James A. Michener, The Source
(New York: Random House, 1965), pp. 589-633

In the spring of 1289, when the spiritual fire that had sustained the Crusades had died away to an ember, when Jerusalem was lost forever to the infidel, when the lovely chain of seaports reaching southward from Antioch had fallen permanently into enemy hands, and when a sense of doom hung over the land like a searing cloud of sand particles blown in by the khamsin, the walled city of St. Jean d'Acre still remained as the Crusader capital and the eighth Count Volkmar of Gretz still defended the castle of Ma Coeur as a bulwark of the faith, trusting that some miracle would permit him to retain it for another generation.

Then, on April 26, 1289, a miracle caused his prayers to be answered. The Mamelukes, a handful of slaves imported from Asia to serve the Turks, had somehow gained control of the vast Muslim empire and unexpectedly volunteered to extend their truce with Acre for the traditional period of ten years, ten months and ten days; and when this reassuring news sped across the Holy Land, caravans started moving once more between the Mameluke stronghold of Damascus and Acre. French and Italian newcomers, struggling ashore at the latter seaport after tedious voyages in dangerous ships, were frequently astonished to find that among the first persons to greet them upon landing at Acre were beturbaned merchants from Damascus, trying to earn an honest bezant by sharp trading with the Christians. It was difficult for these new arrivals to understand when the resident Crusaders explained: "Of course, it's your duty to kill infidels, but not these infidels, because with them we conduct a very good trade from which everyone makes a profit."

Among the first of the Muslim merchants to drive his camels across the overland route from Damascus was the old Arab Muzaffar, who in the fall of 1289 made one of his accustomed stops at Ma Coeur to peddle his pepper and nutmegs, his China silks and Persian brocades and, most importantly, to hand Count Volkmar a document from the Mameluke officials in Damascus. As always, the residents of the castle extended old Muzaffar a brotherly welcome, for through the years he had handled much business for them and was considered a member of the family, especially since years ago at the wedding of Volkmar VII, the present count's father, the old Arab had advanced the castle a goodly sum toward the festival expenses.

He was short for an Arab and inclined toward fatness, so that when he stood against Count Volkmar, who like his ancestors was red-headed

and rugged, he seemed flabby; but when properly dressed in fawn-colored robes, with a black and gold cord about his headdress, and with his white beard standing out from his tanned face, he was handsome; and when he delivered the official document he smiled warmly. "The Mamelukes grant you permission to go on pilgrimage," he said in French, making himself comfortable in the castle hall.

"You've read it?" Volkmar asked in Arabic.

"Of course." Abruptly he abandoned the count and hurried forward to greet the countess, who kissed him warmly on both cheeks. She was a slight, winsome creature whose plaited locks hung in two strands forward over her shoulders and reached to her waist. After studying her with approval Muzaffar observed in French, "Almost every garment you wear has reached Ma Coeur on my camels, and today I have a worthy successor." He called for one of his men, who brought a leather box containing a long-trained dress made of samite, adorned with wide sleeves and decorations of pearl. "For a lady who is going on a pilgrimage," he said graciously, and she realized that this beautiful garment was being offered as a gift.

"The Mamelukes have given permission?" she asked.

"After a little help, here and there," he laughed, twisting his right hand this way and that to indicate bribery.

"You're our dearest friend," the countess cried, kissing him again, "but I'm not going." The old Arab made as if he were taking back the dress, and she caught his hands. "But in my new dress I'll make a little pilgrimage right here," and from a window she pointed down to the basilica, the Maronite church and the Roman. The latter stood across from the mosque.

"But our son's going," the count explained.

"How excellent!" the old trader cried in French. "Volkmar! Take your pilgrimage next spring. We can meet in Saphet and ride across the hills together."

The count, a tall rugged man in his forties, clean-shaven and sharp of feature but dark of face like his Holy Land ancestors, studied the proposal for some moments, then countered cautiously, "It would be appropriate to see Saphet with you, Muzaffar, but there are two drawbacks. In spring the Galilee grows warm, which would not of itself stop me, but from Saphet I'd planned returning over the hills to Starkenberg to show my son the German castle there, and that would take you far out of your way."

"Not at all!" the old man protested. "I'll send the camels along the trail with a driver. I'll ride across the hills with you and catch up with the camels here."

"Will you bring your own horse?" Volkmar asked.

"It might be better if you brought one for me . . . No! I'll buy the best horse I can find in Damascus, then sell it when I reach Acre."

"Agreed?" Volkmar asked.

"Saphet in April." As the two friends shook hands, the Arab added, "And if I'm to do that I must be moving."

"Not till you've eaten," the count protested, and he called for an early lunch.

The great hall in which the two men sat had been finished in 1105 by Gunter of Cologne, and it was a masterpiece of Crusader art, its thin rock ribbing rising in a series of high arches into which narrow windows had been let. The stone floor was of excellent workmanship, each stone abutting tightly against its neighbor, so that in nearly two hundred years it had required resetting only once. When the paving was freshly oiled—as it was this day—it looked more like soft carpeting than hard stone.

About the room were placed statues of some of the famous owners of the castle, silver candlesticks from Damascus and Aleppo, items of gold from Baghdad and enameled boxes from Persia. Because wood was beginning to be scarce in the Holy Land the huge chests that lined the walls and the long table had come to Acre on Genoese ships from the forests of Serbia, but the spectacular tapestries that hung on the eastern wall had been woven in Byzantium.

It was a beautiful room, and much life had passed through it, for in the preceding hundred and eighty years the Volkmars had contracted family alliances with most of the great Crusader families, except only the Bohemonds of Antioch and the Baldwins of Jerusalem, who had always refused to marry with the line of Ma Coeur. Marriages had been performed in this room and coronations, and in August of 1191 month-long celebrations were launched when the castle was recaptured from Saladin by Richard the Lion Heart of England and restored by him to Volkmar IV. Richard had stayed in the castle for two weeks, recuperating from his siege of Acre. The princes of Galilee had graced this room, the Embriacos from Genoa and John of Brienne. Here the emissaries of the Comnenus emperors of Constantinople had come, and the Ibelins, a local nobility, and the queens of Armenia. How great they were, the lords of Tyr and Cesaire, the counts of Tripoli; but in the history of the distinguished room one name stood out above the rest.

"Let us drink to Saladin, cursed be his memory," Volkmar proposed, and the old trader raised his glass, even though as a Muslim he should not have taken wine.

"I love wine," the old man said, adding, "Saladin was so noble he should have been an Arab."

"He killed two of my ancestors," Volkmar observed.

"If both sides had listened to him," the old man reflected, "we should have long ago devised a way of living on this land."

"That much I grant you," Volkmar agreed.

At this point the count's son, a boy of eleven, came in from his studies and greeted the Arab, who had often brought him unexpected gifts from Damascus. The two spoke in Arabic, and Muzaffar asked the count, "Have you ever shown your boy the Horns of Hattin?"

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In the early summer of 1290 the position of the Crusaders seemed to improve and a restrained optimism could be felt creeping across the countryside. Crops promised to be above average. Olive oil and wine were being produced in abundance. The Mamelukes were at rest and word reached Acre that the call of Pope Nicholas IV for a Crusade had been ignored throughout Europe, and men could reasonably hope that the present truce would not be disturbed.

When Volkmar of Ma Coeur observed this optimism rising in his principality he dropped his plan for sending his son to Europe. After inspecting the walls of his town and their glacis he concluded, "If some kind of minor trouble does erupt, these outside walls will surely hold for five or six days." Then he studied the moat and the massive wall which protected the castle itself, and he judged that they could hold for at least half a year, as they had done in the past; their surfaces were as smooth as ever and their outward-sloping bottom sections were as well prepared to ricochet boulders among the attackers. "When the next century comes we'll be in this castle," he whispered to himself.

In early July he decided to visit St. Jean d'Acre to see if the leaders of the kingdom agreed with his hopeful assessment, and as he approached the famous city, its towers rising from the sea, his sensation of security increased, for in some mysterious way Acre communicated its strength

to all who saw it. Disaster the city had known, but always it had recovered. After his crucial victory a hundred years ago at Hattin, Saladin had taken it; but four years later Richard the Lion Heart had thrown eighty thousand of his men to death against its gates and forced them open. Volkmar felt content that Acre was destined to remain in Crusader hands.

It was a town on a peninsula, surrounded by the sea; its strength came from the sea, and its fortresses stood with their great stone feet in salt water. Across the peninsula ran a massive wall, and the heart of the city was protected by a second. It was the noblest town of the coast, and as Count Volkmar led his party to the iron gate leading beneath the towers his men shouted proudly, "Volkmar of Ma Coeur!" and the ponderous doors swung open to admit the dusty knights to the security of Acre.

But as soon as he entered this stronghold of the Crusaders, Volkmar was hailed by a Venetian merchant, who cried, "Sire, sire! Don't sell your olive oil this year to the Pisans. They're robbers." And he found himself drawn back into that frustrating whirlpool of conflicting interests and cross purposes that characterized Acre in the days of its death. "Oh, God," he muttered as the angry cries of competing groups reached him. "This city can't survive another week. We are indeed doomed."

For in those lovely days, as the Crusades ground to their mournful halt, Acre summarized the reasons why this movement was crumbling in disaster, for few cities in history had been so sorely divided as was Acre in 1290. Nominally it was ruled by the Franks of Henry II, King of Jerusalem, who controlled neither a kingdom nor Jerusalem, but actually it was a sorely divided Italian city, torn by the feuds of Guelph and Ghibelline. The heart of Acre was divided into three commercial quarters, each completely walled off from the other, with its own churches, town hall, magistrates and unique body of law. Each of these Italian areas centered upon its fonduk, a large, open-square warehouse from which the quarter took its name, and from which it maintained an open warfare, featuring soldiers and assassinations, against its competitors. The largest fonduk, running along the eastern waterfront and commanding the best industrial area, belonged to Venice and was subject only to laws promulgated in that Adriatic mother-city, for the functionaries of King Henry were not even allowed inside the walls. In the heart of Acre, well fortified on all sides, stood the fonduk of Genoa, whose residents obeyed only Genoese law. And at the southern tip of the city, enjoying a wind-swept spot along the sea, stood the autonomous fonduk of Pisa. The relationships between the quarters in this critical year of 1290 epitomized a basic weakness of the Crusades: differences in Europe determined behavior in the Holy Land, for in Italy, Genoa had declared war on Pisa, and Venice was maltreating Genoese merchants; so in Acre local Venetians had driven Genoese from the city, and Genoese ships were retaliating by capturing both Venetian and Pisan sailors and selling them to the Mamelukes as slaves. It was war, conducted solely for

economic advantage, and if it ever became profitable for the factions to betray Acre to the Mamelukes they would do so without a twinge of conscience.

That was the first division, but not the most important. The city was defended not by a traditional army but by monks who had entered one or another of the military orders—Templar, Hospitaller, Teutonic—and each of these stubborn units was also self-directing, self-paid and dedicated to warfare against the others. The monkish knights who led the orders were permitted to make their own treaties with the Mamelukes and to determine when and how they would do battle. To get all three to agree on any plan of defense was difficult if not hopeless. In Acre each had its own fortified section of the town, not included in the Italian quarters but equally distinct and self-governing; monks and merchants looked at each other with contempt, but since each was essential to the other, a grudging truce was maintained.

The third division, while of lesser importance militarily, was probably of greatest significance where morale was concerned. There were thirty-eight churches in Acre: Latin churches loyal to Rome; Greek Orthodox obedient to Byzantium; Greek Catholics who supported Rome but retained their own rites; and the stubborn, colorful Monophysites who ignored both Rome and Constantinople in their adherence to the old belief that Christ had but one nature. These included the Copts of Africa, the Armenians, and above all the Jacobites of Syria, whose priests made their sign of the cross with one bold finger, proclaiming to the world the oneness of Christ. Among these groups flourished bitter hatreds, with the priests of one confession ignoring or hampering the presence of the others. There were four sets of churches, four rituals, four competing theologies. In any crisis the interests of the four groups were almost sure to be divergent and any hierarchy might try to throw its enemies into confusion or even into the arms of the waiting Mamelukes.

And so the turreted town of Acre, so powerful when seen from a distance, was actually eleven separate communities bound together only by their fear of the encroaching enemy: the Venetian, Genoese and Pisan fonduks; the Templar, Hospitaller and Teutonic orders; the Roman, Byzantine, Greek and Monophysite churches, plus the fragile eleventh, the kingdom of Jerusalem, ruled by a handsome, ineffectual young king whose intimates had succeeded in hiding from the public the fact that he was an epileptic.

In this confusion there was only one redeeming feature, the bells of Acre, and now as the time for evening prayers approached, their magic quality drifted across the walled city. First came the deep iron bell of the SS. Peter and Andrew, the Roman church near the waterfront, establishing a stately rhythm which was soon joined by the dancing bronze bell of the Coptic church and then by the tinkling chatter from the Syrian church of St. Mark of Antioch. One by one the other thirty-five bell towers sent forth their messages until the sea-girt peninsula was

throbbing with sound. No city in the kingdom of Jerusalem—so great a name now signifying so little—had ever known an assembly of bells like those of Acre, and from his childhood Volkmar had loved them. Now as he looked aloft toward the azure sky from which they sounded, his hope revived for a moment and he listened to their noble symphony, the only thing their churches could agree upon, but then a Pisan merchant tugged at his sleeve and whispered, "Sire, don't listen to the Venetians if they promise to buy your oil for more than we paid last year. Words, words. You know Venetians."

Disgusted with the interlocking feuds that surrounded him, and feeling the old sense of doom returning, Volkmar rode to the Venetian fonduk, whose entrance was marked by the statue of a pig placed there to insult the Muslims, and went to the caravanserai, a spacious courtyard whose bottom rooms contained fodder for camels and whose upper floor served as a kind of inn. He looked for Muzaffar, hoping that the old Arab might still be trading with the Venetians—and there the old man was. Volkmar grabbed his hands and led him to the church of SS. Peter and Andrew, which Volkmar preferred because these men had been fishermen of Galilee; and there the Crusader went to one of the Christian chapels to give thanks for his safe arrival, while Muzaffar went to a chapel reserved for Islam, where before a delicately carved screen with a mark indicating the direction of Mecca, he prostrated himself on the pavement to whisper his Muslim prayers.

This was an arrangement guaranteed to startle hot-headed visitors from Europe—this business of sharing a consecrated Christian church with the enemy one had come to slay—but it was justified on the logical basis that outside the town walls stood a Muslim mosque in which a chapel containing a statue of the Virgin Mary was set aside for Christian use. There were other confusions for the stranger: most of the internal trading was in Arab hands, so that trusted Muslims like Muzaffar of Damascus were courted by the Italian merchants; and if one finally did meet a Catholic priest, he was apt to be a bearded Syrian with long oriental-looking garments, and it was this which helped bring about the final catastrophe in Acre.

For the time being the town was delightful. The boy-king, Henry II, and his recent bride were in residence, and in the long afternoons the knights dressed in ancient costume and rode horses caparisoned with ribbons and flowers. Those in men's clothes pretended that they were Lancelot or Tristram or Parsifal, while the others, dressed as women, were their ladies; and mock-jousts and tournaments were held, men against women, and there was much singing. The sight of real women, dressed handsomely and seated with the young queen, reminded Volkmar of the exciting days he had enjoyed in Acre when he was young and when all the families—the Volkmars were rich then

– – – soon he saw knights running from the various quarters, shouting, "The Crusaders have arrived!" And he joined the cheering, for there, rounding the Tower of Flies which protected the anchorage, came the fleet from Europe. At the critical moment, as had so often happened in Acre's history, substantial reinforcements were at hand.

As the bells danced in their steeples with noisy glee the first ship tied up to the Venetian dock, and Volkmar noticed an ominous fact: the captain and crew showed none of the elation customary at the end of this dangerous voyage. Mechanically they tied the ropes and sighed as at the conclusion of a dirty business, and soon the knights of Acre were to understand why.

At Rome, Nicholas IV, the first Franciscan Pope in history, had hoped to make a name for himself by preaching a fiery Crusade that would finally wrest Jerusalem from the infidel, but he was unlucky in his timing, because none of the kings he had hoped to attract had any intention of leaving home. England, which in the past had provided many stalwart knights, offered no response whatever, for the English ruler was preoccupied with Scottish matters. In France, the birthplace of Crusaders, business was good and after the death of St. Louis the French had lost all stomach for Jerusalem. Aragon was engaged in open war with the papacy, while relations between Genoa and Venice had again degenerated into warfare. From all the countries of Europe, Pope Nicholas had been able to find only one nest of volunteers, and these came not from knightly families but from a cluster of backward villages in northern Italy, so this culminating Crusade consisted not of warriors but of sixteen hundred illiterate peasants who knew nothing of Jerusalem and less of Acre.

When the gangplanks were lowered and the triumphant army straggled ashore, the citizens of Acre gasped. Slack-jawed men, bowed from toil in field and shop, the Italian peasants straggled onto the Holy Land. Without leadership, without any arms but knives and clubs, the riffraff landed, listened to the bells, stretched their still wobbly legs and asked, "Where's the infidel?"

Through one of God's inscrutable stage directions, some of the mob fanning out through the city happened onto the church of SS. Peter and Andrew, where they entered to give thanks for their deliverance from the sea. As they knelt they saw in the chapel opposite the prostrate figure of the Damascus merchant, Muzaffar, praying at the little Muslim mosque. One of the Italians dashed back to the door of the church, screaming, "The infidels are upon us!" on which the others unsheathed their daggers and lunged at Muzaffar, slashing him severely across the right shoulder. The startled Arab ran crying from the church, pursued by the Crusaders,

whereupon others, seeing the Muslim with his sword arm covered with blood, concluded that the Arab had killed a Christian and leaped at him with their daggers and swords, and would have killed him had not Volkmar jumped forward to save the old man.

The local knights, apprehensive over what might develop if the peasants got out of hand, moved among the rioters and tried to calm them, but the crusading spirit was alive and they burst out of control, storming through the town, for on the day they had sailed from Europe they had been promised certain heaven if they killed an infidel, and they could see that the infidel was among them. "Hold them off!" the leader of the Templars shouted, and his knights formed barriers while bells lent music to the confusion, but the mob swung unexpectedly to the north, where two Syrian priests happened to be leaving the church of St. Mark of Antioch and their unfamiliar robes convinced the mob that here were infidels, and the two were slaughtered.

The massacre, that hot August day, was paralyzing. Armenian Christians whose families had lived in Acre for two centuries were slain. Mameluke ambassadors from Cairo, Mameluke emissaries in town to arrange trade treaties with the Venetians, were beheaded amid scenes of fire and cheering. Arab merchants on whom the prosperity of the city depended were stabbed to death, and churches which could not be easily identified as either Christian or Muslim were sacked. The delicate balance on which Acre existed, attained after so many decades of patient adjustment, was shattered in an afternoon.

At the height of the riot Count Volkmar thought of the improvised Jewish settlement in the fonduk of Genoa, and for reasons which he could not fully have explained he gathered some Templars and hurried there, only to find that the new Crusaders were storming through the place and screaming, "Kill the Jews! They killed Jesus!" Volkmar rushed to the mean hovel in which the rabbi lived, but he arrived too late. The rabbi was dead. The manuscripts were burned.

The Italians, riotous with victory and still unaware of what they had accomplished, were finally herded into the Pisan quarter, where they sang Crusader hymns while the iron bell of SS. Peter and Andrew concluded its dirge. When they sought the king, so that he could praise them for their fidelity, some of the older knights began arresting the leaders of the mob, hoping that by delivering them to the Mamelukes disaster could be forestalled, but the Italians resisted arrest, crying, "We were sent to kill Muslims and we've killed them. Take us not to jail but to Jerusalem."

When news of the massacre reached Cairo the Mamelukes refused even to discuss resumption of the truce; ambassadors sent from Acre with apologies were allowed to die in prison. Any possible reason for allowing Christians to remain in the Holy Land had been surrendered in the massacre, and St. Jean d'Acre must be finally eliminated. When this fiat reached the city the knights knew that barring a miracle their days in

the Holy Land were ended. "Oh, God," prayed the surviving priests, "why did those fateful ships not sink in the harbor before leaving Italy?" And all inside the walls made preparation for the final tragedy.

Count Volkmar, nursing a cut left arm which one of the new Crusaders had given him as he rescued Muzaffar, summoned his men and prepared for the doleful journey home, but before he left he felt that he must say good-bye to the tall Circassian girl, so he climbed the stairs of the Pisan caravanserai, but found there that the Italians had come upon this lively Christian as she wore a Circassian robe and had of course slaughtered her. Gravely he bowed to the other girls, then walked to the castle, where from the king's general he obtained a basket of pigeons which he carried with him as he went to SS. Peter and Andrew for his final prayers. As the bells of the city pealed their litanies he led his men out through the walls of Acre, that cherished city, that strange abomination, and each man suspected that he would not again visit those walls, those gleaming turrets that so captivated the imagination.

At Ma Coeur, Volkmar and his knights launched a day-and-night activity. All peasants living outside the walls were ordered to make ready to move inside and to bring their beasts, and when this was done Volkmar told them, "If any are afraid, you may leave now." A few Muslims headed south to join the Mamelukes; but where could the Christians go, even if they so desired?

The knights were perplexed when Volkmar paid considerable attention to brushwood, but without discovering his purpose they humored his whim and directed peasants to lug large piles of the brush inside the castle walls. Other men were let down on ropes to check the huge cisterns, thirty and forty feet deep, and they reported that thanks to the secret well, the castle had enough water to serve two thousand people for two years, should the siege last so long. Comparable supplies of food were also in storage: fruits, nuts, dried fish and meat, chickens, some pigs whose very shadows alarmed the Muslims, and immense stores of grain. Few castles in the Holy Land over the past two hundred years had escaped sieges, and some had held out for thirty or forty months unassailable behind their walls. But in those happier days there had always been the assurance that sooner or later relief would come from Antioch or Cyprus. But this time where would the rescuers be?

When supplies were checked Volkmar and his knights inspected the lines of defense. The outer wall of the town no longer seemed so stout as when Gunter of Cologne had built it two centuries before, but it was in good repair and was protected by the glacis; if properly defended this wall could frustrate an enemy for five or six days. The narrow alleys of the town also presented opportunities for defense, and the mosque and the three Christian churches would provide strong rallying points: indeed, the Basilica of St. Mary Magdalene could be converted into a minor fortress which ought to hold for several weeks. The deep moat protecting the castle wall would be hard to cross, while the wall itself was

surely impregnable. Behind it rose the castle, a self-contained unit with its own ponderous walls well able to withstand an enemy for months. And all was in repair.

Satisfied on these points Count Volkmar next turned to the most difficult question facing him: what to do with his wife and son? He assembled his knights and said, "If there is one who would prefer sailing from Acre, perhaps to Germany . . ." The discussion had gone no further. The countess said that she had been born in the Holy Land, that her father had withstood seven sieges, and she four. And her son said, "At Saphet I heard what the Mameluke captain said and at the Horns of Hattin young Volkmar stood with his father, didn't he?"

"He did," Volkmar replied. He then asked, "Do any of the knights prefer Acre?" None did, and the waiting began.

On a stormy morning in late February, 1291, the man on the watchtower announced, not loudly nor with excitement, "They are coming."

Dispassionately the knights lined the battlements to inspect the Mamelukes as they rode easily up from the southern plains. There was no great dust, no shouting. The vast columns moved slowly, for they felt no excitement; when they finished with Ma Coeur they would proceed to Acre and one siege was pretty much like another: generals stayed in the rear and half-naked foot soldiers went up against the walls. Any Ma Coeur peasants who happened to be working outside the town moved quietly within, except a handful who set off across the fields to join the Mamelukes. No one tried to prevent them.

By noon the purposeful column was nearing the walls of the town, but no one on either side fired arrows or launched spears. The impressive thing was that the columns kept coming forward in staggering numbers. "There must be fifty thousand people down there," one of the knights calculated. The figure was not unreasonable.

As soon as the horde was sighted, Volkmar went to the quiet room where he and Muzaffar had dined at the beginning of the truce, and he wrote to Acre:

> A Mameluke army of considerable size is now approaching from the south. It seems to be accompanied by so many siege engines that I cannot believe they are all intended for Ma Coeur, so I suppose you must expect them next. All here is well, and we shall withstand until we have been slain on the last battlements. We shall send you the customary signals, but we do not expect your few knights to ride to our defense. To do so would be folly. May God bless us both in these hours of trial, and may He send divine rescue from some quarter that we cannot now perceive.

He carried the message to one of the keeps, where it was tied by a silken thread to the leg of a pigeon, which, as soon as it was released, circled higher and higher above the castle until it established a reckoning, then sped for Acre.

All during the day the columns moved forward, the largest army Count Volkmar had ever seen, and at dusk his knights agreed that it must number well over a hundred thousand—while Ma Coeur had only some sixty knights and a thousand unarmed peasants. He posted his sentries, then went to bed and slept well.

For two days nothing happened, except that the Mamelukes sent their slaves fanning out across the countryside, chopping down all trees except olives, stripping the trunks and moving into separate depots both the resulting posts and the broken branches. At the same time the soldiers pushed up from the rear the great wooden engines of war, creaking noisily and moving slowly: the monstrous ballistas which could be cranked tight, then sprung to arch rocks of two hundred pounds into the castle compound; lighter sheitanis, the Satanic ones, for lighter loads; enormous swaying towers with retractable drawbridges which would be dropped across the walls of Ma Coeur; wooden bridges to throw over the moat; rams with bulbous iron heads to smash down gateways; ladders, scaling hooks, grapples and buckets for burning pitch; next, the most effective weapon of all, the mangonel, a rope-wound bow which required three men to operate and which, when sprung, released an arrow capable of crashing through the strongest shield; and finally, the most frightening, the slow-moving turtle creeping steadily forward as if it had a life of its own. In the days ahead the men on the battlements would come to know each of these weapons well, and already they held them in respect.

It was not only the presence of the engines that impressed the Crusaders; it was their astonishing number. Where an ordinary siege might have one tower, the Mamelukes had five, plus two dozen turtles, and so many horsemen they could not be counted. When all was in readiness the Mameluke general signaled by three white flags his desire for a parley, and in accordance with the custom of the age the gates of the town were opened, the drawbridge was lowered across the moat, and the main gate to the castle was thrown open to admit the general and six of his top assistants, who thus had a chance to study carefully the nature of the defenses they must finally subdue. With a kind of grim fascination Volkmar noticed that among the six were the mustachioed governor who had treated the pilgrims so graciously at Tabarie and the baldheaded man with the scar who had captained the garrison at Saphet. The Mamelukes looked straight ahead.

Their general was a short, red-faced man of forty, bearded and with long mustaches. He wore a turban beset with jewels, and no metal armor, but a costume of heavily quilted brocade richly adorned with gold and silver. His shoes were similarly decorated and came to sharp points that rose at the tip. He was armed with a short curved sword whose handle was encrusted with jewels, and he carried in his right hand an ebony baton, also bejeweled. He was a man of considerable importance and wished to get right down to work, for he had been given a terminal

date by which Acre must fall and he wanted to waste no unnecessary days at the preliminary siege of Ma Coeur.

Count Volkmar mustered his knights in the courtyard so they could be seen, and directed peasants bearing lances to move about the other portions of the castle. Then he waited till the enemy general appeared, dismounted and approached, extending the hand of friendship. Volkmar took it. The men shook hands, whereupon the other Mamelukes dismounted. The leaders gathered at a table near the parapet and the Mameluke spoke first, using Arabic, which he handled awkwardly.

"Our preparations you see. You wish to surrender? Now?"

"Under what terms?"

"Your peasants, Muslim, Christian, can stay. They'll farm their land as now," the Mameluke began, and Volkmar smiled, thinking: They aren't going to make the same mistakes we made at the beginning. The little general continued, "No knights killed. You select four. The rest become slaves." At this Volkmar drew back, and the general concluded, "You, your wife, your family and the four knights. Safe-conduct to Acre."

Coldly, and with a courage he was not aware he possessed, Volkmar asked, "The same safe-conduct that you gave the defenders of Saphet?"

The Mameluke general masked his anger—if indeed he felt any. "Since then we learned," he said.

"To each of your proposals, no." Volkmar spoke without accenting any word.

"The sultan directed me. I must ask you a second time."

"And I am bound by my conscience to answer for the second time, no."

The red-faced Mameluke bowed. Contemptuously he surveyed the castle and the assembled knights. "You may delay us perhaps one week." He bowed again, and at the gate called back, "No man up there will come through this gate alive." And he was off.

Still he made no move. His mangonels were primed and his turtles were ready, but he spent two more days bringing the towers up to the walls of the fortress, after which he signaled for another parley; but when the gates were opened he did not ascend to the castle but directed an assistant to speak with the villagers, after which some sixty peasants followed him out through the gates. The Christians among them were started on their way to the slave markets of Damascus and Aleppo.

Shortly after dawn on the twenty-fifth of February the siege began. The fat general in the padded suit gave signal for his trumpeters to sound alarms, and the vast army inched forward, all engines moving at the same time toward the main gate and applying such a steady pressure that by mid-afternoon the enemy was within the walls of the town. Stunned by the failure of his outer defenses, which he had calculated could resist for at least five days, Volkmar ordered his troops to fight in the streets,

where determined cadres occupied the mosque, the Roman and Maronite churches and the basilica, while their companions retreated across the bridge, which was raised behind them. All who did not make their way into the castle were methodically butchered by the Mamelukes, almost without passion. The invaders did not even bother to save attractive young girls for harems; they raped them in the streets, then slaughtered them. To prove to the defenders how mortal this siege was to be, Mameluke slaves were then given the job of beheading all corpses. The ballistas were cranked up and one by one the heads were lobbed into the castle compound, where Volkmar's men saw the grinning, rolling faces of their friends.

Count Volkmar retired to draft his next report to the men of Acre, and in it he reported his dismay at the easy collapse of the city wall:

> It was a wall such as I have seen withstand an ordinary army for many days, and it was courageously defended, but the Mamelukes have summoned an army of a size not hitherto known in these parts. At first, our knights estimated them to be near a hundred thousand, but I thought more like sixty. Now we are agreed that they are more than two hundred thousand, with so many engines that they cast solid shadows. They will find our castle difficult indeed and I am not apprehensive about an early defeat. We pray to God each day, and to the sweet Jesus Christ who brought our ancestors to these shores.

And with this message the next pigeon was dispatched.

Of the four defenses upon which the castle depended—glacis, town wall, moat, castle wall—the first two had given way, but knights still controlled the three churches and the mosque. Early next morning the Mameluke general inspected the town and gave orders for the reduction of those four religious buildings, and before the sun was well up the attack began. At the same time slaves began throwing rubble into the moat at those points where the wooden assault towers would be hauled into position against the castle wall. Where the moat protected the main tower the outer edge of the moat was chopped away, forming a steep path leading to the bottom of the ditch, and down this path crawled, at a hauntingly slow pace, the ominous turtles.

They were low sheds, not more than three feet high and neither wide nor long, but of immensely strong construction. Under them miners, protected from rocks or Greek fire from above, could gnaw out a tunnel beneath the foundations of the main tower. An ordinary tunnel would be so narrow that when it opened on the other side of the tower, men crawling through could easily be killed as they merged, but it was not an ordinary tunnel which the men beneath the turtles were digging.

To the edge of the moat were moved the largest ballistas, and when they were in position they began lobbing huge rocks into the castle buildings, and the Mamelukes cheered as one giant boulder crashed through

the stone lacework of the grand hall, ripping away part of the wall. Next the mangonels were cranked up and their lethal arrows placed against the strings, and when the machine let go, the arrows winged with sickening force against the men of the wall, and if a defender was caught by such an arrow it went completely through him and he toppled backward from the parapet.

Count Volkmar's men were not powerless. When the slaves approached the moat to cast their rubble, arrows and rocks drove them back and many were killed; when the turtles tried to work their way into the bottom of the moat the defenders dropped large round rocks down the face of the wall, and the flange at the bottom would send the rocks careening through the massed troops, tearing away legs and arms. But their most effective weapons were the clay jugs of Greek fire—naphtha and sulphurous compounds, set ablaze by red-hot flints—that burned even on water and could be extinguished only by vinegar or talc. It blinded soldiers or burned away their faces, and constantly, from each round tower so carefully positioned by Gunter, a stream of iron-tipped arrows sped at any Mameluke who tried to approach the glassy-surfaced walls. At this point Count Volkmar decided to conserve his pigeons, so as midnight approached he directed his men to haul onto the highest tower of the castle a pile of brush, and he and his son climbed the winding stairs with a torch, throwing vast shadows on the rock; and they lit the brushwood in the ancient manner so as to signal throughout the hills of Galilee and across to Acre itself the fact that at the castle of Ma Coeur all was well.

The arrogant boast of the Mameluke general that he would invest the castle within a week had long since been proved empty: he had leveled the mosque; he had taken the Roman and the Maronite churches and had torn them down, but the Basilica of St. Mary Magdalene still resisted, and at the end of the third week the siege had bogged down in the bottom of the moat, except for three towers that had been inched close to the main walls, where for the time being they rested, inactive. Each morning the ballistas would hurl great rocks and the mangonels would let fly their piercing arrows, but the siege seemed to have ground to a halt; so each night at midnight the count and his son sent the signal: "The fires of Ma Coeur are still burning."

But the miners were at work. Deep in the heart of old Makor, down below the level of the Roman times, below the potsherds of the Greeks and Babylonians, the Mameluke slaves were digging a tunnel under the main tower of the outer wall. As they inched forward, other slaves came behind bearing stout wooden props which they forced into position to support the tunnel. And at the close of each day one of the Mameluke captains entered the tunnel with a white string to measure how far the digging had proceeded, and when all were satisfied that it must have gone well beyond the inner face of the wall, the general ordered a huge cave to be widened under the tower foundations.

Now the miners dug rapidly, and hundreds of posts were lugged through the darkness to shore up the cave until the vast emptiness looked like a forest that had died. At this point all work ceased and attacks on the castle were halted, while the three white flags were once more prominently displayed, after which the red-faced Mameluke general and his assistants rode over the drawbridge and into the beleaguered fortress. Nodding gravely he dismounted and ordered the scar-headed captain from Saphet to stretch out the measuring string, while another drew with chalk the circumference of the underground cave. Then he said, "Knight, our cave lies under this tower."

Count Volkmar looked at the ominous circle and said, "I believe you."

"We have not yet moved in the brush," the Mameluke said in his broken Arabic. "We offer one last chance. Then the brush."

"The terms?" Volkmar asked.

"As before." There was a pause. "Your answer?"

"As before."

"Farewell. We shall not speak again."

"Yes, we shall," Volkmar contradicted. "For when you get through that wall you must also get into the castle. And every night at midnight I shall speak to you with my signal fire. It will take you much longer than the week you said."

The Mameluke made no reply, and that afternoon the defenders of the castle watched as long lines of slaves carried brush into the cave. But the torment of the digging had stopped, and in the quiet respite Volkmar dispatched one of his last pigeons, bearing fatal news that would be correctly interpreted in Acre:

> The basilica has fallen. The mining has ended, they have shown me the circumference of the cave under the principal tower, and the brush has been moved in. We wait in silence, but we cannot hope. The tower must fall, and then we shall be forced into the castle. Go to the church of SS. Peter and Andrew, the patrons of Galilee, and pray for us. We shall hold out for weeks but seek your plea for divine help.

That night the Mamelukes lighted the brush in the cave, and in a sighing, smoking fire the wooden posts began to burn away, producing a final blaze that heated the tower walls and cracked them, so that when the under-supports were gone the foundations began to collapse, and there came a shudder in the wall and wild shouting from the Mamelukes as the long-impregnable tower of Ma Coeur came crashing down. Turbaned warriors leaped across the hot stones to drive the Crusaders away from the outer battlements and into the castle; but at midnight from the highest parapet the signal fire blazed forth, assuring Acre that all was still well.

Now came the grim days when the hand of defeat was close to the

throat of the defenders, for the Mameluke general methodically directed his thousands of slaves to smooth out the stones of the fallen tower and to build a level road over which his huge wooden structures could be wheeled, along with the ballistas and the mangonels. Patiently the turtles were moved against the castle itself and miners began their laborious job of undercutting the gate, and with no display of haste or bitterness the Mamelukes proceeded to bite away at the foundations. The siege was now in its fifth week, and since the ballistas and sheitanis were closer, the Crusaders began to lose more men. Worst of all, throughout the day, throughout the night, those who survived could hear the tapping of the hammers and the picks far below them, while the castle's supplies of Greek fire diminished and had to be used more sparingly, so that the attackers grew more bold.

Now came the sickening part of the siege, the subtle, fearful whisper that could creep through the strongest walls of a castle and into the minds of everyone defending it. When this sound first arrived no man was exempt from fear; and later, no matter how casually he came to live with the sound, in the base of his mind there lurked always fear. It was the distant noise of pickaxe against stone, of men digging deep in the earth, and because they tapped against the fundamental wall the sound was carried through all the stones of the castle, not echoing madly as when a rock plunged through a roof, tearing all away with it, but insidiously, like the aching of a tooth that does not yet require pulling but which warns: "This ache is not going to stop."

How persuasive the sound became. The count would look at his wife, and she would say nothing, but he could see in her eyes the reflection of each tapping sound as it carried to her feet and up through her chair and into her brain. On some bright mornings, when the tapping stopped for a moment, the Crusaders would look at each other in alarm and then return to normal as the almost noiseless echo resumed.

So far the great rocks tossed skyward by the Mameluke engines had not penetrated the circular chapel, and here the countess and the women spent most of their days, contemplating the errors which had brought their men into this grave position and wondering as to what might happen in the last hours of the siege, for none had hopes that she would escape; the tapping was too insistent and too close. Countess Volkmar, leaving the chapel now and again to help care for the wounded, thought: It wouldn't have mattered if I had married into some other castle. They're all doomed. But I wish we'd sent Volkmar to Germany.

The boy, less susceptible than others to the psychological pressure of the tapping which echoed through the castle, busied himself about the inner ring of turrets, running from one group of defenders to the next, as the knights fought to keep back the giant wooden towers that seemed to inch forward by themselves and were now almost touching the outer faces of the wall. Several times in recent weeks men had been killed near where young Volkmar stood, and he must have known that his castle

was doomed, but he displayed no fear. For him—as for his father—the best part of each anxious day came at midnight, when they climbed together to light the fires which always seemed at first to give only a feeble blaze but which in the end illuminated the countryside in an eerie light, disclosing the Mameluke tents in the olive grove and the rolling hills of Galilee.

At the end of the fifth week the besieging forces halted offensive operations and once more raised the three white flags, but this time the red-faced general took no part in the parley. He sent the Saphet captain, who said simply, "The tunnel under your gate is ready for its brushwood. Do you now surrender?"

"Do you guarantee safe-conduct for all to the city of Acre?"

"Your family and four," the scar-headed captain repeated. "The rest sold as slaves."

"No."

The envoy turned abruptly and strode from the castle, making no boast about how quickly it would fall. That night the cave was set afire, and after the blaze had eaten away the supporting logs the gate towers swayed toward the Mamelukes, hesitated, than came apart and crashed grotesquely in the dust. The Crusaders retreated into the central keep while the methodical Mamelukes put their slaves to building the warm rocks into a roadway, and their engineers to the task of pushing the engines of war into position until turbaned faces could look almost into the narrow windows of the keep. The defenders had lost two cisterns and most of the animals but they still controlled the David Tunnel, and their remaining tower contained enough food to sustain them for months in case a miracle was on its way across the Mediterranean. But no ships were coming; the futile Italians had been the last gasp of the crusading effort, and they had destroyed, not helped.

So at the start of the sixth week the defenders of Ma Coeur were contracted into the final tight knot of men and women protecting themselves inside the enormous walls of the keep itself, and it could be only a matter of time until one of the great Mameluke engines was maneuvered against some door. So sure were the Muslims of victory that they no longer sent miners beneath the walls. Ma Coeur must now fall through sheer brute pressure.

It was fascinating, hideously fascinating, to watch the first wooden turtle edge forward to perform a new function. It crept ahead until the men beneath could place their hands against the keep. Rocks from above careened down the slanting walls and spurted outward, but the roof of the turtle was so constructed that the boulders skimmed across the top, killing men standing behind but not those crouching beneath. Next Greek fire was poured on the machine, but the Mamelukes had covered this turtle with the bloody hides of freshly slaughtered cattle, so the wood did not burn—and the flames were extinguished with vinegar. And when the turtle had crept into position ropes were passed back and lashed to

one of the great assault towers, and by pulling from the turtle and pushing from behind the enormous engine was edged into position.

A crash. A scream. A cry of "Over here!" and Crusaders rushed to intercept the Mamelukes who had stormed their way into the keep—twenty of them, forty, dropping down from the tower.

"Protect the gate!" Volkmar shouted, and knights converged suddenly from all sides, fighting the powerful invaders hand to hand; and gaspingly the forty-three Mamelukes were slain and the keep was spared; so that again at midnight the fires of Ma Coeur could be seen at Acre, where men prayed both for the defenders and for themselves.

Before dawn the defenders beat back that first enemy tower and toppled it into the courtyard, killing many slaves, but with daylight the Mamelukes moved forward two other turtles which in turn started drawing two new towers against the keep. But when these were in position no assault was made, for the turtles crept along the wall to new positions from which they drew up three additional towers, until the keep was ringed. "They will come at us from all sides," young Volkmar said, more with a boy's interest in mechanical things than with fear.

The castle priest, looking at the ominous towers, knew that this day must mark the end of the siege and he summoned Count Volkmar and his family to the roof, where they looked out upon the glorious fields of the Galilee, red and gold in their spring flowers. The olive trees, in which the Mameluke had staked his innumerable tents, were silvery gray; and in the distance beyond the spires and minarets of Acre gleamed the blue Mediterranean. It was an April day, the kind that had always made the hearts of men glad in this region, and the priest told the knights and their ladies, "Beloved children of Christ, we have come to the day when we shall meet God Almighty face to face. We have fought well. We have been crusaders of the spirit, and if there are among you those who ask, 'Why has this tragedy overtaken us?' I cannot explain, but centuries ago that great man St. Augustine, surveying a similar period, spoke thus to all who are perplexed: 'For the world is like an olive press, and men are constantly under pressure. If you are the dregs of the oil you are carried away through the sewer, but if you are true oil you remain in the vessel. But to be under pressure is inescapable. Observe the dregs, observe the oil, and choose, for pressure takes place through all the world: war, siege, famine, the worries of state. We all know men who grumble under these pressures and complain, but they speak as the dregs of oil which later run away to the sewer. Their color is black, for they are cowards. They lack splendor. But there is another sort of man who welcomes splendor. He is under the same pressure, but he does not complain. For it is the friction which polishes him. It is the pressure which refines and makes him noble.' "

As the priest finished these words the Mameluke general waved his ebony baton and the final pressure against Ma Coeur commenced, but with an additional terror for which the Crusaders were not prepared. The

mangonels and sheitanis they knew, and when the latter began lobbing bundles of burning fagots onto the roof Count Volkmar helped his men throw down the fiery embers, but in addition to these ordinary machines the Mamelukes had brought a special weapon: a corps of drummers banging nearly a hundred drums of various sizes and constructions, all with animal skins drawn tightly across reverberating heads, and as the soldiers and the slaves began their final push against the walls these drums thundered a wild beat of encouragement and gave a sense of inevitability to the stormy scene, while from the captured basilica bells clanged furiously to mock the doomed Christians.

In the first terrifying burst of sound Count Volkmar ran back to the center of the roof, where the priest and the women waited, and throwing himself on his knees, cried, "Good Father, bless us now," and above the throbbing of the drums the priest intoned his last benediction: "Forgiving Jesus," his thin voice came, scarcely audible above the thunder of drum and bell, "accept our souls this day. In our castle we have been a Godly family and each man has trusted his brother. We have fought as we can, and in our last hour we find great love in the presence of each other. King Jesus, accept us as we are."

From behind came a cry: "They are upon us!"

The fight was hideous. Each of the five towers crawled with archers who fired point-blank at the Crusaders, often from a distance of inches, while powerful Mameluke swordsmen, intoxicated by the drums, leaped like animals from the towers and swept the turrets with their scimitars. This day there were to be no prisoners, not even women to be sold as slaves, for the general had determined to wipe from the earth this annoying castle.

Count Volkmar would have preferred making his last stand on the ramparts, but the wildly charging Mamelukes forced him below, and with the increased tempo of the drums echoing in his ears he found his wife standing quietly with her son, keeping his hand in hers lest he join the battle. "Let the boy fight with me," the count cried and he stooped to lift a sword from the hand of a dead knight, and while he was in this position three Mamelukes leaped into the room and stabbed him many times, so that he fell forward without having struck a blow. His death prevented him from seeing the Mamelukes swarm upon his wife and son, after which they sought out the inner rooms, launching a systematic slaughter of the remaining women. As this was happening the first group of drummers climbed the towers and came into the keep, where, over the dead Volkmars, they beat out their triumphant rhythms while bells clanged brazenly from all remaining steeples. Thus ended the Crusades at Ma Coeur. In blood the iron men of Germany had come and in blood they went.

At midnight, in gruesome jest, the round little general ordered the signal fires of Ma Coeur to be lighted, and they flamed as in the past and were hopefully seen at Acre, but in the silent morning, when the great

engines of war were needed no more, the general ordered that Ma Coeur be leveled: "No tower here will ever again cause us trouble." The slaves began, stone by stone, to throw down the turrets and to destroy this most powerful of the small Crusader castles. Work on which Gunter of Cologne had spent years was destroyed in days, and when it was clear that slaves could be trusted to complete the task the red-faced general ordered the mangonels and the ballistas and the turtles and the walking towers to be moved westward until they reached the walls of Acre, where the miners resumed their patient underground tapping until the sound echoed ominously throughout that city.

At Ma Coeur the slaves continued their work for the better part of a year, disassembling the castle as children might break apart a toy. Many of the larger stones were hauled away to build new Mameluke castles and smaller ones were broken and scattered over the landscape. The well shaft was filled in, and shortly there were no towers and no walls to betray where the castle had stood. The slaves withdrew and the spot was desolate. The once-lovely fields were barren and remained so; the ancient olives were untended and no human being lived where the town had existed for so long.

On his yearly trip in the winter of 1294 Muzaffar, a one-armed Arab still operating caravans out of Damascus, had difficulty identifying the mound of Ma Coeur, for the Galilee was covered with snow. He found the location only by spotting the roadway which had always climbed the hill to the zigzag gates, and here he halted his camels for a moment, bowing in reverence to the knight who had saved his life. "Poor men," he whispered when his prayers were done. "They knew nothing of the land they occupied, so they built huge walls to lock reason out." And he plodded his way westward to ruined Akka, where no bells rang and where the harbor was silting up.

In summer searing khamsins from the now treeless hills blew across the plains, bringing minute dust which eddied into the crevices, imperceptibly solidifying the fallen mass and slowly covering it. In 1350, half a century after the fall, numerous rocks were still evident, and shepherds remembered that there had been a castle; but by 1400—a century after the annihilation—only a few rocks were visible and people were beginning to forget what they pertained to.

Now the only visitors to Makor—for the Frankish name was forgotten, having passed into history with the last of the Volkmars—were jackals, which sent forth their strange, penetrating yowls when the moon was full, and which picked over the area for things that might be trapped in their swift rush. Birds flew over the mound and sometimes nested among the last of the whitish rocks strewn haphazardly in the dunes of sand. There were snakes and toads coming up from the malarial marshes that had taken the place of the irrigated fields which for twelve thousand years had fed the people of Makor. And there were a few rodents seeking for the wheat which once again grew wild.