

Subtext of the Steppes:

A Critical Analysis of Harold Lamb's Cossack Saga

A Master's Thesis

By Howard Andrew Jones

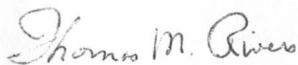
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

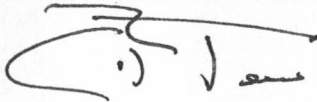
August 10, 2007

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, University of
Southern Indiana, in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.

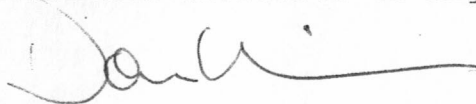
Dr. Thomas Rivers, Chair
Professor of English,
Director, Master of Arts in Liberal Studies



Dr. Chad Tew
Assistant Professor of Online Journalism



Dr. Dominic Micer
Assistant Professor of English



(Two of three signatures required)

Subtext of the Steppes:

A Critical Analysis of Harold Lamb's Cossack Saga

Howard A. Jones

In the 1920s magazine racks overflowed with periodicals printed on inexpensive pulpy paper. The paper quality became so synonymous with the fiction printed upon it that the era's magazines have forever after been referred to as the pulps. Content within provided the escapist entertainment of the day: westerns, sports stories, war stories, detective stories, science fiction stories, romance stories, historical adventure stories--in short, stories from almost every conceivable genre, printed several times a month, or even weekly.

Like media today most of this fiction was forgettable, or so rooted in its time that it has become historical curiosity. A handful of names are remembered from amongst the almost countless authors whose fiction appeared in the pulps: horror writer H.P. Lovecraft, Tarzan's creator Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert E. Howard, and, later, Tennessee Williams, as well as famed speculative fiction writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Ray Bradbury. There were other writers, some equally well known, but most remain obscure. One of them was Harold Lamb. While never a household name, Lamb was well-respected in his day, becoming one of the most popular authors in *Adventure* magazine, his primary

fiction outlet before he rose to even greater renown with a long series of biographies and history books printed by Doubleday through the 1930s until Lamb's death¹. A set of volumes about the Crusades once garnered him an award from the Persian government², and brought him to the attention of movie maker Cecil B. Demille, who used Lamb as a script consultant and co-writer for many decades thereafter. Lamb's expertise on the Middle East was recognized by the State Department's "Foreign Institute" who used him as a consultant³, and he worked in Persia for the O.S.S. during World War II. Long cited as an influence on later adventure writers, his historical fiction has been rare and difficult to find for decades. In the last few years it has undergone rediscovery, chiefly because of the recent availability of a new series of volumes published by the University of Nebraska's Bison Books imprint.

Harold Lamb (1892-1962) was born in Alpine New Jersey, the son of Eliza Rollinson and Frederick Lamb, an artist and writer. Harold Lamb later described himself as having been born with damaged eyes, ears, and speech, adding that by adulthood these problems had mostly righted themselves⁴. More specific information is scant. Author L. Sprague de Camp wrote that in

¹ Lamb wrote almost two dozen histories and biographies from 1927 onward. *Genghis Khan*, his first biography, has remained in print since 1927.

² Lamb, Harold. *The Crusades: The Whole Story of the Crusades Originally Published in Two Volumes*. New York: Doubleday. 1956. Back cover.

³ Burger, Nash K. "Talk with Harold Lamb." *The New York Times Book Review*. 1952.

the 1950s Lamb wore a hearing aid⁵--though this might have been less an indication of lifelong trouble than a sign of advancing age.

Lamb was never very comfortable in crowds or cities, and found school "a torment."⁶ He had two main refuges when growing up: his grandfather's library and the outdoors.

He attended Columbia University, where he first dug into the histories and fables of eastern civilizations, ever after his lifelong fascination.

By 1914 Lamb was writing financial statistics for the *New York Times* and publishing a few stories on the side. He served briefly in World War I as an infantryman, but saw no action. At the time of Lamb's marriage to Ruth Barbour in 1917 Lamb was competent enough to see print in better known magazines like *Argosy*, and to start gathering readers who preferred his stories.

On the whole, the fiction from this period is dated and shallow, and the social conventions often read as either quaint or racist, sometimes both. Most of Lamb's early work is typical of the time. It was only when he began writing for *Adventure* magazine in 1917 that something interesting happened.

⁴ Lamb, Harold. *Kirdy: The Road out of the World*. New York: Doubleday, 1933. Back cover flap.

⁵ De Camp, L. Sprague. "Harold Lamb." *Marching Sands*. New York: Hyperion, 1974. p. ii.

⁶ Lamb, Harold. *Kirdy: The Road out of the World*. New York: Doubleday, 1933. Back cover flap.

Later *Newsweek* would christen it the dean of pulps, but in 1917, under the aegis of editor Arthur Sullivan Hoffman, *Adventure* had already developed a reputation for presenting stirring, well-researched adventure fiction⁷. Encouraged by Hoffman, Lamb penned historical stories set in the Asian lands that so fascinated him.

Lamb fashioned a heroic adventurer whom he returned to time and again to spin stories around. This was Khlit the Cossack, who was to appear in nineteen stories between 1917 and 1926. After the first tales, the Khlit novellas were always given either the coveted opening or closing slot in the pages of *Adventure*. Clearly Lamb was appealing to both his editor and his readers--likely his success had something to do with his cinematic pacing or his exotic settings, but further speculation in that regard is beyond the scope of this paper.

This paper will instead examine Lamb's Khlit the Cossack stories through the light of New Historicism. New Historicism is fascinated with the application and distribution of power in society, and Lamb's work is rife with scenes of conflict and cooperation between different levels of society, as well as conflicts between different cultures. In Asia during the years in which Khlit adventured Lamb presents us with two flavors of

⁷ Pulp scholar and writer Robert Weinberg has written the following in an essay for an unpublished Lamb collection: "*Adventure* was considered the most prestigious pulp magazine in America. It was the very best the pulps had to offer. And the very best author in *Adventure* was Harold Lamb."

the same kind of government, despotism and somewhat enlightened despotism, and we will see what this may say about Lamb's attitudes about cultures and society shortly after World War I, when he was writing these tales. I will compare the Khlit stories to tales by prominent contemporaneous crafters of historical adventure fiction and look for similarities in outlook and understanding.

Before any of that analysis is possible, however, it is necessary to describe the basic structure and elements of the Khlit the Cossack stories.

Part 1: Analysis of Form

It is unclear whether or not Lamb set out from the start to write a set of stories with a recurring character because none of Lamb's own notes about the character survive. The point is perhaps irrelevant; the fact is that Lamb created a character that he continued to sell stories with. Once he determined to write a continuing series of adventure stories he created them within certain constraints, which I outline below.

1. **Heroic Behavior:** The hero must act heroically, meaning at the least that when "the chips are down" he will risk life and limb to see his cause through and to guard those under his protection.

2. **Heroic Environment:** The hero must frequent an environment in which interesting and exciting things will occur.
3. **Heroic Skills:** The hero must have the skills with which to cope with those experiences.
4. **Independence:** The hero must be independent and in command of his own fate, at least for the most part. While he may be given an assignment by a superior, once the adventure is underway the important decisions must be made by the hero. Likewise, the hero cannot attain a position of great command or responsibility and remain an active adventurer--should he attain such a position then he must be removed from it by exceptional circumstances (an important mission, he is kidnapped, etc.) so that he can act himself rather than through subordinates.
5. **Lack of change:** As the stories are part of a continuing cycle, the hero cannot be fundamentally changed by any one story. A permanent change in the character's financial, social, or marital circumstances is likely to end the character's adventures. Thus any love found is likely to be lost, any financial gain is likely to be temporary, any injury is likely to be healed, and so on.

6. **Unique Stamp:** With all of these other formative characteristics in mind the character must still somehow be shaped uniquely, so that he is clearly not Tarzan, Heracles, Luke Skywalker, etcetera.⁸ While his archetype will be recognizable, he should have the stamp of individuality.

When Harold Lamb set out to write his longest and most successful adventure cycle he chose the steppes of Asia in the late 16th century, specifically the dangerous, shifting border between Russia and lands to the east and south. His hero was a Cossack, one of that breed whom Lamb tells us lived in picked war camps along the frontier--self appointed protectors who had all the independence and skilled horsemanship of an American cowboy, the camaraderie found amongst the protagonists in *The Three Musketeers*, and a reputation a little like a cross between the famed French Foreign Legion and pirates. Tricksters, daredevils, vagabonds, the Cossacks lived a dangerous and exciting existence. "For weapons, the free Cossacks were forced to rely on what they could take from the Moslems, who were the best armed troops in Europe at that time. No one received any pay.. Only two conditions were made to a newcomer; he must be able to use weapons, ride and take care of himself, and he must

⁸ While this list could be extended almost indefinitely into a discussion of the characteristics typical of a hero, heroic archetypes, and such philosophical considerations as what actions are of themselves heroic and definitions of good and evil, further discussions are beyond the intended focus of this paper.

be a believer in God and Christ. Every new arrival was expected to perform some feat to show his worth. A good many died in attempting to shoot the cataracts of the Dneiper, or in jumping their horses over the palisade around the camp."⁹

Clearly Lamb understood this was a suitable environment for heroes. Not only was adventure readily available, this sort of living implied certain skills which we soon learn our hero has in abundance. He is Khlit, also known as Wolf, owner of a curious sword which has earned him the additional sobriquet of Khlit of the curved saber. Contrary to the tradition we see most frequently today in popular fiction, where the hero is a stripling coming into his own (a la Luke Skywalker or Frodo Baggins), or a slightly older man seasoned with experience but still in the prime of life (Indiana Jones, James Bond), Khlit is an older man from his first adventure--one of a very few Cossacks who has survived into his middle-years. This is no accident, and while we soon see that Khlit is a fine horseman and sword wielder, it is his keen intellect which sees him through so many escapades. Archetypally he is not Achilles, Luke Skywalker, or Superman--he is quite clearly in the mode of Odysseus. He is aged and wily.

While the trickster hero has been with us at least since the time of Odysseus, he seems to have first stepped onto the

⁹ Lamb, Harold. Letter to *Adventure*, published in 10/20/1923 in "The Camp-Fire" letter column.

modern stage in the works of Dumas and Stevenson, although the figure was further advanced and popularized by the now lesser known Stanley Weyman in his historical novel *Under the Red Robe*.¹⁰

Unlike important trickster heroes like Zorro and his predecessor, the Scarlet Pimpernel, Khlit never hides his identity by playing the part of a languid aristocratic fop, though he sometimes acts gullible, frightened, or simply stupid to lull his enemies into a false sense of security. In his introduction to *Captain Blood*, Gary Hoppenstand discusses the trickster hero and his appeal to the audience of Lamb's day. Hoppenstand writes of Rafael Sabatini's *Captain Blood*, some of whose exploits appeared in the very magazine where Khlit himself roamed the steppes, *Adventure*, at approximately the same time as the old Cossack: "...this hero has appealed to the early twentieth-century working-class reader (one of the major audiences of popular fiction) since the trickster is often a rebel figure who thwarts the unscrupulous might of those in power. This protagonist's aims are often subversive, battling the representatives of corrupt leaderships, and even treasonous by the standards of the established political authority, as this character seeks to right wrongs and protect those who are helpless and victimized by the powerful elite. Such a hero, no

¹⁰ Hoppenstand, Gary. "Introduction." *Captain Blood*. Penguin New York: 2003. p. ix.

doubt, engendered a strong following among working-class readers of popular fiction in both Europe and America who, at times, would themselves feel exploited by their employers, or by a less-than-sympathetic government. The trickster's popularity was based in a nineteenth-century socialist ideology that was in conflict with an evolving capitalistic economic system, which explains why the character came into being following the Industrial Revolution in the late-nineteenth century."¹¹

Certainly Khlit the Cossack struggled mightily against tyrants and corrupt leaders. He does not, however so neatly fit into another of Hoppenstand's qualifications of the trickster hero. As a hero for the masses, the trickster hero is "able to defy social expectations and successfully rise above the restrictions of social class."¹² Khlit never seems interested in rising above his own social class. He does find riches, of course, and perhaps that is close enough, although, as a serial character, never enough to raise his social status that he can settle down. He does, like Blood, show "that nobility is innate. It is achieved by chivalrous behavior and not by aristocratic birth."¹³ Indeed, Lamb seems to hold in highest regard the intelligence, bravery, and loyalty of his characters. Cultural origin, religion, and skin color of his heroes has far less

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. x, xi.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. xi.

¹³ *Ibid.*

bearing upon his measurement of their worth than does their intelligence and capability. The racism we expect from Lamb's time period, from Edgar Rice Burroughs' rabid anti-German statements and implied white supremacy¹⁴ to the more mild comments even from the polished Sabatini (who wrote: "He was in danger of becoming no better than an animal, of sinking to the level of the negroes who sometimes toiled beside him."¹⁵) is mostly absent from Lamb's work save from the point of view of his characters. This difference in tone is discussed at greater length later in this paper.

Series Overview

Khlit appears in nineteen stories, the bulk of which were published between 1917 and 1920, although four were written between 1925 and 1926.

Lamb was still finding his footing in the first two adventures, "Khlit," and "Wolf's War," although "Wolf's War" is already longer and more sophisticated than "Khlit." By the third story, "Tal Taulai Khan," Lamb had mostly settled on the form typical of the majority of Khlit's tales, a form that would

¹⁴ In *Tarzan the Untamed* Burroughs purposefully puts "the wickedest kind of Germans" against Tarzan -- Jane seems actually to have been killed by them early in the story (Taliaferro, John. *Tarzan Forever: The Life of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Creator of Tarzan*. New York: Scribner, 1999. p. 138). After the war, German printings of *Tarzan the Untamed* completely soured German readers on the heretofore popular character. One German paper wrote "It is not possible that a greater insult to the German reading public could be written" (Taliaferro, p. 204.) In the same story, Burroughs had Tarzan casually remark that "black are so unprincipled themselves that they can imagine no such things as principle or honor in others." Taliaferro, p. 139.

¹⁵ Sabatini, Rafael. *Captain Blood*. Penguin New York: 2003. p. 57.

remain fairly similar for nine more adventures. Realizing perhaps that the formula had worn thin or that the last two solo stories were not as successful as the best of his Khlit adventures, Lamb had Khlit--now in India--join forces with another of Lamb's heroes, the Moslem swordsman Abdul Dost, for four more tales. Three of these have the length and many of the elements typical of the solo stories, but the fourth is a short novel, "The Curved Sword," which may well have been intended to conclude the series.

"The Curved Sword" was the last word Lamb would write about Khlit for five years. When Khlit re-appeared again it was as an even older man, at which point Khlit's role was no longer that of Odysseus but that of the old wise man¹⁶, advisor to his adopted grandson Kirdy, to whom he has turned over his famed saber. Two stories from this period again resemble the structure of Khlit's solo stories, another, "White Falcon," is a novel. The fourth is primarily a story of Kirdy (once reprinted in hardback in 1933 by Doubleday it was retitled "Kirdy") and Khlit himself makes an appearance only during the first chapters when he tasks his grandson with the mission that will sustain him through a novel-length story that concludes the entire cycle.

¹⁶ A character and archetype discussed by both Carl Gustav Jung and Joseph Campbell in various writings, although first discussed in Jung's *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*. (1981 2nd ed. Collected Works Vol.9 Part 1), Princeton, N.J.: Bollingen.

Story and Form

Khlit's first story ("Khlit") was printed in *Adventure* in November of 1917, and was the shortest of the entire series, numbering only 3,500 words. Lamb had not yet established the formal structure of the Khlit cycle, a more typical episode of which would stretch to approximately 24,000 words. This first tale is slight, although it introduces us both to Khlit's world and his guile. Interestingly, despite Khlit's status as a Cossack, the story is the *only* tale of Khlit which takes place within a Cossack camp. Let us turn to Robert Sampson for a succinct summary:

War impends and the Cossacks wait for news. Challenged by a gambler, Khlit wagers a fortune that his foster son, Menelitzka, will arrive in camp in a display of unrivaled daring. To make sure the boy cannot cross the raging Dnieper River, the gambler gets the only ferryman dead drunk. But absence of the boat means only that Menelitzka swims the river to bring news of war to the camp, thus performing that astonishing feat Khlit promised.

At story's end, we learn that Khlit had concealed the oars, making sure the boat was out of action so that Menelitzka would be forced to make his dramatic swim. While the point of the narrative is confused by that double

chicanery, matters will soon get better. And Harold Lamb has served notice, if you were paying attention, that the Khlit stories will have plots and end in unexpected twists.¹⁷

By "Wolf's War," the second story, Lamb has already realized he must set Khlit apart from the Cossack camp to experience adventure, where he can act independently, outside the chain of command. We are told he has stayed behind rather than march with the Cossacks for a war against the Poles. Khlit is certain that his old enemy, the Tatar chieftain Khan Mirai, will move against the land protected by the Cossacks. His suspicion proves right: Khan Mirzai not only invades the land protected by the Cossacks, he kidnaps the lovely Mirza, the beloved of Khlit's foster son, Menelitzka. To get her back, Khlit swears he will ride unarmed into the camp of Khan Mirzai. Again we turn to Sampson for a summary: "Knowing that Khlit will keep his word--honor is honor--the Khan releases the woman and prepares red-hot pinchers for his enemy. Khlit does ride into the Tatar camp, but unexpectedly, amid a stampede of horses." Not to mention in front of a fire he has set racing through the dry steppe behind him.

¹⁷ Sampson, Robert. *Yesterday's Faces. Volume 6: Violent Lives*. Bowling Green State University Popular Press: 1993. p. 155.

This story demonstrates for the first time how Lamb sees Khlit out of at least one circumstance that would change his ability to adventure: the character has no interest in women, whom he looks on as "the baggage of Poles and Turks, useful otherwise in making and serving wine and cooking food."¹⁸ Obviously then, there is no danger of Khlit settling down--he will not end his adventuring career that way.

Lovely women are a frequent feature of the Khlit stories, as they so often are within adventure tales, but the women are always decades younger than he, and romance is left to Khlit's allies. Menelitzka, for example, settles down with Mirza. His adventuring days are over. Not so Khlit.

It is during the third story of the series, "Tal Taulai Khan," that the most common features of the series take shape, although the typical length is not established until story four, "Alamut," about which more is seen in a moment. By the third story Lamb has given up making Khlit a regular member of the Cossack encampment, which was an impediment to his independence and freedom of action. When certain comrades seek to push the older Cossack into "retirement" (meaning into a monastery) Khlit will have none of it, and gallops off into adventure. Thus begin the wandering that sets Khlit on the road to the many exotic places he will see throughout the rest of his saga.

¹⁸ Lamb, Harold. "Wolf's War." *The Mighty Manslayer*. New York: Doubleday, 1969. p. 15.

From the third story on, almost all Khlit adventures are structures as follows.

1. They begin in an exotic setting with the scene already underway--Khlit is either in motion in a new landscape or city or in the midst of deliberation amongst comrades.
2. Khlit agrees to aid or work with someone, or is faced with a task he must complete for the good of his allies. Inevitably there is more to the task than is at first apparent and frequently it is a trap.
3. Khlit embarks on the task, encountering minor obstacles such as bandits or hazards unique to an environment, such as the *jallut kum* (deadly, swift-acting quicksand of the Gobi), or must adapt to an environment--adopting a disguise to infiltrate a city or fortress, for example.
4. At this point Khlit's sidekick, if he has one, is likely to have been introduced, although he might have been introduced as early as step 2. If there is to be a love interest for a side character then she will be introduced here.
5. Khlit will come upon that which he seeks, but it will not be what he expected or will be harder to obtain than he supposed. He will either have an audience with the

main antagonist, who will underestimate Khlit's intelligence, or he will witness some great demonstration of the seemingly overwhelming power of the opposition. Sometimes this appears to be supernatural in origin.

6. A low point is reached where all seems hopeless or impossible. Khlit may seem powerless to the antagonist's aims, or to have agreed to work within the antagonist's scheme as a pawn.
7. The antagonist's plan goes into full swing, yet Khlit's counter plan goes into effect. While the exact nature of Khlit's plan and its final outcome are left a secret, the reader witnesses Khlit's execution of the plan and usual bloody denouement, almost always resulting in the death of the main antagonist.
8. In the resolution, the love interest finds the arms of her beloved; those under Khlit's protection--be they a tribe whom he comes to safeguard or a girl whom he befriends, reach safety; the temple or fortress is destroyed; and if a supernatural element was suggested its natural explanation is revealed. Khlit has triumphed. Yet the triumph has been no easy thing. "Khlit the Cossack... is shrewd but explicitly not as intelligent as the high-ranking antagonists he ranges

himself against. What carries Khlit through to success--to the confusion of his enemies, at least--is experience, a very different thing. Even experience wouldn't be enough were not Khlit willing to accept the cost of victory to himself, his friends, and his allies; because victory in these stories never comes cheap."¹⁹

There are other typical features as well.

- Section headers quote obscure fables or excerpts of historical writing which sometimes hint at an upcoming calamitous event but do not reveal it.
- The action takes place in a series of unique or unfamiliar locations--hidden temples, cities on the caravan routes, ancient Chinese cities, the hidden lair of the famed cult of assassins, the tomb of Genghis Khan, the crypt of a Chinese emperor, and so on.
- Despite his grouching about women Khlit finds himself the frequent protector of them, lovely, young--usually in their late teens--and shrewdly intelligent. They are usually sharp-tongued, ambitious, and decisive.
- Frequently Khlit is joined by capable allies, junior heroes who are skilled in ways different from those of Khlit (one is possessed of Herculean strength, another

¹⁹ Drake, David. "Alien Landscape, with Figures." *Warriors of the Steppes*, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. p. xiv.

is an accomplished archer, another is charming and eloquent in contrast to Khlit's gruff reticence) but they are his followers, not equals.

Dissected in this way the Khlit stories may seem formulaic, but in actuality when Lamb sticks to his structure he manages to provide a surprising amount of variation, so much so that the stories defy the predictability common in serial adventure fiction. We are certain Khlit will survive, but never how he will overcome his challenges, and any of his allies or friends may not make it to the end of the story. Structurally this is atypical for many adventure writers: most sidekicks endure along with the hero, and plotting can become static. For example, once Edgar Rice Burroughs had created Tarzan he seemed content to drop him into a seemingly endless series of valleys where two lost civilizations warred, and once his wife and son were introduced neither could truly be harmed.

No serial character can be sustained indefinitely, of course. The author writes always for his audience. Putting aside readers who have no interest in adventure fiction on one end of the scale and the others who will read endless numbers of virtually identical exploits about the character at the other, most authors find there is a finite limit to what can be created with their hero and the environment through which he moves before plotlines begin to repeat themselves. Some writers do not

mind recycling scenes or, indeed, entire plots (perhaps they are incapable of working with more than a handful of story elements). Others, through their own preferences or perhaps those of their editors, once they run out of new ideas tire of creating the same story with different packaging each time.

The repetitive nature of serial fiction is discussed in Umberto Eco's essay "Interpreting Serials." While he speaks for the most part about television and cinema, his comments about repetition in serials apply equally well to written fiction. He feels that there are two levels of enjoyment in serial fiction. A reader at the first level enjoys the fiction precisely because it seems entirely new, although it is not, and the reader at the second level appreciates the variations that are played upon the familiar theme. "In this sense seriality and repetition are not opposed to innovation. Nothing is more 'serial' than a tie pattern, and yet nothing can be so personalized as a tie. The example may be elementary, but that does not make it banal."²⁰

When Lamb began to depart from his established structure, the Khlit stories stopped working as well. For example, the next-to-last solo in which Khlit receives "top billing," "The Rider of the Gray Horse," loses its focus on Khlit. Lamb, fascinated with the heroine of the story²¹, allows her to move

²⁰ Eco, Umberto. "Interpreting Serials." *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. pp. 92-93.

²¹ Lamb had become fascinated with Nur-Jahan, about whom more is discussed later in this paper.

almost to center stage. It is her cleverness, not Khlit's, that sees him through the final conflict which closes the story (a battle in which Khlit is too weary, after the privations of a long journey over the Himalayas, to participate).

In the last of the solo stories Lamb's focus again wavers-- he spends more time than ever on the antagonists and the environment itself. Khlit becomes less the central character than a force through which change occurs, in this case a rebellion against a tyrannical lord of an Indian province.

Perhaps Lamb realized that something was structurally less satisfying in his stories, because the next time he featured Khlit he threw him together with the younger, less imaginative (though no less deadly) Abdul Dost. He returns to the structure he devised, and Khlit, who has yearned for an ally, finds one. Over the course of the last solo stories Lamb had made mention of the fact Khlit's strength was beginning to wane, setting up the reader for a break in the sustainability rule. Lamb is allowing Khlit to change, to age, and while Khlit does use his wit and his sword in the four tales with Abdul Dost, he is in the thick of the fight less often.

Five years would pass before Lamb returned to Khlit, and when the old Cossack wanders back into his fiction it is with his grandson, Kirdy. Once more the stories take place along the Russian border; the Indian exploits and travels to China and the

country of the Tatars are through. Kirdy, a likable athletic youth, now bears Khlit's curved saber. Khlit hopes to introduce Kirdy to the Cossack brotherhood, but first there are lessons he must learn. While aged, sleeping more, and too weak to use his saber, Khlit is still the brains of the stories, although Kirdy comes into his own in the end. In the first three stories (one of them a novel) Kirdy learns various lessons Khlit thinks important to know, for example, in "The Winged Rider" Kirdy "has not learned to see what lies in another man's soul--treachery or good faith."²² Finally, in the last story of the saga, Khlit makes an appearance only at the tale's start. The Cossacks have been betrayed by the impostor Tsar, Otrepiev, and Khlit sends Kirdy out to find and slay him. Kirdy tracks Otrepiev across the Himalayas, finding companionship and love along the way with the daughter of a Cossack, Nada, and while he slays the traitor, Kirdy does not return, living happily ever after rather than continuing to adventure. Over the course of the preceding stories Lamb seemed to have been setting himself up for a handoff, replacing Khlit with Kirdy as central character. With the final story, though, and a change in structure, the series has effectively ended.

²² Lamb, Harold. "The Winged Rider." *The Mighty Manslayer*. New York: Doubleday, 1969. p. 160.

Part II: The Antagonists

In an overwhelming number of the Khlit the Cossack stories, Khlit's major antagonist is surrounded by armies of well-armed, capable underlings, including far-ranging spies. His antagonists are inevitably figures of authority: Chinese generals, leaders of rival Tatar tribes, high-ranking Buddhist priests, or other nobles--even the mistress of the Chinese emperor. They are brutal, efficient, and highly intelligent, and they are apt to be strong and courageous in battle as well. Inevitably their one mistake is underestimating the old Cossack.

That so many tales--seventeen of nineteen--deal with Khlit and his allies struggling against tyrants clearly suggests that their author is fascinated with this particular kind of struggle. The repetition of theme might be less remarkable and easily dismissed if Lamb himself were a formula writer, one who continually recycles the same plot, altering names and locations and situations only slightly with each outing. But while Lamb has recurring themes, his plots surprise.²³ Lamb's interest in dethroning tyrants should not, then, be seen as the laziness of a writer interested in a stable paycheck intent only on delivering what's worked before.

²³ "For all his skill at world-building, Lamb's real strength is in his plotting. His stories have a tendency to fly off in any direction the compass may point, like a prowling falcon spotting a rising duck. The strange alliances and enmities that convincingly rise out of "Bogatyr" might startle anyone not used to Lamb's turns. Lamb makes new story lines appear with the facility of a three-card-monte dealer turning up and then hiding the red card". Knight, E.E. "Introduction." *Riders of the Steppes*. Forthcoming from Bison Books Spring 2007.

It might be argued that there were no other real alternatives to autocrats and tyrants in Khlit's time and that to tell a dramatic tale one had to place them in one's story. That's true enough, at least in the lands where the Cossack travels, but can't excuse the fact that it was possible to write stories where battles with megalomaniacs weren't the primary focus. The antagonist of the first Khlit story is a corrupt gambler, the antagonists of the fifteenth are smuggler/kidnappers.

Was it, then, only a personal interest? Perhaps. But then we must also consider the astounding success of Zorro, created by Johnston McCulley. Zorro first appeared in a short novel titled "The Curse of Capistrano" in *Argosy*, a magazine rival of *Adventure*, in 1919, only two years after the first Khlit story. While there are certain obvious differences, both heroes are swashbucklers fighting against tyranny. Rafael Sabatini's *Captain Blood*, first published in book form in 1922, turns pirate to fight injustice. None of these writers were stealing themes from one another, instead, a new theme seemed to have become a fixation of adventure writers in the period, catapulting some of them, like McCulley and Sabatini, into bestseller status. While Lamb's character never became a household name like McCulley's and Sabatini's, he was clearly one of the most popular writers appearing in *Adventure*, hence

his prominent placement as the opener or closer in most issues where his stories were printed. This speaks to the popularity of the opposition to tyrants amongst the reading public.

Early on in the narrative of each Khlit story Lamb emphasizes the resources of his tyrants so that there is no mistaking their power. This occurs as early as the second story in the series, "Wolf's War." Here Lamb is describing the camp and mindset of the Khan who has abducted the love interest of his foster son:

There were many reasons why Khan Mirai should have been carefree, for he had rejoined the main encampment of the tribe with booty and slaves. The host of the Mirza Uztei-Kur, which the Khan was honoring with his presence, was located in a grassy basin, a mile or so in extent, surrounded by a ring of wooded hills.

Nothing better in the way of an encampment could have been desired. And the Khan's own quarters, the leather and silk pavilion mounted on a wagon drawn by fifty horses, was richly furnished with Mongol draperies and Persian rugs.²⁴

In this first example Lamb makes clear that the enemy's camp is large, and the khan himself holds great wealth and must

command many forces. By the next story in the series, Khlit faces an even more powerful adversary, a Khan whose forces clearly dwarf those of Khan Mirzai, who is only a vassal of Tal Taulai Khan. Lamb's language is already more vivid and specific. Consider how he describes the titular character of "Tal Taulai Khan":

It was in winter, the year of the ape, according to the Mongol calendar, that Tal Taulai Khan, Chief of Chiefs, leader of the Black Kallmarks, told his wives that he was tired of them. Instead of killing them and obtaining others from Circassia, Georgia, or Astrakhan, Tal Taulai Khan began a hunt through the mountains that separated him from the lands of the west.

The Grand Khan of the Kallmarks knew no bounds to his kingdom. The wall that girded China, Sabatsey, the Land of Dogs, was no bar to his entrance. His horsemen thronged to the shores of the Salt Sea. When he hunted, the chiefs of the country came to pay homage. If they neglected to do so their towns were sacked. To make easier the royal pathway, the commander of his armies, Kefar Choga, made, as they went along, a road that was wide and level. If a gorge was to be crossed a bridge was built. If the hunt delayed long

²⁴ "Wolf's War." *Wolf of the Steppes*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. p. 25.

in one spot pavilions were built of solid tree trunks and ebony.

It was the will of Tal Taulai Khan to hunt, and never during his life had the will of Tal Taulai Khan failed to achieve its purpose. That it was winter made no difference. The cold in the mountains of the Black Kallmark land was great. Snows were deep. Passage, for ordinary travelers, was impossible. Yet Tal Taulai Khan announced that it was his will to hunt to the summit of the mountain called Uskun Luk Tugra in Kallmark tongue, or Pe Cha in the speech of the Mongol Tatars, which signified the "roof of the world."²⁵

Near the opening sentences of this excerpt Lamb off-handedly mentions that the khan decided not to kill his multiple wives, implying that he would not have been questioned or challenged if he had done so, which certainly suggests great power. We are then given a clear picture of the Khan's vast domain, and the authority which he wields. Even nature itself is bent to his will. Clearly he is a dangerous man and one not to be trifled with.

In "the Star of Evil Omen" Khlit once again comes upon a powerful man readying a mighty hunt; this time the might of the

ruler is indicated in a discussion between Khlit and the khan of a small tribe whom he is pumping for information:

"Nay, you must be from a distance, if you know not that Wan Li hunts with an army. Aye, an army of thousands; blue and yellow banners of spearmen, armor-arrayed beaters by the hundred; the nobility of Liao province. His pagoda is moved upon the backs of fifty oxen—"

"Rare plunder for a shrewd man."

The khan stared, his grievance forgotten.

"Wan Li's court! Nay—" he shook his head helplessly—"the Forbidden City itself is not safer than the imperial riches. A hundred beaters die in the time between sunrise and dark, for his sport. Have the *rakchas* sent madness upon your head?"²⁶

Khlit inevitably sees the power of the tyrants demonstrated. Here is a description of the Chinese general Hang-Hi, found in the tale "The Mighty Manslayer." First we see Hang-Hi's understanding of himself:

Hang-Hi, mandarin of a high order, master of literature, and favorite general of Wanleh, Son of

²⁵ "Tal Taulai Khan." *Wolf of the Steppes*. pp. 45-46.

Heaven, had been listening to Yen Kui Kiang, in company with his councilors and mandarins of the tribunal of ceremonies, as the chronicler read from the books of Confucius. Always, said Yen Kui Kiang, in his chronicles, Hang-Hi listened to words of the great Confucius before undertaking to judge cases that came to him for trial, in order that his mind might be open and just.²⁷

And here is Hang-Hi as seen by Khlit, who has just heard, along with Hang-Hi, the testimony of a Chinese agent:

He (Hang-Hi) lifted his hand to the attendant who stood beside the merchant with bared sword.

"Strike once," he said, "and sever the sinews of the traitor behind the knees. Thus will he learn to kneel to me. Strike again and slit his mouth wide into both cheeks. Thus he may learn to speak the truth."²⁸

Sometimes the power of Khlit's antagonists is more subtly demonstrated, as is often the case when he encounters cults and priests. Here is the Tibetan priest Dongkor Gelong speaking with

²⁶ "The Star of Evil Omen." *Wolf of the Steppes*. pp. 451-452.

²⁷ "The Mighty Manslayer." *Wolf of the Steppes*. p. 191.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

Khilit, who has become the Kha Khan, or king of kings, of a Tatar tribe.

Dongkor Gelong inclined his dark head courteously.

"It is well that you should hear the word of the almighty Tsong Khapa, O Kha Khan. Although it is many li from the Jun-gar steppe to the Holy City, the power of the Dalai Lama to safeguard his servants knows no limits of space."²⁹

Here's Khilit describing the power of the Tibetan priesthood from later in the same story:

"The clergy of the Yellow Hat," went on the Cossack slowly, "are actual rulers of Kashgaria, which reaches as far north as the Thian Shan, and in Tibet to the south of the Taklamaklan. Also of portions of China by the headwaters of the Yang-tze River. To the northwest of Kashgaria and the northeast of the Yang-tze the Tsong Khapa, I have heard, has pulled his magician's veil over the Khan of the Kallmarks, and the Emperor of the Chinese. They believe he is the envoy of the gods upon earth. Such is the blindness even of a ruler of millions."³⁰

²⁹ "Roof of the World." *Wolf of the Steppes*. p. 374.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

A table that summarizes obstacles in seventeen of the nineteen stories faced by Khlit and, later, his grandson Kirdy, follows.

"Wolf's War"	Khlit matches wits with Mirai Khan and his horde of Tatars to rescue the kidnapped lover of his foster son.
"Tal Taulai Khan"	The titular character is autocratic master of a numberless horde of Tatars, and seeks an alliance with Mirai Khan to move against the Cossacks and all Russia itself. Khlit uses his wits to set the two hordes against each other.
"Alamut"	Alamut is the famed home of the hashish eaters, or assassins, feared throughout the ancient middle-east. Khlit infiltrates the secretive cult, ferrets out its secrets, and with the aid

	of a Moslem adventuress and her prince, brings it down.
"The Mighty Manslayer"	Khlit seeks out the tomb of Genghis Khan, running afoul of a Chinese double-agent and an entire Chinese army besieging a Mongolian city.
"The White Khan"	Khlit finds himself trapped in a Chinese-controlled city while hunted by Chinese spies and the Chinese army.
"Changa Nor"	Khlit and a few friends must defend a small fortress from a rival Tatar horde led by a duplicitous Tibetan priest.
"Roof of the World"	The Tibetan priesthood traps Khlit in a political vice, and he must find a way to safeguard his tribe, protect them from betrayal, and escape from the Tibetan city with his life.
"The Star of Evil Omen"	Khlit and some huntsmen are framed for the murder of the

	Chinese emperor and pursued by a horde of vengeful Chinese soldiers, masterminded by the court favorite behind the plot.
"The Rider of the Gray Horse"	The Cossack safeguards the lovely Nur-Jahan over a mountain pass, where the king of the Moguls awaits her. They are stalked the while by members of the deadly cult of Kali.
"The Lion Cub"	Now in India, Khlit wanders into a quarrel between an exiled young prince and the tyrant who deposed him--and the vast number of fighting men under the tyrant's control.
"The Bride of Jagannath"	Khlit and Abdul Dost rescue the betrothed of a friendly Indian prince from hundreds of devotees of the Indian god Jagannath to whom she is to be "wedded" for a night.

<p>"The Masterpiece of Death"</p>	<p>Khlit and Abdul Dost get caught between two aristocratic thieves who plan to frame them and steal the money, and a cult of the deadly thuggee--stranglers.</p>
<p>"The Curved Sword"</p>	<p>In this short novel, one of the mogul's trusted governors is tyrannizing the province of Afghanistan where Abdul Dost makes his home. Khlit journeys across the Himalayas to recruit his old Tatar comrades to stave off the massive number of the Moguls troops, but only a small number return with him.</p>
<p>"Bogatyr"</p>	<p>An aged Khlit and his grandson Kirdy find an exiled Russian noble who has led his serfs into the steppes; the tyrant plans to loot an ancient burial mound while abandoning his serfs to steppe marauders so he</p>

	<p>can claim his expedition to found a new village was doomed to failure.</p>
"White Falcon"	<p>An elderly Khlit bargains with Czar Boris Godunov to release a Cossack troupe --sentenced to death--if they will plunder the treasures of a distant Moslem city. Godunov releases the Cossacks, who conquer the city; all, however, but Khlit, Kirdy, and Ayub are slain by the avenging Moslem army that rides after them.</p>
"The Winged Rider"	<p>Khlit and Kirdy come upon a fortress in the steppe ruled by a woman. The chivalrous Kirdy accepts the offer to command the woman's forces when a bandit lord intends to storm the fortress and abduct the woman; but she proves to be almost as great a tyrant as her</p>

	attacker and Kirdy and Khlit depart her service.
"The Wolf Master"	Kirdy, Khlit's grandson, is tasked by Khlit to track down and kill the imposter Tsar, Dmitri, who has betrayed the Cossacks and led hundreds of them to their deaths. While Kirdy does not have to face down numberless fanatical followers as are seen in previous Khlit the Cossack stories, the whole of the plot is concerned with finding, and killing, a tyrant.

Part III: Allies and Themes

Khlit's opponents are dependably powerful, masters and mistresses of mighty empires with vast forces at their disposal; his resource-poor allies stand in stark contrast. There is Arslan, a Manchu who appears in two of the tales ("Changa Nor" and "The Star of Evil Omen," in which he perishes) a skilled archer who makes his living as a mercenary. There are Chagan and Ayub, who appear as sidekicks in several stories (Ayub features

more prominently in another cycle of Cossack stories). Chagan is a Tatar, Ayub a Cossack, but they are similar in that they are large men of great strength with battle prowess who are content to be loyal followers to one brighter than they, namely Khlit.

When Khlit's allies do have resources, such as the Tatar tribe he leads in "Changa Nor" and "Roof of the World" then Khlit and his immediate allies are removed from those resources to face challenges independently.

Khlit's greatest friend is Abdul Dost, an Afghan swordsman. They first meet when they cross swords, for Abdul believes Khlit to be one of a troupe of kidnappers he has been trailing, and are devoted comrades in the two novellas and novel that follow this meeting. Abdul is a famed swordsman, and was a high-ranking warrior in the administration of the former Mogul emperor. With that emperor's death Abdul's own fortunes have dimmed, and he wanders the countryside with Khlit doing martial deeds for food and shelter. In their final story together, "The Curved Sword," Abdul Dost becomes the leader of an Afghan freedom force that rises to combat an oppressive governor. The full force of the Mogul government is brought forth to crush the rebellion, rendering the numbers at Abdul's back almost superfluous. Khlit rides back across the mountain passes to enlist help from his old allies, the Tatars, and returns with a small force of cavalry, clearly smaller still than the mighty force of the

Mogul. But they are led by wily Khlit and guided by his knowledge of tactics, and so they triumph.

Lamb's message is evident in all of these stories; only through honor, loyalty, and martial skills can freedom be maintained. Yet only in "White Falcon" does he come close to explicitly stating these sentiments. The normally taciturn Khlit opens up to the Cossack leader Demid on the eve of a great battle. Both men sense they will not meet again and are more talkative than usual.

"In other lands," resumed Khlit after a moment of thought, "you meet with men who are bold and not lacking in love or daring. They are shaped like ourselves; they have children that they cherish and it cannot be said that they lack for wars. But in one respect they are different. They have no brotherhood. Gold, and the embraces of young and white-breasted women are the things their hearts covet. You speak to them but they give you no word of heartfelt fellowship."

He glanced up at the stars, listened for a while to the quiet movements of the warriors and went on:

"Nay, only men such as these"--he nodded at the shadows that passed and repassed the standard "can enter into a fellowship where all is given and nothing is sought.

Nothing is sought save the honor of the brotherhood. Is it not so? Ataman, it is so. I, who have lived two lifetimes beyond the border, have seen it. I have had other comrades, but none like these."

Thoughtfully he shook his head, not sorrowfully, but gravely, as a man who weighs all things. And Demid listened attentively, because the speaker was one who had been through the ceaseless toil of war, who had endured all suffering, and had gleaned the wisdom of hard years.

"And it has not failed them," the low voice of the old warrior went on, "the Cossack spirit. Not their minds, not ambition or the love of praise, sustain them--only the Cossack spirit is within them."

Demid lifted his hand. "I have failed them."

Again Khlit shook his head. "Ataman, not yours is the fault. The fault is the emperor's--who would sacrifice brotherhood to ambition. You have buffeted the Moslems, your strength has not failed; you have availed yourself of every expedient. And I, who rode at their side, say this: if the ancient atamans, Rurik and Schah and Skal Osup could shout down to us now, they would put down their drinking cups up yonder at the table of the White Christ, and say 'Well done, ataman! Cossack honor has not suffered at your hands.'"

In other words, the Cossacks represent liberty and freedom, which are honorable pursuits. What Lamb does not say here, but clearly suggests with mention of the betrayal of the emperor, and implies in other places with the abuse of power by those who wield it, is that civilization is corrupt, be it the civilization of the tsar that sends 500 men on an impossible mission solely to further his own goals, be it the civilization commanded by the Chinese usurpers in "Star of Evil Omen" that sends an army to massacre an entire province when the emperor is believed slain, or the armies of the Mogul or Turks and other Moslems, journeying to extinguish the Cossack brotherhood. The protectors of freedom are ordinary men, not men drawn from the nobility, not those who have inherited their rule, but those who have risen to rule through their own ability. The implication is that if men become too civilized they are weakened, that only men bred to combat, willing to sacrifice all for their honor and belief in their comrades, can keep freedom's fires burning.

Even religion is shown as a corrupting force. Lamb clearly feels it is not the sect of belief that is important, it is the sincerity of that belief. Lamb views religion as a force that shapes society--it is a political tool used by those in power to sway the masses. Only when religion is practiced independently, as it is practiced by Khlit, or the Moslem Abdul Dost, does it

arise from true faith. Khlit, an Orthodox Christian who risks his life rather than spit upon his cross in "Alamut" and who does not turn over strangers for blood letting because they are Christians in "Changa Nor," thus jeopardizing his own political power, even respects faith in other cultures. So too does Abdul Dost. In "The Bride of Jagannath" the two warriors are in the service of a young prince, who is arguing with the corrupt leader of the Kukushetra temple who desires that the young prince's new bride become a bride of the god--that the temple's head priest sleep with her. A crowd of devout villagers has gathered to hear the discussion. Khlit and Abdul Dost listen as well. Here is the young prince, the Rawul.

"You of Kukushetra follow the doctrine of Vallabha Swami. He it was who said that gratified desire uplifts the soul. And so do you live. What are the handmaidens of Jagannath but the prostitutes of the temple and its people?"

An uneasy stir among the listeners greeted this. Many heads were shaken.

"It is the truth I speak," cried the Rawul, turning to them. "Nagir Jan claims to be the friend of the poverty-afflicted. Is it so? He seeks devotees among the merchants and masters of wealth.

"He takes the fields of the peasants by forfeiture, contrary to law. He has taken much of my land. He seeks all of Thaneswar." The young chieftain spread out his arms.

"My spirit has followed the way of Chaitanya. I believe that bloodshed is pollution. My household divinity is the image of the sun, which was the emblem of my oldest forebears, whose fields were made fertile by its light. Is it not truth that a man may uplift his spirit even to the footstool of the One among the gods by *bahkti*--faith?"

While the watchers gazed, some frowning, some admiring, Abdul Dost touched the arm of Khlit and nodded approvingly.

"An infidel," he whispered, "but--by the ninety-nine holy names--a man of faith."

The sincerity of the Rawul's faith appeals to Abdul Dost. This is a man who believes in his god because he believes it is right and honorable, not because it will bring him political or temporal power. Few true believers appear in the Khlit the Cossack stories, and in the entire canon of Khlit the Cossack stories, the leaders of organized religion are shown positively only twice.

In "Changa Nor," Khlit leads his tartars to find an ancient treasure he has promised them, only to discover it's safeguarded

by a fellow Christian, an ancient priest who introduces himself as follows: "...I, Atagon, am the last of the patriarchs. Truly my flock is small. For save Gurd, who ministers to our needs, there are only a few wandering Nestorians from Hsi'en-fu, in Shensi, who visit Changa Nor."³¹

Atagon is a simple, pious man whose faith ensures that he must protect the great emerald cross and the small caskets with holy relics stored in his chapel. Likewise, he is dedicated to speaking the words of God to his small flock.

Muhammad Asad, first encountered by Abdul Dost in his own small cycle of adventures,³² is a poor blind holy man. Unlike Atagon, he has no fortress, and no treasures. He, though, is not so simple. He is introduced into the Khlit stories near the start of "The Curved Sword."

Up one of the watercourses which descended from the slopes of the overhanging hills there was a granite cliff bearing certain writings in the Turki tongue, chiseled into the face of the rock. These writings, maxims of the Koran, were laboriously traced by the hermit mullah, Muhammad Asad, whose blindness precluded his writing upon parchment.

Unlike the Hindu fakirs, Muhammad Asad lived not upon

³¹ "Changa Nor." *Wolf of the Steppes*. p. 330.

mendicant charity, but was supplied with food by the villagers. A thin native boy who had kindled a fire in the mouth of the cliff's base—the abode of the mullah—stared at the two newcomers who walked their horses into the circle of light.³³

Asad is revered by those who seek him out, and spends his time in contemplation of holy writ. Despite his blindness and age he is acutely aware of the world around him, as he demonstrates while speaking to Abdul Dost, when he explains how he knew things about Abdul without being able to see him: "Sight, Moslem," smiled Muhammad Asad, "lies inward as well as outward. A lame sense is aided by the crutch of wisdom. Nay—you walk and sit like one who is sore and wearied, as I can hear. Were you not a follower of the World-Gripper—may Allah heap upon him the fruits of his tyranny—Alacha's guards would not lightly let you pass. And since my poor home is hidden from the highroad, you have sought me out."³⁴

Asad is shrewder even than this, however. In the following passage he both manipulates the emotions of Abdul Dost and hints at powers beyond those of normal men—one of the few times in

³² Abdul Dost narrates four short stories and is a character within a short novel prior to his joining forces with Khlit. He meets Muhammad Asad in the short story "Prophecy of the Blind." The prophecy of the title is foretold by Asad, who also happens to be blind.

³³ "The Curved Sword." *Warriors of the Steppes*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. p. 497.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 499.

Lamb's writings that a tinge of supernatural appears and is not revealed as mummery.

"The last time I heard your voice, Abdul Dost," he meditated aloud, "you helped to save a child from the path of charging buffalo. Behold, the child is grown to half-boyhood and he honors your name. He it is who tends my fire and who is now gone to the village. Have the drugs and wine and the flung gold of the Mogul changed your spirit? Are you no longer a true Afghan?"

Abdul Dost looked up with smoldering intensity but said nothing.

"Dreams, Abdul Dost," continued the blind priest, "are the visions of the soul in flight without the body. In the first of this moon I dreamed that one who was skilled in war, whose name is a talisman in Badakshan, who had the noble stamp of the ancient race of Sulieman in his features, came to the oppressed people of Badakshan and placed upon his strong shoulders the cloak of faith, and took within his hand the staff of leadership."

Again he nodded with the assurance of the aged.

"And, behold, Abdul Dost, you came to my fireside and the first portion of my dream was true. Yet because you cherished the rank of *mansab*, in the pay of the money-

gleaner Jahangir, I would not share bread and salt with you until I knew whether you were true Afghan or-" and his mild voice strengthened in righteous wrath-"a dog that feeds at the table of the Mongol who has forgotten his birth, his faith, and the two laws--the law of the Koran and the law of Genghis Khan who was the first and greatest Mongol."

The subtle oratory of the ardent-spirited mullah worked profoundly on the simpler emotions of the soldier. But to Abdul Dost truth was self-evident: his mind was shaped for action, yet before acting it was not his nature to ponder at length.

"*Bismillah!*" He flung out an eloquent hand. "O *kwajah*, hither I came to drink at the refreshing well of your wisdom. What avails it to reproach me for that I have been a warrior of the Mogul. It is no shame. Were more of our heedless and quarrelsome men obedient to authority, the balm of peace would heal the sores of past wars that afflict Badakshan. In a just ruler lies the solution of our unrest."

"Not so, Abdul Dost. Can a tiger be prisoned within bars? Is an eagle fashioned by God to fly with clipped wings? Jahangir has proclaimed himself lord of Badakshan. It is the heritage of the Afghans to have no rulers except

themselves!"³⁵

It is Asad who persuades Abdul Dost to lead the Afghan people in rebellion, and his words are revealing as to Lamb's true agenda. True men must fight for their freedom and must protect their lands and people; it is only right and natural.

Lamb betrays his prejudices, but they are not the prejudices of race or class. He did not write from the viewpoint of the Victorian writers who immediately preceded him (and whose writing strongly influenced many of Lamb's contemporaries). There is no sense in Lamb's Cossack stories that his characters are men who impose their greater moral sense and greater learning upon a society because they are superior white men from the west. If anything, Lamb turns that completely upon its ear. He could not have created Tarzan, a white man transplanted to a strange new land who somehow is superior to those born and bred there for uncounted generations. Lamb's sympathies remain with those upon civilization's fringes. If they are not quite barbarians, his characters are but a step removed. Lamb seldom passes up a chance to show that civilization's movers and shakers are users and abusers of lives and resources. He has little sympathy for figures in power and merchants especially are tricksters who are more interested in gain than their fellow

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 502-503.

man. The Russian Jews, who made their livings throughout Asia at the time as traders, are almost universally depicted as wily wheeler dealers.

In "Wolf's War," the second of the tales, the trader Yemel aids Khlit the Cossack for a share of spoil, going so far as to murder a Tatar shaman and impersonate him to further the scheme. In "The Winged Rider" the Jewish trader Schmel is less bold, though no less a merchant eager to barter, constantly extolling the worth of his goods. He tries to convey important information to Khlit's grandson, Kirdy, but the merchant has been so annoying that when Schmel finally has something important to say Kirdy brushes past him.

"Harken, young lord! Is it not true that Erlik Khan has shown you honor? Take me under your protection, O most illustrious of chieftains, and I will repay you well. Before God, I know that which will open your eyes. Last night on the steppe I saw--"

But Kirdy, impatient of such talk, moved away toward the gate. He could not understand the merchant, who had no thought for his own honor, yet would risk torture for the sake of selling his trinkets at many times the price he had paid for them.

As for Shmel, he lifted his hands in amazement at the man who would not stop to listen to a message that might mean life or death to him.³⁶

Lamb here demonstrates the clash of culture not so much of Jew and Cossack but of civilization and outlander. He betrays something similar when Khlit, Ayub, and Kirdy, the sole survivors of the 500 sent by Boris Godunov to raid a Muslim stronghold, return to the throne room of the merchant tsar. Boris Godunov here speaks to Khlit from his throne room, looking over the treasure of gem stones the Cossacks have brought with them.

"It is strange," he remarked. "So the matter was foretold--achievement and death have come to pass at the same time. Yet it puzzles me. Your grandson has said that you lacked for money among the Tatars and sold your girdles and neckcloths. Why did you not take one such stone and buy camels and horses?"

"The ransom was not ours. It was gained by Demid and the sir brothers."

"By the apostles--they were dead!"

When Khlit remained silent, the Tsar considered them,

³⁶ "The Winged Rider." *The Mighty Manslayer*. p. 183.

frowning, and signed to Van Elfsberg, among his officers, to approach. When the captain bowed at his ear, the emperor spoke to him in Latin. "*Sic itur ad astra*--such is the rise to fame. I did not think these savages would prevail."

The Swedish officer bowed, well pleased at the success of the mission--seeing that Boris Godunov was satisfied.

"These men would not understand," went on the Tsar. "I care little for this." He touched the glowing emerald lightly with his plump finger. "The wealth of Muscovy must be gleaned from its trade. A route must be opened for our goods, to Cathay and to India. These men have dealt a blow to the robbers who have hindered the trade of my merchants. *Summum bonum*--that is the true gain."

If Godunov does not seem to appreciate the sacrifice and the loss of many bold and daring men, he does see further than those he calls savages--he is looking toward the building of his civilization. Lamb's sympathies and those of the readers are clearly meant to be with the Cossacks, and this is not the first hint that readers of the stories see of changing times, of the border being pushed further and the old Cossack freedoms being driven out by the onrush of civilization. It is ironic, then that the Cossacks serve and protect the very thing that is destroying them.

A similar disregard for life expressed by a merchant appears in the final story in the cycle, "Kirdy." The tsar has been murdered and chaos has erupted in the streets. Bertrand, a French merchant, is speaking with Kirdy:

"Eh, it is terrible," Bertrand sighed, watched men run into a door under upflung shields, while arrows flickered down from narrow windows. "It is a massacre of the Poles."

There was real regret behind his sigh, because the shrewd trader foresaw that this slaughter of the visitors would be ample excuse for the ambitious and powerful King Sigismund to lead his armies into Muscovy, and that a great war would follow on the heels of civil conflict--with more plundering than profit for himself.³⁷

In the first paragraph Lamb leads the reader to believe that Bertrand is a humanitarian, but it is only a few sentences before the readers see that Bertrand is no more concerned with the loss of life than tsar Godunov from "White Falcon." Profit is all.

Nationality, culture, and past prejudices mean little or nothing to Lamb; it is civilization and its war with the barbarian and freedom that count for more. We are told that

Khilit has spent the whole of his life fighting Tatars, and by the time of the tale "Alamut" we have seen him in deadly combat with them in two stories. In "Alamut" the woman Berca has tricked Khilit and a Tatar warrior named Toctamish into sharing bread and salt together, meaning that by both of their codes that they cannot lift hand against the other. It does not mean that they are friends, and Khilit is routinely insulting to the Tatar (and he to Khilit) as they are here, while sailing upon an inland sea:

"Hey, Flat-Face," Khilit greeted him, sitting opposite against the side of the dark recess, "you look as if the devil himself was chewing at your entrails. Can you speak as well as you grunt? I have a word for you. Where is the little Berca?"

"In her cabin, oh, dog without breeding," snarled the Tatar, who was less disposed to speak, even, than usual, "looking at silks of a Syrian robber. This sickness of the sea is a great sickness, for I am not accustomed."³⁸

Yet Toctamish proves his mettle. He stands his ground, fights bravely for Berca, and then, once caught when Khilit and Toctamish infiltrate the stronghold of assassins, he will not

³⁷ *Kirdy* (originally published as "The Wolf Master") p. 77.

talk to betray either the Cossack or Berca's plan. Khlit debates raising his sword to save the Tatar, and sees that he is outnumbered, then tries to talk the men interrogating Toctamish into sparing him--for they do not yet suspect Khlit--then realizes there is nothing he can do. "Khlit scanned the face of Toctamish. The yellow skin was dark and moist with sweat. The eyes were bloodshot and half-closed. The mouth lifted in a snarl, disclosing teeth pointed as an animal's. He felt that Toctamish would not yield to the torture. And great love for the man whose courage was proof against pain rose in the heart of Khlit whose own courage was such that men called him the 'Wolf.'"³⁹

This is a sea change in the Cossack, but an all important signpost in understanding Lamb's themes of brotherhood and loyalty, which transcend race, religion, and culture.

Part IV: Women and Sexuality

While they are frequently allies of the Cossack, those women encountered by Khlit and his grandson fall into two sorts of camps. They are either young, beautiful, supremely confident and very clever, or they are young, beautiful, and needing protection. Those needing protection are rarely so clever as those who have schemes of their own. Those adventuresses are

³⁸ "Alamut." *Wolf of the Steppes*, p. 96.

always shown as mysterious creatures whose true motivations are unknowable--much of the tension from "The Wolf Master" arises from the fact that Kirdey can not understand the character of the woman Nada, with whom he has fallen in love.

Lamb's women are just as independent in thought as his men, and usually quick-witted, even if their motivations are unguessable. The first of them we meet appears in "Wolf's War" when Khlit converses with the woman who's stolen the heart of his foster son Menelitzka. Alevna is no blushing bride-to-be:

"Then you are Khlit," she said quickly. "I know about you. The Cossacks went away and you stayed behind to sleep on your stove, for fear of the Poles. Or it may be just because you are old, and the young men are better fighters. Menelitzka has chosen badly when he made you come wooing for him."⁴⁰

Alevna doesn't stop tongue-lashing him there:

"So that is why you sit in your house on the hill looking across Father Dnieper, old man, to see if you can find any enemies. That is all you are good for, now, isn't it--that and to come paying suit to young girls...You need

³⁹ Ibid., p. 144.

more than money, old man," said Alevna mockingly, as she stroked his horse's neck, "if you want to woo a girl, with your face. I had heard that Khlit was a mighty warrior. I am disappointed."⁴¹

The taunting is hardly unique to Alevna--it is a frequent speech pattern of the women whom Khlit encounters. They do not understand him, for he does not explain himself. The Persian adventuress Berca, from "Alamut" sounds very similar:

"Is this the wolf you told me of?" she said to Toctamish. "I do not think he is the one the Tatar fold fear. See, he blinks like an owl in the light. An old, gray owl."⁴²

Berca has much to say, for she needs warriors if her plan is to succeed. Before too long she extols her beauty, another common feature of the women whom Khlit encounters: "You are hungry, Father of Battles, and I would speak with you. A man speaks ill on an empty belly, although a woman needs no food nor wine to sharpen her wits. Eh, look at me and say, Father of

⁴⁰ "Wolf's War." *Wolf of the Steppes*. p. 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴² "Alamut" p. 89.

Battles, is it not true I am beautiful, that men would die for me? It is given to few to look at me so closely."⁴³

The response to another woman, in a much later story, "Roof of the World," is typical of Khlit's reaction to such women: "Khlit returned her gaze indifferently. He had seen many women and all were fond of talking. Sheillil puzzled him slightly, for she went unveiled and seemed without fear. He judged that she had been much with men, bought and sold in many bazaars. Still she could not be more than seventeen."⁴⁴

The womanly insult to Khlit is such a dependable feature of the conversations that occur in the series that it is worth dwelling upon. The tongue-lashings are light comedy, but they seem to serve notice of two things: First, Khlit is not viewed as a threat by the women, sexual or otherwise, although his lack of interest clearly frustrates them, perhaps because they are used to using their wiles to intimidate and control. Second, and perhaps unintentional, is that the verbal sparring between Khlit and these women serves notice as one more clash between civilization and the barbarian. These intelligent, well-dressed, lovely women are products of civilization, every one of them. Upon seeing Khlit they do not understand his power and skills-- he seems merely an unlettered, ill-mannered boor. He does not act as a man from civilized lands would act.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 90.

Nur-Jahan (later Nur Mahal), of India, is the epitome of all the features in a woman Lamb seemed most fascinated with. An actual historical personage, the famed Nur-Jahan won the heart of the Indian Mogul Jahangir and then ruled the empire for him while he slowly died due to complications brought on by his dissipated life style.

When Khlit first encounters her, in "The Rider of the Gray Horse," she is fleeing with a price on her head. The two talk over the camp fire.

Khlit had heard of Ind as a land of many peoples and great treasure, whence caravans came to China. As far as he had a purpose in his wandering, he was bound there.

"Are there many *yurts* and tents in Akbar's camp?" he inquired. The girl stared at him frankly and threw back her head with a musical laugh.

"O steppe boor! O one-of-small-wisdom! There be palaces in the empire of Akbar the Mogul as many as the tents of one of your dirty Tatar camps." The laugh ended abruptly. "Nay, he has a following of millions of many faiths, who obey his word from Samarkand to the Ganges'

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

mouth. And his word has laid the seal of death on Nur-Jahan—"45

Here Nur-Jahan realizes she has said too much and has placed her identity and life at risk. Shortly thereafter she tries to knife the old Cossack to keep her identity secret. This troubles Khlit little and seems merely to indicate to him that she has spirit. "...Nur-Jahan, watching sleepily by the tamarisk flames, thought that here was a man of a kind she had not met with, who cared not for her beauty and less for the threat of death, yet who gave up his shelter and the half of his food to her."46

Lamb usually stayed in the moment and introduced historical details as part of the story. Almost never did he step aside, like Sabatini and continental writers of the previous generation, as an omniscient, all-knowing voice. Nur-Jahan was cause for one of those few breaks, and Lamb here sounds more like the historian and biographer he would become than a writer of adventure stories.

Nur-Jahan was unlike the women of India. Once a wanderer, daughter of a poor caravan-follower, her beauty and splendid intellect had made a name for her at the court

⁴⁵ "The Rider of the Gray Horse." *Wolf of the Steppes*. p. 529.

of Akbar, father of Jahangir... Sorrow and the vicissitudes of life had left their stamp on the woman's soul, although her fairness seemed to have grown the greater for suffering. Her courage in holding up the mirror of truth to the eyes of the narrow-minded and short-tempered monarch had increased her influence over him. Fearless, prone to follow her own path, her wisdom overmatched the wits of the statesmen of the court.

Nur-Jahan was destined to be the greatest empress of India. And the love of the Mogul for her was the brightest spot in a dissolute life. Although the Taj Mahal was built as the tomb of another woman, Nur-Jahan, the Persian, was the fairest figure of the Mogul era.⁴⁷

She appeared multiple times within Lamb's fiction,⁴⁸ eventually becoming the title character of one of his Doubleday novels. Lamb was so interested in her that he mis-stepped with the Khlit novella "The Rider of the Gray Horse:" for the first time his focus shifts from Khlit; the plot is moved forward by Nur-Jahan. The story suffers because Khlit, purportedly its main character, is merely a participant and not the driving force.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 532.

⁴⁷ "The Curved Sword." *Warriors of the Steppes*. pp. 561-562.

⁴⁸ She is a principal character in two tales of Khlit the Cossack, "The Rider of the Gray Horse" and "The Curved Sword," and in the third (and best) of three Lamb novellas narrated by an Arabian physician, "Light of the Palace,"

It is not Nur-Jahan's beauty which so intrigued Lamb, though it is clear the woman was lovely: "The molding of the luminous brow and the tiny mouth bespoke pride and intelligence. The dark hair peering from under the hood of the *khalat* was abundant and silk-like."⁴⁹ It is her intelligence and courage in face of adversity. "Here was a true daughter of kings, thought the Cossack. Worn by the hardships they had been through, she still had spirit to confront those who hungered for her death."⁵⁰ Later, in "The Curved Sword," when Nur-Jahan falls into the hands of Khlit's Tatar allies, they try to question her for information as to the deparment of the Mogul's forces.

"Then," cried Berang and others of the khans, "let her suffer until she voices the tidings you would know."

He bent back the fair head of the captive with a twist of his wrist, and the others muttered hoarse approval. Khlit glanced once searchingly into the strained face of the Persian and caught Berang's arm, thrusting it aside.

"She is Nur-Jahan, and she will not speak. Brothers, khans, are ye dotards and fools to wage war upon the body of one woman?"⁵¹

and finally is the protagonist in a novel of historical fiction titled "Nur Mahal" often mistakenly filed by libraries with Lamb's biographies.

⁴⁹ "The Rider of the Gray Horse." *Wolf of the Steppes*. p. 529

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 592.

⁵¹ "The Curved Sword." *Warriors of the Steppes* p. 604.

She is lovely, resourceful, feminine and thus in Lamb's universe, unknowable, but supremely intelligent, which clearly most inspires Lamb's admiration.

For all the time spent upon Nur-Jahan, perhaps the most touching and successful relationship between man and woman in all of the Khlit stories takes place in "The Mighty Manslayer" when Khlit befriends a young slave girl, buying her freedom on a whim and earning her loyalty and love (though it is love between a young girl for a grandfather figure). She is one of the few characters in the whole of the saga to whom Khlit shows true affection, and she returns his loyalty later by helping him to escape imprisonment by the Chinese. She lacks the sharp tongue and awareness of her own beauty common to all other Lamb heroines.

Khlit later protects a slightly older woman, a singing girl whom Abdul Dost assumes he has helped to kidnap, and we see a rare instance of Khlit perceived through the eyes of a woman sympathetic to him: "The next day, and the next, Yasmi kept close to Khlit. His rough touch of kindness--giving her his khalat--had been the first she had received for many months and Yasmi was grateful. She kept her pony at the side of the black horse where the narrow track permitted, and at other times in front of

Khilit."⁵² Women, of course, cause nothing but trouble, and Khilit "had felt when he first saw the women in the caravan that they would breed trouble. Now it was coming to pass even as he had foreseen. But the hardships inflicted on Yasmi stirred his anger."⁵³

Most crucial female characters in the Khilit saga, though, have their own agendas and are not usually damsels in distress. Lamb admires women, he respects women, even shows that they have superior intelligence to most men--yet they also are dangerous. They are like elemental forces, going where they will regardless of what may happen, moving to their own strange rhythm. This is not to suggest that Lamb depicts them as fickle or changeable--they hold constant to their courses and desires--those courses are just not explicitly clear to the men around them, and are almost always kept mysterious to the reader as well. Mid-way through "The Curved Sword" Nur-Jahan has already divined that the Mogul's governor in Afghanistan is corrupt and seeks to bring an end to the conflict before all-out civil war explodes within the province.⁵⁴ Her future husband, the emperor Jahangir, has no inkling of the governor's true motives. Even the governor does not suspect Nur-Jahan's visit to be an investigative one,

⁵² "Law of Fire." *Warriors of the Steppes*. p. 339.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁵⁴ Robert Sampson takes note of this incident by remarking "Nur-Jahan, the Light of the World, being three hundred and twelve times smarter than the Mogul, has entered Afghanistan in disguise. She intends to seek out Abdul Dost and reconcile him with the Mogul." (*Yesterday's Faces*. p. 62.)

but he burns with such desire for the lovely Persian that he has her bodyguard slain and absconds with her so that she is unable to return to the emperor with what she has learned in time to avert the war. Once freed by the Tatars, though she sympathizes with their side of the conflict, she will not betray the Mogul's forces, even when threatened with torture and death as shown in a previous excerpt.

Clearly these women are desirable and lovely, although Khlit is immune to such lures (whatever tryst he underwent to beget a son or daughter who further begat Khlit's grandson Kirdy is unmentioned in any of the Cossack stories). Yet desire and lust are implied rather than openly discussed. For all that, Nur-Jahan's near rape at the hands of Alacha, the governor, is chilling despite its lack of blatant language. Earlier in the series the Tatar Chepé Buga has designs upon a woman without interest in him, in the most sexually tense scene in any of the Cossack stories. The moment is all the more startling because the Tatar is expressly one of the good guys, brave and likeable and, prior to the arrival of Abdul Dost later in the series, Khlit's greatest friend. That Alacha the governor, a tyrant, should have designs on Nur-Jahan is understandable, for he is a villain. What then to make of Chepé Buga?

So intent was she that she did not hear a stealthy step in the chamber, as Chepé Buga entered, closing the door noiselessly behind him. Before she had realized that another was in the room the Tatar had gained her side and thrown his arms around her. The girl's slender form stiffened in fright. A startled cry was cut short by Chepé Buga's hand over her lips.

"The old Atagon is at his prayers, Chinsi, of the golden hair," the Tatar whispered. "You would not like to disturb him. Nay, I have taken the song-bird in her nest."

The girl twisted and turned in a vain struggle. The Tatar's powerful arms held her easily. He pressed his face against the sweet tangle of her hair.

Chinsi's heart was beating heavily. She remembered Chepé Buga's admiring glances, and the persistency with which the khan had followed her about the castle. She realized that it was hopeless to try to free herself from his hold.

A sudden thought came to her, and she ceased her struggles.

Chepé Buga cautiously lifted his hand from her mouth. Seeing that she was silent he laughed.

"I am weary of waiting to slay your lover Gurd," he said. "You are the fairest woman of the Khantai Khan Mountains--nay, of Tatar." "

His hand passed over her hair eagerly, but he did not give up his grasp of her shoulders. The blood rushed to the girl's face under his touch. Although she was passive, her mind worked quickly.

"You are fair as the pine flowers in Summer, Chinsi," his voice was deep with passion. "You have quickened my blood with love."

His hand grasped her chin. But this time the girl tore herself free.

"Look, Tatar," she cried, "there are wolves around the castle. I have seen them from the window."

Chepé Buga laughed softly.

"You are as full of words as the magpie of Lhon Otai, Chinsi. And as wayward as an unbroken horse. Nay--"

"Fool!" stormed the girl. "Am I so witless as to try to deceive you? While you are prating of love, the castle may be in danger. I saw a man run from Changa to the shore. Who it was, I know not. Look, and you can see for yourself."⁵⁵

Chinsi does not lie--there are, indeed, armed men surrounding Changa Nor, and she is saved by their arrival and her own quick wit. What might have happened if the besiegers had not appeared at that very moment is left to the imagination of the readers. Chepé Buga perishes later in the same story, holding a gate against the invaders while Chinsi fights at his side in a moment that, along with his death, might have been intended to redeem him:

Her glance fell on the dark stain that covered the khan's mail, and she gave a cry of dismay.

Chepé Buga shook his head in mute protest as she tried to draw off his heavy mail.

"The spear," he whispered, "went deep. Your sword killed the man that did it. Brave Chinsi, the golden-haired!"

Chepé Buga's dark head sank back on the floor, and his sword fell from his fingers. The watching girl saw a gray hue steal into his stern face. Chepé Buga, she knew, was dying.

"Harken," she whispered, pointing to Atagon who lay beside them, conscious. "Let the presbyter bless you, Chepé Buga. The priest will save your soul, for heaven."

⁵⁵ "Changa Nor." *Wolf of the Steppes*. pp. 348-350.

The Tatar moved his head weakly until he could see Atagon. Something like a smile touched his drawn lips. The girl bent her head close to his to hear what he was trying to say.

"Nay, Chinsi. Do you bless me. Heaven is--where you are."

Raising one hand, Chepé Buga caught a strand of the girl's hair which lay across his face. The girl, who had stretched out her hand to Atagon, sighed regretfully. Yet she did not move her head away.

Chepé Buga's hand was still fast in her hair. But its weight hung upon the strand, and the Tatar's eyes were closed when Khlit and Chagan ran from the tower stairs into the hall a moment later.

Both men, the good and the bad, who come close to rape, are stayed prior to the act and both men die before the conclusion of the story. There is something very Victorian in the handling of both incidents, not just in the way that the sexual tension is handled and that the virtue of the women is titillatingly on the edge of violation--at least by old fashioned standards, for there are no ripped bodices--but in the final result of both scenes. Alacha and Chepé Buga both have nearly committed unpardonable acts, thus both die. While Lamb is clearly an

advocate of independent, intelligent women, it is not solely the rape for which these men are being punished. Both men have lost control. Passion must be controlled by intellect, or the unthinkable will result; destruction will necessarily follow from loss of a tight rein over one's emotions. And though Lamb never blames these women for whatever happens, there cannot but be a slight hint that, at least in Chepé Buga's case, the woman has been the downfall of man, a suggestion that if not for Chinsi's charms the brave Chepé Buga would not have strayed from the path of virtue.

Lamb's women are complicated creatures. They are sophisticated and desirable, intelligent and capable, one of the best features of civilized lands. They are further sighted than men and of clearer purpose--exemplified by Nur-Jahan--yet they also can lead men to ruin. They are the saviors of men and their downfall, much as civilization itself brings with it both benefits and wickedness. The Cossacks cannot help but protect such a thing of beauty, though it will in the end destroy his way of life and destroy his freedom.

It has already been remarked in my proposed rules for serial adventure characters that if a hero is to remain adventuring he will almost always have to remain all but unchanged (Captain Blood is kept apart from his Mirabelle until the very end of his adventures, when they marry, and Zorro's

career is over when he unmask himself to the lovely Lolita and the whole of southern California, saying that there is no more need for Zorro⁵⁶) and therefore probably single.

In "The Myth of Superman" Umberto Eco refers to a paper by Roberto Giammanco which suggests a homosexual undercurrent to tales of both Batman and Superman⁵⁷. The longer an adventurer's exploits are extended the more easily serial adventure fiction leaves itself open for this charge. To have a hero in continuous search of adventure means forestalling settling down with a wife to create a family. When the character not only fails to settle down with a wife but belongs to a society where his closest companions are male the undercurrent of homosexuality is inevitable.

In the typical *Adventure* story in the days of editor Arthur Sullivan Hoffman romance between hero and heroine was downplayed in favor of action; moreover a popular magazine was certainly no place to find a hidden cache of homosexual fiction.

Certainly when we are told in "The Curved Sword" that Abdul Dost and Khlit had shared the same blanket Lamb expects us to draw no inferences other than that on cold nights the men slept together for warmth. In Changa Nor a priest manages to drive a wedge between Khlit and his Tatar friends by revealing Khlit's Christianity. Here Khlit succinctly tries to remind his friend

⁵⁶ Sampson, Robert. *Yesterday's Faces*. p. 41.

Chepé Buga of the strength of their friendship: "Speak, *anda*, brother in arms," he said gruffly, "what matters my faith to you? We have fought together and shared the same bed. Will you leave me for the fat conjurer?"⁵⁸

To a modern reader, the sub-text is unavoidable, but it is a mis-read, one that Lamb and his editor could not have anticipated. One did not speak of sharing the bed of a woman, let alone a man, in any sexual sense. Later in the series, as Khlit hungers for companionship he finds Abdul Dost. And he risks all to save him, for he is all that Khlit has left.⁵⁹ He arrives in time and finds Abdul Dost alive, though he sees his friend's hand is mangled and overhears onlookers saying "the ribs of Abdul Dost were broken about his heart and that he would be a cripple henceforth."⁶⁰

This, though, is meant to show the love of true men, to symbolize a brotherhood forged of loyalty, virtue, and honor. The last words of the story are especially telling, mouthed by none other than Muhammad Asad, the blind Mullah: "Not by

⁵⁷ Eco, Umberto. "The Myth of Superman." *The Critical Tradition*. New York: 1998, p. 871.

⁵⁸ "Changa Nor." *Wolf of the Steppes*. p. 339.

⁵⁹ "He wondered how the old chiefs of Cossackdom had fared during the years after he had left the war encampments. He would have liked to see their faces again, hear their oaths and see the glitter of their swords. Yet he knew his old companions were dead.

So likewise had the elder khans of Tartary passed from his life, Chepé Buga and the others--their souls loosed from their bodies in the swift tide of battle.

Only Abdul Dost remained.

Khlit's life had been long and full. He had chosen the open plains and the hard fortunes of war instead of the peace of cities and the honors of the courts. No comfort had he won out of life, nor had he gained anything to serve him except his sword." "The Curved Sword." *Warriors of the Steppes*. p. 608.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 620.

spirits, nor by the strength of warriors, was the Mogul defeated-but by the fellowship of two men."⁶¹

It seems almost certain that Lamb intended this story to be the conclusion to his series. When Khlit kneels beside the wounded Abdul Dost in that last moment, we are told that "He let the hilt of his broken sword fall to the earth..."⁶² Khlit at last has a home, and a loyal comrade, and the wars and fighting, symbolized by the broken sword, are over.

Yet Lamb did return to the Cossacks, first with a series about other heroes, then finally with an aged Khlit and young Kirdy. And Kirdy carries the saber once borne by Khlit. Fortunately, for continuity, Lamb wasn't explicit about which broken sword it was that Khlit carried, although the reader would certainly have sensed that it was his famed saber.

What is interesting is that Kirdy in the end chooses love.. once he completes a dangerous mission that would have assured him the acclaim of the Cossacks as well as a position of honor among them, his adventures are over, for he remains with a woman he loves. And it is there that the series of Khlit stories truly concludes. Kirdy and Nada are across a mountain range, their way home blocked. Yet they might have returned eventually, had they wished it, by some other route. A later story with an older Ayub makes mention of Kirdy having disappeared in the steppes to

⁶¹ Ibid.

never return. Kirdy, then, made the change that Khlit could never adopt, and embraced civilization in the form of woman, albeit a Cossack woman.

Conclusion

Sampson writes that in the aftermath of World War I, writers didn't yet want to address modern warfare, that the memory was too recent. "The blood still pooled; the smoke still drifted. Authors wrote about war because that subject had consumed readers' attention since 1913. But they wrote about different war, war subject to fiction's silent order, in which one man could make a difference. Above all, they wrote about war distant in time."⁶³ So Sampson introduces his discussion of Khlit the Cossack, and his points are valid. Yet it is not just that there was suddenly an interest in writing of one man making a difference because of World War I. The industrial revolution had brought with it the rise of cities, pollution, corruption on a vast scale, the servitude of an entire class of people to a new kind of merchant class.

Lamb was ambivalent as to the benefits of civilization, although a scholar like himself would have found it hard to have existed without it. His merchants, much like the robber barons, have only their own profit at heart.

⁶² Ibid.

Then too Lamb lived in a time when kings and tyrants and generals ill-equipped to understand the changes wrought to warfare had destroyed a generation of young men. Nationalism was on the rise and fascism and Bolshevism loomed in the shadows.

The Cossack stories were a declaration of rebellion against tyranny and all the ills of civilization. Freedom could belong only to those daring enough to master their weapons and stand together with true brothers⁶⁴, and might be jeopardized at any moment from any direction, even by the tsars and boyars who were sometimes allies, though they are usually depicted in Lamb's Cossack tales as tyrants just as grasping as Turkomans, Tatars, and evil shamans. Real virtue and strength lies only in the outsider, the Cossack who protects the border and knows that change is coming. He protects civilization even as it pushes the border that is the Cossack's home further and further away. Someday, he senses, there will be no border and the adventures will be over. Someday he will have to grow up. But for now, there is the glory of battle.

Though he ages, Khlit cannot change and is forever a creature of civilization's fringes. The women know it and cannot manipulate or understand him, much like civilization itself. Only young Kirdy can retain his virtue and loyalty and embrace

⁶³ Sampson, p. 154.

civilization, if somewhat reluctantly and still not with full understanding, by taking Nada as his wife.

It is clear that young Robert E. Howard read *Adventure* magazine. He remarked in his letters that he began to collect every issue, and that he had both respect and keen admiration for Harold Lamb's work⁶⁴. Howard took Lamb's interests one step further, writing of true barbarians. The Cossacks are masterless men, some having fled from civilization. Conan, Howard's most iconic and famous character, is no dweller on the borderland: he comes from the land beyond, and bears with him all the prejudices of Lamb's heroes toward civilization and initially has even less understanding of its vices and virtues.

Robert E. Howard scholar Patrice Louinet kindly shared an unpublished Howard document with me, rightly suspecting it was somehow connected to Lamb. It consisted of a long list of names and terms, mostly Cossack and Mongolian. A search through Lamb texts showed us that Howard had apparently gone through a stack of Lamb stories, writing down foreign terms and phrases in the same order that they appeared in Lamb's fiction, probably planning to use them in his own historicals. Louinet's

⁶⁴ Lamb let it be known that no women were allowed in the Cossack camps -- in his 10/23 letter to *Adventure* he wrote "Women were barred from the Siech rigorously -- possibly because it was desired to keep the situation of the war camp hidden." This is made clear numerous times within the stories besides.

⁶⁵ Robert E. Howard mentioned Lamb to H.P. Lovecraft in their letters on several occasions. Circa December 1932, he listed Lamb in his list of favorite writers. In a letter received by Lovecraft on July 15, 1933, Howard wrote "I do not possess an indiscriminate antipathy for intellectuals; for such men, as, for instance, Harold Lamb, I have only respect and keen admiration." (Howard letter text courtesy Robert E. Howard scholar Patrice Louinet.)

introduction to the Howard collection *Lord of Samarcand* notes the similarity in tone and theme between Lamb and Howard, and in that collection introduces an outline Howard made of Lamb's Tatar story "The Wolf Chaser," as well as an abortive start at a similar story based on the same events.

This is not the place for an in-depth comparison of the themes explored by both Lamb and Howard (that would take another paper) but it is an ideal point to mention the synergy of their ideas. Both men held up barbarism as a vital force, and Lamb was the writer who blazed the trail, even if it was Howard who more fully explored it.

When I set out to write this paper I thought that Lamb's work would be a snapshot of genre writing of the time, but have since learned that his work is hardly representative. The prejudices of Lamb's era do not appear in his work because Lamb's prejudices are set upon the ills of civilizations and the practitioners of those ills. His women look ahead, for they are direct actors within the action. If they do not sound quite modern, they are shaped with more realism than the untouchable goddesses and dark antagonists one might find in Haggard and other writers a generation before Lamb, and they, like Lamb's men, are shaped with greater complexity than we see in other popular heroes of Lamb's days. Zorro's exploits are light and

repetitive. "If taken in small doses, like rhubarb extract, the stories are charming. Across them flicker familiar scenes from 'Capistrano,' blended in like bits from an old movie. The characters are vividly painted shells. The stories, bland simplicities, string together direct confrontations, crafty menace, immediate action. It is all as predictable as eggs in a carton."⁶⁶

Zorro may oppose the tyrannical governor and eventually stop him, but the whole system remains unchanged. Peons still labor for the aristocrats. "Since Don Diego Vega was, himself, an aristocrat, we have the interesting spectacle of the hero maintaining a paralyzing status quo. Zorro's constant message to the natives is "'Don't rise up. Don't revolt. You will be protected."⁶⁷

Sabatini was a writer of greater sophistication than Zorro's McCulley: *Captain Blood* is redolent with the themes of injustice. "Sabatini underscores in Peter Blood's enslavement the immoral economic and personal underpinnings of the practice of slavery, and Blood's escape from this pernicious condition makes Sabatini's novel a truly American story in its celebration of personal freedom. Regrettably, elements of racist nationalism are nevertheless

⁶⁶ Sampson, p. 39 -- "Capistrano" is the title of the first Zorro novel, in which Zorro triumphs over all and reveals his identity to all in the end. Later adventures conveniently overlook these incidents.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

still evident in *Captain Blood*, in the author's stereotypical portrayals of the Spanish and French as stock villains."⁶⁸

Lamb is different from these authors. His adventure fiction is some of the earliest that reads as essentially modern both in style and outlook. His pacing and description are direct and forceful. We have few of the asides in his fiction practiced by contemporaries like Sabatini⁶⁹ where the author sounds more historian than author. This difference in tone might be expected to stem from the nature of the publications printing Lamb's work, which one supposes must have featured faster-paced storytelling than found in novels of the time. That, though, is a false assumption. Lamb's most well-regarded pulp historical adventure writing contemporaries, the team of Farnham Bishop and Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, A.D Howden Smith, and the most accomplished of them, Talbot Mundy, almost never matched Lamb's headlong pace. Of these other *Adventure* authors, all but Mundy almost always weigh down their prose with heavy exposition and the parroting of plot points and back story via character discussion. Mundy was too accomplished for those flaws (and is worthy of his own study), still, his plots move with less speed

⁶⁸ Hoppenstand, p. xxiv.

⁶⁹ Consider the opening to Chapter XVIII of *Captain Blood*, a typical example of Sabatini's style: "The affair at Maracaybo is to be considered as Captain Blood's buccaneering masterpiece. Although there is scarcely one of the many actions that he fought--" where Sabatini sounds more the historian than the author.

than current fiction. Today Lamb reads as cinematic, the others as staid, slow, and resultantly old fashioned.

Lamb's fiction was poised upon a razor-thin edge of the old and new, and dealt ably with many of the themes that continue to fascinate writers, and readers and viewers, of adventure fiction today. If it has lacked study it is because his work has only been available in rare book stores and even rarer old magazines, hidden away in library collections. Assembled now for the first time in complete editions, with appendices publishing related letters, it is now finally possible for scholars to study these texts. They are a fascinating look at one of the first writers who mastered a modern adventure vocabulary--and the stories themselves are likely to continue to entertain readers for generations to come.

Bibliography

- Bishop, Farnham and Brodeur, Arthur Gilchrist. "The Hand of the Mahdi." *Adventure* (February 18, 1920).
- Bishop, Farnham. "Libertatia." *Adventure* (April 30, 1925).
- Bleiler, Richard. *The Index to Adventure Magazine*. Borgo Press, 1990.
- Brodeur, Arthur Gilchrist. "The Doom of the Gods." *Adventure* (November 18, 1919).
- Brodeur, Arthur Gilchrist. "For the Crown." *Adventure* (May 20, 1922).
- De Camp, L. Sprague. "Harold Lamb." *Marching Sands*. New York: Hyperion, 1974.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Eco, Umberto. "Interpreting Serials." *The Limits of Interpretation*. Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Eco, Umberto. "The Myth of Superman." *The Critical Tradition*. New York: 1998.
- Gallagher, Catherine and Greenblatt, Stephen. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Haggard, H. Rider. *Eric Brighteyes*. New York: Zebra, 1978.
- Haggard, H. Rider. *The Wanderer's Necklace*. New York: Zebra, 1978.
- Hoppenstand, Gary. "Introduction." *Captain Blood*. Penguin New York: 2003.
- Jones, Robert Kenneth. *The Lure of Adventure*. Starmont Pulp and Dime Novel Studies. Starmont House, 1989.
- Jung, Carl Gustav. *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*. (1981 2nd ed. Collected Works Vol.9 Part 1), Princeton, N.J.: Bollingen.
- Lamb, Harold, *Warriors of the Steppes*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.

- Lamb, Harold. *Kirdy: The Road out of the World*. New York: Doubleday, 1933.
- Lamb, Harold. *Riders of the Steppes*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.
- Lamb, Harold. *Swords of the Steppes*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.
- Lamb, Harold. *The Mighty Manslayer*. New York: Doubleday, 1969.
- Lamb, Harold. *Wolf of the Steppes*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.
- Louinet, Patrice. "Introduction." *Lord of Samarcand*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2005.
- Machor, James. *Reception Study; From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*. Routledge, 2000.
- Mailloux, Steven. *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics*. Cornell University Press, 1998.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*. University of California Press, 1987.
- Mundy, Talbot. *Tros of Samothrace: Helene*. Avon Books, 1967.
- Mundy, Talbot. *Tros of Samothrace: Helma*. Avon Books, 1967.
- Mundy, Talbot. *Tros of Samothrace: Liafail*. Avon Books, 1967.
- Mundy, Talbot. *Tros of Samothrace: Tros*. Avon Books, 1967.
- Myers, D. G. "The New Historicism in Literary Study." *Academic Questions* 2 (Winter 1988-89): 27-36.
- Rice, P & Waugh. *Modern Literary Theory: a Reader*, 2nd edn. Edward Arnold, Melbourne, 1989.
- Sabatini, Rafael. *Captain Blood*. Penguin New York: 2003.

Sampson, Robert. *Yesterday's Faces: Violent Lives*. Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993.

Smith, Arthur D. Howden. *Gray Maiden*. New York: Longmans/Macmillan, 1929.

Smith, Arthur D. Howden. *Swain's Saga*. New York: Macmillan, 1931.

Taliaferro, John. *Tarzan Forever: The Life of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Creator of Tarzan*. New York: Scribner, 1999.