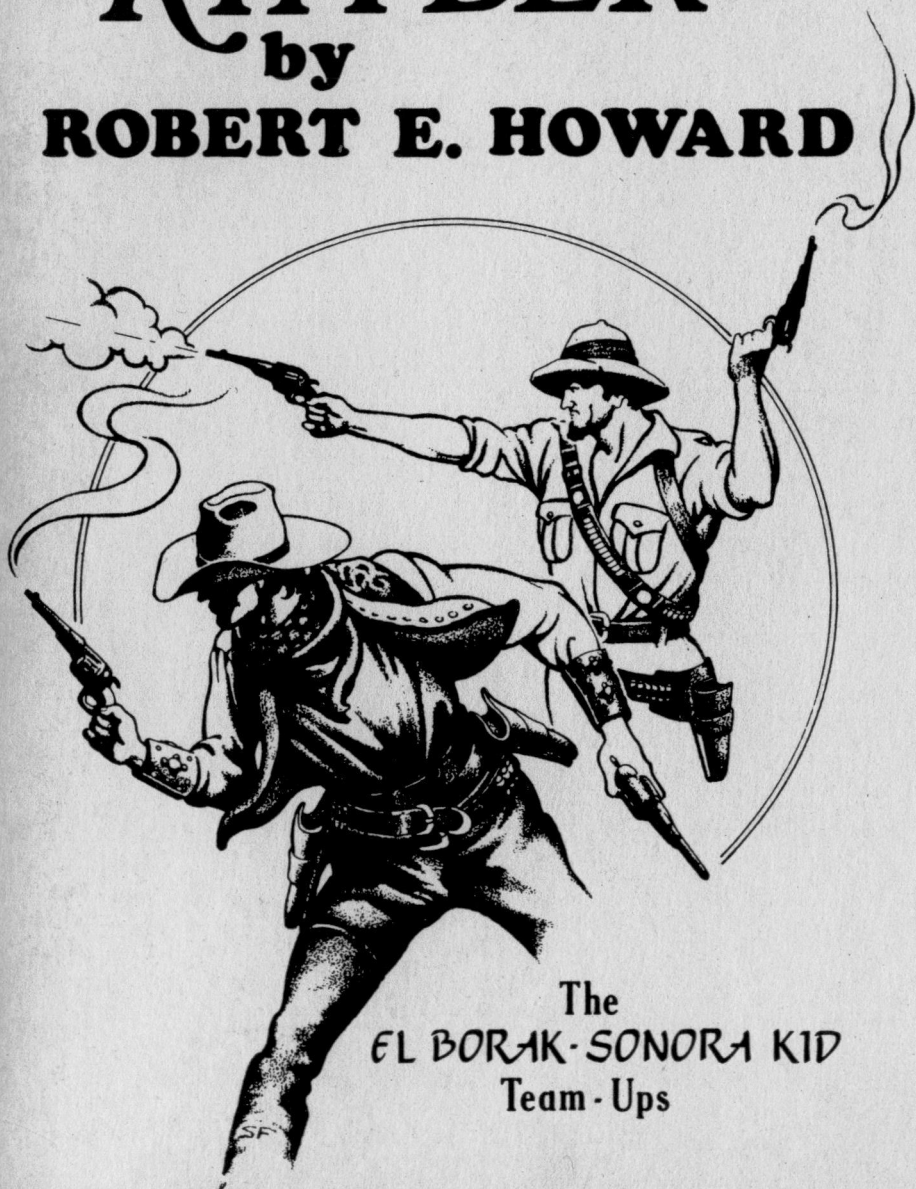


\$5

# *NORTH of KHYBER*

by

**ROBERT E. HOWARD**



The  
EL BORAK-SONORA KID  
Team-Ups

# NORTH OF KHYBER

## C O N T E N T S

Introduction . . . . .	2
North of Khyber . . . . .	3
The Land of Mystery . . . . .	11
El Borak . . . . .	22
The Shunned Castle . . . . .	41
A Power Among the Islands . . . . .	44

by

**R O B E R T   E .   H O W A R D**

Illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian

## Introduction

It is always especially fun when one's favorite heroes from different series of stories are teamed up to face some foe too formidable for any one good guy alone. The one famous instance of this in Robert E. Howard's fiction is "Kings of the Night," one of Howard's best tales, in which King Kull is called out of the past to fight shoulder to shoulder with Bran Mak Morn. I have always regarded this story as a special treat and have only wished Howard might have gone on to pair Conan the Cimmerian with Kull or Bran. Barring some fabulous discovery among Howard's papers, however, that team-up must remain pure fantasy.

But exploration of Howard's discarded drafts and fragments has yielded a couple of other hero team-ups. For one, we discover that the inclusion of Sikh warrior Lal Singh among El Borak's amazing crew was actually such a team-up, since Oriental gentleman Lal Singh began his fictional existence as the subject of his own abortive series, no stories of which were published until our own booklet The Adventures of Lal Singh appeared in 1985. Apparently Howard felt the Sikh did not have enough potential to develop him in any more than a second-banana role.

El Borak also teamed up with another very early Howard protagonist, Steve Allison. Which Steve Allison? Many of Howard's characters have interchangeable and barely distinguishable names, so even an avid Howard fan can be forgiven for not instantly recognizing Steve Allison as "the Sonora Kid," one of Howard's obscure gunslingers. The Sonora Kid was the star of "Knife, Bullet and Noose" and "The Devil's Joker" (both featured in The Last Ride).

North of Khyber collects the five unpublished early fragments in which Howard tried teaming up El Borak and the Sonora Kid. This time we have decided to correct Howard's obvious spelling, typographical, and punctuation errors, but we have let his occasional run-on sentences run free.

Though the material in this collection is not of such stellar quality that we are sure you will be desperate for more Sonora Kid epics, we will in fact eventually assemble the remaining juvenilia featuring Steve Allison (by himself) in a Cryptic Publication booklet called The Sonora Kid, perhaps in 1988 or 1989.

--Robert M. Price

# North of Khyber

## Chapter 1

### "The Afridis are Stirring Up a Row"

In an upper room of a great hotel a man lounged in an armchair and gazed through the wide window. Outside and below, the crowds swirled by and New York's traffic roared, but the man paid no attention. He seemed to be looking beyond the skyline, preoccupied by his own thoughts.

He was young, little more than a boy, but his face was strong and showed high intellect and character. He was of medium height, of a slim, wiry build, with black hair and long, narrow gray eyes.

He picked up a newspaper and began to scan it, presently throwing it down with an exclamation of annoyance.

Just then the door opened and another young man entered. He was of about the same age as the occupant of the room, but was shorter in build with broader shoulders. His hair, too, was black and his eyes were gray, but they were different. They were lighter gray and were somewhat wide.

The two men might have been taken for brothers, but in fact they were of no kin. In one respect they were alike, however: the forms and faces of both were of clean, strong lines that showed clean living and clean thinking. There was nothing greedy, shifty or sensual about the countenances of either.

The newcomer had a newspaper in his hand and he strode over to the discontented looking youth in the armchair.

"Still dreaming a day-dream?" he asked with a chuckle. "The life of the idle rich don't suit you much."

The other waved his hand toward the papers he had discarded.

"I'm trying to find something interesting," he said, "but there's nothing happening in the whole world except divorce suits."

His friend laughed. "You're behind times," he chaffed. "I have a later edition than those."

He seated himself comfortably and opened the paper. "It says Ecuador and Colombia are on the verge of war."

"They always are," answered the young man languidly.

"And the Bolsheviks are calling on the Balkan states for support."

"I should worry," yawned the ennuied one.

"And there were over a thousand divorces last month," pursued the other.

The languid young man sat up suddenly.

"Say!" he said with force, "You know such stuff don't interest me. You've got something up your sleeve. Spill it!"

The other shifted himself to a more comfortable position and eyed his friend speculatively.

Finally he asked, "Steve, were you ever in India?"

"Yes, I was there with Gordon a couple of years back."

"Um. I suppose you know all about the Afghans?"

"No, I've heard a great deal about them, but I've known only one personally. That was Yar Ali Khan, who was with Gordon in Arabia. I've never seen very many of them. You see, I never went north of Lucknow."

"Well, it says in this paper that the Afridis are stirring up a row. There's been looting and murder along the Afghan bor-



der. Seems like there's a mullah, a descendant of the prophet, who's preaching a jihad, holy war. The British fear an invasion of India through the Khyber Pass."

Steve's eyes lighted with interest. "Indeed. Let me see that paper, please."

He read the article silently. Then he turned to his friend.

"Billy, run down and get tickets on the first ship while I pack up."

His friend grinned. "It's already been done. What's more, we make the straight trip. We're booked on the liner Valencia, sailing tomorrow for Bombay."

"Good work," Steve approved. "Now to pack up."

The task of packing trunks and travelling bags having been brought to a satisfactory conclusion, Steve said, "Buck, I'm going to leave the rest to you while I chase around and give my regards to my respected relatives. Meet me on board."

At a certain elegant mansion on Riverside Drive, a highly respectable family were dining. Only part of the family were present, two to be exact. These two were a stately, silver-haired lady and a beautiful, dark-haired girl.

And upon these people descended Steve. He entered with scant ceremony.

"Where are Uncle John, Teddy, Dorothy and the rest?" he demanded.

"Father is at the golf-club," the girl answered. "The others have gone with a party to Delmonico. Did you want to see them?"

"Well, I rather hoped they would all be here," he admitted. "I wanted to give them all my respects as I am leaving on the next boat."

"Where are you going?"

"To India."

"India!" exclaimed middle-aged respectability.

"India!" echoed budding respectability.

"Well, of all the weird ideas!" chorused the two.

"Stephen," said his aunt, rather sternly, "I must really protest. This running about all over the world does you no good. This new whim of yours is simply preposterous."

He laughed. "Say," he said, almost rudely, "the opinion of you stay-at-homes doesn't matter in the least. You said I was silly to go to Yucatan—and I discovered a lost silver mine. You said that it was 'preposterous' for me to go to Arabia—and I came back with a fortune. So wish me luck for I'm bound for the Orient."

"Oh, very well," sighed his aunt. "If you have made up your mind I suppose you will go, but I had hoped that you would stay longer in New York."

When the ensuing conversation was concluded, Steve kissed his aunt's hand with all the grace of a courtier and turned to go. His cousin followed him to the hallway.

"You are really going?" she asked wistfully. She was a beautiful young woman, no older than Steve, but as is usually the case, she appeared at all times more of the grown woman than he did of the grown man.

He regarded her with a brotherly affection, just as he did his sisters, but the feeling she had for him was something more than that. Steve, however, did not suspect it. He was no ladies' man, was Steve Allison.

"Are you going alone?"

"No, Billy Buckner is going with me."

"Why must you go?" she asked.

"Why, of course I don't have to," he laughed. "But you know me, Madge. I can't stay still long. I have the wanderlust, strong."

"Then why don't you go to some civilized country like France or England?"

"And moon around and go to teas and theaters? Hardly, my dear. I don't think," he laughed, "that I am scarcely civilized myself."

"But you will stay in Bombay or some city?"

"No, we will go north to the Khyber Pass and perhaps beyond to Kabul and Herat."

"But I have heard that those mountain tribes are hostile."

"They are, sometimes."

"Aren't you afraid?" she asked curiously.

"Say," he protested uncomfortably, "you're making me talk like a melodrama hero. Yes, no doubt I shall be scared, but think of the fun I'll have."

She could not understand. Her idea of pleasure was idle luxury, dances, balls and an occasional tour of Europe. She could understand why anyone would wish to go to Paris or London, but to invade the wilds of Asia!

"Well, kiss me before you go," she said. "You might get assassinated by bandits."

He took her in his arms and kissed her as he would have his sister. She returned his kiss and then lay quiet in his arms, her eyes closed. He tenderly brushed back a stray lock of hair from her soft, white cheek and said playfully, "I'll bring you back a rajah's crown jewels or would you prefer the rajah himself?"

She drew back from his embrace and stood erect. "I suppose you will have a harem, of course," she said banteringly.

He chuckled. "I've been to the Orient three times and have escaped so far. I don't think you need have any fears in that direction."

"Let us hope so," she said demurely.

"Well, give my respects to the rest of the folks and tell them I'll bring them each something from India."

## Chapter 2

### "Moriarty's on This Boat!"

Allison stood on the promenade deck of the Valencia, leaning on the rail and gazing eastward. Two days out of New York and the voyage seemed most promising as to time and weather.

Allison eyed the liner in admiration. He had tried his hand at sailing, both steam and sail, and he knew a fine ship when he saw one.

"What a change!" he mused. "Here I'm bound for the same place Columbus was, he in a wooden tub, I in a floating palace and headed in exactly the opposite direction."

A quick step sounded behind him and Billy Buckner leaned on the rail beside him. Allison cast a quick glance at him and asked, "What's up, Buck?"

"Moriarty's on this boat!" was the answer in a low, quick tone. "I just saw him."

"Moriarty, eh?" Allison repeated softly.

"What had we better do?" demanded Buckner.

"Does he know you saw him?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Listen, then. After dinner you go to his cabin. And manage it so that he knows you go. The door will be unlocked; open it and go

in, then—well, you'll see. But be sure that Moriarty follows you."

On another part of the deck a large, genial looking man reclined in a deck-chair and chuckled. Moriarty, corporation detective, had reason to feel well of himself. Some years before, Allison with the aid of Buckner had successfully staged a most daring robbery and gotten away with a vast sum of a large mining corporation's funds. The proofs were not sufficient to send Allison or any of the others to the penitentiary, yet the corporation felt there must be proofs somewhere and finally they put Moriarty on the trail. Moriarty was a keen, persistent detective, a bold man and something of a genius in his way. For months he had tirelessly followed Allison and members of the former road-agent band. But especially he had pursued Allison. But the young ex-road-agent had outwitted him at every turn.

Now, Moriarty felt that it was his turn. For here were Allison and Buckner on the same ship and so far as he knew, they were not aware of his presence aboard.

Moriarty believed that he would soon be collecting that two thousand dollar reward that the corporation had offered for the capture of the highwaymen, in addition to his regular wages which were considerable. This sum was highly desirable to Moriarty, but the zest of the game was more so. He really did not need either the salary or the reward to live comfortably for he had been both a private detective and a Federal detective and had accumulated quite a tidy sum. But the joke of it was that the two had taken passage on the same ship in which he had booked, intending to go to Lisbon and not aware that Allison was in New York!

He chuckled and twirled his mustache.

Just then the dinner gong rang and he went to the salon. Buckner was there, but there was no sign of Allison.

Moriarty watched Buckner closely. He seemed to be nervous, glancing around occasionally in a furtive manner.

"I was wrong," thought Moriarty. "He knows I'm aboard."

Moriarty did not know what a perfect actor Buckner was.

Buckner finished his meal rather hurriedly and then hurried out of the salon.

Moriarty rose and strolled after him, unhurriedly. Walking with a lightness surprising in so large a man, he followed Buckner across the deck and down the companionway.

"Oh, so it's my stateroom you're after calling on!" he murmured as Buckner stealthily approached the stateroom belonging to Moriarty. He fumbled with the door, opened it and stepped inside, leaving the door open. The room was dark, but the lights in the corridor illuminated it enough so that Moriarty could see Buckner step to the table and begin to go through the papers on it.

The detective drew his pistol and stepped noiselessly through the door, covering the young man.

"Put 'em up, Buckner. I've got you," he said sharply, and at that instant something pressed against the back of his neck and a soft voice remarked, "Please do the same, Mr. Moriarty." And simultaneously Buckner stepped aside, out of line with Moriarty's pistol.

Moriarty knew when he was caught. His hands went into the air; Buckner stepped forward and twitched the gun from his fingers and went over him skillfully in search of hidden weapons. He found a detective's badge and a pair of handcuffs, both of which he appropriated.

The man who had held up Moriarty had pushed the door to and turned on the lights. Now he locked the door and stepped in front of his prisoner.

"Allison, eh?" grunted Moriarty. "Well, I might have looked for it."

"Sit down," ordered Steve, motioning toward the berth. The detective went over and sat down.

"You were easy, Moriarty," commented Allison, sitting on the edge of the opposite berth and twirling his gun by the trigger-guard.

"You come lumbering in here, yelling 'Han's up!' and all I have to do is to step out from behind the door and tickle you with the muzzle of my gat. Buck didn't come down here to steal anything or to establish your identity; he knew you'd stalk him. That's what I like about you, Moriarty, you do just exactly as we think you will do."

Moriarty was boiling, but he smiled grimly. "Well, well, 'tis me old friends, 'Drag' Buckner and th' Sonora Kid. This is indade a pleasure."

"It is indade," they murmured politely.

"How well the two av yez will look in sthripes," mused Moriarty.

"Moriarty," said Allison, "you haven't got anything on us and never will. But you interfere with us. We are trying to go straight, but how can we with an idiotic detective following us from place to place, never giving us a minute's rest?"

"Oh, I'll get yez, me buckos," promised Moriarty.

"If you were a gunfighter, I'd know how to manage it. But it would be murder to force you to a gunfight. However—Drag, what did you take off him?"

"The gat, handcuffs and a badge." He flipped up the badge, caught it, and asked, "Don't it keep you broke most of the time, Moriarty?"

"What?"

"Buying badges, handcuffs and guns to replace the ones we take off of you."

Moriarty cursed soulfully.

His captors chuckled softly.

"What an orator you'd have made, Moriarty," said Allison admiringly.

"What do you want av me?" demanded Moriarty.

Allison was silent for a moment, and then said, "It's like this, Moriarty. As I said, we're going straight. I don't mind telling you we're going to India. We're going to try to do the world a mighty good turn, if you only knew it. What we want you to do is to get off at Lisbon as you intended—oh, yes, we even knew where you were going. We want you to promise us that you won't molest us, at least until we have completed our business in India."

"And do yez think I will make any such promises?" asked Moriarty.

Allison stood up and looked straight into the detective's eyes.

"You will promise or by heaven, I'll kill you," he said. "I'm going to India and no detective on earth shall stop me."

Moriarty was looking at Allison's eyes. They were mere slits and they flamed and glinted like daggers. Moriarty knew that the soul of a killer was looking out through them and he winced in spite of himself.

"Make your choice," Allison was saying. "Promise what we ask you and keep that promise and we will not molest you. Refuse, and we will kill you and throw you through the porthole. Choose."

Moriarty was a brave man. These threats were like melodrama, but for the look in Allison's eyes. It is nothing to Moriarty's discredit that he answered as he did.

"And suppose I make this promise, what will prevent me break-

ing it?"

"Nothing," Allison replied. "But I don't think you'll break it, Moriarty. I've always found you a man of your word."

Allison had skillfully touched the right chord. Moriarty had always prided himself on keeping his promises, even to criminals.

He shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"All roight. I promise yez that I will not molest yez in any way until you blaguards have finished your 'business' in India and also that I will lave the ship at Lisbon as was me former intentions. Does that satisfy you, Kid and Drag, me cheerful road-agents?"

"It does," answered the Sonora Kid, replacing his gun in its hidden holster, "Give him back his stuff, Buck. Good. Now, Mr. Moriarty, unless you wish to talk of old times with us, we will wish you a pleasant good-night."

"Good night," answered Moriarty and a second later the stateroom door closed behind his erstwhile captors.

"The young blaguards," muttered Moriarty. Then he grinned, and a close observer might have drawn the conclusion that he did not dislike the two as much as he pretended.

### Chapter 3

#### "That's Bombay"

Straight across the Atlantic, stopping for a day in the Azores, then to Lisbon, swinging around Gibraltar, then straight across the blue Mediterranean. Through the Straits of Suez, down the Red Sea and around Aden into the Indian Ocean.

Buckner and Allison stood for'ard, in the bows of the liner. Buckner was eagerly scanning the eastern horizon, but Allison's gaze was turned westward, where the sandy, desert shore of Arabia was fading into the skyline. He was deep in thought. In Arabia he had first met his friend Gordon, and had had his first close experience with the Orient.

He was living over again the conspiracies and intrigues of an Eastern court: the fierce struggle for supremacy between the court nobles, the swift expedition into the desert, the pursuit, battles and running skirmishes, and finally the finding of the buried city and the fierce battle for the fortune discovered; then the victory in the swirling simoon and the flight across the desert to Aden.

Buckner's voice broke in on his thoughts. "We should be getting close to our destination, shouldn't we?"

Allison nodded.

Buckner's thoughts swerved to something else and he remarked, irrelevantly, "Moriarty's a pretty good scout after all. He got off at Lisbon just like he promised."

Steve grinned. "Yes, I thought he'd keep his word. There's nothing mean about Moriarty."

And then one morning Buckner gave a gasp of delight as he gazed on the spires and mosques and minarets of a great city, rising from the horizon, each detail leaping into clearness as the liner neared the shore.

Allison threw out his arm in a gesture that embraced both bay and city.

"That's Bombay," he said, "and beyond lies India."

And more wonders were in store for Buckner. As they rode through the streets to a European hotel, he wondered at the amazing blending of East and West; for Bombay is the cosmopolitan of the Eastern world.

Northward they rode in first-class compartments on a train, and Buckner got his first views of India from the car window.

At Delhi, Allison sought the office of a certain unobtrusive Government official, to whom he was not unknown, and asked certain questions.

And because he was not unknown to the Government, the official answered him.

Briefly, what he told Allison was: "We have heard only rumors. We know there is revolt and war in Afghanistan, but we can get no authentic news. We have heard rumors of a mullah preaching a holy war to drive the Giaours into the sea, and establish the Emir of Afghanistan as ruler of all India. It is also known that the Emir looks with disfavor on the mullah and his schemes; he is friendly to the British Government, but is losing power fast with his people. We have sent several men into Afghanistan, but they never reached Kabul, being either murdered by the mountain tribes or driven back by them. There has been raiding, looting, raping all along the Frontier. Whether the mullah is a mere fanatic, a man wishing to make himself an emperor, or whether he is in the pay of some European power, we do not know."

Allison was silent, but his eyes sparkled. He asked, "Is Frank Gordon in India now?"

"I do not know," the official answered. "It is probable."

"If you will give me a pass into Afghanistan, I and my friend will see what we can do, as regards to the Afghan situation," Allison said.

"What! You would go into the mountains?"

"Yes."

"Can you speak Pushtu? Do you know anything of the country? Of the people?"

"Yes to all three questions. Give me the passes. Who, even Afghans, would molest two ambassadors from the United States of America?"

"Dare you impersonate ambassadors?"

"Why not? You said the Emir was for us; if we can get to Kabul, I'll do the rest. I have friends north of the Pass."

"And what are your plans?" the official was skeptical.

"Haven't any, so far," Allison laughed. "I want to be introduced to the mullah first. Maybe I'll join him and help him whip England."

The Englishman shrugged his shoulders. "Very well, I'll give you the passes. After all, you are an American."

Northward to Peshawar. That part of the journey first in a train and then on horseback. Allison was exultant. He hastened. He wanted to feel the mountains under his feet and the mountain breeze in his face.

As they travelled, Buckner asked many questions.

"What kind of people are Afghans?" he wanted to know.

"I pointed some out to you in Delhi," Allison replied.

"Yes, but I only saw them from a distance."

"Well," said Allison, "As I said, Yar Ali Khan was the only Afghan I ever knew intimately. He was a big, tall man with a big, black beard and he wore a wadded coat nearly all the time in spite of the heat of Arabia. He carried a Khyber knife a yard long and he could use it, too! He's an Afridi. Some fighter, even for an Afghan. In the desert, when the Wahabis captured him and I rescued him, he gave me a ring of Afghan make and said if I were ever north of the Khyber and needed friends, to show certain men that ring. He especially mentioned two: Yar Hyder and Khoda Khan, both chiefs of

clans."

"And how are we going to go to Kabul?" was Buckner's next question.

"How do I know?" asked Allison. "Wait till we get to Peshawur."

#### Chapter 4

"By Allah! It is the Ring of Yar Ali!"

The Peshawur Serai. A riot of colors. A throng of shoving, crowding, haggling traders. A noise as of the Tower of Babel. A mingling of Moslem and Hindu; wild tribesmen and money-lenders; hawk-faced chieftains and smirking menials. And horses, horses, everywhere.

Allison and Buckner were bewildered by it all. It was Allison's intention to engage a kaflia as an escort and fortune favored them.

Soon after their arrival in Peshawur, as the two were walking down the bazaar, they passed a tall, stately Northerner, who strode majestically along as if India belonged to him. His face was strong and hawklike and his beard was graying. A tribesman saluted him with respect, "Greetings, Yar Hyder."

Allison jerked about. He stepped forward and accosted the chief, speaking in Pushtu, which Yar Ali had taught him. The customary salutation, and then: "You are chief Yar Hyder?"

"And what if I were, sahib?" responded the Paythan, somewhat haughtily.

For answer Allison extended his hand. On one finger was a golden ring of curious make, set with a brilliant jade.

Yar Hyder started. "By Allah!" he exclaimed. "It is the ring of Yar Ali!"

\* \* \* \* \*

# The Land of Mystery

Ancient of nations as the pyramid,  
 What mysteries lie vaguely hid,  
 Amid the ancient jungles and the plains,  
 Where, lichen-grown beneath the jungle rains,  
 Half-hid by trees that tower toward the sky  
 The ruins of strange, ancient cities lie;  
 Cities that were forgot already when  
 Stonehenge and Karnak sheltered tribes of men.  
 Cities whose kings had gone to their last sleep,  
 Ere lost Atlantis sank into the deep.  
 Oh, land of ancient mystery's domains,  
 Dark as the tribes that roam thy ancient plains,  
 There you will find, as stayed Time's tracing hand,  
 Yesterday's ages in that ancient land,  
 Thou, Africa.

## Chapter 1

### "There Are Strange Things in Africa"

Gordon was speaking. His listeners leaned forward eagerly, with the utmost interest.

"Not only my porters deserted, but my askaris also. I was left in the midst of a tropical jungle, the only white man for hundreds of miles, with a good supply of provisions, but armed only with a .577 double-barreled elephant rifle, my pistol, a yataghan and a heavy scimitar of Arab make. For the rifle I had perhaps eighty cartridges, and for the pistol some two hundred. The askaris and porters had managed to make off with most of the other luggage. I saw little use of trying to make back to the coast. Indeed, I was so near to the interior that I had an idea that one coast was almost as near as another. At any rate, I plunged on into the jungle.

"There did not seem to be any natives. The jungle itself did not differ from other African jungles. Finally I emerged from the jungle and came upon a strip of desert. I could see what appeared to be mountains in the distance. That desert I crossed. The heat and desolation was ghastly. The sun beat down with a fierce heat which was cast back by the hard, barren soil. There were no oases, no springs. There were no mirages such as I have seen in other deserts. There was nothing but a barren waste of sand and rocky soil. But the desert was not wide. Presently I came into a strip of savanna country, level, rolling plains, with tall waving grass.

"There was much game there and there also lived tribes of black men. They were savage, warlike tribesmen—bowmen and horsemen—riding some of the finest horses I've ever seen.

"They were easy to elude. I came to one of their villages which was set on a kind of prominence above the plain, and had a tall, strong stockade. Unobserved, I slipped into the village and appearing suddenly before the tribe, created quite an impression. They had never seen a white man before and though they were hostile at first I managed to show that I was a friend. They were tall, well-built people, with good-shaped features, and the women were not bad looking. They had a few of the typical negroid features. They spoke a language that seemed to have come from a Bantu stock and I learned



to speak it fairly well, although there were words and phrases entirely new and different from any language I ever heard. Their country was between the desert and a great jungle. It seemed that other tribes of black men inhabited the jungle and there was always war between them.

"The tribe in whose village I was, was called the Shansai. They were, as I said, splendid horsemen."

"Ha, good horsemen," said Lal Singh, leaning forward with new interest. "And good fighters?"

"Some of the best I ever saw," Gordon answered. "The tribes were always fighting among themselves as well as against the jungle negroes."

"Their country was bordered, as I said, by the jungle on the east. The negroes told me that the strip of savanna where they lived swung around the jungle to north and south, in a kind of great half-circle, finally running into the desert at the southeast and northeast. The jungle stopped before it verged into the desert, which, they said, seemed to be shut in at a distance both at northeast and southeast by a wild, desolate expanse of barren crags and foothills and mountains."

"The negroes of the plains had never crossed the desert and seldom ventured into the jungle unless it were to raid the jungle negroes whom they called Balingas."

"Beyond the jungle I could see, afar off, mighty mountains rearing up toward the sky with snow on the peaks. I spoke of them and found the Shansai unwilling to speak much about them. Investigating this strange reticence in regard to the mountains, I found the negroes to believe them haunted. They told me strange tales, little more than legends some of them were, of a strange, savage race who from time to time came from the jungle and raided the villages, slaughtering men and carrying off women, and who were neither of their own race nor Balingas. They dwelt in the mysterious mountains, said the Shansai, and were a terrible people. Apparently they were a race of negroes, but of different stock from the Shansai. They showed me a dagger taken from the raiders. Here it is."

And Gordon laid a dagger on the table by which he sat.

Steve Allison took it up and the others crowded around him to see it.

The blade was long, straight and slim with two edges and of fine blue steel, on the surface of which were engraved faint lines of what seemed to be writing. There was a gold-inlaid steel guard and the hilt was of silver worked and inlaid with gold. Small stones that were undoubtedly diamonds and rubies were set in the hilt and a large one formed the pommel. On one side of the hilt was a small gold plate and on it was carved a lion with the most consummate skill. Tiny rubies were set for the lion's eyes.

"A wonderful piece of skilled workmanship," said Omar Bey. "I have never seen better."

Yar Ali Khan's eyes glittered as he handled the dagger.

"And how did you obtain the dagger, sahib?" he asked. "Slay three or four, belike, or take it by stealth?"

"Neither," Gordon laughed. "A priest of the Shansai had it in his possession and he traded it to me for a few tricks of sleight-of-hand and parlor magic that I taught him."

"And what did you do after you got the dagger?" asked Abdul el Kadour.

Gordon continued. "As you might guess, I began to have a desire to see the land where such costly daggers were made. I tried to persuade some Shansai to accompany me. But they refused and

tried to dissuade me.

"You will be slain by the Balingas or by some wild beast of the jungle," the Shansai said. "Or if you should make your way through the jungle—which you might do for you are a mighty fighter—you will be captured or slain by the savage people of the mountains. Better stay in the land of the Shansai and we will make you a chief." For I had aided them in some of their battles with other tribes.

"So, finding the Shansai would not accompany me, I set out alone. Many of the warriors went with me to the edge of the great jungle, but would go no further.

"That jungle was thick, with much underbrush and mighty trees which towered sometimes hundreds of feet into the air. Many of the trees were unfamiliar to me. For awhile I cut my way through the jungle with the scimitar, which was well adapted to the work, being heavy, long and of the best steel.

"Then I came upon narrow paths, which I judged to have been made by the Balingas. So I went warily. I took to the trees which were so huge and so close together that I could travel with ease along the branches from tree to tree. Presently, after several miles, the jungle became less tangled, with less underbrush, though the trees were still larger, their topmost branches entangled so as to shut out the sky and most of the sunlight except such as filtered through the branches. It was rather an uncanny place and I did not wonder that the Shansai and their tribesmen seldom came into the jungle.

"I had noticed tracks of lions, leopards and deer and as I swung through the trees, I suddenly came face to face with a huge gorilla. I was surprised to find a gorilla in that part of Africa and was more surprised when with a wild screech he leaped upon me, his great, hairy arms clutching for me. Story books to the contrary, it is very seldom that a gorilla will attack a man. He took me off my guard and nearly crushed me before I managed to stab him with my yataghan. And even as he released me and rolled from the branch where we fought, his small, piggish grey eyes glared at me so hideously malignant that I shuddered.

"I went on my way and when night fell, slept in the crotch of a great tree, a hundred feet from the ground.

"The next day I continued on my way through the jungle and presently came to a trail down which a party of Balingas were coming. There were ten of them and I concealed myself in a tree whose branches spread above the trail, and watched them with interest. The Balingas were not as high a type of negro as the tribes of the plains. Not so tall as the Shansai, with more negroid features and somewhat receding foreheads, clad only in loin-cloths, they were far from prepossessing figures. They were armed with bows and long spears. They walked as lithely and noiselessly as leopards.

"And as they passed beneath the branches where I crouched, a branch broke and I tumbled into their midst, breaking my fall somewhat by snatching at branches as I fell. The Balingas gave back an instant in surprise and then charged me from all sides. For a few moments there was some quick and swift fighting, the long spears flashing and licking in and out like serpents' tongues and I using my scimitar with all my skill. I downed one Balinga with a Mameluke upper-thrust and cut another down. Then, snatching up the rifle I'd dropped in my fall, I dashed the butt into a Balinga's face and broke away, making for the trees. I reached them ahead of the negroes and swarmed up out of reach just as a flight of arrows whizzed up at me.

"It didn't seem to occur to the Balingas to follow me through the

trees—I found out why afterward—and I soon distanced them."

"And the reason the negroes did not follow you?" asked Omar Bey.

"Gorillas," answered Gordon. "I never saw so many before or since. And they were different from any apes I ever saw. They travelled almost entirely in the higher branches of the trees and were as big as any I ever heard of. The full-grown males would have weighed between three hundred and five hundred pounds. And their ferocity was a thing to marvel at. As I said, a gorilla seldom attacks a human, but the gorillas of the Balinga jungle were perfect fiends. Every time one of the great apes caught sight of me, it charged me furiously with hideous shrieks and howlings. I always managed to elude them, in spite of the fact that I was burdened with my weapons and what ammunition and provisions I carried.

"After roaming through the jungles for some days I came upon a large lake. About the shore I found deserted villages, similar to those I had seen back in the jungle occupied by the Balingas, but the villages by the lake had long been deserted and were falling into ruin. Which fact struck me as rather strange. Beyond the lake, which was dotted here and there with small islands, was the jungle and beyond that rose the mountains. On all sides the jungle ran down to within perhaps a mile from the lake shore.

"I constructed a kind of crude raft with a sail made of bamboo leaves pinned together with thorns and managed to float across the lake on it. The lake abounded in fish of many varieties, including what seemed to be a kind of small, fresh-water shark, exceedingly savage and voracious.

"Having sailed across the lake I plunged once more into the jungle of the Balingas. Occasionally I came upon a village, but the natives seemed scarcer than on the other side of the lake. Those that I saw were typical Balingas. The jungle, after some miles, had less underbrush than on the other side of the lake, which for lack of a better name, I called the Balinga Lake.

"Presently I emerged from the thick jungle into a kind of forest, with no underbrush whatever and gigantic trees hundreds of feet high. They were set rather far apart, as a rule, but so wide-spread were their branches that they shut out most of the sunlight. No Balingas lived in that forest; there was no sign of a village. There seemed to be nothing in the great forest except gorillas and even they did not seem so numerous as in the jungle. And, which struck me as being rather strange, the great apes were not so prone to attack on sight. The few gorillas I saw swung along through the trees noiselessly and seemed somewhat in awe of something.

"I decided that if the forest was inhabited by something so terrible that even the monstrous gorillas feared it, I did not care to meet it, so I took to the trees once more.

"Tree-travelling in the forest was not so easy as in the jungle, but I managed it without very much difficulty.

"I climbed to the top-most branches of a great tree that towered above the others, and gazed about me.

"All about me, for numberless miles, was a sea of waving tree-tops. To north and south the forest and jungle stretched away as far as I could see. To the west lay the great Balinga Lake and beyond the jungle I could see the savanna lands and beyond that, the desert."

"You could see all that?" exclaimed Steve Allison incredulously.

"Certainly," Gordon smiled. "I had a pair of field glasses.

"To the east the great forest stretched away to meet an upland that sloped up toward the mountains. Just beyond the forest, there

was a tangled strip of jungle. The upland was something like the veldt and something like the steppes of north Asia.

"The mountains themselves did not seem to be so very steep and beyond the uplands, seemed to have something of a large forest on the lower slopes.

"As I said, there was snow on the peaks.

"Proceeding on my way, I came upon a great hollow tree. The hollow was some fifty feet from the ground and extended twenty-five feet up the tree, and was at least fifteen feet across. The tree was so huge that the trunk was not weakened in the least by the hollow and I decided to spend the night there.

"The great forest was an eerie place at night. There were no sounds except the night-wind blowing through the great trees. The wind rustled the branches and leaves, making the forest seem full of weird whisperings. The branches were entangled and formed a lofty roof, through which no moonlight nor starlight shone. The forest was so dark that even my jungle-trained eyes could make out no object.

"Sometime in the night I was wakened with the knowledge that something, some monstrous thing, was prowling in the night close to the tree where I was. Rifle in hand, I peered out of the hollow of the great tree but could see nothing in the darkness under the gigantic trees. There was a faint reptilian odor in the air, but there was no sound. Presently I sensed that the thing, whatever it was, had moved away into the forest.

"Next morning, under and about the great tree, I found, here and there, the tracks of the creature. They were huge and wide-spreading and something like the claws of a monstrous bird. But they were not the tracks of a bird, I knew, and I was amazed, not because I did not know what they were, but because I knew. I had seen such tracks in slabs of rock and in great stones in museums, in the Bad Lands of the Dakotas and upon the steppes of Mongolia.

"The creatures who had left such tracks were evidently the 'devils' of whom I had heard vague legends among the Shansai."

"They were devils, undoubtedly," rumbled Yar Ali Khan.

"I did not attempt to trail the thing that left the tracks," Gordon continued, "because I was sure that I would meet similar creatures before I got out of the jungle.

"I went on through the trees for some distance and was presently aware of some monster coming through the forest. I climbed to the ground and waited. And presently, through the mighty trees, there came a weird, monstrous shape, on silent feet.

"Although I had known almost exactly what would appear, still I could hardly credit my sight.

"There among the huge trees the monster stood, at least twenty feet high, standing upright like a monstrous kangaroo, evil, reptilian, a great dinosaur!"

"A dinosaur!" exclaimed Steve Allison.

"A dinosaur," replied Gordon. "In that instant I seemed to be transported back a million years into the old Stone Age.

"There the monster stood, amid the uncanny silence and gloom of the mighty forest trees, as ancient as the age it represented. Primeval silence reigned. It was a setting wondrous strange for the modern age and I had an uncanny feeling that by some means I had been carried back into ancient days. I even glanced at my rifle half-wondering whether I would find myself clutching, not a modern cordite rifle, but a crude stone hatchet. It was with difficulty that I rid myself of the feeling of unreality, and convinced myself that I had

merely come into some strange land, rather than having stepped into a long-past age.

"The great dinosaur stood glaring evilly with its small, hideous eyes and then charged, covering the distance in great bounds, like a kangaroo.

"I threw my rifle to my shoulder and fired twice and the gigantic reptile plunged to the earth. I doubt if a lesser rifle than the cordite .577 would have stopped it. I cut a talon from the monster that had come out of the gloom of the ages. Here it is."

And Gordon laid upon the table a great curving claw. Nearly a foot long it was, curved, sharp and like steel.

Steve Allison visualized the reptile that had worn the talon and shrugged his shoulders as he realized that his imagination could scarcely picture the monster.

Yar Ali Khan swore wonderingly in his beard.

"A devil, without a doubt," he said. "It was an ifreet, sahib, surely."

"It was monster enough for any demon," Gordon answered. "I found many signs of dinosaurs in the forest and I knew the reason that no Balingas lived in the forest, and why the great apes went swiftly and silently.

"I caught glimpses of other dinosaurs, but I did not come face to face with any more except one, and I eluded it by slipping behind a great tree and gliding silently away.

"Finally I came out of the forest and came upon a swamp. It was a ghastly swamp of quagmires and stagnant lakes, abounding in reptiles. But it was not very wide and I crossed it, partly in a crude pirogue, partly by leaping from hummock to hummock. At any rate, I crossed the swamp and came into the strip of jungle I had seen from the great tree.

"It was a jungle of thorn-trees. The trees were large and grew close together and the thorns were nearly as strong as steel. I hacked my way through that jungle with my scimitar and it was no easy task.

"All the time I was wondering whence came the terrible black men whom the Shansai had told me about. I had found no trace of them in the jungle or forest of the Balingas, though of course I had traversed only an exceedingly small part, comparatively speaking, having travelled by a more or less straight route. Just the same, I did not believe that they inhabited the jungle. The Shansai had said that they lived in the mountains and I was inclined to that belief myself. But by what route they came when they raided the villages of jungle and plain, I had no idea. I found no traces to show that any human being had ever come that way. As far as I explored, the thorn-jungle was unbroken by path or trail.

"When I emerged from the jungle I came upon the sloping steppes I had seen. They were a strong contrast to the country I had been travelling through for days. Verdant grass grew tall, and deer, gazelle, bison and antelope grazed there by the hundreds. Also many wild horses, fine as Kabuli or Arab steeds. The steppes sloped gradually upwards for miles and miles, to meet a great plateau, on which was a great forest. Beyond, to the east rose the mighty mountains.

"I fashioned a lariat out of plaited grasses and caught a wild horse. I half-tamed him, at least enough to ride. I was nearing the forest, where I intended releasing the horse and going on, on foot, when I saw some fifty horsemen coming at a run. I rode toward them. They were soon near enough for me to see that they were negroes and I was sure that they were of the race of whom the Shansai had

spoken. They were giants in stature and perfectly built. They had even features, high, broad foreheads with almost no negro characteristic except color, and would have been handsome except for the expression of fiendish fury and cruelty they wore. They wore little except loin-cloths and a kind of feathered head-dress and ornaments, consisting of armlets and anklets which seemed to be mostly gold, often set with costly gems. They were armed with long spears, bows, short swords and knives. Some of them carried small, round shields. The horses they rode were splendid steeds and were richly caparisoned, though the saddles were merely leather pads.

"Such were the warriors who were charging down upon me. They ignored my peace-sign and swooped in. Three or four were ahead of the rest and with wild war-cries they swept in, wielding short swords. I saw that they had no mind for anything but battle. And I gave it to them. Using my scimitar I cut down four negroes and broke through the ranks that surrounded me, smiting right and left. They were close behind me as I raced for the forest, but the half-wild horse I was riding was a swift one, and I managed to get beyond bow-range.

"From all sides the negroes came racing until my pursuers numbered some two hundred warriors.

"I tried my elephant-rifle, knocking two negroes from their horses with long range shots, but it did not daunt the other warriors.

"As I neared the forest I saw another band of mounted black men ride out to intercept me. There was a clump of huge boulders close by and to them I headed. Reaching them, I sprang down and leaped for cover, turning the horse loose. He raced away over the steppes and the black men made no effort to recapture him, being too intent on me.

"The warriors raced around the boulders, much like Indians, sending flights of arrows. But I was sheltered by the boulders so that not an arrow touched me. In the meantime, I managed to drop two more negroes.

"Then the black warriors, finding that they could not reach me on horseback, dismounted and charged me. I have seen many furious battles and many fierce fighters. I have seen the Cossack fight and the Moro juramentado and the Ghazi and the Zulu. But those black warriors excelled them all in sheer savagery and reckless valor.

"Nothing daunted them. I emptied my elephant-rifle twice and my pistol once before that charge swarmed over the boulders, and I did not miss. Yet the warriors never paused, but leaped over the boulders and fell upon me with spears and swords. And among the rocks and boulders we fought, man to man and steel to steel."

"Would I had been there," muttered Yar Ali Khan, toying with the hilt of his tulwar.

"I slew with scimitar and yataghan," Gordon went on, "but they overcame me. I was surprised that they did not kill me, but they bound me hand and foot and threw me across a horse. They tied my weapons upon another steed, handling the firearms gingerly. Then the whole band set out, leaving the bodies of the slain negroes where they lay, having first taken their weapons.

"The black men headed in a direction somewhat southeast, skirting the forest. When night fell, they camped, leaving me upon the ground, loosing my feet but tying my hands behind me and binding them to a tree, with a huge warrior as jailer, watching me and my weapons which they laid close by, evidently believing them to possess some uncanny power. That night I managed to slip my bonds and escape, leaving behind me a negro, knocked unconscious with the shaft of his own spear.

"I took to the forest which was something like the forest of the Balingas. It was without underbrush, with tall and mighty trees, but lacked the uncanny silence and gloom of the Balinga forest.

"It was, as I said, on a great plateau. There were lions, leopards, apes and other wild things.

"I made my way through the forest, now and then sighting bands of black warriors, sometimes mounted, sometimes not, but they were not hard to elude. Besides individual characteristics and different styles of ornaments and head-dresses, they were all of the type of those who had captured me.

"I went higher into the mountains, and found them something like the Himalayas, but not so great nor rugged, nor so barren."

"No mountains can equal the Himalayas," said Yar Ali Khan with conviction and satisfaction.

Gordon continued, "I came upon a ruined city among the mountains. It showed signs of being very ancient and was built of granite and stone resembling marble. The architecture was strange to me, having some of the solid stability of the Assyrian, some of the art of the ancient Greek, and yet in some ways reminding me of the Egyptian.

"It had been a great city, situated on a high-flung plateau, and with a strong, high wall about it, most of which was still standing.

"I entered through an ancient gate and began to explore the city with great interest. High in the mountains the creepers and lichens did not grow as they did in the jungle and the city was not hidden as one in the jungle would have been.

"There were lions and leopards prowling through the ancient streets and buildings and I was very wary as I went. However, they showed no especial inclination to attack me.

"One side of the city I saw a great building which seemed to me, as well as I could see at the distance, that it had had additions added, much newer than the rest of the building. Approaching it warily, I saw that it was a magnificent place, fit for a king's palace, and was set in an open space, with no other buildings very close to it. It was strongly built, reminding me strongly of the great pillars of Karnak.

"There was a mighty hallway in front, with gigantic arches upheld by mighty pillars, and a kind of lofty roof went around the entire building, held up by pillars almost as large as those that held up the arches. In that respect it was a great deal like the ancient Roman residences. I could see that it had been made into a fort. Blocks of stone had been built in between the pillars, forming a wall about ten feet high all about the building. There were loopholes at regular intervals in the wall, which seemed to be very strongly built.

"I scaled the wall with caution and dropped down on the other side. Just as I did so, I heard a clank of arms, and the sound of men marching, whose approach was hidden by the gigantic pillars. I darted behind some other pillars, and saw what seemed to be a doorway. I stepped within and found myself in a maze of rooms and corridors which seemed to run in all directions, without any plan, though that, I believe, was only due to the peculiar form of architecture of that country.

"Having crossed innumerable rooms and followed numberless corridors, I came to a winding stair. Up that I went. Many of the rooms and corridors I had traversed showed signs of being, or having been, occupied. That was especially true of the second floor.

"I came from the stair into a long corridor and followed it. Presently I came to a large doorway, which seemed as well as I could see

to open into a more elaborate room than most of the others I had explored. And I was aware that someone was in that room. I knew that people of some race occupied the great building. I heard several times the tread of feet and what seemed to be the clank of armor or weapons. But I had not caught a sight of the inhabitants.

"Listening carefully, I found that there was only one person in the room. Scimitar in hand, I stepped through the door. The person in the room was a woman. She sprang back with a frightened cry, and I stopped short in amazement. For the woman was white!"

"White!" exclaimed Abdul el Kadour.

"White and very fair," Gordon answered. "She was only a girl, a slender girl of medium height. Her hair was long, wavy and golden. Her eyes were a violet color. She was quite a pretty girl, with one of the best faces I have ever seen.

"A very pretty girl, with a merry face and eyes that sparkled with good humor. She had a face such as usually wears a happy smile. But there were traces of tears on her rosy cheeks and a bruise on her pretty, round arm, as if she had been roughly handled. She was dressed in a garment of soft, white material which was sleeveless and low-necked, belted at the waist with a plain cloth girdle. The skirt came just below her knees and her small, dainty feet were bare.

"She shrank back against the wall, her hands out before her as if to ward off a blow. Her face was full of terror.

"I thrust my scimitar back into its sheath and advanced a few steps, with both hands upraised, palms outward, in the universal peace-sign.

"She seemed somewhat reassured and some of the fear faded from her pretty face. I spoke to her in several languages and dialects, but she could not understand any of them and motioned me to be quiet.

"Hesitatingly, she came forward and timidly touched my hands, my face and my sword-belt, with seemingly great interest. She reminded me of a child with a new toy and the resemblance was strengthened when she smiled.

"Then she paused and glanced around, rather nervously. She took me by the arm and drew me toward a door, not the one by which I had entered.

"But I held back. I was not sure of her intentions. Then she began to make signs. She pointed to me and then stood on her tiptoes, reaching up as high as she could, with her hand held flat and bent at the wrist, as though indicating the height of something. Then she pointed to my scimitar and made a gesture as of drawing a sword and striking.

"I believed that she was telling me that a big man with a sword would come kill me if I stayed. Then she urged me toward the door again. But I was not interested. I had a desire to see the man she described and I did not particularly favor the idea of being hidden by a woman.

"And presently I heard the sound of someone approaching over the marble floor. The girl started and her evident terror was pitiful. She caught my arm and tugged to draw me toward the door. I pushed her away as gently as possible and as I did a man entered the room. He was a big man. One of the largest I have ever seen. He was white and was dressed a great deal like the black warriors I had been captured by. He was dressed in a loin cloth, a feathered head-dress and wore barbaric ornaments of gold and silver on his arms and legs. On his feet were a kind of sandals and from his girdle swung a long



straight sword in an ornamented scabbard.

"Thrust through his girdle, also, was a dagger in a golden sheath. Aside from the costly ornaments the man wore, I knew instantly that he was a chief. His face was rather handsome, but cruel. He carried himself like the barbarian chieftain he was, proud, arrogant, dominant. I hated him on sight.

"He paused in amazement and turning to the frightened girl, spoke to her in a language that I could not understand. She answered humbly and her shrinking, frightened look and attitude convinced me that my assumption was correct, that she was a slave or a captive.

"She came close to the chief, holding out her hands appealingly and apparently pleading. Begging for me, I believed, and it did not lessen my antipathy for the chieftain.

"He laughed sneeringly and swung her out of the way. Drawing his sword he strode forward, motioning me to throw down the yataghan I had drawn. Naturally I declined. He seemed rather pleased. With a cruel smile he stepped forward, rather leisurely, as a leopard plays with its prey.

"And as he raised his sword I was in, under his sword-arm, and stabbed him three times with my yataghan.

"He flung up his arms and fell, his sword flying from his hand and ringing on the marble floor.

"I stood ready, listening, half expecting to hear a rush of feet and a clash of weapons, but I heard nothing.

"I glanced at the girl. She was leaning forward, her lips parted, her eyes wide with wonder. She did not seem to be afraid and there was real relief in the gaze she cast at the body of the chieftain. She must have been his captive.

"I was examining his weapons with interest when she took my arm and motioned toward a door. I saw that she was urging me to come with her and I thought that perhaps I might aid her to escape, supposing she was a captive.

"Before I left I took the chief's dagger and handed it to the girl. She took it, somewhat gingerly it seemed, and slipped it into her girdle.

"The sword I took, noting that it was of blue steel with the hilt and guard of gold, set with diamonds and rubies, much like the dagger that I had gotten from the priest of the Shansai.

"The girl led the way out of the room into another and then into a maze of rooms and corridors such as I had traversed in coming to the room where I saw her.

"Several times we hid behind pillars or in hidden rooms, while warriors passed by, sometimes in bands, sometimes singly, sometimes marching in order, sometimes chatting as they marched along. They were of a type of the man I had killed, tall, large men, well-built and powerfully muscled, some seeming to be of higher rank than others. But few of them seemed so arrogant or domineering as the chieftain.

"Presently we came to a long, wide corridor with a winding, narrow stairway, and the girl started to lead the way when at one end of the corridor appeared a band of marching warriors. We turned toward the other end of the corridor, but they had seen us and in an instant the corridor was filled with armed warriors who rushed from almost every door at the shouts of those who had first seen us.

"There was but one way of escape; straight up the stairs, and up them we went. Before we were halfway to the top, warriors were swarming up after us, but a narrow, winding stair is not an easy place to take with a rush.

"The very force of their numbers forced me back and up the

stair, but I piled that stairway with slain men. I broke three swords, each time snatching another from a foe. Still they came on, savagely, silently, slashing and thrusting with sword and dagger, clambering over the bodies of the warriors I had slain.

"At last I stood on the top of the stairs, the warriors massing for another rush, halfway down the stairway. I threw away a broken sword and drew my scimitar, intending to make a last stand, when the girl touched me on the arm. We were in a long corridor, similar to the one below. Other corridors led away from it, and toward one of those the girl went, motioning me to follow her.

\* \* \* \* \*

## THE SHUNNED CASTLE

(continued from page 43)

"That stuff won't hold you up," he said. "And besides it may be full of snakes."

"Then how are we goin' to get over?" Steve demanded. "We won't have time to drop a tree across for a bridge, before it's too dark."

"It's not wide," Gordon answered, and with a light bound he cleared the fifteen foot space that separated them from the opposite bank of the moat. Allison tossed the rifles over to him and measured the moat with his eye. He shook his head dubiously, but backed off several yards and with a short run, managed to leap across.

Then the two men walked toward the castle and Allison, at least, walked warily, glancing suspiciously from side to side, his rifle ready.

They came to the mighty gate, whose two great doors sagged on rusty hinges and Allison reached his hand toward the great handle on one of the doors. But Gordon, who had been scanning the great gate, drew him back.

"Let's climb over the wall," he suggested, leading the way.

Keeping a wary eye for snakes, they clambered over the crumbling wall into the ancient court-yard.

Then Gordon turned toward the ancient gate again. Approaching it cautiously, he pushed on the section Allison had started to open, and then leaped swiftly away. With a crash, the mighty iron door fell outward.

"My gosh!" Allison breathed awedly. "How did you know that would do that, Frank?"

Gordon shrugged his shoulders. "Intuition, perhaps," he suggested.

"Bosh!" Steve said, rudely. "You saw it would fall, or guessed it."

Gordon smiled. "Let's go in the castle."

# El Borak

## Chapter I.

Were you ever stranded in a strange land, broke, hungry and without a way of raising the necessary cash? Well, it's a mean feeling. I've been in that fix several times but I believe it was worse when I was in Aden for the first time. I'd shipped as an A. B. seaman on the merchantman *Aerial*, bound for Calcutta by way of the Suez and the Red Sea, and when we were making port in Aden, I had a row with the bucko mate and laid him out with a hand-spike. The captain butted in and I did the same by him. Then I took a header over the rail and swam ashore with the bullets from the second mate's six-shooter knocking up the water on each side of me and a flock of sharks heading my way with wishful looks. I dodged the bullets and outswam the sharks by a hair.

So there I was. I couldn't speak their heathen lingo and if there were white men in town I couldn't find them. Moreover I had to lay close for awhile for the crew of the *Aerial* was scattered around the town and I didn't have any friends in that gang. I spent my last coin for a supper and a place to sleep in a squalid native inn and, having spent most of the night fighting off the bugs and insects that overran the place, I arose and went to the wharf to watch the *Aerial* weigh anchor and sail away. As she disappeared over the horizon I almost wished I was aboard. Consider; there I was, alone and unarmed, in a town, which was then extremely hostile to whites, possessing nothing but the clothes on my back and a big pocket knife, not able to understand the inhabitants or to make them understand me, flat broke, and, apparently, the only white man in the city. I might have sold my knife for a meal or a few coins but I didn't want to do that, as it could be used as a weapon, and, judging from the scowls and ugly looks cast my way by the natives I had an idea I might need a weapon in the near future.

I roamed the town over trying to find a white man but nothing doing. I was ready to call the guy a liar that said there were Englishmen all over the world. I tried to make several Arab merchants understand that I wanted a job but they couldn't or wouldn't understand me, so near sun-down I was standing by a well in the middle of a big square, wondering what to do. I was tired, hungry, and getting pretty desperate. And when a man gets desperate with hunger and lack of money, something's going to happen; especially if the man has been a rustler and a road-agent. Copper and silver coins seemed everywhere. Dancing girls wore them in their hair. They were piled high on money changers' counters. The very slaves wore garments spangled with them. Sheiks rode by, with leathern bags at their saddle-bows, which, as the horses trotted gave forth a musical jingle. Which noise, was, to my ears, as the sight of water is to a famishing desert-traveller. Some chance I had of getting any, though; Sheiks and officers of the pasha riding by, eyed me in cold, haughty contempt. Many a lean, brown hand curled longingly around a saber hilt. Slaves coming to the well for water glowered at me with sullen distrust.

One of these, a huge black, deliberately jostled me, growling some insult in his own tongue, whereupon I felled him with a cobble-stone. Although it did not kill him or even knock him unconscious, it seemed to instill some respect in the other negroes and they confined their

hostilities to scowls and mutterings.

It was growing dusk when a richly-dressed, portly Arab rode by on a donkey, accompanied by a big, husky Arab servant, on foot and armed with a scimitar and a long musket. The fat Arab, (I took him to be a merchant) seemed nervous and in a hurry so I judged that he had some money on him. Here was my chance! I followed some distance behind until I saw that they seemed to be heading toward a certain alley. A short cut home, I supposed. I ducked down another alley on the same side and emerged on another street running as near parallel to the one I had just left as those twisting, winding Arab streets can run. I had an idea I could find the alley I wanted for I had become somewhat familiar with that part of the city in my hunt for a job or a European. I found the alley I sought and entered it stealthily. It was a long, winding, narrow place, dark as Erebus. I followed it until I could see the starlit sky at the other end. Then I drew back against the wall and waited. Nor did I have to wait long. Scarcely had I taken my position when two shapes appeared against the sky. Evidently there were no tall houses across the street from the alley. Perhaps none at all for the building arrangement in Aden is irregular and rather fantastic. So the figures were outlined against the sky and I saw they were the merchant, his donkey and his servant. I flattened myself against the side of the alley, poising a heavy cobble-stone in my hand.

The servant came first, groping ahead with the long barrel of his musket. As he came within reach I brought the cobble-stone crashing down on his head. He dropped, stunned, and before the merchant could flee or cry out, I was on him with a panther leap. Stifling his screech for help, I dragged him from his mount and knelt on him, pressing the keen edge of my knife against his throat.

"Move and die!" I whispered, and though it is doubtful if he understood the words, he understood the feel of cold steel and lay still.

I was about to ransack him when a cool, amused voice spoke out of the darkness behind me.

"Oh, sahib, why do you waste your time with that fat fool when there is gold, aye, and women too, to be had for the picking?"

"I don't know who you are," I growled. "But if you make a false move I'll slash this guy's throat and then—"

"Pah! Think you I care for that fat Jew fool? Slay him if you will but do what thou wilt quickly and then come with me for I have work for a man such as thou art and will pay well."

"A paying job, eh? All right then, I'll let this guy go. But," I added softly, "if you're double-crossing me you'll never live to tell of it."

"No fear of that, sahib," was the answer. "Follow me."

I rose and followed him as he led the way down the alley in the direction from which I had come. My eyes had become accustomed to the dark by this time and I could make out a moving blotch which I knew was my would-be employer. I walked warily, my knife ready, but he made no treacherous move and presently we emerged on the street, now dimly lighted by crude lanterns set far apart. One such lantern hung close to the alley mouth and I got my first look at my unknown friend.

He was a tall, lithe man, dressed in plain but costly native clothes. His features were hidden by a burnous but I knew he was of high class, probably some sheik or noble of the Pasha's court. The erect form, proudly held head proclaimed him an Oriental chief as well as the jeweled hilt of the saber that protruded from his robes. Without a word he started up the street beckoning me to follow. But I had

been thinking fast. I knew that no Arab sheik would hire an unbeliever for any honest purpose, doubtless he wanted some enemy of his put out of the way. Perhaps even, he was in disgrace with his ruler and wanted the ruler assassinated. I was not very familiar with the East but I had an idea that if an Oriental noble wanted his sovereign put out of the way he would choose just such a fellow as I to do the job. Killing a king was a little out of my line; I had no desire to mix in world politics. So I stopped and said,

"My English-speaking friend, with all due gratitude for your kind offer, I must hear the whole details before I follow you anywhere."

He turned and came back. "You must realize that is impossible for me to give you the 'details' here on the street." He said impatiently.

"So!" I replied, "Just as I thought. You want me to do dirty work for you. You want me to murder some man or carry off some girl for you. Well, nothing doing. I'll go back and collect the tax off that fat merchant."

"Wait, wait!" he exclaimed, seizing my arm. "If you rob the merchant you will have but a few wretched coins to pay you for your exertions while if you will follow me you shall have thousands of gold-pieces and as many beautiful girls as you can carry off."

Thousands! Why, I had risked my life many a time, yes and killed too, for a few hundred dollars.

"You can keep your beautiful girls," I answered. "But a few thousand gold-pieces listen good to me."

"You made two good guesses as the Americans would say. Suppose I told you I wanted you to steal a certain maiden for me?"

"I'd tell you to go to the devil," I snapped. "I tell you I won't be mixed up in anything that has a woman in it."

"Ah, indeed. And suppose," he lowered his voice, "I told you that I had a friend or rather an enemy that I wanted removed? A man."

"Well," I reflected. "That would depend on two things. Who the man was and the price offered."

"The price will suit you," he responded. "And as for the identity of the man—you are a stranger here and that should not bother you."

"Well," I murmured as I followed him down the street. "If the price is high enough it don't matter much who the man is; even the king."

At the words he whirled on me like a tiger, one hand outstretched to seize me, the other leaping to his saber.

"What devil put those words in your mouth?" he hissed. "Who are you?"

"Easy, stranger," I warned backing away, my knife glittering in my hand. "If you try to draw that sword you'll never get it clear of the sheath."

"Are you in Mustapha el Hamid's pay?" he asked menacingly.

"Never heard of him," I responded watching him warily.

He hesitated, looking at me uncertainly. I could see his eyes glitter above the burnous. Finally he said,

"I believe you. You would not dare—Come, we will go to my house and discuss things further."

As we walked down the dimly lighted street, I suddenly had the feeling that we were being followed. That instinct comes to a man who hunts men and is hunted in turn. I cast my eyes around. There were no booths or bazaars on that street and so it was deserted. At least that was my first impression, but presently I caught a glimpse of two vague shadowy figures stealing along at some distance behind us,

on the opposite side of the street. I mentioned the fact to my companion who had not spoken since he had bade me follow him.

At last we emerged from the maze and came into the suburbs where the nobles, rich merchants and sheiks have their palaces and mansions. There were some fine looking buildings and terraces there but I had no chance for a good look at them because of the darkness and my companion's hurry. As we entered the suburbs he began to [walk] faster and faster and at last we were fairly flying down the way, keeping to the shadows and dodging places lighted by artificial lights or by the moon. Once I looked back and caught a vague sight of our two shadows scooting along behind us.

"Say!" I protested. "What's all the rush? I haven't eaten anything today and I ain't feeling fit for a cross-country run. I thought you were hiring me to do a few assorted murders, not run foot races with you."

"Be silent," he muttered.

We flitted along for a few hundred yards further, shying away from an especially elegant mansion. I didn't know why he did it but I was following him and when he went nearly half-a-mile out of the way to go, I pulled in my belt another notch, and followed.

When we got past that villa he slowed up for which I was devoutly thankful. We walked for perhaps a mile, swinging toward the bay and at last we came to a large building, a regular palace set in the midst of wide rolling terraces, surrounded by a high stone wall. We went through a small door in the [wall] and my guide carefully locked the door behind us.

"Ain't you going to let the shadows in?" I asked.

"Shadows?"

"Your men I mean. The guys that were chaperoning us."

"They will take care of themselves," he answered, impatiently.

"You ask too many questions. You annoy me."

I started to retort but changed my mind. The terraces were bathed in the soft light of the Arabian moon, gently rolling, dotted here and there with beautiful fountains and plots of dainty shrubbery they were friendly and inviting while in startling contrast the great building situated in their center was dark and repelling.

I gazed in wonder and some apprehension at the mansion. Not a light showed, not a sound issued from it. Dark, sinister, forbidding, the great pile of architecture loomed against the star-scattered sky. My silent guide led the way up the terraces toward the house, and as I followed the short hairs of my scalp prickling for in some mysterious, occult way, in a way I cannot describe or explain it seemed to me that for an instant the veil of the future had been rent and I had peered through at dark and bloody deeds yet in the maw of Eternity. I shuddered and glanced nervously at my guide as dark forebodings began to assail me. Who was this man who spoke and looked like a prince, spoke better English than I, kept his face concealed, maintained his strange silence, was followed by a body-guard, and came through the night to hire a white man to do a deed of darkness? An Arab? A European who had become mixed up in Oriental politics? And who was this man whom he wanted slain? I had no way of knowing. I could form no theory, could make no plan. It was for me to walk warily and watch my step. I opened the knife I had put away and slipped it up my sleeve, then followed my companion who strode up the terraces until he came to a wing of the building. He opened a door and stood aside for me to enter. The hall, room or whatever it was, was dark as an alley. I hesitated and then stepped inside. The door clicked shut behind me and the next instant I felt the man

step past me.

"Come, this way, sahib," he said in a low voice. I tried to follow him but it was so dark I couldn't see him and I couldn't hear him for at every step our feet sank deep in costly Oriental rugs that effectually muffled any sounds. So I had not taken a dozen steps until I was as bewildered and turned around as I had been in the city a short time back. I stopped and addressed my invisible guide.

"How in thunder do you expect me to walk your trail when I can't see, feel, or hear you? Maybe you expect me to locate you by the sense of smell, hey? What's the idea, anyhow? Why can't we have some lights?" I added somewhat irritably, for truth to tell, the darkness and silence had begun to get on my nerves.

Something touched my arm and I jerked back instinctively.

"It is only I, sahib," a voice said. "Take my hand. It is necessary that we have no lights."

I didn't believe him but I took his hand and he led me through darkened rooms, over rugs and carpets that I could not see but sank ankle deep in the fabric. And all this time not a sound, not a sight, not a feel, except the carpets under foot and the man's hand by which he was leading me. And I felt like a darn fool.

After we had trod the carpets for what seemed to me an interminable time and had climbed at least one winding stair case, (it had carpets on it too) he let go of my hand and left me standing like a lost calf. Suddenly a flood of light blinded me and when my eyes had become accustomed to the sudden change I saw my employer standing before me.

With a sweep he threw aside the burnous and I saw that he was an Arab. But an Arab such as I had never seen before. Here was no fat, greedy merchant, no fawning court noble. With lean, firm molded chin, thin lips, thin bridged hawk nose and high, intellectual forehead, his was the face of a man among men, the features of a conqueror, an empire builder. He was lighter than the average Arab and extremely handsome. His eyes were dark and lustrous telling of a keen brain and a driving will power behind them. He was, as I have said, tall and lithe. His movements reminded me of a panther. He was slim enough for lighthness and heavy enough for strength. I have [seen] few men who could equal him in appearance. He was one of the most perfectly built men I have ever seen. He waved a hand toward a divan.

"Pray be seated."

I sat down and looked about me. The luxury and richness of the room and its furnishings made me gasp. The floor was covered with rich rugs of Bokhara and China, the walls were hung with gorgeously worked tapestry of silk, velvet and cloth-of-gold, the furniture which consisted of divans and an ebony-wood table were richly decorated, the table with gold and ivory and the divans with the same costly material to which was added beautifully worked silk and gold-cloth. The walls themselves were graced with gold and ivory ornaments. The room, which was a large one, seemed illuminated by light that poured in through parallel slits in the wall close to the ceiling. Close by, beyond some curtains I heard a clear musical tinkle that I knew was made by a fountain.

"Say," I said, "I believe we've gotten into the pasha's palace by mistake." Then, as a sudden hair-raising thought struck me, "Say! Are you the pasha?"

"Not yet," he laughed, seating himself on a divan just opposite me. I was slightly surprised at his sitting down like a white man. I expected him to sit, tailor fashion on a cushion on the floor.

"I believe you said you had not dined?" he asked.

"I have neither dined, supped or breakfasted," I answered. "And furthermore," I hinted broadly, "I am one of those queer guys who cannot transact business on an empty stomach."

He clapped his hands and a black slave appeared with a suddenness that made me think of the "Arabian Nights." He said something to the slave in soft, slurring Arabic, and the slave salaamed and backed through the curtains.

"Forgive me," my host apologized, "that I begin asking questions relating to the business at hand, before you have eaten, but truth to tell, I am in something of a hurry."

"Go ahead," I answered, settling myself comfortably.

"In the first place, I believe your name is Allison?"

"Yes, it is," I replied, trying not to show my surprise, "Stephen Angus Allison."

"And you are a deserter from the English merchantman Aerial?"

"I am."

"You are an American?"

["Yes."]

"From what state?"

"Texas. Born and raised on the Mexican Border."

He eyed me contemplatively. "You are younger than I thought."

"I'll be twenty my next birthday," I answered, "but what of that? I'm a man in experience."

"What has been your occupation?"

"Cow-puncher, horse-wrangler, rustler, brand-blotcher, road-agent and sailor at which I wasn't a success."

His brow puckered in thought. "Your American slang is hard for me to grasp. Am I correct in understanding you to have said that you have been a cattle-herder, a horse-thief and a highwayman?"

"You are," I answered without argument, for just then the slave came back with a big tray loaded with dishes of food and vessels of drink. He set it before me on a small table and salaamed himself out. I'm not going to try to describe that meal because most of the dishes were unfamiliar to me but there was lots of it and it was cooked wonderfully. The vessels were filled with wine and sherbets cooled with snow brought from the Lord knows where.

"Aren't you going to join me?" I asked my host. He apologized for not joining me, having already eaten, but he needn't have. I felt perfectly able to do away with that meal without any assistance. So I waded into it and got another surprise. Silver knives, forks and spoons were on the tray. I wondered where he got them. Arabs like most Orientals eat with their fingers and do not know the use of table implements. My host watched me a while in silence and then said,

"I have travelled a little in the Western United States, that is why I am familiar with the jargon. There are many interesting characters there. One of the most interesting, to me, is the character called a gun-fighter." Here he paused and watched me with narrowed eyes.

I devoured a piece of roasted meat in a noncommittal manner.

"I found the gun-fighter very interesting," he repeated.

"Indeed?" I commented politely, pouring myself a glass of very rare Medoc wine. I wondered how it got to Arabia.

"By an odd coincidence, the man I have hired you to deal with is one of that trade," he went on.

I sat down my glass, "A gun-fighter? And a Spaniard?"

"Yes, and one of the swiftest and surest of gunmen."



"Well!" I reflected. "A gun-fighter in Arabia!"

"He is a marvelous marksman," the Arab continued, and his speed and skill [are] incredible."

I did not reply. I sat silent, feeling once more that fierce, driving power within me that had driven me time and again into a gun-fight. My finger tips tingled and the muscles of my hands twitched with the force of that strange urge.

The Arab watched me closely. "Perhaps you dare not go against this man?" he suggested. "Even now you may refuse—"

I merely laughed. "I have answered all your questions," I told him. "Now perhaps you will answer some of mine."

"With pleasure."

"Well, who are you?"

"You may call me El Bahr."

"And how did you know my name?"

"I talked with the captain of the Aerial. What he told me showed me that you were a man of determination and courage. I was searching for a man to do the deed of which you know when I saw you following the merchant. If you had not been so intent on him you might have seen me stalking you. But it was to your interest that I did so. The incident with the merchant showed me that you were a man of little wealth, skill in stalking and banditry and—few scruples. Such a man I may afford to pay high wages."

"And who is this man you want me to kill?"

"He is a Spaniard and his name is" (here it seemed to me the Arab hesitated and his eye wandered from me) "Diego Valdez," he said.

"Any relation to the original?" I asked innocently.

"Original?" He darted a quick glance at me.

"And in the face of Fortune and last in mazed disdain

I made Diego Valdez, High Admiral of Spain."

I quoted. In that brief instant of hesitation before the name it had seemed to me that his wandering glance had rested on a book on the table and that book bore the name of "Kipling" on its vellum binding.

"Ah," he said, perfectly at ease. "You refer to Kipling's poem? It is quite a coincidence. Perhaps it is an assumed name, yes? We have no way of knowing and he has not long been out of Spain."

"Spain," I mused. "A gun-fighter from Spain in Arabia! Well, tell me why you want him murdered."

El Bahr paused a moment and then began: "The Sultan of Oman has but little real power. Yet the people and the army [are] back of him and he who is the sultan's favorite is the ruler of Oman. The position of favorite is rightfully mine and I have but one rival. A prince named Mustapha el Hamid. His was a losing cause until Diego Valdez came to Oman. He became Mustapha's ally and together they have worked to bring about my down-fall. I have tried time and again to have Valdez removed but he is a terrible fighter, fierce as a wolf and cunning as a fox and he has a band of outlaws from India, bandits and murderers. I am not without power, yet until Mustapha's power with the sultan declines, I dare not have him assassinated; and his power will not decline as long as Diego Valdez is his ally. Here is my proposition: kill Diego Valdez in a fair fight or in any way you choose and I will give you a thousand pieces of gold, assure you of protection from his Indians and Mustapha's Arabs and give you passage back to America."

I was silent.

After a pause the Arab went on, "You can still draw back. I warn you that this man is a magician with a gun. The Arabs call him "El Borak" on account of his speed and sureness. Better men than you have not dared meet this Spaniard."

I laughed. "I accept the position. But I kill this man fair, in a public gun-fight. But you'll have to get me a gun."

He clapped his hands and the slave entered, bearing an armful of revolvers and holsters. He laid them on the divan before me. I ran over them with an experienced eye. There was quite a collection: Webleys, Brownings, Lugers and a Colt or two. There was one that I selected at once. It was a heavy calibered, single action Colt with a stiff leather holster.

I tried the action of the gun, did the double-roll and the road-agent's spin. The balance was perfect.

"I procured that gun in the United states," remarked El Bahr. "It is yours."

"Thanks. Now about the details of the meeting with Valdez."

"That will be arranged later," replied the Arab, signalling the slave to take away the other weapons.

"What kind of a man is he?" I wanted to know.

"A man of about your size. Middle height, light and wiry. A lean strong face, dark eyes and black hair, blacker than mine, blacker than yours. Always smooth-shaven. He wears sometimes European clothes, sometimes the dress of an Arab."

For a while there was silence as I sat meditating, balancing the gun on my palm.

Suddenly there was a light rustle of silk, the curtains parted and a girl tripped into the room. She was a slender, beautiful young thing, unveiled, her soft, sheer garments modeling the contour of her lovely form. She stopped short at the sight of me, evidently having not known that El Bahr was not alone. She started to retreat, but the Arab rose, strode forward and caught her by the arm. There was an angry scowl on his face and the girl appeared to be frightened. I could not understand their conversation, of course, but I knew that he was threatening her and that she was pleading with him. Her large, fawn-like eyes were soft with tears. Suddenly he dragged her over to the wall. I did not understand what he meant to do until he took from the wall a riding-whip. Still I could not believe he meant to whip her till he raised the whip and the shrinking girl closed her eyes in anticipation of the lash. I leaped across the room and caught the descending whip across my arms. Then I wrenched it from his hands. I was furious and it was all I could do to refrain from laying his face open with his own whip but something told me that it wouldn't do. However, I told him what I thought of him.

"You cowardly, dirty, horse-thieving, woman-whipping, yellow imitation of a Siwash Indian!" I told him. "You can't try anything like that around me." He was angry at my interference of course, but to my wonder, he seemed more surprised than anything else.

"You dare to interfere with me?" he asked, wonderingly, as if he could hardly believe it himself.

I laughed. "Dare interfere with you! Why, it's all I can do to keep from pinning you to the wall, you cowardly jackal."

His eyes glittered but he asked quietly, "And how have I incurred your displeasure, may I ask?"

"How?" I was dumbfounded. "Do you mean to say you don't know? Let go of that girl."

He laughed unpleasantly. "Oh, I had forgotten that the Feringi

do not like to see women corrected. So that is why you are angry. That is a small affair!"

"Small to whip a girl?"

"Certainly. One of my slaves disobeys me; it is no one's concern what I do to her—much less an Unbeliever. Give me that whip."

"She is a slave?" I asked in wonder. I was new to the East then.

"Yes, you fool. And whether she is slave or not makes little difference. Give me that whip."

I stepped forward. "You may not know it," I said between my teeth, "but you are trifling with death. You are right; it makes no difference whether she is slave or not."

For a moment we looked each other in the eyes; then he shrugged his shoulders. "After all," he said, "this is a trifling matter to quarrel about."

He released the girl with a shove. She darted away through the curtains.

"Does that satisfy you?" he asked, ironically.

"It does not," I responded. "Swear on the Koran that you will not harm that girl or you can find someone else to fight Diego Valdez."

"Very well," he answered. "I swear on the Koran and by the beard of the Prophet. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes," I answered; but his eyes were glittering and I knew that he was furious and that I must be on my guard.

"Perhaps you are weary," he suggested. "I will show you to your bed."

He led the way through the curtains on one side of the room and made his way down a large hall-way, finally entering a small room. It was as luxuriously furnished as the room we had just left and I perceived that I was to sleep on a kind of Oriental couch or divan. The room was lighted with richly ornamented Arabian lamps.

I sat down on the divan and El Bahr stood a moment in the doorway.

"Do you desire that dancing-girls be sent to lull you to sleep?" he asked.

"I do not!" I replied emphatically. "And by the way, El Bahr, I am a very light sleeper."

"You shall not be disturbed," he replied. "May you have pleasant dreams, Sahib."

After he left the room I still sat on the divan, going over my day's adventure. To tell the truth, I was somewhat bewildered. It seemed that I had torn a page from the "Arabian Nights"; here were mysteries, intriguing princes, beautiful maidens as slaves and here was I, a more or less unsophisticated American youth put down in the midst of the confusion. Then my thoughts wandered to the Spaniard, Diego Valdez, whom El Bahr had hired me to kill. Who was this strange man who mixed in Oriental intrigues and Eastern politics? Some ambitious soldier-statesman with a dream of carving out an Empire for himself or some wandering adventurer such as I was?

I mused awhile on such thoughts and finally lay down, dressed completely except for my shoes. I laid my open knife on the divan beside me and put the gun on the other side. It was not loaded but a gun is as good as a blackjack in a hand-to-hand fight. Then I composed myself for sleep, lulled by the soft Oriental music that filled the air.

I awoke next morning rather early and was arranging my clothes when a Nubian slave entered with many salaams, escorted me down the corridor and into a room that was furnished much like a European

breakfast room. El Bahr was there before me.

"Good morning, sahib," he greeted. "I hope you rested well."

I sat down to a sumptuous breakfast. I was fast falling under the lure of Oriental luxury. For weeks I had been accustomed to the plain fare and hard toil of a "wind-jammer" merchant ship and now, dropped as it were into "the lap of luxury" I felt the comparison strongly. Would it not be well to accept constant employment under El Bahr? That was my thought as I listened to my employer talk. He was evidently highly educated and extensively travelled. I later learned that he was a graduate from a famous European college and had travelled practically all over the world.

When we had finished breakfast El Bahr remarked, "Perhaps you would like to get a birds-eye view of Muscat?"

I assented and he led the way out into a corridor, (the castle seemed to be a maze of endless corridors) and started down in. I followed when suddenly I stopped short, the short hairs of my scalp prickling. Through the whole castle, rising higher and higher until it broke at the highest note, rang a piercing shriek! And I knew that it was human, that it was the shriek of a man in torture.

"Who is that?" I exclaimed whirling on El Bahr. He merely shrugged his shoulders and smiled. With a curse I sprang past him and leaped down the winding stairs. He shouted after me angrily but I paid no heed. I raced down another corridor, found and descended another stair and following the direction of the shriek, kept on going. It was mere chance that caused me to at last to descend a flight of stairs that led into a dark, gloomy corridor. Down this I went, cautiously, my knife ready. At last I came to an open door through which shone a gleam of light. I stepped through and the sight that met my eyes completely astounded me; it carried me back to the middle ages.

It was a dungeon into which I stepped. The dim light of torches thrust into niches in the wall lit a scene which seemed more in keeping with the Spanish Inquisition than anything else I could think of.

There were about a dozen Arabs in the cell, and they were grouped about a strange contrivance. It consisted of a wooden frame, shaped like a V. It rested on the point of the V, secured and held upright by heavy timbers. The V frame was not one solid piece but each prong or side of the V was fastened together at the point of the V with some kind of a pivot arrangement that allowed the V to be opened like a fan. To each side of the V were secured strong ropes that were fastened at the other ends to a sort of windlass.

And between the prongs of the V lay a man, his hands bound fast to one prong, his feet to the other, his form stretched out between the prongs of the rack. For that was what it was—a rack.

The Arabs had looked up as I entered but now at a word from one of their number they bent over the windlasses again. The heavy timbers creaked as the V widened slightly. A groan burst from the man on the rack.

Furious, I leaped forward, to the nearest windlass, caught an Arab by the shoulder and swung him away. He cursed and as I caught the glint of a knife I struck, sending him sprawling to the floor. At that moment the voice of El Bahr hurled a sharp order and the Arabs paused in their rush at me.

El Bahr stepped forward and the men fell back and salaamed.

He strode up to me. "What do you mean coming here?" he asked sharply. It was evident that he was in a fine rage. But I had a rage to match his.

"Who is that man, you devil?" I asked, drawing my knife. "Tell

your Oriental fiends to let that rack down." I stepped toward the rack.

"Stop!" ordered El Bahr peremptorily. "It is none of your business but that man is an Indian and a spy of El Borak."

The man on the rack spoke for the first time. He spoke English with a babu accent.

"Beg to differ. Never heard of El Borak. For Vishnu's sake, sahib, release me from present position, same being most embarrassing and humiliating to man of my high education. I swear I never heard of El Borak."

"It makes no difference to me," I replied. "El Bahr, are you going to give the order I told you?"

"You are a fool," he answered sneeringly. "Evidently you do not realize that I am absolute ruler here, that you are as completely in my power as you would be in the power of the Sultan were you in his dungeons."

"El Bahr," I said quietly but I knew that my eyes were glittering in the gloom like the eyes of a jungle-cat, "are you going to give that order?"

"You fool! What is to prevent me from having you bound on the rack?"

"This!" and I drew. He did not see the gun until it was in my hand. A gasp went up from the Arabs and I saw El Bahr's expression change as he realized the speed of my draw.

But he only said, "Put that gun up, Allison. You know as well as I that it is empty."

I laughed gratingly. "You gave it to me empty. But, you fool, did it never occur to you that a man who has always carried a gun of this caliber might not have cartridges in his pockets?"

He looked undecided. "If you don't believe me," I said softly, "refuse to order that babu released."

Still he hesitated. The Arabs said something to him; he paused and then threw a curt order to them. They went forward, cut the ropes that bound the Indian and lifted him to the floor.

"As soon as you can walk," I told him, keeping my eyes on El Bahr, "go into the corridor and up the stairs. I will follow."

"Allison," El Bahr broke in, his voice full of suppressed rage, "you are going too far. I won't tolerate this."

"What are you going to do about it?" I asked. "If you try to stop us I'll kill you."

Suddenly El Bahr laughed and it was a laugh that made cold chills race up and down my back.

"Very well," he said, "I will let this Indian go but I will remember."

He gave an order to the Arabs and they stepped aside to let us pass.

I backed toward the door, with the babu. "You'll come, too, El Bahr," I told him. He followed without a word. So did the Arabs.

The situation seemed to strike El Bahr's sardonic sense of humor. He not only made no protest but he led the way out of the castle and in a few minutes we were on the terraces.

"There is the gateway," he said, pointing. "Go, babu."

"Wait," I interrupted. "We'll accompany him to the gate."

As we walked along in the sunlight I got a good view of the babu. He was a typical Bengali, except that he was of a different build from most babus, being of middle height and rather slim and lithe. He had a pleasant face and I noted that he did not speak with such a babu accent or use such flowery language as most babus I had seen.

"What is your name?" I asked him.

"Ghopal Ramm, so please the sahib," he answered with a smirk. "B.A. degree, University of Calcutta."

"How is it you're a captive of this Arab?"

"Vishnu knows!" he replied. "If allowed to guess, would base supposition on fact that El Borak sahib (whoever he is) has a following of natives of India, no doubt budmashes and outcasts. Thus, Indian villains follow El Borak, this babu being Indian, consequently, he is in employ of El Borak sahib. Q.E.D. Such being no doubt conclusion reached by ignorant and thoughtless Arabs. So, thought being paternal parent to deed, next thing is to seize said babu and torture him, to make him reveal state secrets. Ignoring said babu's high intellectual standing and," with a smirk, "aristocratic lineage."

"What are you doing in Oman?"

"Savants of science," he replied glibly, "going all over the world regardless of expense and personal comfort in order to advance knowledge, I being one; many old ruins of castles and other marks of antiquity in Oman. Therefore, here I am!"

"Here's the gate," I said. "Now scoot. You better get out of Oman!"

"That is my only wish," he avowed. "Salaam, sahib!"

And he "scooted" out of the gate and fled down the road with amazing speed, his loose garments flapping behind him.

I turned to El Bahr who stood watching, a sardonical smile on his handsome face.

"You can take your gold and go to hell," I told him resentfully.

"I wouldn't do no work of no kind for a gink like you."

"Indeed!" His aristocratic heavy eyebrows lifted. "You have forgotten that the Oman police are already on your trail for the attempted robbery of the merchant?"

I didn't even know that Oman boasted a police-force.

"You are in my power," he went on. "If you try to leave my palace you will be slain by my Arabs. If you should escape them the Oman police will seize you and put you to torture. On the other hand, if you do as I say, you will leave Oman a rich man."

I hesitated.

"You have scruples about killing a European?" he continued. "The man is a scoundrel and a villain. A murderer and a ravisher of young girls."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I gave my word," was all I said. "But don't try to get me to do anything else for you."

## Chapter 2.

The bazaar was a sea of gaudy colors; robes, turbans and swarthy faces. As I followed El Bahr through the bazaar I paid little heed to the surroundings. I was too preoccupied with my thoughts. The blood-lust was burning in my veins. Yes, my eyes blazed and my hand twitched with the lust to kill a man whom I had never seen.

He was a gunman, I was another. That was enough.

Suddenly my pulse gave a bound as I saw ahead of me a man in European garments.

At the same instant El Bahr touched me on the shoulder and whispered, "Kill! It is El Borak," and vanished in the throng.

I strode forward and the crowd backed away on both sides, leaving a broad space clear between the Spaniard and me. Evidently they had seen El Bahr speak to me and had seen El Borak and had drawn

their own conclusions.

My [hand] hovered, claw-like, just above my gun butt. I had greased the holster whose end was tied to my leg with a leather thong and hung low on my right hip. The pistol rested easily in it. I had carefully removed the trigger and had examined each cartridge.

And now I was gazing at El Borak. He was of medium height, of lithe, wiry, build. His eyes were black and so was his hair, for his sun-helmet was pushed back.

He was dressed in linens and riding boots. What hesitation or scruples I might have felt at killing a European in a strange land, were swept away by the sight of the big pistol swinging low on his right hip. And with an experienced eye I noted that it was not tied down.

A big Oriental, evidently not an Arab, was walking at his side and he pointed [me] out to El Borak, apparently. The Spaniard nodded; he stepped forward and seemed on the point of calling to me when I saw his expression change. A gunman himself, he knew the signs of the blood-lust.

"El Borak!" I said, not loud but clearly. "Draw!"

And I went for my gun. I put all my speed and skill in that draw and never before did I draw so swiftly. My intention was to fire from the hip, the instant the muzzle cleared the scabbard. I cocked the hammer as I drew the gun.

Yet even as the gun left the holster, before I could fire, there was a crashing report. I felt a stunning shock in my right arm and my gun spun from my hand, exploding harmlessly in the air.

I staggered back, cursing and gripping my right hand.

El Borak was standing as before, except that now he held a smoking gun in his hand.

There seemed to be a somewhat puzzled look on his dark face.

He strode toward me, stopping just in front of me.

"Well, why don't you shoot, damn you!" I exclaimed, wild with rage and the humiliation that comes to a gunfighter when he has met a greater one.

For answer he sheathed his gun.

"You are certainly fast," he commented without sarcasm to my infinite amazement.

"Fast?" I was thrown off my track by this remark. "Fast? When you shot the gun out of my hand, before I could fire?"

"You had your gun out and cocked before I fired," he answered, and there was no vanity in the statement.

"My—!" I ejaculated in awe. "What kind of a guy are you?"

He picked up my gun and handed it to me. A certain wistful expression seemed to be present on his face.

"It's a pity that two Americans in a foreign land should try to kill each other."

"Americans! Are you an American?"

"Certainly. What did you think I was?"

"A Spaniard," I said slowly, "named Diego Valdez."

He laughed. "What other lies has El Bahr told you? I was born in Texas, just north of the Border and my name is Frank Gordon."

Texas! The Border! So El Bahr had sent me to murder an American. I stood staring. And then came the crash of a jezail rifle and the wind of a bullet fanned my cheek.

The shot was reechoed by the crash of Gordon's pistol and turning, I saw an Arab spin around and fall, his long rifle dropping from his hand.

"A message from your erstwhile employer," said Gordon, dryly.

I was bewildered. "But why, what—"

"Ahmed Habib has no use for one who has failed," he answered. "Oman is no longer safe for you. You'd better go home with me. Ali, go bring the coach."

The big Asian strode off without a word and Gordon said, "Suppose we go into this shop, Allison."

Feeling rather dazed I followed El Borak into a shop, whose proprietor, at a word from Gordon, salaamed us into a room at the back, piled with Oriental cushions.

Gordon motioned me toward a pile of cushions and sank down upon another pile himself.

I seated myself; surely not many men have had such a strange experience. Here was I, throwing in my lot, apparently, with a man whom I had tried to kill a few minutes before.

I scanned him curiously. As I said, he was of middle height and lithely built. Except for a certain pantherish quality in his movements, there was nothing unusual about him, nothing to indicate that he was the terrible fighter that El Bahr had avowed him to be. He had the narrow hips and straight, firm-built, rangy legs of a fighter but his square shoulders were not broader than usual and his chest was not especially large. His arms were longer than most but their muscles did not bulge or show signs of the extraordinary strength El Bahr had said he possessed. Speed, that was what he was built for, rather than strength, it seemed to me. His hands as well as his feet were rather slim and rather long, his fingers long and tapering; the fingers of a gambler or a musician or an artist.

I have said his eyes were black. They were, and different from any eyes I ever saw before or since. They were neither small, beady eyes nor large, soft eyes, such as is the case, one way or the other, with most black eyes. Gordon's eyes were of medium size, with extraordinary depth. Quiet, imperturbable, clear, and far-seeing. They were pure black and pure white. There was [no] hint of any other kind of color about them.

He looked anyone straight in the eyes, with no hint of mockery, no challenge. His eyes gave the impression that if he would, he could read your very soul, but refrained because of courtesy. And for some reason, this put anyone singularly at their ease.

That was my first impression.

His hair was black; the blackest I have ever seen. Straight but not coarse. There was no hint of Indian blood about him.

His features were rather aristocratic; there was something about his face that reminded me vaguely of El Bahr, although there was none of the Arab's arrogance.

Gordon was not handsome. His face was rather too lean, his lips rather too thin. Though when he turned his face a certain way he appeared almost handsome. His face was rather dark, though not as dark as is common for a man of his eyes and hair, and was tanned by the Arabian sun. He could have passed for an Arab easily in native garb.

His features were clean; there was absolutely nothing greedy, shifty or sensual about him. His straight nose was thin-bridged, his jaw lean and rather long. His face was absolutely smooth.

He was slightly taller than I, as I had not reached my full height then. His height, I should say, was between five feet eight inches and five feet nine inches.

His build was deceptive and I was afterwards surprised to learn that he weighed close upon one hundred and forty-five pounds. I doubt if there were five ounces of surplus fat upon him. Such was



my first view of El Borak, Frank Gordon.

"Have a smoke?" he asked, offering me cigarette papers and Turkish tobacco.

I am not an habitual smoker but I felt I needed something to steady my nerves. As I rolled a cigarette with no very steady hand, I noticed that he did not prepare himself a smoke.

"You'd better throw your lot in with me," he said without preliminaries. "As I said, Ahmed has no use for an employee who has failed. If you try to stay in Muscat, (and you can't get away) his Arabs will get you sure."

"But what, how—" I began bewildered.

"I know Ahmed hired you to kill me," he went on, imperturbably, "but you didn't and he'll be after you now; anyway, two Americans ought not to be fighting each other in a strange land, as I said before. Throw in with me and I'll guarantee you a good time, if nothing else."

I hesitated. From what I had seen of El Bahr, whom Gordon called "Ahmed," I knew that he was right. Indeed, was it not I whom the Arab Gordon killed had aimed at?

But it was not fear of El Bahr that led me to make the decision I made.

I liked Gordon. Of course, he was [a] white man, but it wasn't that that caused my liking for him, alone. There was something about the man that attracted me.

I often act on impulse and I did then.

"Gordon," I said, "I don't know what your game is but I'm with you. If it's crooked politics, international robbery, empire building or what, I [am] with you just the same. I'm not particular."

A wonderful smile lighted his dark face. "Good," was all he said, but he held out his hand and we shook.

Just then in came the big Asian Gordon had sent for the coach. I took special note of him. He was a big, tall man, with a big turban that was not Arab, and a heavy black beard. He was big, no mistake. And he wore a strange kind of a garment, a wadded coat that I don't see how he stood on account of the heat. A heavy leather belt was around him, and through this was thrust a yard-long knife in an ornamented sheath.

"Mr. Allison," said Gordon, "this is one of my companions, Yar Ali Khan of Kadar, Afghanistan."

He spoke a few words in some strange tongue.

"Salaam, bahadur," rumbled the big Afghan. I seemed to detect a sarcastic note in the greeting.

"We will go to my place if you are ready," said Gordon. I followed him to the street where a crowd had gathered about a most unusual vehicle. It consisted of two seats mounted on four wheels. The front seat was between the front wheels, the back seat between the hind wheels, and both were connected by a floor. The seats seemed to be made of divans, shortened and provided with arms.

Two Arab horses were hitched to the vehicle by a complicated system of harness.

Yar Ali dispersed the crowd with a few kicks and a flourish of his long knife and mounted to the front seat. Gordon and I climbed into the back seat.

"This is Ali's own invention," Gordon explained. "He made the thing out of a rajah's chariot and the furnishings out of a rao's palace."

The inventive gentleman now started his invention in motion by the simple process of giving voice to a hair-raising screech and prod-

ding the steeds with the point of his knife. We were off down the street at a speed that made my hair rise. Bump! bump! bump! Over the cobble-stones and ruts of those abominable Oman streets. I was jerked and flung from side to side and only escaped being deposited in the street by an activity and skill at acrobatics not equalled by many.

Gordon seemed not to mind it. He swayed to every motion, never changing his position, never seeming inconvenienced.

How the Afghan kept his seat I don't know but finally he stood up on the front seat and waved his knife and yelled and chanted some kind of heathen war-song, stopping every now and then to curse the horses in seven different languages.

It was a wild ride, I want to say, and it was no wonder people stopped and stared after us. Of the three of us, Gordon was the only one who appeared to have any sense at all.

I have no idea how far we went but at last we came in sight of a castle on a small hill, quite a distance from any other houses.

A high wall surrounded the castle which loomed up more like a medieval European baron's castle.

Without slacking the pace we dashed straight up the slope and a pair of great iron gates swung wide. Through them we dashed—I had only time to note an armed Arab on each side of the gate—straight up to the castle doors—the hill was flat on top. Straight up to castle doors, whirling about in a grant curvet that swung the coach around like a whip and deposited me on my head in the court-yard.

Yar Ali leaped out, hauled me to my feet, brushed me off with blows that would have knocked mules down, nearly, and bellowed what I took to be an order, since two or three young Arabs appeared and took charge of the horses.

"Welcome to our city," chuckled Gordon. "The accommodations are not of the finest but I trust you will make yourself at home, Steve. (If you will pardon me for calling you by your first name.)"

I glanced curiously around. There was quite a large space between the wall and the castle. It was not terraced, as was the estate of El Bahr. But there were fountains and trees and the whole was covered with grass and flowers.

The castle had on its front a large veranda, evidently a new addition. To this Gordon led the way. But we had not reached it when there came a screech of fear followed by a fierce yell and a perfect Babel of heated conversation. We turned to see Yar Ali striding toward us, dragging a man by the slack of his clothes with one hand and waving his knife in the other. The captive was speaking rapidly and with great feeling and Yar Ali was replying with, apparently, some quotations from the Scriptures.

"A babu," Gordon remarked with some surprise evident, which was a rather unusual thing for him.

And I saw it was Ghopal Ramm!

The Afghan dumped him down before Gordon and began an impassioned oration which I would [love to] have been able to have understood.

Gordon replied in the same tongue in a quiet voice and the Afghan stopped abruptly. Gordon put a question to the babu in Hindustani.

Ghopal climbed to his feet, arranged his clothing and replied in English:

"Most noble sahib, having escaped dungeons of Arab-in-power, owing to bravery and skill of yonder sahib," respectfully indicating me, "and finding Muscat no longer suitable for a man of my refined tastes, owing to hostility of aforesaid Arab, taking sahib's advice to

seek Gordon sahib.

"Therefore, seeing sahibs careening through the streets, and being unable to attract attention by vocalizing 'Hi! hi!' this babu took the liberty of mounting rear part of vehicle. While resting after ride was discovered by this Himalayan-chief who evidently suspects treachery. Suspicion quite unfounded, I assure you!"

"He is a spy of El Bahr's," rumbled Yar Ali Khan, thumbing his knife suggestively.

"He seems to know you?" Gordon turned to me.

"El Bahr was having him tortured in his dungeons," I replied. "I made El Bahr release him and told him he'd better come to you. I knew Oman wouldn't be safe for him with the Arab after him and I took a kind of liking to the man."

Gordon looked at the babu who wriggled beneath the gaze.

"Well," he decided, "you are a clever man or you couldn't have boarded and ridden that coach without my hearing you. You are either a spy of El Bahr or an ordinary wandering babu. In the first case you will be found out if you are a spy and in the second case you may be useful. At any rate, you can go or stay as you choose. If you throw in with me and become one of my men you will be treated the same as the rest. What is your name?"

"Ghopal Ramm, please your worship," smirked the Bengali, "B.A. degree, babu University, Calcutta. At present engaged in research work in Oman."

"What kind of research?"

"Exploring antique castles, most noble sahib,"

"Very good. This castle may interest you."

The babu salaamed and smirked.

Gordon led us up on the veranda, Yar Ali and the babu following. The babu kept close to me and cast apprehensive glances toward Yar Ali.

"What kind of a place have we gotten into, sahib?" he whispered.

Gordon clapped his hands.

"Possibly you would like to meet some of my friends," he remarked.

Almost instantly the great doors swung back, revealing heavy velvet curtains screening the entrance.

What followed was dramatic, impressive. Whether it was staged to impress me or merely because of the Eastern love of dramatics, I have no idea.

Hardly had the doors swung open when a man stepped through the curtains.

He was slim and lithe, rather tall. He stepped with a cat-like grace and was handsome in his way.

He was clothed with elegance. A rose colored turban with a diamond brooch adorned him, and his clothes were of silk and satin. A wide silk sash supported a jewel hilted dagger. Pointed satin slippers were on his feet.

His dark, handsome face was adorned with a pointed beard.

"Mr. Allison; my friend Rustum Bey of Persia. Rustum Bey, Mr. Steve Allison and Ghopal Ramm of Calcutta."

The Persian saluted gracefully and stepped aside as another man came through the curtain. I knew him instantly for what he was. I had seen his tribe before, clad in the uniform of the British army or police force. Tall as Yar Ali Khan but rangier built, with plain white garments.

"Mr. Allison, my friend, Lal Singh of Lahore."

The Sikh lined up with the Persian, the introductions over and

the curtains parted again.

A bronze image of a man appeared. Of medium height but with such broad shoulders and heavy chest as to appear stocky, the face of the Sphinx, skin the color of bronze, clad only in a loin-cloth—

I heard the babu gasp and step back. I recoiled, myself, as I saw the caste-mark on the man's brow. I had seen that mark before!

"Vishnu!" the babu gasped. "The mark of Kaali! A Thag! Oh, my aunt!"

"—Juggnara Nath of Delhi," Gordon was saying. Fascinated, I gazed at the silken handkerchief in the Thag's girdle.

A tall, stately Arab came through the curtains.

"—sheikh Ahmed el Kadour—"

I nearly forgot my manners in my fascination. This was, in truth, a page from the "Arabian Nights"!

I looked with wonder. Gordon, in his European garb, the great, uncouth Afghan, the elegant, cat-like Persian, the white-clad Sikh, the sinister, immobile Hindu, the stately Arab, the perspiring, apologetic babu—they formed a picture such as is the privilege of few men to see.

"A Paythan, a Sikh, a Thag and a babu," I remarked. "It seems that India has emigrated to Arabia."

Gordon smiled and spoke a few words in some language. With the exception of the Arab and the Afghan they vanished so quickly it made me dizzy and they took the babu with them.

The Arab seated himself in one of the chairs on the veranda and the Afghan retired to a distance, seated himself cross-legged on the floor and drew his knife, casting a significant glance at me. Evidently he still had suspicions.

Gordon clapped his hands again and a young Nubian brought a tray of liquors and placed them on a small table.

"What will you have?" Gordon asked. "Champagne? Brandy? Whisky? Wine? Cocktails?"

"Champagne," I decided. It was cold and delectable.

I noticed the Arab drank his share in spite of the Koran's forbidding the use of wine. Probably he argued that brandy isn't wine.

Gordon drank less than any of us. I think Ali waylaid the Nubian for I saw him making gestures with a long bottle of wine.

"I'm taking you on trust," Gordon said. "I can sometimes see a man's character."

And he could, too. He could read a man like a book.

"I'm going to start at the first," he went on. "I don't mean a story of my life or anything like that. That would take too long. I mean why I am in Oman."

"The tale starts in India. Owing to the fact that I have friends among the Thags, I am admitted into the temple of Siva and other places that no white man is ordinarily allowed to enter. In a temple in Delhi I found some old books. With the aid of a priest I translated them. Aside from many things which have no bearing on this tale, I found evidences of a great treasure hidden somewhere. The book was vague as to its exact whereabouts but stated definitely that the treasure was beneath the sands of a desert. What desert? My first thought was that it referred to the desert of Bikanir. But translating further I found this could not be the case. Translated roughly it stated the treasure lies: 'Between a sea and a sea and two narrow seas.' That could only mean Arabia. The 'sea and a sea' are the Mediterranean and Arabian Sea. The 'narrow seas' are the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. But where in Arabia? I made a guess. The

treasure was evidently Indian. Oman is closest to India. I guessed Oman. There was a page gone from the book. The priest declared the page was a map, locating the treasure. It had been torn from the book by a Frenchman who had gained admittance into the temple in disguise.

Trying to escape through Afghanistan he was killed by bandits. I searched through Afghanistan for the map but found that it had been taken from the Afghans by a band of Turkoman raiders. The Afghans thought it had magic powers and this belief has evidently been shared by all other peoples for there has been murder and tribal war to gain possession of it. With my friends I traced the map across half of Asia." (Here Rustum Bey appeared silently and sat down.) Gordon went on, "We traced the map from Delhi to Khabul, from Khabul to Pamir. Thence to Bokhara, then to Khiva. From Khiva the trail led to Teheran and from Teheran to Bagdad. From Bagdad the trail doubled back to Ispahan and from there it led straight to Shiraz. From Shiraz across the Persian Gulf to Muscat.

"When I arrived in Muscat my only thought was to secure the map and go after the treasure. But I found it harder than one would expect. I found it to be in the possession of sheikh Ahmed Habib Abd Ullah Saden. He whom men call El Bahr. I soon found myself mixed up in Arabian politics. For whom should I meet but Mustapha el Hamid, an old friend of mine. I knew he was of Oman but had no thought of meeting him here. He is a rival for power and the Sultan's favor with Ahmed el Saden. They are the powers of Oman.

\* \* \* \* \*

## A POWER AMONG THE ISLANDS

(continued from page 44)

"Herran," Gordon said, "it is very impolite to misuse passengers and when the passenger is the daughter of an island king, it is bad politics. I do not make a practice of giving advice, but I am asking that you leave the young lady alone, and that you put her ashore at the first opportunity. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes," Herran answered sullenly.

Steve Allison chuckled. It was an increasing wonder to him the effect that the mere name of Gordon had on the wildest and most criminal men.

It was evident that Gordon was a power among the islands.

## The Shunned Castle

The jungle. Thick, hot, the sunlight scarcely making its way through the branches of the great trees that criss-crossed for a hundred feet into the air.

Two horsemen were riding down the narrow trail. Neither of the men were large, wiry built men of medium height and both had black hair. The eyes of the older were black, the eyes of the younger gray, long and rather narrow. There were rifles in saddle scabbards on each saddle and each of the men wore a heavy pistol swinging low at the right hip.

"We have come quite a distance not to have seen a tiger," remarked the older man, "especially as they are quite numerous in the vicinity."

"Well, to tell you the truth, Frank," the younger man responded, "I'm not very much disappointed. I'm not to say burning to meet any tiger."

Frank Gordon smiled. "It's nearly night. We won't try to reach the Grand Trunk Road until tomorrow."

"Meanin' we'll have to spend a night in the jungle? Nix, nix, friend Frank. I can see myself dozin' gently in the jungle while the tigers and crocodiles and elephants prowl around looking for dessert."

"I see a building through the trees," Gordon answered. "It's either a temple or an old castle. No matter. It will furnish us shelter for the night."

Steve Allison rose in his stirrups and gazed about him.

"You have some eye-sight, Frank," he said. "I can't see a sign of any castle or any building."

"You'll see it presently," Gordon replied.

For awhile they rode on in silence.

"No other man but you, Gordon," Steve remarked, "would have started through the jungle with no guides or anything."

That was mostly true. Frank Gordon, the slim, dark man whom Arabs and Indians called "El Borak, the Swift," was as much at home in the wilds, whether jungle, desert or mountain, as any American Indian. His sense of direction was amazingly highly developed. No wolf or panther that ever roamed the wilds was ever more at home or more at ease than Frank Gordon.

His companion, Steve Allison, little more than a youth, was ahead of most people in wilderness-craft, thanks to the careful tutelage of Gordon, but was still far behind the older man in knowledge.

The companions rounded a bend in the trail and saw, something like a half-mile ahead, a massive pile of masonry rearing up gray and forbidding against the dark back-ground of the jungle.

There came a sound from the jungle.

Gordon's hand whipped to his gun.

"A man," he said, quietly.

"How do you know—" Steve began, when out of the jungle a man sprang into the trail. He was a native Indian peasant, his scanty garments tattered, his turban awry, his eyes wild with fright.

The horses reared and swerved as the man came fleeing up the trail.

As he raced by, Gordon leaned from his saddle and caught the man by the shoulder of his garment.

"Make haste slowly," he instructed in the vocabulary of the region. "Why fleest thou?"

The man glared at him, wide-eyed. "Oh, sahib," he gasped, "I am a wood-cutter and I was cutting fagots."

"But what scared you?" Gordon asked.

"Go back, sahib, from whence you came!" the Indian gasped. "No man may pass through this jungle at night. The castle of Janir Khan—djinn—devils—Moslems—"

With a swift effort the Indian wrenched himself free of Gordon's grasp and fled down the trail with all speed.

Allison swung his horse about to pursue the man but Gordon stopped him.

"He'd take to the jungle," Gordon said.

"What do you suppose was after him?" Allison wondered.

"Nothing," Gordon answered. "If there had been, it would have caught him."

"Not unless it was a record breaking runner," Steve chuckled.

"That Indian sure was making tracks."

"He was cutting wood near the castle," Gordon mused. "Something scared him. Janir Khan, Moslems. Um."

"Who was Janir Khan?" Allison demanded. "And I didn't know there were any Mohammedans in this jungle."

"Janir Khan was a Mohammedan chief," Gordon answered, absently.

They had been riding on down the trail and they were now close to the castle.

They reined up and scanned it. It was a tall, massive castle, evidently built for military as well as residential use.

There had been a tall wall about and outside of that a deep moat. But the wall was mostly fallen in ruins and the moat was filled up.

Only an ancient draw-bridge remained and the ruins of great gates, sagging on mighty pillars that had stood the test of time.

Much of the old castle itself was in ruins, the ancient lines of architecture almost lost in the crumbling but mighty piles of masonry.

Steve eyed the castle askance.

"Nope," he decided. "I prefer the jungle to that pile of loose cement, or whatever it is. Gimme tigers to ghosts, anytime."

For answer Gordon reined his horse toward the ancient draw-bridge.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Allison followed.

As he came to the draw-bridge, Gordon stopped and swung down from his saddle. Tossing the reins to Allison, he walked cautiously to the moat. For a moment he stood gazing down at the draw-bridge and the moat beneath. Allison watched him, puzzled, for a moment; then with a startled curse he whirled in his saddle, his pistol leaping to his hand. Close by stood a tall, old man, an Indian, white of beard, with a hint of a mocking smile on his face.

"Say, Frank—" Steve began dubiously.

"Put up your gun, Steve," Frank answered without turning around. "I saw him when he came. Village patriarch, doubtless."

Steve shrugged his shoulders with helpless wonder. He shoved his gun back into its scabbard and shifted himself to a more comfortable position, watching the old man suspiciously.

Gordon finished his inspection of the moat and turned.

He took in the old man with a casual glance.

"Thy village is near?" Gordon queried, in a tone of polite inquiry.

"Mayhap, sahib," the old Indian agreed, drily.

"Then what do ye at the castle of Janir Khan?" asked Gordon.

"The castle whom all men shun?"

"Who might the sahib be?" asked the old man, indirectly as is the way of the East.

"The Moslems call me 'El Borak' or sometimes 'Bagheela.'" Gordon answered, watching the Indian narrowly.

"El Borak!" exclaimed the old man, his dark face lighting with interest. "Bagheela, the black panther! Aye, even in the jungle we have heard of thee, sahib."

"Then take these horses to thy village," Gordon commanded, signing Steve to dismount. Steve obeyed without question, but with a look of surprise.

"Take these horses to thy village," Gordon repeated, handing the Indian some coins. "Stable them and keep them well. Bring them here at sun-up."

The Indian salaamed and took the reins.

"But you will not spend the night in the castle?" he protested.

"Certainly."

The old Indian hesitated and then said swiftly, "But sahib, it is not safe for men, white men, to go in that castle."

"And why?" Gordon demanded.

"Nay, that I know not," the Indian replied evasively and refusing to meet Gordon's eye. "But men have been slain and have disappeared in this jungle, close to the castle. Perhaps tigers took them but—"

"But what?"

"It is the old castle of Janir Khan, who—" the Indian began.

"All that I know," Gordon interrupted him. "Still, my friend and I pass the night in the castle."

"As you will, sahib. Perhaps, being El Borak, you will succeed."

"And the horses are yours should the tigers carry us off in the night," Gordon said with a touch of sarcasm.

The old Indian salaamed and turned down the trail, leading the horses.

Steve Allison, who had said nothing, now turned upon Gordon with a desire for information.

"That looks like a fool play, on the surface Frank, but I know you never do anything without a reason," said Allison.

Gordon did not reply, but stood for an instant, scanning the jungle.

"How do you know that Indian guy will bring those horses back in the morning?" Steve demanded. "And if there are bandits in the jungle, how do you know they won't steal them?"

"The Indian will bring them back," Gordon answered. "If he does not, it will be no great matter to trail them. And the bandits, if there are any, will seek to dispose of us first."

Gordon strode toward the castle. Allison followed. When they came to the ancient draw-bridge, Gordon stooped and pointed.

"Look."

Allison looked. Although ancient, the bridge seemed solid and stationary enough, but on closer inspection, Allison could see that the flooring sagged and barely rested on the heavy iron girders that seemed to support the ancient timbers. The bridge would fall if a heavy weight were placed on it. Probably would not even support a man walking across it.

The moat was filled with silt and weeds and fallen trees. Allison decided he could cross on some small trees which had apparently fallen into the moat and which were entangled with one another and with other vegetation.

But when Steve started to make his way across, Gordon stopped him.

(continued on page 21)



## A Power Among the Islands

The schooner, "Marquesas," was riding smoothly beneath the moon of the tropic sea when the two passengers heard a woman scream in the captain's cabin. Steve Allison was out of the cabin he shared with Gordon and at the door of the other cabin before the frightened cry ceased to echo.

From within the cabin came a muttered curse and a sound of scuffling feet. There was no other sound except the soft sound of the waves breaking against the ship. The seaman at the helm turned his head toward the companion-way and grinned evilly.

Steve Allison tried the door. It was locked. He wrenched at it savagely. Then he saw that Gordon was beside him.

"That—Herran," began Allison, "I'll bet it's that native girl—"

Gordon nodded. He drew Allison out of the way and then, with a quick, cat-like movement threw himself against the door, striking the panel with his shoulder. The door crashed inward and Gordon, without seeming to even lose his balance momentarily, sprang into the room, closely followed by Allison.

The cabin was in disorder, chairs and the one table being broken and overtruned. Over in one corner a native girl crouched, her single garment in tatters, wild fear in her eyes. Captain Herran turned, cursing vilely. He was a huge, hulking man of great strength, sincerely hated by all decent men.

He glared at the two men who dared to interfere with him and recognized the two passengers who had come aboard at Samoa. He saw two men of medium height, both rather slimly built. He sneered.

"Get out of my cabin," he ordered, with embellishments.

Gordon walked toward him. One might almost say he strolled casually.

Herran grinned contemptuously and suddenly lunged forward, great, gorilla arms reaching for the smaller man.

To the captain's surprise, Gordon did not attempt to evade the grasping hands. With a motion that seemed unhurried yet was as quick as a striking snake, Gordon stepped in, crouching beneath Herran's flailing arms. One lean brown hand caught Herran just beneath the chin and the other gripped the captain just above the right knee. Gordon jerked and pushed simultaneously. Herran's lunge aided him and the captain catapulted over Gordon's head and struck the cabin floor with a crash. Dazed by the fall and wild with rage, Herran snatched a pistol from his belt. With incredible swiftness, a Colt appeared in Allison's hand and spat flame simultaneously. The gun flew out of Herran's hand and went spinning across the cabin.

The captain shook his numbed hand, cursing bewilderedly.

"Oh, shut up," Allison said, dryly. "I probably saved your worthless hide by that trick. It ain't no ways wise to draw on Wolf Gordon."

Herran started. "Are you 'Wolf' Gordon?" he asked.

Gordon nodded. "The girl has your permission to go?" he suggested politely, and no trace of irony. But Herran winced for all of that.

"Yes," he answered sullenly.

Gordon spoke to the shrinking girl in her own language and she sprang up and scurried through the door, to the stateroom she had occupied.

(continued on page 40)

Copyright © December 1987  
Stories by Mrs. P. M. Kuykendall  
Cover art by Stephen E. Fabian

Introduction by  
Cryptic Publications  
Robert M. Price, Editor  
107 East James Street  
Mount Olive, North Carolina 28365