred to run off into the role of a barbarian Mongolian sort of grand vizier... A strange mixture of primitive actualities and modern concepts, his particular universe..."

He spread his hands. "No, I would rather not offer explanations for such behaviour. Now my case, on the other hand, is rather different."

"Your case?"

"Yes, my case. Some of the less significant individuals in one of these fantasies are comparatively easy to account for. There was a man called Kuo Ming—I doubt if I could identify him. In his case, it was a need for violence which lured him, persuaded him to join with Choong—how did he choose to start his group off, by the way?"

"Typically. He walked them into that square facing the hospital, sat them on benches, and sent them into catalepsy."

"Knowing that there of all places they were bound to be spotted before they starved to death, brought in and cared for. I see. Well, Kuo Ming's need for violence was satisfied—by a barbarian's pike. He died. I should imagine that will cure him.

"But my case. Now that would be one where the actions of the nucleus—the projective telepathist without whom a fantasy grouping would be impossible—would be more easily explained than those of the—the supporting cast."

"Are you jealous?" said Pandit Singh with horrified realisation.

"Yes, I'm jealous," said Howson. "And why not? There was a girl there—her name was Lin Ten—well, it wasn't real, anyway. I'll give you my report later, if you have no objection. I—I need to rinse my mind."

He got down from the bed; Pandit Singh's eyes followed him as he went towards the door. He had to reach up towards the handle, of course. It was slightly stiff, but when the nurse made to help him he glared at her, and redoubled his effort. After a second try he managed it, and Gerald Howson, four feet three inches tall, went limping slowly through the corridors towards the modern world.