

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER FOUR

ACROSS THE FENCE

The next morning they woke, and Joe sat up in bed wondering just where he was for a minute or two. Then he saw the silk covers and painted walls and remembered. He had that feeling you get when you know you're going to the dentist that day - only he thought that seeing the dentist might just be better than where they were going. The idea that he had had seemed really good the night before but now in the light of day it all appeared rather desperate. There was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" called Joe,

"Me, Sarah," came the reply and Joe told her to come in. Like him she was wearing the pyjamas the attendants had left on the bed the night before - Sarah's were of green silk and had dragonflies embroidered on them while Joe's were red and had monkeys climbing all over.

"How do you feel," asked Sarah. She seemed rather downcast.

"Nervous," admitted Joe. "Will it work?"

"It's worth a try," came the response. Sarah sat silently on the end of the bed staring down at her feet. Suddenly she burst out, "Joe, do you think they can harm us here? I don't want to be shot full of arrows." Her eyes were filling with tears and she seemed to have been crying already. Joe thought that he should try and reassure her but inside he felt like doing the same and then Hadrian barged in, wearing bright purple pyjamas embroidered with what could only be described as madly dancing woolly elephants. The pyjamas were far too big for him and he stumbled over the extra bits of leg and went flying, skidding across the polished floor, crashing into a wall and bringing down a silk wall hanging on top of him. The children cheered up and tried to disentangle Hadrian, their efforts not helped by his panicking and thrashing about in the hanging until he was wound up like an Egyptian mummy. The children were giggling by the time they had him free, their troubles forgotten for now.

Breakfast arrived, brought by the attendants of the Mandarin and once again it was a good assortment of very interesting things on fine china plates. Whatever the delicacies were, they tasted very good - Joe thought it made a nice change from cereal or toast - and there was plenty of tea; this time a more refreshing kind to wake you up, a different taste and smell but still excellent. It gave Joe another idea too. He kept it to himself for while. Having eaten, washed in big china bowls and dried themselves on the softest towels Sarah had ever felt they went down stairs, dressed and ready to try out the idea that that had thrashed out the night before. In the hall below the Mandarin was waiting for them.

"How was your breakfast?" asked the Mandarin, considerately. He was really a very kind old man and hated the thought of having to execute anyone let alone these children and their strange

friend. But orders were orders and if he didn't carry them out, he was the one who would be executed.

"Very good, thank you," said Hadrian.

"I have selected some horse for your travels, and some supplies," said the Mandarin, indicating some boxes and bags on the floor. "There are boxes of food, specially prepared so it will last a long time, sleeping bags and a small tent, and as you like our tea so much, I have also included a teapot, a box of the finest tea and a special little stove so that you may make a pot whenever you feel like it."

He beckoned to an attendant who showed the children and Hadrian a brass box containing tea leaves and a beautiful china teapot. The attendant put a little collapsible silver stove together and showed them how to put fragrant wood chippings in the base and light them with a tinder box. It was a skilful job to light it using a piece of flint struck against a piece of steel so that the sparks caught a bit of dry cotton wool, but Sarah and Joe found that they could soon master it. The attendant then returned the stove, wood chippings and tea to a padded bag.

"When you are ready, we will saddle up your steeds and off you can go," said the Mandarin. "I will send an escort as far as the fence - after that you are on your own."

"That's very kind of you," said Hadrian rather hesitantly, "but may we have some time to prepare ourselves, please?"

"Yes," nodded Sara, trying to calm her beating heart and sound as plausible as she could, "Some ceremonies that we have to perform before we set out on journeys like this."

"That's right" said Joe, as persuasively as he could. "We need somewhere quiet and private. We'll have to take these things with us to. . . to . . ." he floundered, trying to think of something.

"To bless them and bring us luck," put in Hadrian, thinking quickly.

The Mandarin nodded, not surprised in the least. "Yes," he said, "of course. You may go the Temple of Heavenly Peace in the corner of the courtyard. The monks there will give you a quiet room where you may spend all the time you need."

"There's one other thing," added Joe quickly and the others looked at him, surprised. "Could we please have another large box of your excellent tea? I thought it might come in handy as a sort of peace offering."

"Good idea," nodded the Mandarin, "although whether those barbarians will appreciate it or not is a good question. I will have some prepared for you."

He signalled to the attendants who scurried out and returned with a large red shiny box with a scene of leaves and birds painted on the lid, sealed with a big wax seal.

"The attendants will carry the things you are going to take with you to the Temple. If you follow, they will show where you may perform your ceremonies," said the Mandarin. He stood up. "I really do wish you the best of luck," he said. "I'm very sorry about all this. I wish the circumstances were different." He shook each of them by the hand and then left, head bowed low and looking very sad.

The children and Hadrian followed the attendants to the Temple, a beautiful building with wide curved eaves from which hung little bells that tinkled in the breeze.

"Good idea about that tea," said Sarah. "Let's hope it works. Nervous?"

"Very," said Joe, "I've got that butterfly feeling in my tummy."

"I know the one," nodded Sarah. "I've been feeling like that since I woke up."

“Me too,” added Hadrian. “I always felt like this whenever I had to meet my illustrious brother-in-law.”

They arrived at the Temple, and passed through the red and gold doorway unto the gloom of the interior, where a big gold Buddha statue sat at the end of a hall, monks kneeling or squatting in front of it, the air heavy with the scent of burning perfumes, the sound of monks chanting in deep voices and bells chiming and tinkling all round them. To one side was a small chamber and the attendants arranged all the things they had brought on a carpet in the middle of the floor, bowed to the children and Hadrian and left, closing the door behind them.

“Right,” said Hadrian, trying to sound more confident than he actually was. “Now let’s see if this is going to work. I think we all ought to sit down, close our eyes and hold hands. Try to empty your minds and just think cloud! All right?”

The children nodded and they sat down, cross legged, and held hands. Joe closed his eyes and tried hard to empty his whirling mind. He actually found it much easier than he thought. The chanting of the monks, the rhythmic distant boom of the big bells and the tinkling of the smaller ones in the breeze outside carried into the room and was quite hypnotic. The next thing he knew was that Sarah was tugging at his arm and saying, “Joe, Joe, look it’s working!”

Joe opened his eyes and looked around. Hadrian had his eyes closed still and was breathing deeply and all round them white wisps of cloud were building up. Soon they were engulfed in the white fluffy swirling mist and Hadrian opened his eyes.

“Oh,” he said, sounding pleased, surprised and relieved all at once. “It’s worked! Right, first I’m going to try to call for Thunder Head.” He shouted into the cloud, “Chief! Oh Cheifey! Where are you?” The children joined him but here was no response. “All right, that didn’t work.” he said after while. “Either he’s back on the firewater or something’s stopping him hearing us. Let’s try to make the cloud go back where we came from.” Hadrian took a deep breath and thought hard. The cloud seemed to lurch about and something was certainly happening.

“We’re moving,” said Hadrian, “but where I’m not sure. Hang on and let’s see where we land.”

They didn’t have long to wait. The mist began to clear, and they found themselves on a hillside. They looked about them - it seemed familiar.

“Bamboo again,” said Sarah, disappointed. “We’re still In China. And we’ve got the carpet with us that we were sitting on,” she added. The others looked - there it was, all right, a very fine carpet too, as they could see now that they were in the full light of day. It had wonderful patterns woven in it and in the middle lions played around a temple.

“This is what we thought might well happen,” said Joe. “I don’t mean the carpet coming with us but winding up somewhere near where we landed before. I wonder which side of the fence we’re on?”

“Well, there’s the fence over there,” said Hadrian, pointing to the hills in the distance.

“No sign of rice fields,” said Joe.

“No, but there’s some sheep over there,” said Sarah, pointing to a field. “We didn’t see any sheep on the Chinese side of the fence.”

“I wonder if we are on the other side?” said Hadrian.

They didn’t have long to wonder - galloping towards them they saw a party of warriors in clattering armour on shaggy ponies, waving spears and bows.

“This is it,” said Hadrian and gulped. He stood up with his right arm outstretched and the warriors stopped a spear’s length away.

“Greetings,” began Hadrian in a hoarse voice and cleared his throat. “We wish to see your great leader. We have a proposition to put to him.”

The men didn’t seem impressed and moved forward, spears levelled.

“And we have presents,” added Sarah quickly. “For your leader - this magnificent carpet for a start!” she added pointing to it. The warriors stopped.

“And a wonderful drink that your leader will love - it’s called tea - you don’t know about it already, do you,” asked Joe anxiously.

The leader of the warriors shook his head. “No,” he said, “Never heard of it. We drink fermented yak’s milk and it tastes like it sounds. I like the carpet though. Our leader will be pleased with that. He will also be pleased with your heads.”

This did not sound reassuring and Joe and Sarah went cold all over. Hadrian desperately stepped forward.

“Ah, yes, well, of course he will, but do you think he might like to listen to what we have to say first?” he said.

The warrior leader grunted. “Perhaps,” he said. “Come, this way. We will take you to the Great Khan’s camp. Make no effort to escape or we will be taking just your heads after all.”

“By all means,” said a relieved Hadrian. “Hang on, we’ll just gather our things.”

They picked up all the bits and pieces the Mandarin had given them - there were quite a lot of things and even between the three of them it looked as if they would be lugging quite a weight. With some relief Joe saw a warrior bring up a pony hung with empty saddlebags for them to put their things in. The carpet they slung over the back. Then the warriors spoke amongst themselves for a minute.

“We have decided. You may ride with us,” said their leader. “It is too far to walk.”

He reached down and picked up Sarah as if she were no lighter than a feather and put her in front of him. A second warrior grabbed Joe before he realised what was happening and did the same. Another had grabbed Hadrian and slung him across the saddle, head one side and legs the other. Laughing, the warriors galloped off with Hadrian protesting that he felt very undignified. Joe wasn’t that comfortable either but it was an exhilarating ride as they galloped through the grass of the low hills and seemed to travel like the wind.

“Do you like the ride?” asked the warrior holding him.

“Yes,” said Joe. “It’s exciting. I’ve never been on a horse before.”

“Never been on a horse before!” exclaimed the warrior. “You don’t know what you have been missing! We ride almost before we can walk. We live on our ponies, we warriors of the steppes,” the warrior continued proudly. “You are honoured, to ride with the Khan’s guards. We are the warriors of the winds, swift as an arrow from a bow, living under the stars!”

They seemed to gallop like the warrior said, as fast as the wind, the hooves of the ponies hardly touching the ground. Joe wondered if time was again passing much more quickly for them than for the warriors. Soon they came in sight of a huge mass of tents.

“This is the Great Khan’s camp,” said the warrior holding Joe, “There is the tent of the Great Khan himself in the middle; that is where we are going.”

The mass of tents looked like a city, rows of them arranged each side of broad lanes that radiated out from the centre. The tents were large and mostly black in colour and around them were tethered hundreds and hundreds of horses. Yet more horses grazed outside the tented city. Joe saw that in the middle of the great mass of tents, the very centre from which all the lanes radiated, was an enormous blue tent hung with golden tassels and with banners of all the colours of the rainbow flying from great flag poles around it. As they galloped through the rows of tents, the hooves of the ponies thundering on the hard earth, more and more warriors and their wives and children poured out of the tents to look at them. They were a magnificent sight, these people of the tent city, their clothes striped in bright colours and all hung with beads and bangles - it was something that neither Joe nor Sarah would ever forget. They arrived outside the huge blue tent with the banners fluttering around it; guards in the same armour of small plates sewn together with bright coloured threads rushed up to hold the horses and the children and Hadrian were passed down, the warriors then dismounting. The guards lined up in two rows and the warriors and their prisoners marched between the two lines and into the doorway of the tent of the Great Khan himself.

* * * * *

It was dark inside, before their eyes grew used to the light. They were aware that they seemed to be walking along what appeared to be a tunnel lined in dark blue silk, with shadowy figures of guards on each side, impassive, large, well armoured and each armed with a spear with a three-foot long sword blade on the end. At the end of the tunnel in the distance was a gold light and when they emerged into it, blinking, they all gasped. In the centre of the huge tent was a round space, about thirty feet in diameter, the walls all made out of golden tapestries with the most amazing patterns on them. More guards stood like statues around the room.

“He seems to need lot of guards,” thought Joe.

The roof of the space was open to the blue sky although it looked like a flap could be pulled over at night or if it rained. Sat in the centre of this space on a pile of striped silk cushions sat a man in a heavily brocaded coat much of which seemed to be of gold or scarlet thread. The only hair on the top of his head was tied into a knot with long hanging ends like a tassel of hair. His moustaches were like the Mandarin's, long and falling each side of his mouth and he had a goatee beard. The main difference between the Khan and the old Mandarin was that the Khan was a good deal younger, his hair black but with grey streaks. He looked hard at the little group that entered his presence, saying nothing. The leader of the warriors who had captured the children and Hadrian stepped forward.

“Great Khan of the Steppe People,” he boomed, and bowed very low, “I bring you some intruders we found on this side of our Great Fence. They say that they have presents for you. I was just going to bring their heads but they said that they would speak with you and we can always take their heads off later.”

“What on earth would I do with their heads,” said the Khan irritably. “Not terribly decorative, are they?”

Sarah didn't know whether to be relieved or offended at this, and the warrior leader looked rather taken aback.

“You hang them outside your tent, usually,” he said. “That’s the correct thing to do with heads.”

“The correct thing to do with heads is use them!” said the Khan sharply. “Just think what would happen if I started hanging heads outside my tent. All the flies from miles around would come. Most unhygienic. And then there are the drips. Blood all over my nice blue tent. Really!” The guard seemed rather upset at this and the Khan hastened to say soothingly. “Look, it’s very good of you to bring them to me. I really appreciate that you have brought all of them rather than just their heads. It means I can talk to them. You have done well. Reward him with gold!” he ordered an attendant, who bowed and brought the warrior leader a heavy gold chain from a chest which seemed to Joe to be chock full of gold and jewels. Hadrian’s eyes lit up like headlamps. The guard looked happier and the Khan motioned him to step aside. He beckoned to the children and Hadrian and they drew closer to the pile of cushions.

“Who are you and what do you have to say to me?” he asked. “You know, you have taken a great risk in coming here. We have been at war with the people on the other side of our fence for years. Strangers are in great danger.”

“Oh, it’s your fence, is it?” asked Sarah, in surprise.

“Oh yes, and these Chinese keep breaking through it and raiding our side. Most awkward. It takes us all our time to keep it in repair,” sighed the Khan. “All we want to do is be left in peace to keep our horses and sheep and practice our skills with the bow.”

This put a different complexion on things but Hadrian decided that it was time that they made friends and got down to business. He stepped forward.

“Great Khan of the Steppe Peoples,” he said grandly. “I am Alphonse Hadrian, an architect from the Great Empire of Rome, and these are my companions, Sarah and Joe, barbarians from a distant damp land in the far North. (Sarah snorted at this). “I have come to offer you my services. In token of friendship we bring you this carpet,” and he unrolled it before the Khan.

He was rather worried that now it seemed quite a paltry present - after all the Khan had a great chest full of jewels and carpets might be ten a penny to him.

“Oh, a carpet,” said the Khan, pleased. “Yes, I like it. Of course, we have carpets here but this one is very pretty.”

“We also bring you a rather special drink,” added Joe shyly, “It’s called tea and it really is very good.” He stepped forward and tried to show the Khan the contents of the brass box but suddenly there was a loud, hoarse shout of “NO” and everyone froze.

Unseen until now by the children or Hadrian, standing on his own to one side in the shadows between two of the gold hangings, was an odd hooded figure in a red robe, his waist bound round with a black tasselled cord from which hung many strangely carved objects, pouches, little knives and beads. He leaned on a tall black staff, its head carved in the shape of a snake, mouth open, forked tongue gleaming with gold. As the little group had entered this figure had straightened up and stared intently.

It was he who had shouted and now as they turned to see him, although they couldn’t see his eyes, all three of them felt that from inside the hood were eyes boring into them as if searching out some secret that they didn’t know they had. The figure hissed as he came forward; with shuffling steps and his robe dragging on the floor, he looked as if he was creeping upright like some huge

caterpillar - and as he came closer Joe realised that the hood over the figure's head was enormous. Then suddenly the hood was thrown back and Sarah screamed loud and long while Joe felt cold terror grip him and Hadrian fainted. They saw a terrible face of black and red with a great fixed grimace on the wide mouth, white teeth like tusks stuck up each side of a huge squat nose, bulbous staring green eyes beneath beetling hairy eyebrows which frowned at them, and framing the huge head was a mass of hair plaited with small human skulls.