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Swordsmen of Saladin

by

H. BEDFORD-JONES

In the Twelfth Century an intrigue at the court of the great Sultan Saladin brings forth the Sphinx Emerald to play its strange magic rôle.

Like old Whoosis, the Roman poet, I sing of swords and rascals. With certain few exceptions, all men are rascals. I am, naturally, one of the exceptions. Yet my career has given me no cause of pride, unless it be the affection in which I hold my master Saladin, as he is usually called—a contraction for Sa-la'h-ud-Din, which means "Honoring the Faith." His given name is Yusuf or Joseph. In the Kurdish country where he came from, they use Biblical names.

Greek-born in Alexandria, I was educated as a scribe. My drunken father sold me to the Arabs as a slave, and I was named El Bahi, "The Elegant," because of my good looks. I was taken to Cairo, rapidly made my way and became secretary to Saladin when he came to Cairo, a green Kurdish country boy, with his uncle the governor. This was in the Year of the Hegira 564, or as Christians reckon it 1168, if you must have history.

Myself, I have no love for history; it is dull work. I have set out to tell the truth here, and it deals with some chancy intrigue, an honest eunuch, and a bit of hot swordplay—also with that accursed and beautiful jewel the Sphinx Emerald. This may also be history, but it is generally unknown and deserves to be told. So, with one hand upon my alleged heart, I bow gracefully; El Bahi is at your service with the truth. Salutations!

Let me skip the preludes of intrigue, treachery and struggle. Five years after coming to Cairo, Saladin's uncle was dead, and he was governor of Egypt for the Sultan Nureddin, chief ruler of the Moslem world. As his secretary, I was doing very well for myself. His vizier, the eunuch Karakush, ruled the city and country, with all its emirs and captains, Mameluke slaves and soldiers, workmen and Egyptians. Let me paint these three men for you, since our world revolved about them:

I was rather small, stoutish, of great elegance in dress and manners, and well accustomed to finesse—in a word, a diplomat. I came only to the shoulder of my good friend the tall and scrawny Karakush. He was given to violence and savage passions, but was actually secretive and highly careful. We lived in the old palace with Saladin and his soldiers, but both of us were too wise to cut any figure among the swaggering emirs and great lords. Jealousy and treachery were everywhere, and throats were swiftly cut.

Karakush had one talent: he was a gifted builder, and over a cup of wine could dream great dreams in stone, which later took shape. He was spending Saladin's wealth, and held our master in great love. So did I, and why not? Everyone loved Saladin.

He was then thirty-five, handsome and generous, brave as a lion, so clever with arms that no warrior could stand against him. Yet he could dissimulate, worm his way amid conflicting interests, and suddenly seize an unsuspected point. We had served him well when he became governor. Perhaps Karakush suspected his ambition; I knew it, for Saladin confessed it to me one afternoon after dictating letters.

“El Bahi, the wind is stirring the trees,” he said. “Sultan Nureddin—may Allah prolong his years!—is a suspicious old man. Luckily, the Crusaders in Jerusalem are keeping him too busy to molest me. What would happen if I took arms against him?”

“Things unpleasant to you,” I said. I noted that he was playing with a great green stone set in a ring, but at the moment thought nothing of it. He had startled me. “Nureddin is the Commander of the Faithful, head of our religion; also, he has armies. Your emirs and captains swore fealty to him; they obey you because you govern in his name. He can depose you. He can slay you. That is, if he can reach you.”

Saladin grunted. “I had a pigeon this morning. Nureddin orders me to join him with my best troops to lay siege to the Christian city of Karak, their Arabian outpost. This means he wants me under his thumb. I must either obey him or defy him.”

Here was evil news. Nureddin had established a very efficient pigeon-post linking all quarters of the empire. Saladin himself handled the letters that came by pigeon—one day from Damascus, two days from Bagdad. It was like magic! . . . His reflective eyes dwelt upon the jewel in his hand, then rose to meet mine.

“This is highly secret news,” he went on. “Give me your advice, El Bahi. Egypt is rich and powerful. Karakush is now building a citadel on the hill above the city. I am tempted. Emir El Ghazy is confident that I could defy the Sultan with impunity.”

Here was worse tidings. “El Ghazy is a rogue. He’d love to ruin you. He’s a good soldier but a bad guide.”

“He gave me this emerald,” Saladin said. “An ancient stone found in the palace treasury—one of magic power.”

I clucked my tongue at him and laughed. This angered him.

“Stop evading!” he snapped. “I want advice, not grins.”

“Opinions are prompt, but advice comes best after sleep,” I said. “In the morning, I’ll give what you ask. Let me sleep upon it.”

He nodded, his gaze returning to the emerald, which seemed to fascinate him.

“Very well. A splendid fellow, El Ghazy. He gives jewels like a sultan—jewels that hold angels or devils, I’m not sure which.”

He seemed dreamy and uncertain, and this worried me.

The reason? I got a hint of it that evening when I unburdened myself to Karakush, giving him the whole story. We were accustomed to such confidences; we worked together for mutual protection, highly necessary in a palace crammed with intrigue and treachery. He liked me, and I had great respect for his brains. More than once we had managed affairs behind the curtains and effected great issues.

Chewing at his eternal sweetmeats, which never put any fat on his belly, the gaunt eunuch eyed me sardonically but said nothing till I had finished.

“Our heads are very loose on our shoulders, El Bahi,” he grunted abruptly. “Emir El Ghazy, may Allah blast him, is a clever fellow, a spy for Sultan Nureddin. Unless we can get our master Saladin out of this tight pinch, we’ll be in a tighter one ourselves.”

“No argument,” I commented.

He snarled between his thin lips. “You placid cat! If I didn’t know your sharp claws and keen wits, I’d throw a cushion at you! Look at the game we play! Nureddin makes the overt move to catch the eye, but he’s far away. Emir El Ghazy holds the sword, unsuspected. He’s

the danger-point, the one to watch. Somehow he has over-reached us. . . . Ha! An emerald, you say! Did you examine it closely?"

"I paid it no attention."

"I've heard tales of such a stone; it bewitches men, casts a charm upon them. Hm! You have a cat's nimble jump. How would you handle the Sultan's demands on Saladin?"

I told him, and he nodded slowly.

"Well enough; but the peril is here with El Ghazy. Ten to one, there's a woman in it, too. You pry into that angle. Saladin's no prude; question him. And remember, he has terrific pride and self-esteem! I'll go after the larger game. I can reach the length of the great road, into the hell-pit of the Pyramids, and to the craggy heights above."

The sardonic demon loved to boast, but this was the simple truth. Having Saladin's entire confidence, he was pushing forward vast constructions. First in Cairo, where the citadel was building and the city walls being extended to take in the older towns of El Fostat and Babylon. Then a great army road was being built, north into Lower Egypt and south to the Cataracts, following the Nile. Canals, bridges, cisterns were being constructed with the stones of several small pyramids. Having thousands of slaves and free workmen at his own orders, Karakush was almost unlimited in power.

However, I had some abilities myself. Before midnight I had set a dozen skillful men at work, and had written a letter to the Sultan. Then I turned in to sleep. There would be trouble with El Ghazy, of course, but I was fairly sure of Saladin. He never drank, being fanatical on the subject; he had a repressed love of horseplay; his vanity and pride were solid qualities, well founded; and while he paid no heed to slaves and common girls, he did have an eagle eye for an exceptional woman. So I knew just about where to lay hold of him. And if I knew nothing about weapons and made no swaggering show, as Saladin's secretary I had an almost unlimited expense account, which was useful. Saladin had issued glass money, as a novelty, but I had a fat chest of golden dinars on which to draw; and a gold coin is worth a dozen blustering swordsmen.

Next morning Saladin came to my room after the sunrise prayer—he kept unearthly hours—and cursed me for a lazy dog on finding me still asleep. I gave him the letter I had written, and he read it with astonishment.

"So I'm an obedient slave of the Sultan, am I? Obeying his commands with devout speed . . . the troops being gathered . . . arranging to meet him at Karak. . . . In Allah's name, what means this nonsense?"

"Not nonsense; good sense," I said sleepily. "Gather the troops. It'll keep 'em busy. Seal and send the letter. It'll make Nureddin happy. He'll go to meet you at Karak, and the Christians will trounce him soundly when you don't show up."

He folded the rice-paper thin. I saw he was pleased.

"So! El Bahi, add ten dinars a month to your salary. I'm going for a swim in the Nile. . . . Here—you can play with this till I come back. Guard it carefully."

He threw the ring with the green stone at me, and departed.

Wide awake now, I seized the emerald and inspected it. Bewitched? Obviously. In the stone was a tiny figure, the exact shape of the Sphinx; this was a marvel, surely. Apparently it was quite natural. The emerald was a poor one, but I found it fascinating.

Two of my own slaves appeared. I was trimmed and bathed; then my breakfast came in; and all the while I kept the ring on my finger, admiring that emerald. The masseurs came, and

had just finished rubbing me, when in walked El Ghazy. We had no privacy in this old palace—that was why Saladin was building a new one with the citadel. I sent away the rubbers, saluted the Emir humbly, and he smiled at me. He had a keen face, bearded and trimmed, and his eyes were like a sword.

“My good El Bahi,” he said, “I know quite well you’re a damned deceitful rogue, and you love money. Eh?”

“Not glass money, my lord,” I replied.

He chuckled at this. “I have a hundred golden dinars here,” he said. “Do they make your nose itch?”

“By Allah, they do!” I told him. He nodded at me. He was a lordly man, well made, magnificently attired; his arms and jewels were of the finest. But I had turned the emerald inside my hand and closed my fingers over it, so he did not observe it.

“Our master Saladin, upon whom be peace, has received certain orders from the Sultan, beloved of Allah,” he said. “Can you tell me what answer he returns?”

“Certainly,” I said. “He honors the commands of the Sultan, and is sending troops to aid him, and will himself follow as soon as he recovers from a fever that has smitten him sorely.”

“Oh!” The Emir grinned, swallowed this lie, and pulled a purse from his girdle, tossing it to me. “Good man. I see we understand one another. Salaam!”

I wished him peace also, and he departed happy. I returned to contemplation of the emerald, which was fascinating indeed, and was at this when a slave announced Karakush. He was hot and sweaty, having been overseeing the work since sunrise.

“Oh, damned luxurious cat, may you roast in hell!” said he.

“That being likely, I prefer to be comfortable here,” I retorted. “This is the emerald. Look at it.”

While he did so, I told him of my late visitor and what had passed.

“You see,” I finished, “El Ghazy now believes that Saladin is trying to evade the Sultan’s orders, thus will press his own affair.”

“By tomorrow night we should have some news. Let us meet, then, luxurious prince of devilry,” he said. “This emerald is the same of which I heard. Does Saladin know that it has bewitched him?”

“No, but he suspects something,” I said. “I think he’ll ask me soon.”

He went away. I selected a robe of thin white silk, with a peach-blush girdle, and when dressed went to attend Saladin. He was holding morning court. When it was over, he retired with me to the secretariat.

“The letter you wrote has gone,” he said. “Now take some orders regarding the troops and the gathering of supplies for the Karak expedition.”

When they were done, he asked for the emerald, and I gave it to him.

“It is bewitched,” I said. “Any man who wears it is bewitched. Like you.”

“Me?” He snorted angrily. “Bewitched?”

“Certainly. You asked my advice; that shows. Usually you give orders, and have no need of any advice. The stone has one of those ancient Egyptian gods inside it, and it addles the wits of any person who wears it. That’s why El Ghazy gave it to you.”

This angered him. “The Emir is an honorable man, utterly devoted to me.”

“I had a hundred dinars from him an hour ago, to get your answer to the Sultan. He knew all about that order you received.”

He was staggered. "Eh? He bribed you? And you betrayed me?"

"No, him. I lied to him. The hundred dinars is good money for a lie."

His lips twitched. "My elegant El Bahi, it will grieve me to see your head hung above the gate of my new citadel! I fear it will come to that."

"If Allah desires it, yes," I asserted. "After El Ghazy is governor of Egypt."

He patted the emerald. "When you have proof of the magic and witchcraft you assign to this emerald, come to me with it freely. Until then, use no more loose talk about it." He spoke sternly. "Punishment for loose talk, rewards for proof, by Allah!"

"Then remember it is an oath by Allah's name," I said. This startled him, for he was a devout man, but he could not eat his own words, so the matter ended thus.

The orders went out to the troops; I knew El Ghazy would find my words to him thus confirmed, so all was well. The day passed in routine business. That afternoon Saladin embarked on a boat for an inspection trip up the Nile; he would not return for a couple of days, and I breathed more easily. Luckily he had not taken me with him.

I had bad luck toward evening, just the same. Karakush sent me a jar of wine, and in sampling it I spilled some on my handsome girdle. It was Cyprian wine, and the stain would not come out; the girdle was spoiled. Strictly speaking, wine is not drunk by the Moslem; but neither Karakush nor I cared particularly about religious tenets, and we did like wine.

It was the following day before I began to hear from the men I had set to work. Reports came in fast that afternoon. I got them tabulated, and things began to look exciting. When the time came to get together with Karakush, that evening, I really had something, too.

He had not been wasting his time, either. In his sardonic way he urged me to speak first, and set out cups and a whole beaker of his Cyprian wine. So I gave him my story, and then launched into the reports I had.

"You were right in suspecting a woman at work. A woman occupies a house in the street just behind the Mosque of El Azhar—a very beautiful woman, but rarely seen. Her servants are Persians. Gossip says she is a Persian princess. Emir El Ghazy has twice been seen to visit this house by night, in company with Saladin. A huge amount of hazy detail boils down to these facts. I am having the house watched. Carrier pigeons have been seen to arrive there; whence they come, none can say. The apparent master of the house is the Persian rug-merchant Selim whose shop is in the rug-bazaar, but this is obviously a blind; he never goes there, though his servants often do. The house is registered in his name with the police. That empties my pack, worthy Karakush."

He grinned in his tigerish way. "The woman is named Leila; she is sister to Melek, the vizier of Sultan Nureddin," he said, relishing my astonishment. "That house is a trap set to snare a lion. How do I know? Because, for the past twelve hours a man has been lying in the prison at the construction camp across the river. He happens to be one of El Ghazy's secretaries."

Chilling information, this!

"You've had him tortured?" I said.

"No. He's been kept full of hashish, and all his words recorded." Karakush smiled. "In conjunction with your reports, his babblings make everything clear. He has, however, spoken of a certain date which means nothing to me. Monday, the seventh day of the month Safar. Eh?"

I shook my head. It was the following Monday; it had no meaning to me. There was a sample of our excellent working. Without my information, Karakush would have seen nothing in the babblings of his prisoner; the two were complementary, perfectly fitting, opening the entire plot to our understanding.

“Further,” went on Karakush, “the personal troops of El Ghazy are being assembled at his house in Boulak, the island near the city. They have orders to gather there the end of the week. Those of several other captains are under orders also. They are friends of El Ghazy, but he is the most prominent. Do you think something is expected to happen next Monday?”

“Probably. Let me speak with Saladin about it, and I can tell better,” I said. We refilled our cups. The wine was strong, and had its usual effect on Karakush—that is, it melted his outward seeming, and drew out his real self. He sighed, rubbed his big hook of a nose, and nodded at me.

“I have an ambition,” he said. “We need not be godly men to give of godly stuff. I would like to carve a great eagle upon that citadel. I have picked out the very spot, on the west façade of the wall, so that all men would see it until the end of time. But to represent any living creature is abhorrent to the true religion. Saladin would never permit it.”

I regarded him curiously. “An eagle? Why?”

“My friend, I will never have children,” he said, after gulping down his wine. “You do not know why I am called Karakush; it means black bird, or eagle. Once, as a child, I was named Ardzrouni, meaning eagle-bearer—the name of a royal Armenian family. I would like to put the Armenian eagle on the wall of Saladin’s citadel, you see?”

“It would put your head over the gate,” I told him truly. “Well, shall we warn our master or not?”

He shrugged. “Useless. He would not accept warnings; he trusts El Ghazy, probably is in love with this woman. Let us wait.” He stretched out his arm, smooth as silk yet muscle-hard as iron. “I could use a sword, once. I still can, better than most men. When Saladin returns, feel him out carefully, and we shall see.”

I left him, presently. So he was Armenian, of high birth! Probably taken in war and made a slave—an interesting sidelight upon his character. . . .

Two days later Saladin returned to Cairo, full of praise for the construction work, and heaping honors upon Karakush, who heeded them not. A queer fellow, that eunuch.

I took occasion to talk with Saladin, casually. He still had the emerald, still watched and studied it by the hour; he gave me curt replies while he looked into it. On the Monday evening, said he, there was to be an entertainment by some dancing girls, to which Emir El Ghazy was going with him. A private affair.

Although it was a hot morning, I went out into the city and climbed to the construction on the hill-flank, and found Karakush at work.

“It’s only too clear,” I told him. “Saladin is to be killed there on Monday night.”

“Naturally. Of course that’s the scheme,” he said, and chuckled. “Can you write Persian?”

“That’s my business, isn’t it?” I retorted. “Persian, Turki, Armenian or what have you. Even Bokhari. Tomorrow’s Friday. What are we to do?”

“Pray to Allah,” he said. “I sha’n’t tell even you, my friend. Trust me. On Monday morning you shall write the letters. I’ll deliver them later. There’s just one thing to give you hope. Our master loves a good joke and a good sword; we’ll give him both.”

More he would not say. I thought the heat had addled his brain, and going home got into a tepid bath and cooled off. The nights were chill, but the days were foretastes of hell if one got

into the white sunlight. How Karakush stood his architectural work I could not see.

During those next days Saladin, in high humor, lost no chance to rail at me about the emerald. It was the very father of inspiration, said he, the fount of all good luck and virtue; a royal jewel, fit for a sultan.

“Once you depended on yourself,” I told him impudently. “Then you were a Kurdish prince, the greatest of warriors. Now you seek luck from a heathen stone.”

He went into a roar of laughter, but all the same it pricked him hard. I saw him watching me, after this, with thoughtful eyes.

Saladin was nobody’s fool, however. He knew those troops were concentrating about the city, so he ordered El Ghazy and the other captains to get them started on the desert road toward Karak, and sent others of his own troops along, and they had to obey him. He had me write Sultan Nureddin that the troops were moving and he would follow at once. I tried to warn him, and he shut me up with peremptory voice.

On Monday morning, Karakush looked me up at the secretariat and showed me a letter to be written out in florid Persian. I read it and choked.

“You’ve gone stark mad!” I said. “A letter to Leila—the noble Persian Safir, sent by the Sultan himself to consult with her—”

“Peace! Write it,” he growled. “Safir arrives toward sunset, goes tonight to her house with this letter. Leave the rest to me. Get it written, and bring it to my quarters tonight after supper. And for the love of Allah, stay sober or I’ll have you flayed alive!”

I wrote the letter myself, with much beard-scratching, and did a good job.

That evening I took the letter to the apartment of Karakush. I was innocent, unsuspecting, fearing nothing. A slave bowed me in, and I saw no sign of the Armenian. Then a very demon of a man appeared—a tall fellow with a curled beard, a black patch over one eye, a magnificent Persian costume, jewels on his hands. Two slaves were with him. At his command they seized me roughly, tearing off my delicate green robe of Medina weft.

“Persian dogs, Allah upon you!” I cried angrily. “You’ll be flogged at the gates for this outrage—Karakush will rip the skin from your backs!”

“Strip him,” said the tall Persian, and the two slaves stripped me. “Now shave his head and beard. Those curled whiskers are not necessary.”

They committed this outrage while he stood looking on, gripping a cruel curved sword and laughing amusedly at my threats. When they had shaved off my beard, which required an hour’s dressing and curling each day, they rubbed into my skin some brown stain which darkened me, clothed me in a hideous harsh, ill-cut robe of camel’s hair, and about my neck set a huge rosary of beads for the ninety-nine sacred names of Allah.

The tall fellow picked up the folded letter, which had fallen in my struggles.

“Certainly no one will now recognize you, sleek cat,” said he, laughing at me. “You’re my honored companion, the holy man El Kahin, so don’t forget to finger your beads and mutter prayers. I have numerous slaves waiting to escort us fittingly. What, the noble Safir does not please you?”

It was Karakush himself, and he was well tricked out. His garments and belongings carried the two polo-mallets called *chugan*, heraldic arms much used in Persia, where polo is a highly popular game. The Chugandar, as he is known, is an important court official there.

I cursed him bitterly, but curses and protests were alike vain.

“Drink your wine and save your breath,” he said, sipping the Cyprian they brought us. “I need you, and I need luck as well. My problem is to carry off things so that Emir El Ghazy will not call in the armed men he doubtless has ready. We must confuse him so he will be uncertain. Allah alone knows what the event will be! However, we must hope for the best, and then it may happen.”

He called his slaves and set forth, dragging me along until I yielded to force and went along of myself. The slaves bore lights; some were armed; and it was an imposing procession that arrived at the house which was behind the Mosque of El Azhar. Safir, decked with a jeweled Persian caftan, made a magnificent figure.

Word was taken to the lady of the house, and we were admitted. Leaving our slaves outside, we were conducted to the presence of the lady Leila, as Safir demanded. This was in the large central chamber, open to the sky above, where fountains played, and a thousand lamps made brightness in the alcoves. She was there, sitting upon rich cushions; and there also was Saladin, and the Emir El Ghazy, both of them looking rather aghast at this intrusion. The lady herself was veiled, icy in manner, very decorous, clad in gem-spangled robes. A small monkey on a golden chain sat by her.

Safir, ignoring the other two, saluted her with the greatest courtesy, using her real name.

“Peace to you, sister of the most noble Melek!” said he, presenting his letter. “I arrived in this dog-ridden hovel they call a city barely an hour ago, and have made all haste to present myself before you and deliver this epistle from your brother, vizier to the Sultan—may Allah be kind to him!”

At this disclosure of her actual name and rank, Saladin betrayed no surprise; he was regarding us keenly.

She took the letter and spoke in an angry voice.

“I do not seem to recall your face.”

Safir preened himself, and laughed.

“Lady, I am Safir el Amidi, Chugandar of the court. And this,”—he waved a hand at me—“is the holy man El Kahin, a magician, as his name implies, dweller in the desert and master of incantations and charms.”

All this while Emir El Ghazy, apparently alarmed by our arrival, was in a mood of gathering black anger.

Leila glanced over the letter, then addressed Safir.

“Let discussion wait until later. Sit down, be at ease. These guests of mine are here to witness some dancing—”

She presented Emir El Ghazy, but Saladin made her a gesture of caution.

“I am Yusuf, of the Emir’s suite,” he said, to keep his rank from being known. He stood up and came toward us. “Peace to you,” he said politely, and saluted me. “If it be true that you are a holy man, El Kahin, I ask you for your blessing.”

He suspected nothing, evidently. It was perilous to jest with Saladin on religious matters, but I could not lose the opportunity.

“Take my blessing in the Prophet’s name,” I responded. “The more so, since you seem to need it badly. I see you are not yourself, but a man bewitched.”

He started slightly, and his dark eyes flashed.

“Bewitched?” he repeated. “I?”

“Precisely.” I fingered my beads. “It is proof that you are bewitched, because you are here and not in a safer place, use a name you do not generally use, and appear to trust those whom

you should suspect.”

An outburst threatened, but Safir checked it by a roar of laughter.

“That’s the way with him, always stirring up trouble!” said he. “Pardon him, I beseech you. El Kahin is very holy, but a bit soft in the head—you understand.”

He gave me a warning kick as he spoke. It was all very bewildering to the lady and also to El Ghazy; our arrival had entirely upset their scheme of things. However, Saladin seated himself again. Slaves brought in trays of sweetmeats and the rarest sherbets.

Leila was examining the letter, and she seemed more puzzled than ever. This did not surprise me, since it bore neither signature nor seal. Emir El Ghazy paid me scant notice but fixed his attention upon Safir, and I saw trouble brooding.

Since I knew very well that Saladin was here because Leila was no ordinary person, I thought best to put trouble aside and please my master. I asked:

“Noble lady, would it please you, while awaiting entertainment, to permit me to divert your mind?”

“How would your holiness attempt such a task?” she said, none too politely.

“Oh, nothing could be simpler,” I replied in the same tone. “I pray you, let me be given a brush and ink and paper, and I’ll write an incantation which will astonish you. And you yourself shall be the judge.”

My voice gave me away to Saladin, for I saw a twinkle come into his eye. But the lady beckoned a slave and told him to give me what I wanted. A bit of paper and writing-materials were given me.

“In the name of Allah!” I said, and began to write, making a play upon the names of El Ghazy, “*The Victorious*,” and Saladin, “*Honoring the Faith*.” It took only a moment. “*Victory*,” I wrote, “*can bring sorrow; to honor the Faith is ever wise*.” I let the words dry, then handed her the paper.

“A true enchantment,” I said, “that will cure all trouble in the heart.”

She read it; then her hand clenched the paper into a crumpled ball.

“You are a sage,” she declared, with a little silvery laugh. At this moment came musicians, and three dancing girls; drum and fifes began to play; figures began to move about the fountain before us, and our byplay was ended. But I liked her laugh. She knew now where we stood.

Safir made a noble show, blustering like a true Persian, admiring the dancers, making an ass of himself generally. On purpose, of course! His intent was to keep El Ghazy bewildered and confused, unable to strike a decisive course. Saladin, though discussing the finer points of the dancing with his hostess, kept an eye on Safir—an enjoying eye, it seemed to me. He had never suspected his tall eunuch of such histrionic art.

Saladin had been given a magnificent sherbet in a huge golden cup. He had set it down beside his cushion to speak with Leila, when Safir began to boast about some famed dancer at Erzeroum—a man who danced with his sword and did marvelous things. As he spoke, he hitched around his saber and gestured with it, and the tip of the sheath struck against the golden cup and knocked it over.

Saladin said nothing. El Ghazy flew into a passion, but Safir put on a show that struck me dumb. He apologized most humbly to Saladin, cursing his own clumsiness, asking pardon, finally taking up his own untouched cup of sherbet and asking Saladin to accept it in place of

that spilled. He did this just as a slave was bringing another golden cup. Saladin took it and gave it to Safir.

“Take this, my friend,” he said, “and I’ll accept yours with pleasure. In Kurdistan, where I was born, a sword can do no wrong while it is sheathed.”

El Ghazy cast an angry look at Leila, and I knew that Safir had acted with intention. The cup which Saladin had given him, he kept untouched. El Ghazy, however, fingered his own jeweled hilt and scowled at Safir.

“A child should not play with the toys of men,” he said significantly.

“True, beloved of Allah,” said Safir. “Also, jewels become women, not warriors. Your sword-hilt is pretty; the dancing girls would like it. Mine is unadorned, but does not slip in the hand with blood and sweat of battle. A sword that slips is perilous to a man.”

“Not if his hand be firm,” snarled El Ghazy, quick to accept the challenge. All our attention was now centered upon the two. Leila made a gesture, and the dancing girls left the floor, and the musicians retired. El Ghazy went on speaking, with gathering anger.

“The hand is what matters. If the hand be firm, the sword bites.”

“The hand cannot be firm unless it be true,” said Safir with a ghastly grin. “And if hand and heart be false, victorious one, how can it be firm? The hand that betrays its master must slip, in the justice of Allah. The ambitious heart that aspires to murder its master and take his place—”

“You Persian dog!” burst forth El Ghazy, the veins swelling on his temples. “You prate fine words and dare not back them up with actions!”

Safir fingered his false beard complacently. “I have no permission,” he said gently. “It is discourteous to bare sword in the house of another. If this gracious lady would give her consent, I should be most happy—”

“Oh, by all means!” spoke out Leila, clapping her hands. “Both of you are bold braggarts. Back up your loud words if you can, and let Allah favor the truest heart!”

As a serpent glides yet cannot be seen to move, Safir left his cushions. His tall shape moved out across the tiled floor, and the sword was bare in his hand. A plain sword, but the edge of the steel glittered, and I knew it must be exceeding sharp. El Ghazy rose, slipped off his embroidered coat, and the blade came naked in his grip. He stepped forth, a magnificent picture of a warrior, perfectly coördinated, his dark gaze fastened upon the tall, ornately clad Persian.

I glanced at Saladin. He was leaning forward, watching intently, excitement in his face, all else forgotten.

“Allah!” he ejaculated, his own fingers twitching for a sword-grip. “Allah! The winner shall have a purse of a thousand dinars!”

“The loser,” said El Ghazy, “will have no need for it.”

He laughed, as he advanced toward the tall Persian. At this moment occurred a slight interruption, although it passed almost unnoticed. A slave came hurriedly in and crossed to Leila, sank on his knee and extended something. It was a tiny pellet of paper, I observed, such as might have come from the leg of a pigeon. She took and tucked it away, and the slave departed.

Then the steel clashed.

Exciting? Not in the least. Neither man was mailed; each had a sword, to serve as weapon and shield alike. For all his proud hauteur, El Ghazy was deliberate and very careful. He

crossed blades with Safir. The two men began to strike, in a methodic way; each was feeling out the other and risking nothing. Saladin, obviously, thought it was no more than a fencing game—or did he? To read that dark intent face was impossible. Leila's features were lost behind her veil, which revealed only the eyes.

I watched the fighters, thinking how cleverly Safir had gained all his objectives, drawing the Emir into this match without rousing any hidden men. He was clever now, too, his tall figure stiff and unbending before El Ghazy's attack, his footwork crude and uncertain, his pose awkward; his sword scarcely moved, but was like a wall in the air, clinging to the other blade and holding it. This was not the sinewy, willowy figure I knew so well. He was dissembling.

Suddenly El Ghazy broke into movement too swift for the eye to follow. He delivered three slashing blows, ferocity whistling on his blade. Safir received each on his sword, drawing the steel slightly away as he did so; he was a little slow for the third, which caught his embroidered caftan and shore most of it away from his head; yet he avoided the keen edge. El Ghazy laughed.

“Not bad, Persian! Next time the head goes as well as the hat.”

“I'll take your chain to pay for the caftan,” said Safir. His long arm and long saber and long body shot forward like a steel spring. A backward leap saved El Ghazy, but the steel point caught the links of a great gold chain he wore about his neck, and the gold went clattering on the tiles. Saladin cried out admiringly.

The two men paused, breathing hard, each eyeing the other. El Ghazy made up his mind and moved forward craftily, apparently slashing high, for the head. The steel whistled as it came in—aimed for the long legs, a deadly stroke.

Yet before our very eyes Safir changed stance and body, it seemed. He was no longer tall and erect. He was leaning far forward, his legs well back and safe, his blade pecking threateningly for the throat. Almost in panic, El Ghazy slashed and slashed; his edge was parried each time; he fell back a step and another step; he tried to beat aside the blade before his eyes, and the haft slipped in his hand so he almost lost his sword.

At this, amazingly, Safir halted.

“What did I tell you?” he cried out. “If the hand be false, it cannot be firm!”

The bearded features of El Ghazy darkened under a rush of furious blood. He must have seen that the tall man was playing with him. The rest of us knew that we were looking on swordsmanship little less than magical. Still Safir laughed.

“The great El Ghazy, no longer simple emir, but now Governor of Egypt!” he went on tauntingly. “Hapless Saladin, bewitched by the emerald and dead of poison, El Ghazy ruler in his stead—”

His jeering almost killed him. El Ghazy came in slashing like a madman, reckless and terrible, with such furious address that Safir backed and backed and needed every last bit of skill to avoid the blows, leaping sideways, handling his blade with frantic strength, all energy intent upon defense alone. It was a marvel of attack, a marvel of defense, two masters hard at work, but Safir did not strike a blow in return. He had no chance, so incredibly swift was El Ghazy. Back almost to the fountain went Safir, then fell into that curious crouch. El Ghazy took warning and checked himself.

Saladin was in a blaze. “With two such captains, I could drive the Christians from Jerusalem!” he yelled excitedly. “Allah give me such men—”

He came to his feet and shouted incoherently—for now Safir was attacking, the first time he had really extended himself. I saw his object. He was making no brilliant assault, just a steady, close, savage attack that El Ghazy had to meet with his whole effort. He tried no tricks. His blade swung like a living streak of fire in the air, and El Ghazy had to watch like a hawk. Remembering that lissom, sinewy sword-arm of tireless steel muscle, I knew this was a deliberate attempt to sap and weary El Ghazy; but the latter was no weakling.

Thus far neither man was touched—an eloquent tribute to the matchless mastery at work on either side. Both were streaming and streaked with sweat, the magnificent garments disarrayed, their breath a panting whistle, and the false beard of Safir hung in grotesque patches about his chin; but I saw that the eyes of El Ghazy were staring and distended, and his smile had become a grotesque grimace.

Out of his deadly crouch Safir flew as from a released spring, sword a part of arm and body. The other man, with a terrific effort, parried the reaching blade, swept it aside, and cut forward. A line of scarlet leaped out along Safir's forehead—the point had barely scratched him in passing. With his left hand he whipped the blood from his eyes—and suddenly swept forward again, uncoiling that incredible length of arm.

El Ghazy parried, and as before found an opening and cut in for it, desperately. This was what Safir wanted. He came suddenly to his full height, parried the cut neatly, and slashed. The other could not recover to ward the blow. I could have sworn that it reached him; yet nothing happened. Safir lost balance a little with the force of his own stroke, and staggered away a pace.

Then—Allah forgive all sin! The truth is past belief—the head of El Ghazy toppled, and rolled almost to the feet of Saladin. The body was relaxed, and fell backward into the fountain, with a frightful rush of blood. The saber clattered on the tiles. We had seen an impossible thing, the thing discussed in every gathering of swordsmen and affirmed or denied blankly—we had witnessed it, and the fact stupefied us all. Even Safir, leaning on his blade and gasping for breath, merely stared and gulped and could say nothing.

“Us,” did I say? Not all of us—not the veiled woman, at least. Upon the dreadful choked silence I caught a tiny rustle of paper. Unwitting that she had just now beheld the miracle possible only to a perfect sword and swordsman, she was unfolding the tiny paper message and reading its brief content. A queer strangled sound came from her—a laugh that was not a laugh. She thrust her arm toward Saladin, extending the tiny paper.

“Saladin—read, read!” Her voice was a gasp. “It came from Damascus—by pigeon. Read it!”

He snatched the paper and glanced at its message.

“By Allah—and Allah!” Amazement broke upon his lips. “Sultan Nureddin died in his sleep last night! If this be true—”

His speech failed, but the words had burned into us all.

“If this be true,” I spoke up, “then he who moves quickest has the prize. That is, unless he sits mooning over an emerald while the world turns upside down—or holds his belly like a monkey who has tasted poison meant for his betters.”

This made them all look quickly. Leila's little monkey lay with beady eyes winking around. He had quietly slipped to the sherbet spilled from Saladin's cup, and had been gobbling it greedily. A short laugh escaped Leila.

“You are fools, all of you,” she said. “There was no poison in the cup. El Ghazy thought there was, but I replaced the poison with a narcotic drug. No harm is done.”

Saladin’s fierce, eager laugh broke upon the room. He gestured at me.

“I am not the fool you thought me, anyway! But there was sense in the proof you offered about the emerald. Perhaps I was bewitched; at all events, I am myself again now. El Ghazy? I was not that man’s tool. Take his head, El Bahi, and have it hung over the city gates. Karakush! To me, swordsman!”

Safir moved, very wearily, and came to Saladin, who took his hand and spoke.

“Egypt is a pleasant land; this woman is true. She came to beguile me, an enemy, and Allah turned her into a friend. Take care of her, take care of Egypt, for me. I am going—now, tonight, and I shall return as Sultan. Whatever request you ask of me shall then be granted on the spot.”

“Careful!” A faint laugh escaped Safir. “Careful of promises, Master!”

“I mean it. I swear by Allah that any request you make of me, even if it be to the half of my power, shall be freely granted. As for the emerald, I shall keep it—to bewitch and ruin some other man, one of these days.”

There, my friends, you have the story I promised. How Saladin swooped upon Damascus and in time returned home as Sultan, the greatest ever known to the world, is in the history books.

If you will some day come to Cairo, you shall see for yourselves what was the wish later made by Karakush and granted by Sultan Saladin. Look toward the west façade of the noble citadel that overhangs the town. You may see it carven there as a witness unto future ages—the royal eagle of the Armenian kings, symbol of the eunuch who, but for the will of Allah, might have worn a crown.

You ask about the veiled lady? Well, I am merely El Bahi, chief of the Sultan’s secretariat, so what should I know of the harem of my master? Still, I have heard laughter at times behind the carven screens, and it was the laughter of the veiled lady Leila—may Allah bestow many sons upon her!

But as for the Sphinx Emerald—I never saw it again, for it was kept by Saladin unto his own purposes.

[The end of *Swordsmen of Saladin* by Henry Bedford-Jones]