

For days the Bedouin band had ridden across the white sands of the Rub al Khali, the Great Central Desert of Arabia, and the steady pounding of the horses' hoofs left a rising cloud of sand behind them. The white-robed figures rode in no particular formation, their long guns resting easily across their thighs, their hands lying only lightly upon them. For the danger of a surprise raid by desert bands had passed . . . ahead lay Addis, on the Red Sea, their destination.

There were twenty of them, sitting still and straight in their saddles as their horses moved effortlessly across the sand. Each steed's head was held high, his hot coat shining in the sun, and each pulled slightly on his bit as though impatient to break out of the slow canter to which he had been held for so many days. The men, too, were as impatient as the blacks, bays and chestnuts they rode. E . . . yes! It had taken them ten days to cross the Great Desert from the mountain stronghold of their sheikh, Abu Ja Kub ben Ishak, who led them. Ten days! When other trips had taken them but four! Ten days of constant riding, halting during the day only for prayer, to turn toward Mecca with a reverent "La ilaha-'llah: Muhammadum rasula-'llah." And then they would be in the saddle again, their long limbs wrapped about the girths of their mounts.

And as they rode, if their eyes left the sheikh, astride his giant black stallion, Shetan, it was only to come to rest upon the small black colt who followed doggedly behind the stallion, straining at the lead rope that the sheikh had attached to his own saddle. E . . . yes! It was the young colt with his spindled, tiring legs who was responsible for this long slow march across the Rub al Khali. It was he, as much as his great black stallion of a father, who had caused them to ride with heavy hands upon unslung rifles for so many suns. Only for the possession of the mighty Shetan and his firstborn, worth all the treasures beneath the sun and moon, would other desert tribes dare to challenge the might of the powerful Sheikh Abu Ja Kub ben Ishak! But now the worst of the trek was over, for ahead was Addis and the ship of the sea which would take the young colt to another land.

Nearing the outskirts of town, the sheikh raised his rifle high in the air, and then slung it over his shoulder; and it came to rest with those of his men.

They were in formation, riding two abreast as they entered Addis and started down the street that would lead them to the sea and the ship that awaited the son of the black stallion.

Two boiler-room men climbed the spiraling iron staircase leading up from the bowels of the tramp steamer, Queen of India, as she docked at Addis. Reaching the upper deck, one of them wiped a greasy hand across his perspiring forehead, leaving it streaked with grime. "No better up here, Morgan," he said, as they walked over to the rail and leaned heavily upon it.

Below on the dock, vendors shouted forth their wares to the multitude of onlookers, freight agents and dock hands who laboriously loaded the varied produce of the desert and farms onto the ship. Camels and donkeys, heavily laden with the wares of vendors, milled with the crowd, superbly unbothered by the high-pitched voices of their owners.

"Makes me think of the barkers at Coney Island, Harrity," Morgan said nostalgically.

Harrity didn't answer, for his gaze had left the crowd below and had traveled up the long, narrow, cobblestoned street that led from the pier. Coming toward them was a group of horsemen. And even from this distance he could see that they weren't like the natives below. Heads moving neither to the right nor left, they rode forward, the hoofs of their horses ringing on the stones. Only for a few seconds did Harrity's gaze rest upon the riders' flowing robes; fascinated, he turned his attention to the magnificent animals they rode. He'd heard tales of such horses as these, owned by the feared and little-known Bedouins, supreme rulers of the desert. But in all his years of traveling up the coast of Arabia, he had never seen even one of them until now.

The horsemen came closer, and Harrity's eyes were drawn to the great black stallion in the lead. Never in the world had he seen a horse like this one, he told himself. This horse towered above the others, his body beautiful to behold. Thunder could roll under those powerful legs, Harrity was sure.

"Look at that band of Arabs comin' down the street," Harrity heard Morgan say.

Without taking his eyes from the mighty black, Harrity replied, "Look at the horses, Morgan. Look at them."

"I'm lookin'. And me who's been to Aqueduct and Belmont, and thought I'd seen the best of 'em."

"Me, too." Harrity paused, then added, "Get a load of that black stallion in the lead, Morgan. If he isn't one of the finest chunks of horseflesh I've ever seen, I'll eat my hat."

"Yeah," Morgan replied. "And he's a wild one, all right. See that small head and those eyes? There's fire in those eyes, Harrity. Look! He half-reared. He doesn't want to come any closer to this mob on the dock. That Arab on his back can ride, all right, but he's no match for that devil and he knows it. See, what'd I tell you, Harrity! They're stoppin' out there. He's goin' to get off."

Suddenly Harrity realized that the shrill voices of the vendors and natives had stilled. The dock was unnaturally quiet. Everybody there had seen the Bedouins.

A few of the multitude moved toward the band, but stopped when they were still a good distance away. They had moved as though compelled by the fascination of this wild band, and had stopped in fear of it. They knew this group of horsemen, no doubt about that.

Harrity's eyes were upon the black stallion and the sheikh with the white beard who stood beside him, holding the bridle. The stallion snorted and plunged, and the man let the horse carry him until he had regained control.

"A black devil," Harrity muttered. "A black, untamed devil."

"What'dya say?" Morgan asked.

"That black stallion . . . he's a devil," Harrity repeated.

"Yeah." There was a slight pause, then Morgan said, "And did ya notice that little black one just behind him? He's tryin' to work up a lather, too."

Harrity hadn't noticed the young colt, but now he saw him. Standing there on his long legs, the black colt, whom Harrity judged to be about five months old, was being held by one of the Bedouins.

The colt moved restlessly, trying to pull away from the tribesman who held him close. As though imitating the big black in front of him, he snorted and plunged, throwing his thin forelegs out, striking at the Bedouin. The man moved quickly, avoiding the small hoofs, and then closed in upon the savage head and held him still.

"Could be father and son from the way they act." Morgan laughed.

"Yeah," returned Harrity. "Look a lot like each other, too. Coal black they are, except for that small splotch of white on the colt's forehead. Didya notice it, Morgan?"

"Uh," Morgan grunted. "It looks diamond-shaped from here."