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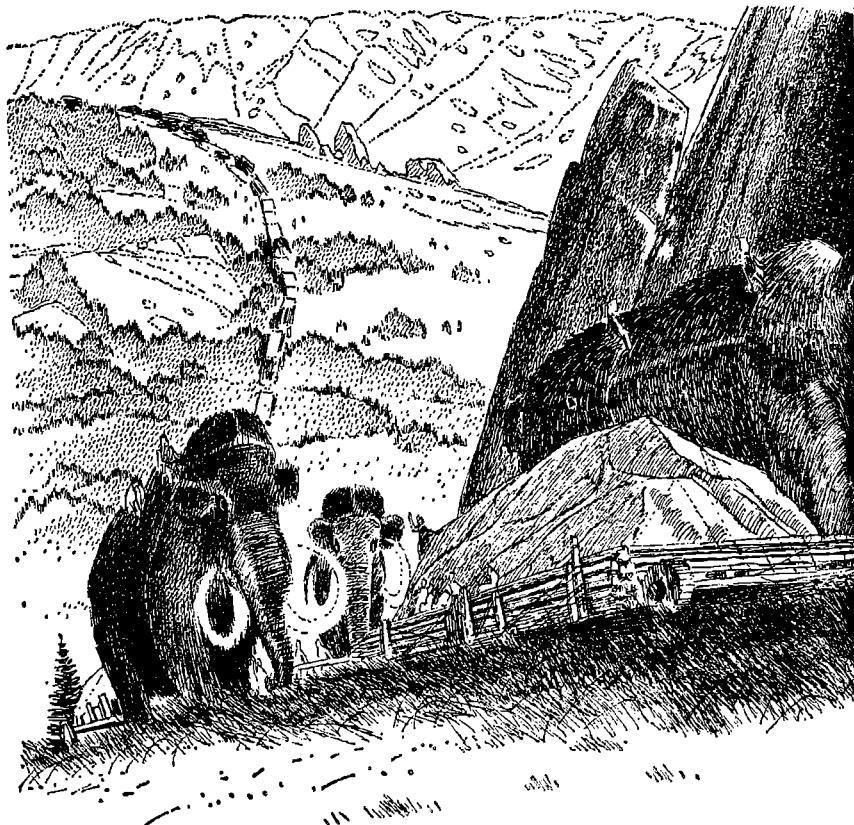
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Illustrating *The House That Time Forgot*

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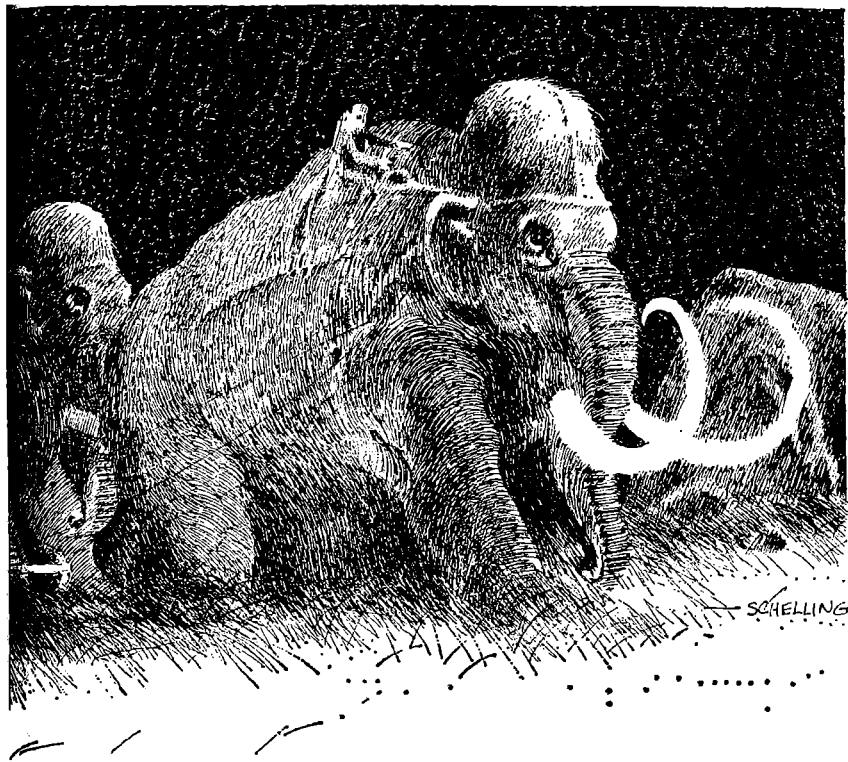


Barayun of Aleyn had a magical device which pointed always in one direction. Unfortunately, that direction unerringly led to . . .

the DEMON of the NORTH

By C. C. MacAPP

Illustrator SCHELLING



THOUGH the Sibyr had not yet begun to replace bronze with iron, Barayun was impressed with King Hulj's court. The great beams of the ceiling were not pine, as he would have expected, but some dark-red rich hardwood imported from a warmer land. The glass of the windows was clear. There were rugs and tapestries of some coarse fibre that he guessed might be mammoth's wool. He was already fa-

miliar with the superb bronze ornamentation and weaponry of the Sibyr, which were items of trade throughout most of the inhabited world.

Hulj was taller than Barayun, and still very erect though the yellow of his hair and beard were streaked with gray. The young woman at his side—his latest queen or consort, Barayun supposed—had hair as yellow as daffodils and eyes like the clear sea

sky at evening. She wore fine silks, but no jewelry except a striking necklace of pale gold set with rubies. At Hulj's left, standing not on the dais but one step below it, was a man who could hardly be Hulj's son but might be a younger brother or a cousin. This man's eyes, when they rested upon Barayun, were speculative.

Hulj had already received the leaders of two armies come to join the great expedition; a yellow-skinned man from the southeast and a swarthy black-haired one from somewhere to the south. Now he was coping with a language problem as he welcomed a big black-skinned warrior from the continent far to the south and west. Barayun thought of offering his services as interpreter, but he had only a smattering of the black man's language, and Hulj seemed to be disposing of the thing gracefully.

Barayun had been kept waiting until the last; deliberately, he was sure. Now he went forward and knelt. He knew the protocol; his own nation was not yet completely deprived of royalty.

Hulj, his eyes cold, motioned him up. "I am told you speak our tongue."

"Awkwardly, I fear, sire," said Barayun, knowing he spoke it very well. He tried to keep his eyes off the girl. It seemed un-

fair a man Hulj's age should possess her.

Hulj stared at him uncordially. "You have the unctuousness I would expect. I have met your king, as you no doubt know. The only good I can say of him is that his hair is not quite so outlandish as your own."

Barayun felt his face grow warm. Even among his own people, the bright red of his hair drew comment.

"I suppose," said Hulj, "you have a speech explaining why your king will not send an army."

WITH an inward shrug, Barayun went into the speech. "It was discussed at length, my lord; and the question was asked, what sense in sending warriors to the Sibyr? It would be like carrying fish to the sea. Besides, we have so little familiarity with the cold country that our warriors would be a burden, not a help."

Hulj smiled scornfully. "I could have quoted it myself. Actually, I suppose your king thinks when I have spent enough of my strength fighting the Demon, he can march against me again. If you wish, you can turn home today and tell him that when the time comes I will take a few squads and chase him home as I did before."

Barayun's face went fever-hot. Words burst from him. "I am no

messenger from one king to another. I was sent by the Council of Aleyn, which orders kings as you order your pants-mender. You have never met soldiers of Aleyn, but only a few freezing mercenaries whom you no doubt bought off with a handful of cheap bronze trinkets. As for invading your lands, from what I have seen I would not pasture swine upon them." He turned his back and started away. Appalled at his own outburst, he expected spears any instant but would not let himself cringe.

"Hold!" roared the king. Blond spearmen seized Barayun and spun him to his knees. "Bring him here!"

They prodded him forward with spear-points. He traded glares with Hulj, but noticed that the young woman fought to suppress laughter and that the man standing beside the dais smirked delightedly.

Hulj had control of his voice. "If you have any other message before being quartered and fed to the wolves, you had best state it promptly."

Barayun, shamed by Hulj's poise, said as evenly as he could, "I was to go with you and observe what is in the north. If it is something that can be fought, Aleyn will move against it with all her strength."

The king thought for what seemed a long time, his eyes

gradually losing their fire. He glanced surreptitiously toward the man to his left. Finally, he motioned for the spearmen to withdraw their weapons. "You may go with us so long as you keep out of the way and cause no mischief. I will decide later what to do about your insolence." He beckoned to a stocky, naked-scalped man at the side of the hall who looked as if he'd been in every war and mead-house brawl in the last thirty years and hoped for thirty years more. "This is Gault. He will see to your needs."

Barayun started away, then remembered. "A small gift." Ignoring the king's frown, he took from his cloak the compass in its intricately-inlaid box. "From the Chief of Council himself."

Hulj, his eyes unreadable now, took it and opened the lid. He looked up in surprise. "I have heard of these. Is it true it points always to the Demon?"

"If Demon it be," said Barayun.

"I will send a messenger with thanks," said Hulj. "Later, I will want to hear more of this Council that calls itself above kings. Little as I think of your king, it does not seem a thing I would like."

GAULT, once out of the hall, roared with laughter. "Jord!" he said when he'd gotten control of it, "The way you spoke to him,

I was already choosing a squad in my mind to carry out the execution. And did you notice Renne's disappointment when it was stayed?"

"Who is Renne?"

"He stood with the king. A cousin, and the pretender. It would suit him well to have Hulj at odds again with Aleyn." He took Barayun's arm and guided him down a side-street. "How goes it with Aleyn these years?"

"Ill," said Barayun with impulsive frankness, liking this man at once. "You have been there?"

"Once; when I was a boy barely old enough to . . . We sailed by the northern sea, past the Isles of Tin and thence down the continent and out to Aleyn. That was before the squabble, and we spent a glad week there. Thence we sailed east to the inland sea guarded by the great rock, and through another small sea or two, and home by land. Aleyn was fair and sunny. Do you freeze as we do?"

"No," said Barayun, "if you suffer from cold here, that is out of step with the world pattern. The warmth is the trouble, we think. You recall how Aleyn lies? In my own lifetime the sea has risen a man's height, and the best ports are abandoned. And that is not the worst. Rain washes our soil into the sea, and drowns crops on what remains.

Many have migrated to our colonies. Those who stay live mostly on fish."

Gault shook his head regretfully. "Aleyn was great," he said. He looked at Barayun. "And yet I have heard, red-haired one, that Aleyn does not believe in the Demon."

"We believe in something," Barayun said. "On the continent west of Aleyn, and in most of the north, ancient ice is melting. Red rains fall, as if the sky itself bled. I hope to learn if this Demon of yours is involved."

Gault seemed to have a little trouble with the idea. "You are not a warrior?"

Barayun shook his head. "I am trained in arms, but I . . ." He realized there was no word for 'science' in the Sibyr tongue. "My work is in certain arts in which Aleyn excells."

In the few days before the expedition got under way, Barayun marvelled anew at Hulj's resources. Nearly ten thousand foreign warriors had to be outfitted with clothing for the north. Only the yellow-skinned ones had fur garments of their own. Then there were the kitchens, and the vast trains of wagons—huge sleds, really, with removable wheels—and the food that had to be compiled, and the fodder for beasts.

The armies were organized in-

to six self-sufficient units, each incorporating some of the foreign warriors to teach them the ways, and each with its own herd of two hundred mammoths and twice as many deer. These last were not the small deer of Aleyn, nor the great elk of the continents near her, but a long-haired king of the cold country. They were to supply milk and meat along the way.

Besides the supplies for the humans, the wagons were heaped high with dried fodder for the animals. Gault, who turned out to be Hulj's first general, had Barayun helping him because there was a scarcity of men who could tally and compute. They were everywhere, watching every operation to make sure supplies were properly assorted and loaded. Gault was doubtful about the mammoths. "I've never taken them through barren country before," he said, scowling at a wagon that was being fitted with its harness, "You've never observed them? They're the laziest loafers you've ever seen. Hitch them to a load a goat could pull, and they moan and sag and make pitiful eyes. Be an hour late feeding, and they take on as if they were about to drop from starvation. Let them eat a handful too much, and they swell up and puff and grunt and break wind and look at you as if you were to blame for it all." He spat and stared toward a corral

where a number of the shaggy monsters were lined up along the fence, watching the activity. "There's only one thing in the world they're good for, beside scaring savages who've never seen them before; and that is, that riding lends a man a certain dignity."

BARAYUN'S judgment of the beasts was less unfavorable, though they did protest out of all proportion to the work. The one he and Gault rode was named Drooi, and though he was a monster bull, the immediate leader of any herd he met, he was gentle and even affectionate. He'd carried Gault in many a desperate battle, and Gault's marvelous cursing could not disguise the bond between them.

The riding-harness went over the back behind the hump, and over the neck, and between the forelegs. Straps on each side of the hump were supposed to keep the harness from slipping sideways. The seats hung on each side, high enough so a man could see over the hump. Barayun tilted and bumped and nearly fell off with every step, since he was right against the shoulder. After a while, watching others, he learned to put one foot or the other in a certain leather ring of the harness and move himself slightly in time with the beast's stride. Also, it was better to

kneel in the seat, or straddle it, part of the time to avoid cramped muscles. Gault grinned at his discomfort.

This first sixth of the army was leading off and the others were to follow at intervals of a day so that the camp sites would not be overcrowded. Hulj and the young woman were leading the second. The others were under four of Gault's captains, with his second-in-command leading the last to round up stragglers.

Gault was not happy at Hulj's coming along. "You understand," he said, glancing around to make sure he was not overheard, "my lord is the finest ruler in the world, and a great fighter in his day, and I have nothing but the highest respect and affection for him. All the same, I'd just as soon he stayed home and kept some of the women happy, if he's still able at all, and kept an eye on Renne, and made sure supply caches were prepared for the return trip. He's getting a little stiff in the joints and it's a chore to watch over him in battle. I'd rather be free for directing a fight, and perhaps to make a few private investigations into the color of the enemy's blood."

"He seems to be able to keep one woman happy," Barayun said. "At least, he brought her along." He tried to keep his voice casual.

Gault looked at him quickly,

then grinned. "You thought she was a consort? I saw you making ram's eyes at her. Curb yourself, my friend; that is the princess Dalna."

"Princess—." said Barayun, trying to avert his face so Gault couldn't see how red it was. "His daughter? I only glanced at her."

"Aye," said Gault, "I too only glance at her, and I see the same things you do. She is not for you nor me, red-haired one. Put such thoughts aside. We have plenty of wenches along; and if you are too bashful to approach one for yourself, I can—."

Barayun whirled toward him, furious, and choked as he saw the grin. He turned away and they rode in silence for a while, except that Gault mumbled girl's names just loud enough to hear, as he turned to stare pointedly at the part of the column where the women marched.

THE land, as they went north, showed the calamitous effects of the change in climate. Though this was spring, snow still lay heavy wherever there was shade, and even in many hollows and ravines where the slanting sun hit. Raw gullies scored the slopes, and everywhere were drifts of grass and small shrubs washed loose by the torrents. Even the stands of pine on the hillsides were not immune. There were uprooted roots and ugly scars in the

earth. Mud was everywhere.

Gault saw him looking, and said, "If my king were not so stubborn, the capitol would have been moved south years ago. Renne has been agitating to move it. In my grandfather's time, so it is said, these hills bloomed like a garden. Now most of the animals have fled; even the birds."

"I don't understand," Barayun said, "why your climate should be so cold when the rest of the world seems to be warming up. Is the wind mainly from the north?"

"Nay; and that is another change. The old records speak of north winds; now it is always from the east, or nearly so."

"What kind of land lies to the east?"

"You could journey to the north and east for half a year and find it always cold and barren. The land reaches far to the north there; some say to the end of the earth; though my uncle told me he found a sea there which may be sailed in summer. Think you it is the wind blowing across those lands that brings us the cold?"

"It may be," said Barayun. He'd already noticed a steady wind, not strong but chill, on his right cheek. "This Demon," he said, "have you direct knowledge of him yourself?"

"Direct? Aye." Gault pulled up

his left sleeve and showed a bad scar on his forearm. "Is this direct enough? It spat our spear-points back at us, molten, and I was not attentive enough."

Barayun tried to assimilate that. He didn't want to offend Gault. He waited, and Gault went on, "I led the first expedition against it twelve years ago. That was when I got this. An eldritch fight it was! Imagine hurling a spear, and having the shaft burnt off and the head sent back at you molten! It was enough to . . ."

Barayun did not think Gault was a man to imagine things. He wondered if the expedition had fought some big unknown animal in the north, and had simultaneously gotten tangled up with a volcano. To avoid seeming to doubt Gault, he lifted his crossbow, in which Gault had already shown great interest. "I'll look forward to trying this. My bolts are of iron, which according to legend is particularly distasteful to demons and such."

Gault shrugged. "We shall see. Though, as I hear it, that metal must be made even hotter than bronze to become molten. Molten bronze coming back at me is hot enough." He rode silently for a while. "I doubt much we shall get to fight the thing."

"Why say you that?"

"We did get spears and arrows into it the first time, but on the second expedition, five years past,

it fled before us so fast and far we did not find it again that year. It has been located since, but I think it may prefer again to avoid a fight. Though I would not swear with a knife at my manhood that we were not a bedraggled victor the first time, and the Demon little hurt."

THE first night's camp was in a meadow with a stream along one side and a growth of pines along the other. The deer browsed on what grass was not drowned out. The mammoths ate pine foliage. They were well trained; instead of merely dispersing along the trees, they went in a line, each breaking off a good-sized branch or the top of a small tree and bringing it to the camp-site. More than one trip was made, to build an oblong enclosure of pine branches around the camp. The women picked the best spots, covered the mud with pine boughs, pitched tents, and got fires started. The mammoths, their work done, lined the inside of the enclosure with much trumpeting and rumbling and a few squabbles among themselves, and began to eat.

By nightfall men and animals were fed, and the deer were driven into one end of the enclosure. The mammoths were persuaded to lie down. A few resisted and were left standing, but most of them squirmed themselves into a

nearly-solid rampart and became quiet.

When he'd finished the meal of deer meat, milk, unleavened bread and greens from along the brooklet, Barayun went with Gault to inspect the camp. Some of the men had wives along, and there were a few stripling boys to learn the ways. There were no children or young girls. The unmarried women made what arrangements suited them.

Neither the yellow men nor the black ones had brought any women, so they did their own cooking and other chores. The former were relatively quiet, gambling and talking in restrained gibble-gabble around their fires. The black men had their own forms of gambling, but many of them worked at their weapons while groups around each fire had their chants going. A good many of the black men took off their fur garments and tried to find sleeping-positions that wouldn't fry them on one side and freeze them on the other. Barayun was a little tired of the furs too, but he stayed in them.

The only sentries were a few of the mammoth-handlers. Gault said the beasts themselves were light sleepers, and would give warning if so much as a rabbit came near the camp.

The handlers had no sleeping-tents, and Barayun had been wondering where he would sleep,

since he seemed technically to belong to that group, being a rider. Now he learned. The handlers not on guard crawled into spots among the great bodies.

Barayun, with a vivid image of Drooi rolling on him, hesitated. Drooi was lying with his belly toward the center of the enclosure, his head resting on the hind legs of another mammoth. His legs were stretched out along the ground. Barayun decided if he curled up against the belly he'd have warning enough. The brute could hardly roll on him without first gathering in its legs.

Gault grinned, and kept grinning. Even after it was too dark to see him, Barayun could feel his merriment. Finally Gault said, with profound regret in his voice, "Merry as it would be, I have not the heart. Come up here closer to me, red-hair."

Barayun sat erect. "Why?"

"Otherwise you may awake in a pool of urine."

"Oh," said Barayun. He got up, glad the darkness hid his face as the nearest handlers chortled. There was room close to the front legs. Gault was actually between them; evidently the upper didn't touch the lower. The end of Drooi's trunk felt of Barayun, then went back against Gault.

It was snug in the long wool below the chest, and not uncomfortable once Barayun got used

to the ponderous breathing. It was like the motion of a boat on mild seas. Drooi was not the least odorous thing he'd ever encountered, but there were enough other smells about so it didn't make much difference.

HULJ'S Capitol was on the river Obeh, which, according to Barayun's knowledge of this part of the world, had its sources far to the south near the land of the yellow men. Barayun had followed up it himself for two days, after reaching it in company with some horse-nomads who were loose subjects of Hulj. Now they were paralleling it through fairly high but not hilly country. Many days to the north, Gault said, it emptied into a gulf which ran far down from the northern sea.

Before they'd gone more than a fraction of the way, they were out of the pines and on monotonous lands, nearly flat, where only grasses and shrubs grew, and those sparsely. Spring was turning the frozen ground into mud, and the column picked its way painfully with many a backtrack and detour. The wind from the east scoured across the barrens, offsetting the warmth of the sun, which was out most of the time.

They were looking for the trail of supply trains which had established caches of food and fod-

der somewhere ahead. Until they found them, they'd have to live from the wagons. The mammoths were vocal about being on rations.

Four days after they'd seen the last tree, they met one of the trains coming back. There were about fifty mammoths, each drawing a nearly-empty wagon; two handlers for each mammoth; a dozen warriors; and less than twenty deer herded by several striplings and one old man. Gault hailed the warrior in charge. "What delayed you? No doubt you wasted a week at the cache, gambling and inventing pastimes that no decent man would want to guess at."

The man scowled. "We tarried a single day. The beasts were exhausted, and the trail—."

"Save your excuses for someone more gullible," Gault said. "How lies the trail? Can we reach the place by nightfall?"

The man shook his head. "Not in this cursed mud. We started with the first light."

Gault glanced at the sun, which was perhaps a third of the way through the afternoon. "We will make camp soon, then. Saw you a likely spot?"

"None I would choose if I had hopes of finding better. There is a bluff you can reach before sundown, the lea of which did not look too muddy." He looked toward the column's half-empty

wagons. "Can you spare us anything? By my reckoning, we are five days from fodder."

"Four," said Gault, "without dawdling. I can let you have two, if you have not eaten the cache bare while disporting. There are five columns behind me. Each may spare you a little. I would advise you to avoid the one next behind, though; Hulj is leading, and there was some talk of beheading loafers."

"The cache is ample," the man scowled, "and if you or the king wish to trade jobs with me, I will gladly take over your snug billets."

Gault chuckled and sent two of his handlers to exchange wagons. There were a few sick marchers who would turn back with the train, and three of the warriors from the train wanted to go north with Gault.

They found the bluff, which ran north and south, giving a little shelter from the wind. The fires were very scanty for lack of fuel. This was the fourth night without decent fires, and the black men were in low spirits. Gault took Barayun to talk to them.

Their leaders were delighted that Barayun understood their tongue. "If we could only have a little fuel each night," the spokesman said, "we could take off these animal skins for a while and become men again."

Barayun translated, and Gault gave a snort. "What kind of warriors are they?" he demanded, after some preliminary obscenities. "Can they not stand being clothed? Look at the yellow ones. They are so uncomplaining one would think each had a small invisible wench inside his clothing with him."

"The yellow-skinned ones are accustomed to cold, and they are wearing their own garments," Barayun said. "It is not so with these. They are in a climate very unlike their own, and animal skins have significance for them. Were you not uncomfortable when you travelled in hot climes?"

Gault spat. "Aye. But ask him what he thinks we are going to burn."

"They speak of the dung of the mammoths. Dried in the sun —."

Gault roared with laughter. Finally, he said, "All right. If they want to gather it up and carry it themselves, I won't object. Perchance its smell will be improved, or at least novel. Whatever wood we may find they can cut and carry too; but it will have to be on their own backs. I will not burden down the wagons with such nonsense. At least, not more than a very little."

THE mammoths were formed into two lines, not far apart, in

order to use the shelter of the bluff. The camp finished its chores and settled down.

The days were longer now; the sun circling low in the sky and dipping only for a short time below the northern horizon to leave a dim twilight. It was in this peculiar dusk that Barayun snapped suddenly awake with the feel of something wrong. The sentries were crouched close to the mammoths, not talking. The big beasts were stirring uneasily. All attention was directed to the top of the bluff.

As Barayun's eyes focussed he saw a bulky light-gray shape there, forty or fifty feet down the line. He recognized it as a giant bear. Its head was lowered in scrutiny of the camp. It began to pace along the edge of the bluff in Barayun's direction. The mammoths made nervous sounds.

Barayun felt for his crossbow and began cranking it up. Gault, who was just crawling from his sleeping-place, put out a hand as if to restrain him, then drew it back.

The bear paused directly above them and seemed to be staring into Barayun's eyes.

If he'd been fully awake, Barayun might have reasoned that this was not a creature to attack mammoths. As it was, he raised the bow hastily and loosed the bolt. Even before it took the bear

squarely in the chest, he realized he'd done a very foolish thing.

The bear screamed mortally and collapsed, to come sliding and writhing down the bluff. The line of mammoths heaved up like a giant surf. Gault came scuttling clear just as Drooi got his legs beneath him, with amazing agility for such a big animal. Gault grabbed Barayun and shoved him forward. "Mount! Mount!"

Barayun grabbed for the harness and hauled himself up just in time to avoid being crushed between Drooi and another beast. He had an awful moment of fear that Gault had gotten trapped, but as soon as the other mammoth lurched away, Gault came bounding from beneath Drooi.

The camp was a shambles now. Mammoths, shrilling their panic, were up and stampeding. People screamed. The deer broke free or were trampled. There was a jarring impact as Drooi blundered into a wagon. Drooi stumbled, caught his stride, and went on. Gault was pounding him behind the ear and shouting into it. Barayun, clinging where he could, bounced like another bit of harness. He would never again think of mammoths as slow animals. The night was full of sound now; the trumpeting and thunder of giant feet, yells of handlers, and the screams of hurt men and women falling behind.

SUDDENLY Drooi set his legs and slid to a stop. He stood, great flanks heaving.

Gault said, "Call! Call them in, Drooi!"

Drooi lifted his trunk and blew a shrill note. He sucked in air and blew another. Around them in the half-dark, other beasts answered.

Things began to quiet. Slowly, Drooi started back toward the camp. Barayun shook with the cold and with reaction. As they neared camp he could hear groans, and the sobbing of women. They passed a wagon, three of its wheels knocked off; another with its side shattered.

Gault shouted orders, and men began rallying to him. "Get fires burning!" he said, "Chop up the wagons that are worst damaged! Handlers! Find your beasts and follow the deer!"

The fires showed bodies, some of them awfully crushed. Several mammoths lay whimpering with broken limbs. At least a score of deer lay around the site, dead or dying. Ten or more of the wagons had been knocked about, some crushing men who'd been sleeping under them.

They rode to look at the bear. Its blood made a pool and stained the light-gray fur.

Men began trudging in from the darkness. After a while the first deer were herded back. They, and mammoths in ones and twos,

kept straggling in until after sunup.

Gault rode Drooi around the camp, looking things over. "Odin!" he said, "It will take a day to clean this mess up and get ready to travel. The worst of it is, Hulj will be upon us before we can move."

Barayun's shame boiled over. "Better you had not told me to mount," he said, "better I had died."

Gault looked at him with mixed expressions. At last he said, "It was a foolish thing, but I cannot let you take all the blame. I could have stayed your shot. But I was curious to see that weapon used."

WHEN Hulj arrived, in the middle of the afternoon, he already had the story from some straggler. His anger was cold. He addressed Dalna rather than Barayun. "Such you have to look forward to as a ruler, my dear. A hundred men and women trampled; not less than a dozen mammoths lost, plus a good third of the deer. All through the stupidity of one man, and a foreigner, at that." Later, Barayun learned, Gault had to talk long to get permission to keep Barayun with the column.

Despite his vow, Gault let wood from the splintered wagons be loaded on the good ones, though he made a great display of requiring the black men to carry token

amounts. Hulj transferred part of his column to make up the losses. He in turn would replenish from the column behind; thus the delay would be minimized and the final weakness left in the last column, where it belonged.

They reached the cache near noon of the following day and found a few starving wild deer trying to get at the fodder. These were recruited into the herd. Resupplied, the column went on. They camped in the open, so the fires were welcome.

Toward the end of the following day Gault said, "Heard you the wolves last night?"

"Aye," said Barayun.

"They are desperate with starvation. A herder was attacked yesterday, and would have been killed had not mammoths been ridden to his rescue. I must organize a hunt and teach them respect."

The hunt took place at the next (and last) cache. Three dozen mammoths, each mounting four men and followed by half a dozen more, dispersed into the ravines around a small sink. When they were hidden a herd of deer was driven by and a few of them, who showed signs of internal injuries anyway, were left as bait.

Packs of wolves followed the herd, and now they closed in on the prey. Barayun counted nearly fifty; huge creatures with bodies as long as a man. One pack quick-

ly pulled down a deer and fought over it, while others harrassed the remaining prey.

Now Gault urged Drooi out of hiding. Two yellow men, quiet as always, rode behind Gault and Barayun. Five of the black warriors, with two of Gault's own to instruct them, followed on foot.

The wolves saw the trap and raced around the closing circle of mammoths, seeking a way out. Spearmen shouted and threw stones to keep them from the gaps. As the circle narrowed, the warriors stretched out to fill the gaps. At that point the wolves, as if obeying a common leader, drew together in a single pack, near the center of the circle.

Hulj and Dalna were mounted at Drooi's left, with some more of the black men so the king could observe them in action.

Now the range was short enough, and arrows began to fly. One of the beasts yelped and darted from the pack with a shaft in its ribs. The rain of arrows increased. More wolves were hit, and they scattered.

THEY formed again quickly, on the run this time, and raced for a spot around the circle from Drooi. Gault was shooting now but Barayun, bow cocked, was waiting for a closer target. The two yellow men were shooting very fast, whipping arrows from

their quivers and not pulling their oddly-shaped bows hard, but hard enough. Their broad faces split with grins and they uttered little cries of glee.

The holocaust was too much for the wolves. They swerved in a body and streaked back toward the center. As the arrows followed them, they made a brief stand, heads lowered. Then, with an air of desperation, they came straight for Hulj's mammoth.

Barayun let his bolt go. It disappeared somewhere in the pack. He grabbed for another as he frantically cranked the bow. Spears began to fly from both sides, but this time the pack did not waver, though gray bodies writhed in its wake.

The mammoths were closing in sideways to narrow the gap ahead of the wolves. A sudden lurch of Drooi knocked Barayun off balance. He grabbed frantically, missed the handhold, and tumbled to the ground. The wolves were only yards away now, and their eyes fixed on him. He knew in that instant that they would not pass him without revenge.

He jumped to his feet and raised the bow. Something whipped around his waist, crushing the breath from him, and he was jerked high out of danger. Drooi's great trunk held him aloft, gasping and squirming, as the black men took the charge, spears firm.

Arrows rained on the wolves, but a desperate core of them hurtled at the black men. There were not enough spears for them all, and they tangled in a snarling, yelling chaos with the warriors. Barayun saw Dalna send an arrow into a beast that had a man by the arm.

It was over before Barayun could realize that he still held his bow, cocked and loaded, and that both arms were free. A handful of wolves broke clear and streaked away. He raised the bow and sent a futile bolt after them.

There was a roar of laughter at the belated shot. Even Gault joined in. But bitterest of all was Dalna's full-throated laugh, hearty as a man's.

Drooi put him down, face flaming, where he could clamber to his seat. He would gladly have changed places with one of the dead wolves.

SOMETIMES there were cold rains now, and once or twice snow. There was no trail. They followed the river, as nearly as mud would let them. Every sideravine became a barrier. The supplies dwindled. Gault transferred loads from some of them, removed the wheels, and they became barges to float north along the river, which would have no more rapids. The weakest marchers were chosen to go.

Hulj's column had dropped back now. Barayun applied himself grimly to the work of trail-breaking, learning how to handle the mammoths and keep the wagons rolling, sledding, or floating. As more wagons emptied, a contingent was sent down-river to try the fishing and wait somewhere with the catch. Sometimes they spent a whole day searching for the rare patches of grass, without making any headway north. The rations had been nil for several days when they found the fishing party. The catch was good, but it carried them to the shore of the gulf, where they found the groups they'd sent down the river.

The seaport, Gault said, was to the east, beyond the mouth of the river, where a range of mountains turned aside the east wind. Even here it was warmer, and with plenty of drain-off the mud was not as bad. There was enough grazing for the animals if they did not have to do much else.

Three days passed, and Hulj's column still did not arrive. Gault sent scouts out looking for it, but said in any case it was time to move again. Now Barayun learned the real reason for the wagon's peculiar and very heavy construction. Each floated a mammoth.

Getting them afloat was a fascinating procedure. A wagon was rolled out to the right depth, then

a mammoth went aboard via heavy planks. At first he stayed at the rear, so the front end of the wagon rode high. The front wheels were taken off. Then he moved forward so the aft end rose, and those wheels were removed. Then he positioned himself in the middle. The wagonbed being a shallow dish-shape, the resulting barge was stable so long as the water was smooth, there were no leaks, and the mammoth stayed put. Quite a number of the beasts capsized their craft, but they were quite at home, even playful, in the water, and it only had to be done over again.

Hulj came in on the fifth day, having had to swerve from Gault's trail because of a new mudslide. By that time ships were arriving from the seaport, and some bigger true barges, along with food and fodder. The remaining columns came in, in various stages of starvation but largely intact.

Gault said the time they'd made wasn't bad. Still, they'd have to hustle if they weren't to get caught in the north for the winter. The seaport was the only self-sufficient settlement near here, and it was far from big enough to support the whole expedition.

IN the port, Barayun could at last shed the furs. There was only a mild warm breeze, off a

blue sea that might have been thousands of miles south. The sky was exceptionally clear, and an odd purple-blue. The blinding sun cast crisp shadows. During the brief twilight, the stars were brilliant points. Some of Aleyn's scientists vowed those were other suns, far remoter than the earth's own. At least two of them—Barayun thought they were of the 'wanderers', whose eccentric motions were the basis of even wilder theories—could be seen during the day.

Gault took it upon himself to invite Barayun to the first conference at the port. Present besides Gault, Hulj and Dalna, was a tanned man named Birk who was possibly even older than Hulj. He commanded all the Sibyr fleets.

Hulj spoke to him first. "Good Birk, you have had time to assess the problems of transport. How soon can you land us near the Demon?"

"The first tenth, including two dozen mammoths, in eight days' time, my lord. The rest will require four times as long."

"What of food and fodder? Is enough stored up?"

"Hardly, sire. I would say we should step up the hunting and fishing, and the gathering of fodder as well. No one expected an expedition of such size."

"Have you the men to handle it?"

"I could use a few mammoths for boar hunts."

"Gault will give you what you need, along with huntsmen if you have not enough. I want meats, well cooked and wrapped against a long campaign, to start moving in large amounts. Greens must be gathered; the kind that prevent the skinsores. Of the deer we brought, you may slaughter most of the stags, but the cows must be kept for milk and for young. Plan that we may encounter delays and mishaps. What of the Demon? Has the watch been kept?"

"Day and night, my lord. It grows, but it has not moved."

"Think you it knows of your presence?"

"If so, it gives no sign."

"We will assume it does. What of the smoke?"

"It breathes out more each day."

Hulj fixed his eyes on Barayun. "Have you been convinced?"

"I did not doubt your word, sire; but I still have no conception of the thing's nature."

"That you will have. Scribe a report to your king, or to this council you speak of, and I will send it by galley. It may be they will send a fleet, at least."

Barayun hesitated. "Had I best not delay until I have seen it, that I may make a description?"

Hulj's eyes flashed. "You can scribe a second! Do you think me

too destitute to send more than one galley? Or that I cannot find more than one bit of goat-skin to scribe on?"

Barayun turned red. "I would not speculate on how much goat-skin you have, sire. I will scribe at once." Dalna giggled, but Hulj did not smile.

Hulj turned to Birk again. "Have you found other harbors near the spot?"

"Two good ones, my lord; but both are several days' march from the Demon."

"Find three more. They need not be the best, nor close to the Demon. I want a strong position on the island."

"Yes, my king."

"All of us here," said Hulj, "will sail at once by your fastest vessel. You have others along the way to pass messages?"

"Of course, my lord."

THE ship was as well-fitted as any of Aleyn's own, with a stout must lateen-rigged and two banks of oars. Hulj, Dalna, and their handservants occupied the forward cabins. Gault and Barayun had one beside Birk's, aft and below that of the ship's captain, who needed the best view.

On the gulf the east wind struck them, helping little with their northing. The gulf was so wide that, from the middle, neither shore could be seen without climbing the mast. Gault

said they'd be five days reaching the mouth; after that it would be easy sailing to the northwest to the tip of a very long island. The Demon had fled there from the second expedition.

On the second day Barayun was summoned forward to discuss with Hulj and Birk how the compass worked. Hulj said, "Clearly, the needle points to the Demon. How is it that Aleyn's sorcerers could put such a spell on it, if you did not even know of the Demon?"

Barayun decided to be frank. "These were not made by sorcery, sire, but simply by rubbing the needles on a kind of dark stone which is in some way a relative of iron. It is only in the last two generations we have known how to make them. We have thought there might be a great mass of this stone in the north, sufficient to attract the needles even far away."

Hulj restrained a smile. "A clever thought, if eldrritch. What think you now?"

Barayun had a second compass, which he drew from his clothing. He compared it with Hulj's. "I do not know what to think, sire. As you can see, they both point in the same direction."

"The direction of the Demon exactly," said Birk.

"It is true," Barayun said, "that as we have come north the needles point more to the west.

I wish I had been there when the Demon retreated, to see whether the needles turned to follow."

Hulj shook his head in wonder. "How valiantly you cling to your doubt. Is it possible the sorcerers worked this charm by accident? Or have they deceived the rest of you?"

Barayun could not help sighing. "No, my lord. They were not sorcerers, but artisans. I myself have watched the needles rubbed on the black stone."

Hulj grunted. "Whatever you call it, it is sorcery. Why would they do it at all, if they knew not of the Demon?"

"We use it as an aid to navigation," Barayun said. "When the stars are hidden, we follow one of these."

The sea-commander's old face twitched. "Exactly as I said," he reminded Hulj, "I could ignore all else, and follow this device straight to the Demon."

Hulj smiled. "I would like to see the faces of Aleyn's seamen, should the Demon decided to move to the other end of the world."

THE next day Barayun tried to teach Hulj, Dalna, Gault and Birk some of Aleyn's theories. He started by describing the world as round like an apple.

Birk snorted. "If that were so, all the water would run off it. Any fool can see that. Obviously it

must not only be flat, but a little dish-shaped to hold the water on. I have often thought about it."

"There is a force," Barayun said, "which pulls the water, and all else, toward the center. Hence it cannot run off."

"Indeed?" smiled Birk, "I might believe that had I never seen a river, nor sailed one. All of them run along the surface of the land; some in one direction, some in another; but all toward the sea. Quite obviously they are not attracted straight down, as would be the case if your notion were true, but toward the sea. What is more natural than a river wanting to join the sea? Both are water, and like draws like."

"We have heard such frivolry before," Hulj added, "Also that the earth circles the sun, as if tied by a string. Now aside from the fact that we see no string, it is impossible that we circle the sun; for if we did we should sometimes see its thin edge, and even its back. We do not. Therefore it is clear that the sun circles the earth, keeping its face turned toward us as the gods decreed."

Barayun sighed. "No doubt you are right, sire. I will surely not complain at such a benevolent arrangement by the gods."

Dalna giggled.

THEY emerged into a sea as warm and deeply blue as the

gulf. Now there was no night at all. They turned west around a headland, rocky and with little vegetation except in a few gorges. Wind bellied out the sail. The oarsmen shipped their oars and spent the time gambling and comparing lies. The fishing was good. There were a few sea-birds about the cliffs, but no sign of land animals.

They met small galleys with reports, and on the second day they overhauled a slow barge laden with supplies. They went alongside to take aboard food, and there was time enough for Gault and Barayun, as well as some of the men, to have a swim. It was a pleasant, relaxed time.

He saw no more of Hulj nor Dalna except a glimpse now and then, as he had no business forward and the sail blocked the view except when he climbed aloft.

On what corresponded to the evening of the third day the captain decided to make more northing, and the oars came out again. When they were shipped once more, Barayun could see a smudge, due west as far as he could determine, on the horizon. It was not a cloud, but rather like smoke from a tremendous fire.

Presently they sighted a hull which proved to be a small galley beating north and south to help incoming ships find their way.

The compass had brought them in perfectly.

THEY eased under oar into a fjord. Inside, it widened a little and ran inland, vanishing around a turn. The walls were too steep for landing here; there were no beaches, which was not surprising considering the rise of the sea.

It was not until the sun had moved almost due ahead of them, behind the high cliffs, that they reached a splitting of the fjord and turned into a canyon rising to the north. They were in dense shadow now. Where the salt water ended, a landing had been hewed out and there were tents and a few galleys. Two dozen men and a few women watched idly as they moored, then jumped to startled attention as Hulj showed himself.

Birk hounded the idlers about, clearing the king's quarters. They'd been built on a ledge a way up the canyon. They were mammoth-hide lodges, crude enough but evidently comfortable, for the women of the garrison had usurped them and now had to be shooed out like scared chickens. Hulj impatiently waved away their apologies. He, Dalna, and the retainers went up the ladder that was the only access. Two men hauled the ladder up behind, though from what Barayun had seen Hulj had noth-

ing to fear from his subjects.

Birk, with quarters below the ledge, took the ship's captain in with him. Barayun lodged with Gault. Their shelter consisted of mammoth-hides draped over some boulders, with a fire at the entrance. There were hides for sleeping, some vessels of water and one of mead, and some dried meat.

The soldiers and oarsmen who'd come along were building fires and rigging quarters for themselves near the ships. A ration of mead was being doled out to them. There was of course a bad shortage of women, which was reflected in their smug smiles. The bidding would be brisk.

WHEN they had slept, Gault took Barayun and six men up the canyon. A trail of sorts had been chopped out. In two hours they reached the top, and walked a short way north to a lookout station among some rocks on a low hill. Gault peered to the north, grinned, and took Barayun's arm. "There, doubt'er!"

Between them and snowy peaks some miles to the north was a considerable hollow. In its center was a vast black sphere mounted on top of a white-hot stem, or so it looked. Barayun's first thought was of an incredible toadstool. But what toadstool was ever an

arrow-cast across and breathed out at the top a tremendous pillar of smoke? That was the smudge they'd seen. It rose straight up a short way, then the wind swept it westward, rising and spreading, until it besmudged the whole horizon.

"Odin!" said Gault, in awe, "It's grown by twice!"

Now that he studied the immense globe, Barayun could see that it was not solid, but composed of some thin stuff that shimmered and eddied as it mounted up, from the fiery stem, around the great curve, to the top. There it seemed to become the smoke itself. Dimly, he could see into it, where the stem, like an unimaginably huge white-hot rod of iron, ended at the center. He saw now that the mantle's color was not all black. At the bottom, where it came into view, it glowed faintly as if hot. Then it was black or dark gray until it neared the top, when it turned into a deep red or purple. An idea struck him. "This," he exclaimed, "is the source of the red rains!"

Gault looked at him. "I see no red, friend."

"Let it fall with rain or snow, and it'll look red enough, allowing for reasonable exaggeration. This is how iron behaves, when burnt. There is a black kind of corruption, which is the stuff that attracts needles of iron after they are rubbed on a chunk of it.

There is another kind of corruption, red or brown, that comes without burning if iron is exposed to the weather without being well greased. This creature is eating a pillar of iron and breathing out the corruption!"

Gault looked at him as if he were mad. "A pillar of iron? That?"

"Aye; I'll wager! Though in what devil's forge it be wrought, to be drawn up thus from the ground, I do not care to guess."

"Better speak of Demons," said Gault, shaking his head, "it will make more sense to me. Though, your notion would fit our last encounter with it. Fleeting, it left this black sphere to collapse like an empty cloak; and the pillar of fire, too. That collapsed to the earth and seemed to be the cause of earthquakes and volcanos. If you are right, then what we see may only be its head, or its leaves. The main part may be under the ground. Think you so?"

Barayun shrugged. He drew out his compass. The needle trembled violently and seemed to want to tilt downward. He tilted the case. The needle indeed wanted to point straight into the ground. "When will we be ready to attack it?"

"By my reckoning," said Gault, "never. But Hulj decrees, and everyone knows that kings are blessed with second sight and

touches of godhood; along with certain oddities I am too loyal to mention. In any case, yon is a glorious enemy, is it not? At the worst, our names shall be heard in the mead-houses."

WITH Hulj here, things moved. A galley went up the fjord to find a suitable landing-place for mammoths. Fishing and salting-down kept the women busy, and squads of warriors went out after game. It turned out that the island, as far south as they had explored, was not barren but bore much low growth that mammoths and deer could eat, and which supported a population of white rabbits, wolves, foxes, bears, small rodents, and ground birds.

The army began arriving, here and at the other ports, and encampments grew around the strange creature's hollow. Barges brought in supplies. The first mammoths arrived and were moved to where they could forage. Lines of support and supply were built up, and a network of paths. Deer were grazed farther south where they'd be out of the way.

When Drooi arrived, Gault and Barayun rode west across the island to inspect the landings on the other side. It was a three days' trip each way, though they pushed on for long hours, Drooi registering complaints for the

record though he didn't seem to tire, and making a great show of martyrdom at having to carry his own food part of the way. Except for broken mountains along the coast and a few peaks inland—such as the snowy ones to the north—the island was fairly level. There wasn't even much mud.

On the return trip they circled the hollow and viewed the creature from different outposts. It had a sobering effect on the warriors stationed around it, but morale was good.

It was well past mid-summer when Hulj decided things were ready.

BARAYUN was privileged to sit in the councils.

Gault was for hurling all at one blow. Hulj and Birk thought it better to make a small probe, in case there were any surprises. Gault argued, "It surely knows we are here, and will recognize a small sortie. Why waste time?" He turned to Barayun. "What think you?"

Barayun hesitated under Hulj's frown. "I do not think the mammoths should be shown," he said, "since that is your only new weapon."

"Of course not," Hulj said impatiently, "It will be an attack on foot only. Possibly from three sides, to test its alertness."

"So be it," said Gault. "I will include a few of the foreign war-

riors, to test their mettle."

"I would like to go," Barayun said.

"Why?" demanded Hulj, "Can you not observe from an outpost?"

"I would prefer a close look, my lord."

For the first time, Dalna spoke directly to Barayun. "Clumsy courage is worse than clever cowardice." Her eyes were mischievous.

Barayun flushed. "I thank my lady for granting me courage. I would not like to be both a coward and a fool."

Gault grinned, but Hulj looked impatient. "Do as you wish; but keep out of the way."

FROM three points, platoons of two dozen men each marched into the hollow. Gault and Barayun were with one; so were six yellow men and six black men. They converged on the creature without visible reaction.

There was such heat from the thing they went no closer than half an arrow-cast. The dark globe hung over them like a devil's cloud. This close, it was all the more clear that the dark wall consisted of a dark mist or a very fine powder held somehow in place, with an over-all upward motion. He could not see much beyond the middle, from down here, but he could see the under part, which was white-hot as it

burbled out around the fiery stem. The stem itself seemed to be the main source of heat, and was almost too dazzling to look at. It was ten feet or more through, and fifty from the ground up to the globe. He heard the murmured awe of the warriors, but no one bolted.

Gault raised his hand and brought it down.

The first volley of arrows went up at a high angle. The second, aimed lower, was in the air before the first hit. Barayun did not release his bolt, preferring to watch first the effect of the bronze arrow-tips.

Before each arrow the dark surface seemed to yield, not more than half the length of the shaft. It was like a waterbag poked with a finger. Immediately, the shafts were aflame, sometimes audibly. The darkness swirled around each indentation. A moment, and each tip popped out, molten and glowing.

One of the soldiers turned to run. Gault, standing not far from the spot, roared oaths and raised his own bow. The warrior stopped and got back into line. Some of the others flinched, but stood their ground, shields raised. One of them yelped and slapped at his thigh. Barayun, with no shield, was happy to see that nearly all of the molten bronze fell short of the men.

Gault signaled again, and the

third flight of arrows went winging toward the stem just below its entry into the globe. The shafts exploded into flame. The bronze heads vanished, with only flashes of green to mark them, and did not come back out.

"What think you?" said Gault to Barayun.

Barayun shrugged. "I think we have no more effect than gnats."

"True. But a sufficient swarm of gnats. . . ." Gault shouted to his captains to march the men away.

"A moment," Barayun said. He waited until the men were clear, then raised the crossbow.

The bolt was a disappointment. It went into the sphere with only a tiny swirl, and did not come out. They waited a while, then Gault said, "I see no signs of death in the thing. It is more as if it had swallowed a sweet tidbit."

Barayun nodded, and they left.

IT had not been clear to Barayun what mammoths were expected to accomplish, but when he saw the formation that moved into the hollow his interest picked up.

They formed a circle around the thing, half an arrow-cast distant, spacing themselves so the soldiers could take cover under and behind them. Each beast was shielded by big pads of leather, so that all but their eyes

were protected as long as they faced forward. The leather was wet, and each animal carried waterbags so it could be kept wet down. Two handlers rode behind upright shields of thick leather. Quivers of arrows hung from the hairy flanks.

A second circle of the beasts, with its own horde of bowmen, trudged into place twenty yards behind the first. There were enough mammoths for the two concentric circles plus nearly three hundred in reserve. Some of the latter were busy hauling up supplies. Only about half the total armies were in the attack, the rest being either garrisoned near the landings for quick escape, or in protected spots nearer the hollow. It was clear that Hulj was prepared for almost anything; that he and Gault knew how to handle armies.

It took half the morning to get everything in place. Now Gault and Barayun, on Drooi, rode from one of the outposts to watch from closer up. Hulj and Dalna stayed closer to shelter.

Gault stopped Drooi, who kept shifting his feet in a little dance of impatience and making snorting sounds. All the mammoths seemed aroused, not with fright but with something like battle-fever. There was no trumpeting nor breaking of formation.

Gault raised his horn and blew the signal.

The coordination was amazing. Platoon captains began to call their commands in quick cadence, somehow timing things so that there was no lag between the near and far sides of the circles. All around the two arcs, bows bent and lifted, the sun flashing on the polished wood. Then the shafts went winging. The two rings of arrows kept their spacing all the way to the target, in an instant of strange beauty like ripples on a pond converging in reverse toward their source. They plowed into the dark curtain.

The rehearsed point of aim was a third of the way up the sphere. Almost as the first struck, two more flights were under way. A bright band flared around the sphere. Barayun realized it was molten bronze. It seemed to constrict inward for an instant, then it exploded outward. A boiling sound accompanied it. As before, most of the metal fell short, but here and there a warrior cried out. One mammoth screamed and bolted from the inner circle. Others shrilled or actually turned, but did not bolt. Barayun could see that the leather armor had taken a spattering.

THE shooting stopped after a set number of arrows per man, and now the handlers shouted as they brought their beasts under control. The one that had screamed was stopped

by two deftly-handled beasts of the outer circle that moved into his path. He was still screaming. Gault said, "Must have taken a hot bit in the eye." His face showed more concern than he would likely admit. He started Drooi in that direction, but the handlers had the hurt animal under control and plodding slowly uphill to shelter. He still whimpered and held his head cocked to one side.

The scars on the sphere were still visible, but growing less so as they moved up toward the top. The column of smoke wavered and thinned for an instant, then was as before.

"Look you," said Barayun, "does it not seem that the molten bronze always comes back with just less than the force with which it went?"

"Aye," said Gault, looking at him questioningly.

"Well, then; it is not wise to have two circles of attack so widely spaced. The bronze of the second one will spatter back as far as the first; or at least, on the average some of the metal will have force enough to do so. Would it not be better to have one circle farther back, and shoot at a more leisurely range?"

"I do not understand your talk of average and force, but I see your meaning. Think you the arrows would still penetrate? They would arrive more spent."

"That does not seem to matter; and if they arrive more spent, the less the metal will come back, I think."

"We could not achieve the concentration."

"Do you not have too much now?" Even a single arrow wounds the thing, but it heals quickly after tossing it out. I can not but think the dark sphere is like a skin to the thing; or like the leaves of a tree. In either case, it might be better to wound it lightly in many places at once, rather than deeply at one spot. The wounds do not seem to be too deep in any case."

Gault thought, then nodded slowly. "Aye. You have a strange way of thinking, but not without shrewdness. If Hulj agrees, we will try that after the noon meal."

HULJ did agree, with a glance at Barayun and a raise of the eyebrows, and the animals were formed into the wider circle. New stocks of arrows were brought out, and the men got busy chopping out places to stand, since they were now up into the rocky part of the slope.

No effort at coordination was made at this range; each man began shooting on signal and placed his arrows at random on any part of the sphere. Many of the first fell short, and a few arched completely over the sphere, some-

times passing unhindered through the column of smoke. The familiar little disturbances appeared all over the sphere. The men improved their aim, and the turbulence increased. The yellow men were at the extreme of their range, arching arrows high but getting them off faster than anyone and quite precisely. As the rain of shafts thickened, the whole sphere became speckled with transparent spots. From this height Barayun could catch glimpses through it to the snowy peaks beyond.

The thing's writhing ceased to be local and became an overall shudder. Suddenly, it collapsed. A vast shout went up from the armies. Mammoths shrilled. The dark smoke that had formed the sphere swirled without confinement now, with only a general upward and spreading motion.

The men stopped shooting and began to jump around.

Then the scene cleared, and the clamor died. Solid and unmoving, a smaller sphere stood over the white-hot pillar. A few arrows, loosed in sudden rage, got a quick rejection. The sphere expanded a little, keeping its shape perfectly. The column of smoke at the top was smaller now. The sphere grew a little more, as if feeling its way, and the arrows began to take effect. It shrank back slightly and held. Now Barayun noticed that it was

settling very slowly on the stem. That went on for half an hour. Gault did not revive the shooting, though a few arrows arched in. Finally he stopped even those. "Enough arrows wasted," he said glumly as he signalled the retreat. "We'll spend two days collecting the metal we've urinated away already, if the thing lets us." They rode in silence for a while, then, "Think you the inner globe was there all the time?"

"No," said Barayun, "for you could see through the outer one for a while. I think it formed the inner one when the attack got too hot; just as an army falls back to a new position. I think it can form its globes wherever it pleases; within certain limits, perhaps."

"Aye," said Gault. "I told you it was bigger than before. Fatter fed, perhaps. If all we can do is knock fat off it, it will outlast us."

"What's next?"

"Catapults. There'll be little metal to spare, though; we'll hurl stones."

THE next day the sphere had grown back nearly to its former size, and seemed a little higher on the stem again. It showed no reaction when squads of men went out to collect the bronze it had spat back. Some of the metal was in big flat gobbs that mammoths had to haul.

THE DEMON OF THE NORTH

After noon of the second day Gault, a grin on his face, nodded to Barayun to come along. "There's to be a little comedy," he said, "the black men want their witch doctors to have a try at it."

Barayun, who'd seen the witch doctors on their own continent, did not smile; but neither did he expect much. He was convinced by now that the creature's strength hadn't even begun to be tried.

The black men made a magnificent show, in their weird masks and costumes. The shindig began with all the black men's drums placed in an arc at a comfortable distance from the creature. The pounding and chanting began, along with a dozen varieties of war dance by different tribes. Nearly the whole of the black armies were in the hollow, chanting and shouting and brandishing weapons. From where Drooi stood, none of the drummers seemed to keep time with any of the rest.

Now the column of witch doctors came snaking from cover. They wove among the tribal klatches, screaming above the din and shaking gourds and ceremonial staffs. A cloud of dust made the whole scene indistinct. Drooi, impatient for action, trumpeted and did his little dance-step. Gault sent him trotting to one side and forward, to get clear of the dust.

The witch doctors emerged beyond the tribes and undulated toward the sphere. It was then Barayun saw its reaction. If he hadn't happened to glance at the right spot, he would have missed it. A point in the great curve, opposite the witch doctors, kneaded and became clear. Then it snapped inward and became dished in. It stayed clear for a second, the black dust moving around it, then the dust swirled up through it. But it still remained concave and held its position. Barayun sat tense, waiting for some awful bolt to shoot out of it. But it remained motionless.

The witch doctors didn't seem to notice it, and after a while they gave up, crestfallen. The dished-in spot disappeared as they trudged back up the slope. It came to Barayun that the thing might have been an eye or an ear, and he wondered what would have happened had someone put an arrow into it. He was surprised later to learn that Gault hadn't seen it at all.

THE warriors became weapon-teers, and began building a large number of ballast-powered catapults and preparing stone ammunition. There was also a prodigy of arrow-making, a ship having brought in some timber fit for shafts and some extra bronze.

About five days after the witch doctors' performance, Gault took Barayun by the arm one morning and said, "Come."

Barayun could tell that he wanted to be away from Hulj. He went without questions. When they'd climbed out of the canyon and were mounted on Drooi, Gault said, "Best be out of sight for a while. There's bad news."

"What manner of bad news?"

"Renne has spread a story of Hulj's dying and has taken the throne. Had we not made plans we would not even know of it. As it was, my men barely escaped quarantine and came down the river by small boat. Hulj will be furious at me on general principles; and at you because you are not an army of Aleyn. He'd counted on Aleyn's allegiance to give Renne pause."

"I don't understand," Barayun said. "How can Renne hope to replace Hulj? Hulj is still popular, and—."

"Aye," said Gault, "and Hulj is trapped in the north. There'll be no supply caches to help us on a return trip. And Renne will move south somewhere."

"But there must be some way to . . ."

"No doubt, no doubt. But we shall not find it this year. I think we will winter on this island, if the Demon lets us, and that it will not be easy even next year." He began to grin. "I wish I could

have watched when Renne discovered he did not have the treasury."

"He does not?"

"No. Secretly, we brought it along."

WHEN they returned to camp Hulj gave them glares but said nothing. The second time he looked at them, he seemed even a little amused at Gault's prudence.

The word did not leak out to the armies for a week, and by then Hulj was ready with a proclamation to take the sting out of it. He made it sound as if next year's campaign to catch Renne would be high adventure.

There were three dozen monster catapults set up on the slope of the hollow, capable of hurling stones bigger than a man's head; and two hundred lighter ones to be moved closer in, with sleds to be laden with the ammunition.

The general plan was to keep hurling stones at the creature until it died or went away. Only a fraction of the men would be needed, so columns were sent far south to seek winter quarters and to learn where game was the best; and also to assess the island as a possible route home. Another strong contingent was embarked with two dozen mammoths and some women to sail southwest and establish a base where a wild and icebound peninsula, not too well known, might

offer livable conditions. The few known tribes there paid tenuous fealty to Hulj.

The bombardment began. Gault and Barayun watched for a while, then went on another tour of the nearby positions. Morale was still good, though everyone wanted to know when Gault thought they might start home. They visited the two closest ports, where work was under way preparing for winter. An impressive navy was gathered to the island by now.

It was noon of the second day when they got back, to learn that the bombardment had been going on steadily. They watched the monotonous rain of stones. Each missile produced a dent and a clear spot, was expelled smoking or shattered to fall to the ground. There was quite a ridge of debris collecting in a circle around the thing, which was a little shrunk-en compared to its largest size but not obviously hurt.

Explorers from the south returned with news that there were growths of trees within four days' march, and that there was warm light rain there which had brought out a burgeoning of vegetation wherever the soil wasn't washed away. That moved Barayun to ask Gault if there were weather reports from other directions.

"Aye," said Gault, "no doubt there are; since scout galleys de-

ploy to the east, west, and north. Why ask you?"

"We have found showers, even during the summer, everywhere but here. Does it not seem this creature has created a dry spot around itself?"

Gault looked surprised. "Indeed, it does. We shall demand of Birk at once what the reports are."

WHEN the evening meal had been eaten and the sun was low in the north, a conference was held as a result of Barayun's question. Hulj listened, then said, "Well, it appears then that it has created a warmth all over the north, clear to the end of the earth for all we know; and space within a day's march or half a day's sail all around it where there is no rain. How does that help us?"

"That I cannot say, my lord," Barayun answered, "But I have toyed with an idea. . . . If it does not like rain, we might attack it with water."

Hulj's eyebrows rose a little, then fell. "And how would you proceed? There are not enough water-bags in the army to more than moisten one slope of the hollow; nor are there rivers near enough to divert."

"No, sire. But there are glaciers within two days' march. Mammoths could draw blocks of ice; and there are places around

the hollow where reservoirs can be created by simply throwing up temporary earth dams. And the catapults might hurl chunks of ice."

Hulj turned to Gault. "What think you?"

"I cannot wait to try it, sire," Gault said, his eyes belying his mock seriousness. "Ice; yes . . . And in addition, perhaps some of my stoutest men, well bloated with mead. . . . And we might hurl mammoth dung at it, too and . . ."

Hulj grunted. "I too have an idea to contribute. We will bind Gault on a mammoth and drive him into the thing; that it may laugh itself to death at his jokes." He pondered for a moment. "If the rocks have no effect in another day, we will prepare to try this foreigner's idea. It is embarrassing I can not find one brain without importing it."

Barayun was amazed at how nimbly the mammoths were handled in the glacier country. Evidently this kind of terrain was not strange to Hulj's men, nor to the beasts. Routes were chosen such that huge blocks of ice could be tugged downhill most of the way; and where uphill hauls were unavoidable, special stations were set up with extra teams of mammoths for a shuttle. The strange processions moved steadily. There was plenty of ice,

though clearly less than there had been in the past, and gradually a vast field of it accumulated around the hollow. Below the dirt dams which held the melting, four channels were dug into the hollow so that the water, when it was released, would flow quickly. Slides were prepared so unmelted ice could be pushed down the slopes.

IN twenty days no one had patience enough to prepare further. The mammoths began shoving blocks of ice to the slides. Where the slope leveled out, the ice was formed into rough dams. Now the reservoirs were opened and water gushed down the channels to back up behind the ice. A little, finding its way through or around, trickled down close to the creature and turned to steam. Now the ice was steaming, in the creature's warmth. A block broke free and went skidding closer in the mud. An audible hissing arose as it began to melt fast.

Cracking sounds began, and the ice dams began to yield. The last of the water from the reservoirs was still piling up. More and more was running down near the creature, which was now slightly obscured around its base by clouds of steam.

Something gave way and a rush of water moved in close, under the curve, where it boiled away fast. The steam rose high-

er now, until only the top of the sphere was undimmed.

Gault signaled and the catapults began hurling ice. Each chunk made a dent and turned to a small cloud of steam, instantly, to add to the curtain of vapor.

The ice was going fast, and the hissing was loud and constant now. Steam welled up above the top of the creature. The pillar of smoke thinned and changed color. Gault cursed delightedly. "By all the gods! This is the way to make it squirm!"

Suddenly there was a great uprush of smoke and a ripping sound. Dark bubbles blended with the steam. A black object, vaguely egg-shaped and no larger than a mammoth, shot up straight into the air. The fiery column, glowing, toppled out of the curtain of steam and came crashing to earth. A sound like the splitting of hell battered at Barayun's ears. Smoke and steam and bits of earth exploded upward in a terrible cloud. Through the din he heard Gault shouting, "Back! Back!"

No one needed much persuasion. Drooi was stumbling through the mud where a reservoir had been. The earth rocked beneath them. Something large and hot sailed by to plunge into the mud. Drooi skidded around it. Barayun shot a look over his shoulder and saw white-hot gouts of lava spitting up from the

smoke and steam, and boulders hurtling.

This was a true volcano, but fortunately a limited one. None of the rocks or lava came very far, and already the earth's trembling began to grow less. Men kept scrambling out of the smoke. Some must have been trapped.

Gault's horn and Drooi's trumpeting called a rally where the canyon started down to the fjord. They found Hulj and Dalna there, about to dismount and take the foot trail. The king turned and eyed Barayun with an odd expression. Finally he said, "Red-haired one, the Demon seems to have gone. I would not have complained at your coming alone, had I understood that you have Bedlam at your beck and call. Were you to trade blows with the Devil himself, I do not know which side I would rather be on."

Barayun flushed and started to make some disclaimer. Then he stopped, mouth open. Since he was facing north and everyone else was looking at him, it was not surprising that only he saw the black thing hurtling toward them. He found his tongue again. "Yonder," he said, "comes your Demon. Perhaps to administer revenge."

THERE was no time even to get Dalna to safety; the thing was upon them. At the instant Baray-

un thought they would be crushed, it halted abruptly in mid-flight and hung over them. A grating voice thundered out. "Persistent fools! Do you insist on being exterminated?"

Gault gasped, then said, "It . . . speaks. . . ."

"Any why not?" The voice seemed to come not from the black egg itself, but from a point in the air a little closer. "Have I not been listening to your chatter long enough? Why have you made such nuisances of yourself?"

No one could answer for a moment. Barayun, who was not inclined to be belligerent but who saw no use in grovelling, finally said, "You have been ruining our climate."

The thing paused as if studying him, or perhaps readying some death-bolt. Then it grated, "You are the one who shot a sample of iron into me. Was there any significance?"

Barayun, feeling hope now that the thing was at least pausing to talk, said, "I come from a different land, where we work iron. I recognized that your own nature was in some way related to iron. It was a—a test."

"Is that all? I thought you might be trying to communicate. Yet you do speak with some rudiments of intelligence. Know, then, my nature. My real being is not visible to you. What you see

now is a seed I am preparing. I must hibernate for a while, as do some animals of your world. In some thousands of your years I will be reborn complete from this seed. To build my seed, I must winnow through great amounts of your world's iron to glean a tiny fraction that I can use. That is what I have been doing since long before you were born. I should be finished before now, had you not disturbed me. When I discovered I was interferring with your climate, I already had cause to be annoyed with you, and that is why I have not ended the disturbance. Now listen well. I do not want to spend the strength to war upon you now, so I am going to a new place to finish my seed. If any of your kind bother me again I will delay long enough to exterminate you. Leave me in peace, and I will not have much more effect on your weather. When I am reborn I will decide whether to teach your descendants a lesson. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Barayun, not willing to risk more.

The black egg rose and dwindled swiftly to nothing in the northern sky. Barayun, staring after it, thought to reach for his compass. It pointed with only a faint tremor after the creature.

He turned to find all of them staring at him. Gault alone did not look much abashed. "Well,"

said Gault, "I for one have a great thirst for mead."

THE next morning Hulj wanted to see Barayun alone.

The king was a little flushed and hesitant, but finally he said, "I have spoken harshly to you once or twice."

"And I with you, sire," Barayun said, "On my part, I hold no ill-will."

"Thank you," said Hulj. "Also, I misjudged you badly at first. Not one of us has more wit and courage."

"You are too kind, my lord."

"There is a great favor I would ask."

"Anything, sire."

"Humph. No more volcanos, please. What I would ask of you . . . Well, finding our way out of here and chasing down that renegade is going to be a task, even if we survive the winter. We do not know what the weather will be now. I do not wish to subject my daughter to such uncertainties." He shot Barayun a look, then plunged on. "Think you she might find a haven in Aleyn? Have you that much standing with this council you speak of?"

Barayun nearly fell off the couch he was sitting on. "Why—uh—why, my lord; I am certain of it. Aleyn would not think of denying hospitality to such as your daughter."

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THE DEMON OF THE NORTH

(Continued from page 119)

Hulj looked even redder, and finally forced out, "How about your king?"

Barayun couldn't suppress a grin now. "Why, sire; he growls about you much as you growl about him; and I think with no more real bitterness. He will surely not hold the grudge."

Hulj sat down and let out a long breath. "Well, then. Rather had I gone out begging meals from huntsmen, but I knew not where else to turn. What of your own relations with your king? Are you in such disfavor with him that your escort would weigh against Dalna?"

"Disfavor?" frowned Barayun. "Oh. You misunderstand the relationship between king and Council, my lord. The king is subject to the Council, but there is no hostility. It is a normal relationship of government." He tried not to look smug. "As for my own relations with the king,

they are quite good. We are second cousins, or some such."

Hulj stared, then broke into laughter. "All my worry was for naught, then. When you are ready to go, there will be galleys suitably manned."

The year being well along, it was thought best to leave soon. They travelled across the island to embark at one of the new ports.

Two galleys full of warriors went ahead. As Barayun's galley pulled away, Hulj, Birk, and Gault, all mounted on Drooi, waved good-bye. Drooi seemed to understand he would not likely see Barayun again. Long after distance blurred out the meaningful grin on Gault's face, Drooi's trunk was lifted in farewell.

Barayun glanced at Dalna, where she stood with her handmaidens at the rail. She did not look at him, but her face was slightly pink and he thought she did not stand as far away as she might have.

THE END