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PATRICIA A. MCKILLIP
VOLUME ONE OF THE QUEST OF THE RIDDLE-MASTER

THE RIDDLE- MASTER OF HED



A DEL REY BOOK



Ballantine/33104 (Canada \$6.99) U.S. \$5.99

The Riddle-Master of Hed

Patricia A. McKillip



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A Del Rey® Book
Published by Ballantine Books

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 76-5492

ISBN 0-345-33104-4

This edition published by arrangement with
Atheneum Publishers

Cover Art and frontispiece by Darrell K. Sweet

Printed in Canada

First Ballantine Books Edition: February 1978

First Canadian Printing: March 1978
Fourth Canadian Printing: February 1980

31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23

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MORGON OF HED MET THE HIGH ONE'S HARPIST one autumn day when the trade-ships docked at Tol for the season's exchange of goods. A small boy caught sight of the round-hulled ships with their billowing sails striped red and blue and green, picking their way among the tiny fishing boats in the distance, and ran up the coast from Tol to Akren, the house of Morgon, Prince of Hed. There he disrupted an argument, gave his message, and sat down at the long, nearly deserted tables to forage whatever was left of breakfast. The Prince of Hed, who was recovering slowly from the effects of loading two carts of beer for trading the evening before, ran a reddened eye over the tables and shouted for his sister.

"But, Morgon," said Harl Stone, one of his farmers, who had a shock of hair grey as a grindstone and a body like a sack of grain. "What about the white bull from An you said you wanted? The wine can wait—"

"What," Morgon said, "about the grain still in Wyndon Amory's storage barn in east Hed? Someone has to bring it to Tol for the traders. Why doesn't anything ever get done around here?"

"We loaded the beer," his brother Eliard, clear-eyed and malicious reminded him.

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"Thank you. Where is Tristan? Tristan!"

"What!" Tristan of Hed said irritably behind him, holding the ends of her dark, unfinished braids in her fists.

"Get the wine now and the bull next spring," Cannon Master, who had grown up with Morgon, suggested briskly. "We're sadly low on Herun wine; we've barely enough to make it through winter."

Eliard broke in, gazing at Tristan. "I wish I had nothing better to do than sit around all morning braiding my hair and washing my face in buttermilk."

"At least I wash. You smell like beer. You all do. And who tracked mud all over the floor?"

They looked down at their feet. A year ago Tristan had been a thin, brown reed of a girl, prone to walking field walls barefoot and whistling through her front teeth. Now she spent much of her time scowling at her face in mirrors and at anyone in range beyond them. She transferred her scowl from Eliard to Morgon.

"What were you bellowing at me for?"

The Prince of Hed closed his eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bellow. I simply want you to clear the tables, lay the cloths, reset them, fill pitchers of milk and wine, have them fix platters of meat, cheese, fruit and vegetables in the kitchen, braid your hair, put your shoes on and get the mud off the floor. The traders are coming."

"Oh, Morgon . . ." Tristan wailed. Morgon turned to Eliard.

"And you ride to east Hed and tell Wyndon to get his grain to Tol."

"Oh, Morgon. That's a day's ride!"

"I know. So go."

They stood unmoving, their faces flushed, while Morgon's farmers looked on in unabashed amusement. They were not alike, the three children of Athol of Hed and Spring Oakland. Tristan, with her flighty black hair and small, triangular face, favored their mother. Eliard, two years younger than Morgon, had Athol's

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broad shoulders and big bones, and his fair, feathery hair. Morgon, with his hair and eyes the color of light beer, bore the stamp of their grandmother, whom the old men remembered as a slender, proud woman from south Hed: Lathe Wold's daughter. She had had a trick of looking at people the way Morgon was gazing at Eliard, remotely, like a fox glancing up from a pile of chicken feathers. Eliard puffed his cheeks like a bellows and sighed.

"If I had a horse from An, I could be there and back again by supper."

"I'll go," said Cannon Master. There was a touch of color in his face.

"I'll go," Eliard said.

"No. I want . . . I haven't seen Arin Amory for a while. I'll go." He glanced at Morgon.

"I don't care," Morgon said. "Just don't forget why you're going. Eliard, you help with the loading at Tol. Grim, I'll need you with me to barter—the last time I did it alone, I nearly traded three plow horses for a harp with no strings."

"If you get a harp," Eliard interrupted, "I want a horse from An."

"And I have to have some cloth from Herun," Tristan said. "Morgon, I have to have it. Orange cloth. Also I need thin needles and a pair of shoes from Isig, and some silver buttons, and—"

"What," Morgon demanded, "do you think grows in our fields?"

"I know what grows in our fields. I also know what I've been sweeping around under your bed for six months. I think you should either wear it or sell it. The dust is so thick on it you can't even see the colors of the jewels."

There was silence, brief and unexpected, in the hall. Tristan stood with her arms folded, the ends of her braids coming undone. Her chin was raised challengingly, but there was a hint of uncertainty in her eyes as

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she faced Morgon. Eliard's mouth was open. He closed it with a click of teeth.

"What jewels?"

"It's a crown," Tristan said. "I saw one in a picture in a book of Morgon's. Kings wear them."

"I know what a crown is." He looked at Morgon, awed. "What on earth did you trade for that? Half of Hed?"

"I never knew you wanted a crown," Cannon Master said wonderingly. "Your father never had one. Your grandfather never had one. Your—"

"Cannon," Morgon said. He raised his hands, dropped the heels of them over his eyes. The blood was high in his face. "Kern had one."

"Who?"

"Kern of Hed. He would be our great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather. No. One more great. It was made of silver, with a green jewel in it shaped like a cabbage. He traded it one day for twenty barrels of Herun wine, thereby instigating—"

"Don't change the subject," Eliard said sharply. "Where did you get it? Did you trade for it? Or did you . . ." He stopped. Morgon lifted his hands from his eyes.

"Did I what?"

"Nothing. Stop looking at me like that. You're trying to change the subject again. You traded for it, or you stole it, or you murdered someone for it—"

"Now, then—" Grim Oakland, Morgon's portly overseer, said placatingly.

"Or you just found it laying in the corncrib one day, like a dead rat. Which?"

"I did not murder anyone!" Morgon shouted. The clink of pots from the kitchen stopped abruptly. He lowered his voice, went on tartly, "What are you accusing me of?"

"I didn't—"

"I did not harm anyone to get that crown; I did not

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trade anything that doesn't belong to me for it; I did not steal it—"

"I wasn't—"

"It belongs to me by right. What right, you have not touched on yet. You asked a riddle and tried to answer it; you are wrong four times. If I bumbled through riddles like that, I wouldn't be here talking to you now. I am going down to welcome the traders at Tol. When you decide to do some work this morning, you might join me."

He turned. He got as far as the front steps when Eliard, the blood mounting to his face, broke away from the transfixed group, moved across the room with a speed belied by his size, threw his arms around Morgon and brought him off the steps face down in the dirt.

The chickens and geese scattered, squawking indignantly. The farmers, the small boy from Tol, the woman who cooked, and the girl who washed pots jammed the door at once, clucking.

Morgon, groping for the breath the smack of the earth had knocked out of him, lay still while Eliard said between his teeth, "Can't you answer a simple question? What do you mean you wouldn't be talking to me now? Morgon, what did you do for that crown? Where did you get it? What did you do? I swear I'll—"

Morgon lifted his head dizzily. "I got it in a tower." He twisted suddenly, throwing Eliard off balance into one of Tristan's rosebushes.

The battle was brief and engrossing. Morgon's farmers, who until the previous spring had been under Athol's placid, efficient rule, stared half-shocked, half-grinning as the Prince of Hed was sent rolling across a mud puddle, staggered to his feet, and, head lowered like a bull, launched himself at his brother. Eliard shook himself free and countered with a swing of his fist that, connecting, sounded in the still air like the distant thunk of ax into wood. Morgon dropped like a sack of grain.

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Then Eliard fell to his knees beside the prone body and said, aghast, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Morgon, did I hurt you?"

And Tristan, mute and furious, dumped a bucket of milk over their heads.

There was an odd explosion of whimpering from the porch as Cannon Master sat down on a step and buried his face in his knees. Eliard looked down at his muddy, sodden tunic. He brushed futilely at it.

"Now look what you did," he said plaintively. "Morgon?"

"You squashed my rosebush," Tristan said. "Look what you did to Morgon in front of everybody." She sat down beside Morgon on the wet ground. Her face had lost its habitual scowl. She wiped Morgon's face with her apron. Morgon blinked dazedly, his eyelashes beaded with milk. Eliard sat back on his haunches.

"Morgon, I'm sorry. But don't think you can evade the issue this way."

Morgon moved a hand cautiously after a moment, touched his mouth. "What's—? What was the issue?" he asked huskily.

"Never mind," Tristan said. "It's hardly something to brawl about."

"What is this all over me?"

"Milk."

"I'm sorry," Eliard said again. He put a coaxing hand under Morgon's shoulder, but Morgon shook his head.

"Just let me lie here for a moment. Why did you hit me like that? First you accuse me of murder and then you hit me and pour milk all over me. It's sour. Sour milk. You poured sour milk all over—"

"I did," Tristan said. "It was milk for the pigs. You threw Eliard into my rosebush." She touched Morgon's mouth again with her apron. "In front of everyone. I'm so humiliated."

"What did I do?" Morgon said. Eliard sighed, nursing a tender spot over his ribs.

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"You made me lose my temper, speaking to me like that. You're slippery as a fish, but I grasped one thing. Last spring you got a crown you shouldn't have. You said that if you answered riddles as badly as I do, you wouldn't be here now. I want to know why. Why?"

Morgon was silent. He sat up after a moment, drawing his knees up, and dropped his head against them.

"Tristan, why did you pick today of all days to bring that up?"

"Go ahead, blame me," Tristan said without rancor. "Here I am running around with patches at my elbows, and you with pearls and jewels under your bed."

"You wouldn't have patches if you'd tell Narly Stone to make you some clothes that fit. You're growing, that's all—"

"Will you stop changing the subject!"

Morgon lifted his head. "Stop shouting." He glanced over Eliard's shoulder at the row of motionless, fascinated figures, and sighed. He slid his hands over his face, up through his hair. "I won that crown in a riddle-game I played in An with a ghost."

"Oh." Eliard's voice rose again sharply. "A what?"

"The wraith of Peven, Lord of Aum. That crown under my bed is the crown of the Kings of Aum. They were conquered by Oen of An six hundred years ago. Peven is five hundred years old. He lives bound in his tower by Oen and the Kings of An."

"What did he look like?" Tristan asked. Her voice was hushed. Morgon shrugged slightly; his eyes were hidden from them.

"An old man. An old lord with the answers to a thousand riddles in his eyes. He had a standing wager going that no one could win a riddle-game with him. So I sailed over with the traders and challenged him. He said great lords of Aum, An and Hel—the three portions of An—and even riddle-masters from Caithnard had challenged him to a game, but never a farmer from Hed. I told him I read a lot. Then we played the game. And I won. So I brought the crown home and put it

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under my bed until I could decide what to do with it. Now, was that worth all the shouting?"

"He forfeited his crown to you when he lost," Eliard said evenly. "What would you have forfeited if you had lost?"

Morgon felt his split mouth gingerly. His eyes strayed to the fields beyond Eliard's back. "Well," he said finally. "You see, I had to win."

Eliard stood up abruptly. He took two strides away from Morgon, his hands clenched. Then he turned around and came back and squatted down again.

"You fool."

"Don't start another fight," Tristan begged.

"I'm not a fool," Morgon said. "I won the game, didn't I?" His face was still, his eyes distant, steady on Eliard's face. "Kern of Hed, the Prince with the cabbage on his crown—"

"Don't change—"

"I'm not. Kern of Hed, in addition to being the only Prince of Hed besides me to own a crown, had the dubious fortune of being pursued one day by a Thing without a name. Perhaps it was the effects of Herun wine. The Thing called his name over and over. He ran from it, going into his house of seven rooms and seven doors, and locking each door behind him until he came to the inmost chamber, where he could run no farther. And he heard the sound of one door after another being torn open, and his name called each time. He counted six doors opened, his name called six times. Then, outside the seventh door, his name was called again; but the Thing did not touch the door. He waited in despair for it to enter, but it did not. Then he grew impatient, longing for it to enter, but it did not. Finally he reached out, opened the door himself. The Thing was gone. And he was left to wonder, all the days of his life, what it was that had called out to him."

He stopped. Eliard said in spite of himself, "Well, what was it?"

"Kern didn't open the door. That is the only riddle to

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come out of Hed. The stricture, according to the Riddle-Masters at Caithnard is this: Answer the unanswered riddle. So I do."

"It's not your business! Your business is farming, not risking your life in a stupid riddle-game with a ghost for a crown that's worthless because you keep it hidden under your bed. Did you think of us, then? Did you go before or after they died? Before or after?"

"After," Tristan said.

Eliard's fist splashed down in a pool of milk. "I knew it."

"I came back."

"Suppose you hadn't?"

"I came back! Why can't you try to understand, instead of thinking as though your brains are made of oak. Athol's son, with his hair and eyes and vision—"

"No!" Tristan said sharply. Eliard's fist, raised and knotted, halted in midair. Morgon dropped his face again against his knees. Eliard shut his eyes.

"Why do you think I'm so angry?" he whispered.

"I know."

"Do you? Even—even after six months, I still expect to hear her voice unexpectedly, or see him coming out of the barn, or in from the fields at dusk. And you? How will I know, now, that when you leave Hed, you'll come back? You could have died in that tower for the sake of a stupid crown and left us watching for the ghost of you, too. Swear you'll never do anything like that again."

"I can't."

"You can."

Morgon raised his head, looked at Eliard. "How can I make one promise to you and another to myself? But I swear this: I will always come back."

"How can you—"

"I swear it."

Eliard stared down at the mud. "It's because he let you go to that college. That's where your priorities were confused."

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"I suppose so," Morgon said wearily. He glanced up at the sun. "Half the morning gone, and here we sit in the muck with sour milk drying in our hair. Why did you wait so long to ask me about the crown?" he asked Tristan. "That's not like you."

She shrugged a little, her face averted. "I saw your face, the day you came back with it. What are you going to do with it?"

He moved a strand of hair out of her eyes. "I don't know. I suppose I should do something with it."

"Well, I have a few suggestions."

"I thought you might." He stood up stiffly and caught sight of Cannon sitting on the porch. "I thought you were going to east Hed," he said pointedly.

"I'm going. I'm going." Cannon said cheerfully. "Wyndon Amory would never have forgiven me if I hadn't seen the end of this. Have you still got all your teeth?"

"I think so." The group at the doorway began shifting, breaking up under his gaze. He reached down, pulled Eliard to his feet. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing that isn't ordinarily the matter when you roll over a rosebush. I don't know if I have a clean tunic."

"You do," Tristan said. "I washed your clothes yesterday. The house is a mess; you—we're a mess, and the traders are coming, which means all the women will be coming over to look at their wares in our dirty hall. I'll die of shame."

"You never used to care," Eliard commented. "Now you're always complaining. You used to run around with mud on your feet and dog hair all over your skirt."

"That," Tristan said icily, "was when there was someone to take care of the house. Now there isn't. I do try." She whirled away, the hens fluttering out of her path. Eliard felt at his stiff hair, sighing.

"My brains are made of oak. If you pump for me, I'll pump for you."

They stripped and washed behind the house. Then

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Eliard went to Grim Oakland's farm to help load the grain in his storage barn onto carts, and Morgon walked through the stubbled fields to the shore road that led to Tol.

The three trade-ships, their sails furled, had just docked. A ramp boomed down from one of them as Morgon stepped onto the wharf; he watched a horse being led down by a sailor, a beautiful, long-legged mare bred in An, jet black, with a bridle that flashed minute flecks of jewels in the sun. Then traders hailed him from the prow of a ship, and he went to meet them as they disembarked.

They were a vivid group, some dressed in the long, thin, orange and red coats from Herun, others in full robes from An, or the close-fitting, lavishly embroidered tunics from Ymris. They wore rings and chains from Isig, fur-lined caps from Osterland, which they gave away, together with bone-handled knives and copper brooches, to the children clustering shyly to watch. The ships carried, among other things, iron from Isig and Herun wine.

Grim Oakland came a few minutes later, as Morgon was inspecting the wine.

"I'd need a drink, too, after that," he commented. Morgon started to smile and changed his mind.

"Is the grain loaded?"

"Nearly. Harl Stone is bringing the wool and skins down from your barn. You'd be wise to take all the metal they carry."

Morgon nodded, his eyes straying again to the black horse tethered to the dock rail. A sailor lugged a saddle down from the ship, balanced it on the rail next to the horse. Morgon gestured with his cup.

"Who owns that mare? It looks like someone came with the traders. Or else Eliard traded Akren for her secretly."

"I don't know," Grim said, his red-grey brows peaked. "Lad, it's none of my business, but you

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shouldn't let your private inclinations interfere with the duty you were born to."

Morgon sipped wine. "They don't interfere."

"It would be a grave interference if you were dead."

He shrugged. "There's Eliard."

Grim heaved a sigh. "I told your father not to send you to that school. It addled your thinking. But no. He wouldn't listen. I told him it was wrong to let you go away from Hed so long; it's never been done, no good would come of it. And I was right. No good has come. You running off to a strange land, playing riddle-games with—with a man who should have the decency to stay put once he's dead and buried in the earth. It's not good. It's not—it's not the way a land-ruler of Hed should want to behave. It's not done."

Morgon held the cool metal of the cup against his cracked mouth. "Peven couldn't help wandering around after he was dead. He killed seven of his sons with misused wizardry, and then himself out of sorrow and shame. He couldn't rest in the ground. He told me that after so many years he had a hard time remembering all his sons' names. That worried him. I learned their names at Caithnard, so I could tell him. It cheered him up."

Grim's face was red as a turkey wattle. "It's indecent," he snapped. He moved away, lifted the lid on a chest full of bars of iron, and slammed it shut again. A trader spoke at Morgon's elbow.

"You are pleased with the wine, Lord?"

Morgon turned, nodding. The trader ported a thin, leaf-green coat from Herun, a cap of white mink, and a harp of black wood slung by a strap of white leather over one shoulder. Morgon said, "Whose horse? Where did you get that harp?"

The trader grinned, sliding it from his shoulder. "Remembering how your lordship likes harps, I found this one for you in An. It was the harp of the harpist of Lord Col of Hel. It is quite old, but see how beautifully preserved."

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Morgon slid his hands down the fine, carved pieces. He brushed the strings with his fingers, then plucked one softly. "What would I do with all those strings?" he murmured. "There must be over thirty."

"Do you like it? Keep it with you awhile; play it."

"I can't possibly . . ."

The trader silenced him with a flick of hand. "How can you set a value to such a harp? Take it, become acquainted with it; there is no need to make a decision now." He slipped the strap over Morgon's head. "If you like it, no doubt we can come to a satisfactory arrangement . . ."

"No doubt." He caught Grim Oakland's eye and blushed.

He carried the harp with him to the trade-hall at Tol, where the traders inspected his beer, grain and wool, ate cheese and fruit, and bartered for an hour with him while Grim Oakland stood watchfully at his elbow. Empty carts were brought to the dock then, to load metal, casks of wine, and blocks of salt from the beds above Caithnard. Plow horses to be taken to Herun and An were penned near the dock for loading; the traders began to tally the grain sacks and kegs of beer. Wyndon Amory's carts lumbered down the coast road, unexpectedly, near noon.

Cannon Master, riding in the back of one, leaped down and said to Morgon, "Wyndon sent them out yesterday; one of them lost a wheel so the drivers fixed it at Sil Wold's farm and stayed the night. I met them coming. Did they talk you into a harp?"

"Almost. Listen to it."

"Morgon, you know I'm as musical as a tin bucket. Your mouth looks like a squashed plum."

"Don't make me laugh," Morgon pleaded. "Will you and Eliard take the traders to Akren? They're about finished here."

"What are you going to do?"

"Buy a horse. And a pair of shoes."

Cannon's brows rose. "And a harp?"

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"Maybe. Yes."

He chuckled. "Good. I'll take Eliard away for you."

Morgon wandered down into the belly of a ship where half a dozen horses from An were stabled for the journey. He studied them while men stacked sacks of grain beyond him in the shadowy hold. A trader found him there; they talked awhile, Morgon running his fingers down the sleek neck of a stallion the color of polished wood. He emerged finally, drawing deep breaths of clean air. Most of the carts were gone; the sailors were drifting toward the trade-hall to eat. The sea nuzzled the ships, swirled white around the massive trunks of pine supporting the docks. He went to the end of the pier and sat down. In the distance, the fishing boats from Tol rose and dipped like ducks in the water; far beyond them, a dark thread along the horizon, lay the vast, sprawling mainland, the realm of the High One.

He set the harp on his knee and played a harvest-song whose brisk, even rhythm kept time to the sweep of a scythe. A fragment of a Ymris ballad teased his memory; he was picking it out haltingly from the strings when a shadow fell over his hands. He looked up.

A man he had never seen before, neither trader nor sailor, stood beside him. He was quietly dressed; the fine cloth and color of his blue-black tunic, the heavy chain of linked, stamped squares of silver on his breast were bewildering. His face was lean, fine-boned, neither young nor old; his hair was a loose cap of silver.

"Morgon of Hed?"

"Yes."

"I am Deth, the High One's harpist."

Morgon swallowed. He shifted to rise, but the harpist forestalled him, squatting down to look at the harp.

"Uon," he said, showing Morgon a name half-hidden in a whorl of design. "He was a harpmaker in Hel three centuries ago. There are only five of his harps in existence."