

# HAROLD LAMB AND HISTORICAL ROMANCE

THE CAREER OF THE AUTHOR OF "THE CRUSADES" AS SEEN BY HIS DISCOVERER

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**T**HOUGH he didn't in the least realize it himself, Harold Lamb began writing *The Crusades: Iron Men and Saints* nearly fourteen years ago. Ancient Asia had cast its spell upon him and there were already a dozen years of work and study behind him when we discussed the question of making the Crusades the subject of the book to follow *Tamerlane*.

One of his ancestors had been of the Washington Irving literary circle and others had been naval men. Heredity was so strong in him that at the age of six he definitely decided to write naval stories, and when the eyesight test at Annapolis barred the Navy at first hand his resolution became the stronger. But there were Asian germs at work in him.

Back in 1917, when he was but two years out of college, there came to me, following a sea story (historical, by the way), a fiction tale about Khlit, an old Cossack of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and I published it in *Adventure*. That magazine during my years as editor ran strongly to reliable historical settings for its fiction; the readers followed it with interest and they at once took Khlit to their bosoms.

For nearly eleven years there was a steady flow of stories, novelettes and serials—fifty-two of them—all dealing with Asia of the past. There were only four laid elsewhere, and none after 1920. Asia had him. There was a dearth of sources to draw on in the English language; in addition to several European languages, he learned to read Arabic, Chinese and a third that I've forgotten, besides something of various other Asiatic tongues, for European sources, too, were scarce and second-hand and he wanted the ultimate facts.

Khlit wandered far and wide over Asia. Later there appeared Abdul Dost, one of

the Moghuls (Mongols) who conquered India, and Khlit joined him in his adventures. Genghis-Khan and Tamerlane themselves stalked, living, through the pages of his stories. Later there came a Cossack, Ayub, under Boris Godunov, with his grandfather Khlit riding sturdily alongside. John Paul Jones leaped into the procession—did you, good American, know that he died serving Catherine the Great as admiral on the Black Sea against the Turks? Harold Lamb was the first to bring this episode into English fiction. Prester John and Stenka Razin, Persian, Arab, Rajput, Lap, Buriat, Tibetan, Armenian, Georgian, Mongol and scores of others from all parts and many centuries of Asia brought each his share of Asia's history into Mr. Lamb's stories.

In 1926 he took the rather inchoate mass of the *Babar Nameh* (The Book of the Tiger), and condensed its 160,000 words into a smooth flowing narrative of 22,000. It is the actual autobiography of Babar, Moghul (Turco-Mongol) conqueror of India, a great great-grandson of Tamerlane, acknowledged by European scholars as deserving a place beside the confessions of Rousseau and Cellini, yet practically unknown in this country. Mr. Lamb was the first to make it available as a continuous, unified narrative.

For eleven years before he wrote *Genghis Khan* he lived with these people, saturated himself with their histories and civilizations, the homely details of their daily lives. Always he was the scholar first, the good fictionist second. Rarely did a story appear without his historian's letter of comment for the magazine's department in which the authors chatted with the readers—letters meticulous as to every least variation from established historical fact, carefully balanced ripe, fairly bursting with intimate knowledge of the broad and only partially explored field

that had become his specialty. And very human letters—it was not dry bones and dusty records that interested him; he wanted to find out what kind of men these had been and what manner of life they led. In the beginning he couldn't. Nobody else had; there was no one to whom he could turn. He must pioneer. So he pioneered. And when Harold Lamb sets himself to a task it gets done. Concentration? Thoroughness? Gentle persistence? Irresistible driving power? Harold Lamb. The task, while a stupendous labor, was in this case only a joyful obsession. He writes me from Rome, busily at work on the second volume of *The Crusades*:

The work here is devilish—the Crusades loom up like a sea that drowns a chap—the mass of evidence buried in hundreds of old Latin records is appalling, and the controversies, are frightful. I'm having a bully time.

But during the eleven years of the fifty-two pieces of fiction he was accomplishing much more than the building of broad, strong foundations as a historian. He was learning, through fiction, to make the ancient peoples as living, breathing and human to readers as they were to him.

The road was not easy going. Aside from the one magazine there was no market for these stories—one of those curious editorial stone walls standing across his path. "Mongols and such? Nobody writes about them; therefore nobody wants to read about them. Historical stuff, anyhow, and costume fiction is out of fashion now." The dictum was the harder to bear because he knew that people did like to read about "Mongols and such" if they were the right kind of Mongols and such. The popularity of his stories with the magazine's readers had been proving that to him for years and, later, the longer ones of these same stories, like *White Falcon* and *The House of the Falcon*, were to prove it still further in book form—not to mention the three books that have swept him into his place as a historian who is an acknowledged authority on both sides of the Atlantic and who can make his history as interesting as the most colorful fiction.

But through those eleven years that stone wall stood, and there came a time when he questioned the sense of going on with the only kind of writing into which he could put his whole heart—questioned even his right to do so. He sent me the outline of a purely conventional story of

the type that most magazines will buy and I sent it back to him, saying that thousands could do this kind of thing but that his own particular kind of work had never been done before, urging him to go ahead, I think his dogged fighting spirit needed no more than the reassurance of a single person in the "writing game" who saw things as he did. There was nothing from then on but steady plugging at his chosen work.

But there had been no mention of the Crusades. That idea, too, had been building -up in him for a dozen years. In his stories there - appeared with increasing frequency some "Krit", some Christian, based on the, historical and much earlier but unsung Marco Polos who, by adventure more tremendous than can exist today, found themselves alone among peoples no more than myths to Europeans, their very names perhaps unknown. Several of these were Crusaders. The Mongols swept through Armenia, Georgia, and past Constantinople, crushed back the Mameluke foes of the Franks in the Holy Land, established themselves east of the Crusader strongholds, and of course Mr. Lamb went with them. The world-smashing of Genghis Khan brought about an intercourse between Europe and the East that had never before existed, so more and more Mr. Lamb met Europeans as he lived the centuries among his Asiatics. And a forefront of that Europe was Palestine, with the Crusaders finally entrenched there. More and more his interest drifted toward these European contacts on the west.

The notable fact, of course, is that he came to the subject of the Crusades from the Asiatic instead of the European point of view, one from the Western world looking with the eyes of one living for generations among those of the world to the East, and chiefly from the point of view of the Mongols, to whom both Christian and Moslem were foreigners in race and religion. An enviable approach for the historian.

When I talked to him just before he sailed for the libraries in Rome and elsewhere and for a personal examination of the scenes most involved in Crusade activity, he was keenly alive to the advantages of his position and to the opportunity it offered, but at least two years before *Genghis Khan* appeared that opportunity was beckoning him on. In a letter to readers he wrote:

"Our existing stock of histories of the Crusades is unfortunate. The early stock

was taken from the main Church chronicles and consisted of a lot of silence and a great deal of fanfare exaggerating the deeds of the *Croises*. Then appeared the cynical history, making much hay of the fact that the Crusaders usually fought a losing fight and were sometimes the very opposite of saints. Lastly the ultra-modern history has cropped up, making much of the superstition and ignorance of the Crusaders and tracing out with great pains the 'advantages' of the Crusades in establishing contact between the East and West, introducing Asia's inventions into Europe, etc.

"In decrying the exaltation of the Crusaders and in hunting out the mercantile gains from their efforts and deaths, we have somehow rather lost sight of the intimate personal story of the Crusaders—which a reading of the Arab chronicles serves to bring back to us.

"So much of our history and biography and fiction, too, has been written out of prejudice or a preconceived bias. 'Catherine the Great was one of the most gifted women of all time' vs 'Catherine the Great was one of the greatest wantons of all time'. 'Alexander of Macedonia was a superman' vs 'Alexander was mad'. You know how these things shape up.

"Nowadays one cannot enter a bookshop without seeing on all sides 'The Truth About This' or 'Outlines of That'. The desire of readers to learn is real enough. The fault is with the writers, who lack both scholarship and inclination to devote months or years to finding out the truth as nearly as possible. The result is that the very modern histories are usually 'outlines' right enough."

"Scholarship seems to have died in the last century. Anyway, I'll wager you can't name a better story of the Crusades than Scott's *The Talisman*. Sir Walter admitted that he wrote from meagre information—there was little to be had in his day—but he was a scholar and a conscientious student of his epoch.

"History, our dictionaries say, is 'a narrative devoted to the exposition of the unfolding of events'. Discarding this husk of Latin phrasing the dictionary says that history is the story of what actually happened. By the way, it's interesting to notice that the dictionary ranks fiction equally with chronicle.' And 'unfolding' is just the word. What is history but the uncovering or unfolding of the past? The story of what certain men did — their adventures—because it's more interesting to read about what they did than what

they were. And easier to get at the truth that way.

"It's so absurd to sit down and start in to whitewash some individual or people and call it history. And equally absurd to assemble a few facts and draw personal conclusions from them, without taking the trouble to get at *all* the facts.

"This is beginning to wander. But it's so tiresome to look for history in many modern publications and find only personal opinions, deductions, vilification or deification, and references to faulty authorities. And so many modern 'historical' novels, written by hasty Americans, are enough to make Sienkiewicz and Tolstoy walk the earth again.

"Getting back to our Arab again—it's been awfully refreshing to read about the Crusaders from Arabic sources. But 'The Shield' is not a story of the Crusades—the *Croises* figure only in the taking of Constantinople. . . . Also an Arab story to the effect that the sword of Roland—Durandal—was taken by the *saracins*, after the death of the hero, and hidden away in Asia Minor. So I'm thinking of a second tale, dealing with the search for the sword by a Crusader."

It is the scholar speaking, the very human but very scholarly scholar to whom anything less than the utmost nicety in accuracy, thoroughness and everlasting allegiance to the real truth of the facts is anathema. He can be satisfied only when he has ferreted out the last attainable fact and, with scrupulous justice and unprejudiced mind, weighed it out to its last atom of significance. Upon the road to the truth Harold Lamb is a Juggernaut to all that stands in his way or crosses his path.

But the hands on the controls of the Juggernaut car are very kindly and human hands and the truth he insists upon finding is the human truth, not the mere dry clatter of statistics and facts of record. He wants to know "what kind of people they were", to meet them as humans. And, when he has learned to know them as living beings, his long fiction training enables him to pass them on to us, colorful, alive, real. The years of work have borne their fruit.

A recent letter from Rome throws a good deal of light:

I'm more than one-half drunk with color and memory of the long trips through the Constantinople region, and—just back from there— Rhodes,

Cyprus, Syria, Palestine. Camped among the Arabs for weeks, going from one Crusader's castle to another, and I've never known an experience quite like that. In the interior the country and people are little - changed since the medieval days, and the great

citadels are finer than anything in France. It does grip the imagination.

Imagination and enthusiasm. Add these to the other qualities and we understand why *The Crusades* is such wholly enjoyable reading as well as being a distinguished contribution to authoritative history.